Pathways to PRACTICE

— A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT —

ONLINE INFORMATION HUBS
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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EAIE
European Association for International Education

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Founded in 1989, the European Association for International Education (EAIE) is the European centre for knowledge, expertise and networking in the internationalisation of higher education. As a member-led association of more than 3000 members from over 95 countries, our mission is to help our members succeed professionally and to contribute to developments in international higher education from a European perspective.

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TOPIC IN CONTEXT

Do your international students get all the information they need when they need it – not just in terms of their specific needs as international visitors, but also as students at your institution more generally?

Often, websites and guidebooks for international students focus only on the things that relate to their international status (*eg* visas) and practical advice on settling into another country (*eg* housing). Meanwhile, a lot of information that is typically available for local students about the broad range of university services and community life is often underrepresented in the information resources designed specifically for international students.

This situation can prevent international students from easily accessing the full range of university services and community resources beyond those services that are most easily deemed 'for international students'. This can have negative effects on everything from students' health and well-being, to their overall sense of satisfaction with the educational experience and their sense of inclusion in the local environment.

To address this limitation, we suggest a set of easy steps for institutions to re-evaluate how they provide international

students with information and to concentrate their efforts into a centralised online information hub. The goal is to ensure international students' equal access to information and opportunities available at their host institution, to empower students to resolve the situations they encounter while studying internationally, and to sensitise campus offices and service providers to think more systematically about all of the students they serve.

Ultimately, this is important because we want the students we serve to be empowered to make informed decisions and have control over how they plan their time at our institutions. Knowing which resources are in place to support them and how to navigate this new community is integral to this process. The online international student information hub can be an efficient tool for early management of expectations, which in turn can help prevent misunderstandings and thus minimise conflicts and mitigate risks.

As a side-effect, the online information hub for students might help other university stakeholders gain a clearer understanding of the scope of university services that are available to international students. These outcomes are positive for international students and good for the institutions that host them.

WHAT PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

Typically, university websites focus on how to attract international students, so there is abundant information about study programmes and admissions procedures. However, there are many things students need and want to know in order to integrate into the university community – but often this information is not easily accessible for international students, particularly when the main language of the country and university is not English. Specific problems can range from international student-specific issues like applying for visa extensions, to more general questions like how to become a teaching assistant.

How can online tools help to ease and speed up the integration of any international student into the university community? An online international student hub offers a way to provide all students with information that is easy to access (*ie* there is one clear entry point), easy to navigate (*ie* it is structured in a meaningful way and corresponds to the needs of the students), and always available in a format that makes sense to students (*ie* online).

A one-stop international student information hub should provide easy navigation to all information about university services and student life, taking into account the specific needs of international students, but also purposefully providing them with information about activities and services not specifically designated as 'international'. More broadly, it should ideally provide a foundation for further developing the knowledge base on internal procedures for all university stakeholders working with international students.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

While international offices and communications/website teams should be the drivers of the transformation toward the provision of an online international student information hub, achieving the goals outlined here requires the direct involvement of all relevant units providing services to students in the institution. Ideally, every office or service unit that deals with students should be active in this expansive effort to ensure comprehensive information provision for international students. Ultimately, each institution will need to determine exactly which stakeholders should contribute.

Examples of other offices to involve might include those focused on health and well-being, scholarships, academic development, careers and internships, student life *etc.*

TERMINOLOGY

Information hub:
an online tool (*eg* a website) that provides clear, comprehensive access to relevant information

Expectation management:
providing clear and accessible information to prevent misunderstandings and disappointments

Student journey or student life cycle:
a way to define the distinct stages (and corresponding information and/or support needs) of a student's engagement with a higher education institution

University services:
administrative support provided by different university units to students, faculty and staff

KEY STEPS
IN THE PROCESS

1. Research the needs of international students at different stages of their journey at the institution

2. Provide core 'survival' information for each stage

3. Gather feedback from students on priority information to be expanded or enhanced

4. Recruit other service units as contributors of information to the hub

5. Provide detailed information in cooperation with relevant administrative counterparts and services

6. Revise, expand and develop the hub on a regular basis.

1. RESEARCH THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

a. **Analyse the student journey**
Find out through feedback and discussion with students and colleagues what services students can and should engage with at every stage of their experience, from pre-arrival, through arrival, the study experience and completion of studies.

b. **Identify relevant counterparts**
Determine who is responsible for the services relevant to each stage of the student journey. At what level are services provided (central or faculty/school)? Who are the contact persons?

