

# *Pathways to* **PRACTICE**

— A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT —

## **ADVOCACY FOR THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

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We achieve this mission through a combination of training, conferences, and knowledge acquisition and sharing. We partner with key stakeholder organisations and institutions to promote our membership's interests and advance international higher education in Europe and the rest of the world.

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# TOPIC IN CONTEXT

Short-term and degree-seeking international students cross borders to undertake an educational experience in another country.

It is important for staff to understand how to enable a successful international student experience, both out of a duty of care as well as for reasons of public standing and perception

Best practice indicates that a purposeful and comprehensive strategy is recommended, with a whole-of-institution approach to supporting the international student experience. In this context, passionate practitioners (for example, in an international office) may need to advocate effectively within and beyond their institution to influence and build relationships with others in support of this goal.

In considering the experience of all students, it should be recognised that each individual student (whether domestic or international) will have a different starting point and a different lived experience in higher education. However, to avoid the trap of applying a deficit model approach to the international student experience, it is important to understand that international students bring different sets of knowledge and insights that, when harnessed carefully, can benefit the domestic student learning experience and the institution more broadly.

Recognising the particular circumstances relating to international education, it is important to adopt an institutional approach to the international student lifecycle with the aim of levelling the playing field for international students.

In this context, advocating for a comprehensive whole-of-institution approach aligns with best practice.

# WHAT PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

**I**n educating international students (whether degree-seeking or short-term), higher education institutions seek to ensure that those students have a positive and inclusive academic and broader experience.

This focus on the international student experience stems from an inherent duty of care for all students, but may also relate to considerations about future recommendation as a place to study (*ie* students as proactive ambassadors).

Best practice indicates that the international student experience is best supported by way of a comprehensive approach focused on the different stages of the international student lifecycle, rather than by a single office, or by focusing only on the pre-arrival and arrival stages of the lifecycle.

Accordingly, it is important for staff in an international office (or elsewhere) to know how to advocate for a successful international student experience.



# WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

**T**he principal readership of this publication is likely to be an international office staff member who has close involvement with the pre-arrival and on-arrival elements of the international student lifecycle, but less subsequent involvement with supporting international students during their studies. Alternatively, this publication could be of value and interest to anyone involved in supporting international student engagement and the international student experience.

Other internal stakeholders in the international student lifecycle could include the admissions officers, student counsellors and/or the student union, academic coordinators in schools/faculties and, of course, academic staff (specifically as this relates to the internationalisation of the curriculum).

Importantly, a key set of internal stakeholders will be senior champions of the internationalisation and/or student engagement agenda, that is, a set of people charged with strategy who can visualise and act on the key policy intersections between different parts of an institution.

Thinking outside the institution, other stakeholders might include:

- National government authorities (*cf* immigration)
- Local government authorities such as municipality/town/city council (*cf* integration with local community, accommodation *etc*)
- Accommodation providers (public and private)

Senior champions within the institution might be best placed to conduct external advocacy for the international student experience.





# WHAT

## DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Success in advocating for the international student experience will principally be measured in terms of increased international student satisfaction, retention and engagement (whether captured systematically through surveys or more anecdotally through focus groups).

Increased student satisfaction will generally lead to a greater propensity to recommend the institution to others, thereby supporting growth in international student enrolments.

Harder to measure metrics of success will include greater equity of participation and sense of belonging for international students, both in the classroom and beyond, and increased opportunities for intercultural learning between student peers.

# TERMINOLOGY

## **International student experience:**

The collective interaction, engagement and development of an international student (in both academic and non-academic environments) during their time at an education institution.

## **International student lifecycle:**

The successive stages through which international students pass from pre-arrival, to on arrival, during stay, pre-departure, and finally re-entry.

## **Advocacy:**

Any action that speaks in favour of, argues for, supports or defends on behalf of others

## **Deficit model:**

A perspective that attributes failure to a personal lack of effort or deficiency in the individual.

## **Stakeholder analysis:**

A process of identifying people who may influence a particular project, grouping them according to their levels of participation, interest and influence, and determining how best to involve and communicate with each of them.



# KEY STEPS

## IN THE PROCESS



1. Analysing and understanding international student support needs at different stages of the lifecycle
2. Collecting relevant data
3. Analysing institutional capacity and support frameworks
4. Stakeholder analysis
5. Advocacy and engagement planning
6. Developing and finetuning advocacy and communication skills
7. Engaging



## 1. ANALYSING AND UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT NEEDS AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THE LIFECYCLE

While international office staff are passionate about the international student experience, they generally have stronger hands-on knowledge of pre-arrival and on-arrival experiences, rather than latter stages in the lifecycle. As such, an important first step towards advocating for a comprehensive approach to the international student experience is to develop a good understanding of the various stages and the different types of support which might be required. This does not mean becoming an expert in internationalisation of the curriculum or student integration and intercultural understanding. However, it does mean being aware of the principal stages in the lifecycle, being able to anticipate support needs at each stage in your institutional context and potentially being armed with resources or references for other colleagues who might want to know more. Perhaps, as one tactic in advocating for a whole-of-institution approach, you could develop a short reading list for the different stages in the lifecycle. In addition, you could explore and contribute to other education enhancement work (such as informal networks, research projects, committees *etc*) underway in your institution aimed at increasing belonging and inclusion.

