

“I’m an international student... get me out of here!” The role of additional study support and inclusive curriculum design in alleviating academic culture shock in UK HE.



The number of international students (individuals who are globally mobile and cross borders specifically for education worldwide) is [increasing](#). Particularly in the UK, the number of full-time postgraduate (PG) international students coming from non-EU countries hit the highest percentage of 59% in 2023, an equivalent of 320,160 students across all [UK higher education institutions](#). These students are from diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages and nationalities, and [we owe](#) much to their unique and different experiences and insights. In acknowledging the value of a diverse international student population in enriching the UK’s education, culture, and economy, it is vital to provide a high-quality academic experience, which positively impacts the international student journey.

For international students, the decision to study at a university in the Western world presents an exposure to a new culture and valuable ideas, which beckons to an enviable future; the quest for UK education brings high expectations. However, international students can be confronted with significant barriers, such as [education system distance](#). This describes the “gap between assumptions within a host country education system (and the belief of what constitutes knowledge, how it should be learned, taught and assessed) and those of the international student’s home country”. Whilst the impact of this phenomenon on their learning are well-known amongst practitioners, universities, and industry bodies alike, the dissimilarities can require major adjustments. So, what is the way forward? Advance HE, Universities UK and the Office for Students all emphasise the importance of offering tailored provision to ensure international students have [access](#) to “a high-quality academic experience, with the right support to ensure that they are fully integrated into their university and the wider community, with the sense of belonging that this brings”.

The dichotomy of being excited upon securing admission versus the reality of academic culture shock, can hamper the motivation of some international students to continue. The bright hope once nursed may become blurry in an unfamiliar and overwhelming academic culture, with different academic norms, classroom expectations and learning styles. When we travel to a new place, the experience is as important as our desired location. As such, how we view international students and create targeted programmes have significant impacts on the international student experience. Logically, without appropriate support, it might be difficult to gain a high-quality academic experience.

One of the pivotal roles of appropriate support is to ensure equality of opportunity. By providing positive interactions and guidance in a safe environment, a variety of positive outcomes can unfold: reduced assessment anxiety, improved academic performance, enhanced

engagement and receiving an excellent international student experience and educational journey.

To improve the narrative surrounding the support for international students, several key areas emerge:

1. Targeted support classes which focus on helping international students adjust to the UK academic system. As a practical example, in the UK, Liverpool John Moores University has incorporated weekly student support into a suite of PG International Business and Management programmes. These are academic study skills classes embedded into module timetables and led by an academic support tutor. The classes encourage student discourse in a safe and supportive environment, where international students are facilitated to talk about unfamiliar module teaching methods, assessments, learning styles or tutor approaches. It is a place where students can compare their different educational experiences across different countries and be enlightened on ‘the rules of the game’ specific to their MSc programme.

2. [Inclusive curriculum design](#) that takes into account “students’ educational, cultural, and social background and experience, as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being”. This is one initiative to help buffer academic culture shock in a diverse environment and promote success. Embedding this practice into postgraduate programmes, where the growth of international students is largely being seen, enables programmes to become more inclusive and enriches the international student experience. Recent findings show that, [inclusive curriculum approach](#) also enhances international student employability.

Recognising and promoting additional support classes and inclusive curriculum design increases success stories, UK academic appeal, employability and overall quality academic experience for international students.

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