2. PROVIDE CORE 'SURVIVAL' INFORMATION FOR EACH STAGE

a. **Analyse the student journey**
What is the information that will meet students' primary needs (for example, with regard to getting started attending classes or understanding fundamental visa regulations)? Consult with the (international) students who are already at the institution and colleagues who work in relevant units.

b. **Use what already exists**
If a relevant university service already has a webpage with information that appears in a language accessible to the students you are trying to reach, do not re-invent it. If a useful page exists but not in a language that you think will meet your students' needs, you can give a brief translated summary of necessary information on the hub website.

3. GATHER FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS ON PRIORITY INFORMATION TO BE EXPANDED OR ENHANCED

a. **Seek out feedback**
Through individual interviews, as well as through a structured feedback system, gather impressions from students. It is important to understand which information they think is lacking and what is unclear, as well as what works well. Reviewing student inquiries to support offices is another great way to determine what information should be added to the hub.

b. **Prioritise areas to expand or enhance**
Identify which information is most needed by students and whom you need to work with to provide it accurately. You can build a matrix of information that is most/least in demand, and easiest/hardest to gather from the relevant unit.

What other kinds of information do international students need? Examples might include:

- student clubs
- mental health and wellbeing
- campus facilities
- becoming a teaching assistant
- joining a research project
- participation in student governance
- internship opportunities and career centre
- how to organise events or get support for projects

4. RECRUIT OTHER UNIVERSITY SERVICES AS CONTRIBUTORS OF INFORMATION

Work on getting more counterparts to feel responsible for providing accurate and up-to-date information about their services to international students (both in English and in the local language).

If the service involves several administrative units or departments, initial facilitation of cooperation between them regarding international students might be needed. Getting other offices engaged in providing support to international students can be a challenging task, so taking the first step and showing good will goes a long way to starting a productive conversation with other offices.

5. PROVIDE DETAILED INFORMATION IN COOPERATION WITH RELEVANT ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

Based on the feedback gathered, update the hub website to make it more useful and easier to navigate for students. Thorough research and analysis of internal regulations and services could be needed to ensure that international students have equal access to all the services provided for local students.

6. REVISE, EXPAND AND DEVELOP

Commit to reviewing and revising the hub on a regular basis. Analyse feedback and revise the content development plan for the hub website at least once per year, in order to incorporate any relevant new developments at the institution and to keep up with the changing context as well as student expectations about the hub's usability.

While we suggest moving away from the idea that the international relations office is a sole owner of the information hub for international students, its role as a coordinator should be underscored. It is vital while updating the information to check in regularly with other relevant offices and make sure that they also stay on track and provide up-to-date information to international students.

WHAT
DOES SUCCESS
LOOK LIKE?

The successful implementation of an online international student information hub involves the creation of a comprehensive, easily navigable online platform, which provides international students with transparent, up-to-date and actionable information about university services, academic resources, campus facilities and community events. Ideally, this product is sustained by a process of broad collaboration across the community of student support service providers within the institution.

The information hub should cover all the four evident stages that an international student goes through: 1) 'before arrival', when a decision to join the university is made; 2) 'upon arrival', when a student starts their studies; 3) 'stay at the university', when a student adapts and integrates; 4) 'departure', when a decision is made whether to stay in touch with the university and whether to promote it among fellow students at a domestic university.

Placing student needs at the centre of the process is vital, not only regarding decisions pertaining to the information provided, but also regarding the formatting of that information and the platform(s) used to share it.

SUCCESS CHECKLIST

Make sure the hub genuinely addresses the issues international students at your institution encounter most frequently

Ensure the hub is easy to navigate; do not leave students guessing about how to find an answer to their questions

Cover all the important stages of the student journey at your institution, not just arrival, to help manage expectations effectively

Involve different service units in keeping the information on the hub up to date and accurate

Do not forget to install an easy-to-use feedback button on the hub!

Use time during student orientations at your institution to ask your new international students to provide feedback on the content and navigation of the hub

TAKE-AWAYS

A carefully crafted online information hub allows students to create a fuller virtual picture of what their life at an institution can be like. By providing access to well-structured, accurate and easy to navigate information, institutions can reduce the stress experienced by students when entering a new environment, and support them in organising their lives more independently during their time at the institution.

While content is crucial, it is important to keep in mind that the interface of the hub should correspond to the needs and expectation of the students, as well. It is also vital that we find ways to let the students be not only the consumers of the information, but also to co-create content, thus facilitating peer-to-peer connections between them and enhancing their active engagement at our institutions.

Finally, focusing on the ways that an online information hub can benefit all of the stakeholders involved in the provision of student services and resources can help sustain interest and support for this initiative over the long term.

If you want to up your game concerning approaches to providing online information for international students, check out the following links:

👆 Enhancing the student experience with essential student services: ICEF Monitor

👆 Tips to make college websites more international student-friendly: Uniquest

👆 Services for international & exchange students: Maastricht University

👆 University PR & communication: UNICA working group

FURTHER READING

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