## 2. COLLECTING RELEVANT DATA

Arm yourself with relevant student data in support of your advocacy, for example from your institution's internal surveys and focus groups, or from external sources such as the International Student Barometer or the Erasmus Student Network. If you don't have ready access to data in support of the international student experience, then perhaps you could work with others to devise surveys and/or run focus groups in support.

## 3. ANALYSING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS

Develop an understanding of your institution's philosophy and/or approach to the student experience, as well as its capacity to act. For example, what budgets exist in support of the student lifecycle and where are they held? Who are the key players with the power and the energy to make a difference? Are there particular committees or frameworks in place which support the full student lifecycle or elements of it? At some institutions, for example, there will be a working group or committee focused on orientation (*ie* welcome and arrival) or another mechanism to monitor and ensure academic success during study. Is there a diversity and inclusion agenda or committee which might have an interest in supporting international student inclusion?



## 4. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Aligned with the particular context of your institution and of your own role (or the role of your team), map out those internal and external stakeholders who are involved in the international student lifecycle and/or who have influence over decision-making in relation to the lifecycle. Multiple tools exist to support stakeholder mapping and analysis, and this exercise is usefully conducted with a team of people, noting the subjective nature of people-to-people relationships.

## 5. ADVOCACY AND ENGAGEMENT PLANNING

Based on your stakeholder analysis, reflect on how best to engage with various internal and external stakeholders to advocate for the international student experience. Are you the best person to undertake all of this advocacy? Or is a team approach more suited? Do you need to leverage the support of a senior champion to effect change with some stakeholders? If so, then how will you secure the support of a senior champion to do so? What type of engagement is best suited to each stakeholder – in person, formal or informal, in writing? If committees are involved, is it best to write a paper or to make a presentation?

## 6. DEVELOPING AND FINETUNING ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

As you prepare to advocate in line with your stakeholder analysis and your plan, make sure that your communication skills are ready for the task. Can you clearly explain international student support needs to other parts of the institution? If you need to hone your in-person communication skills, perhaps pair up with a colleague in your own team to practise what you might say and how.

## 7. ENGAGING

Now that you've done all of the preparation, it's time to put theory into practice. Advocacy for the international student experience is possible in so many different ways - join the relevant committee, speak to a possible senior champion on campus, develop a working group to collect student feedback, develop an information leaflet for other service providers on-campus or reach out to the local council to ensure their support in key elements of welcome and arrival. The possibilities are endless!



# CHECKLIST

-  Make sure that you have data ready to support your advocacy
-  Don't fall into the deficit model – international students are not lacking, but rather have different skills and knowledge of benefit to the institution
-  Skilfully articulate the additional needs that international students have without stigmatising them
-  Understand, by talking to international students, where the knowledge gaps are in terms of settling into life in a new country and institution, so that your advice and support can be relevant and useful
-  Identify other campus stakeholders, such as student unions/associations, who support international students and assess their level of commitment/engagement with the international student lifecycle
-  Get current students involved in support of new students. Make it fun – games work well to engage students!
-  Think carefully about communication methods – speak to students about how they want to receive information other than through traditional channels
-  Don't underestimate the value of face-to-face communication when it comes to addressing problems and developing buy-in for international student support

# TAKE-AWAYS

**W**ith international higher education becoming an increasingly crowded and expensive space, international student expectations of their chosen institutions are generally increasing.

Tomorrow's international student will expect to find that support policies and processes are in place across the student lifecycle, with a sufficiently internationalised academic and professional service community working to enable them to participate fully in all aspects of student life.

Feeling fully integrated into student social life will continue to depend, in part, on the will and curiosity of the domestic student population. As such, institutions – working in partnership with student unions/associations – should consider if they are providing sufficient tools and scaffolding for intercultural learning between student peers, and placing enough value on those interactions.

In the classroom, future international students will and should expect to join learning communities that are inclusive and that value the different cultural, social, political and economic insights that they can bring, as well as different ways of successfully collaborating on academic projects and tasks. With increasingly distributed models of teaching and learning, the aim should be to replicate the same excellent standards when it comes to supporting the international student experience however and from wherever the students are engaging.

# FURTHER READING



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