

## ***Enriching international students' experience post-COVID***

COVID-19 has been an unwelcome visitor since 2020, and, like unwelcome visitors, it has overstayed. Its disruption of international education has brought international student mobility to a standstill.

Many international students have been stuck in their home countries, unable to travel and seek international education where they want. Or they have faced economic and social difficulties in their host countries because of the pandemic.

Yet despite the pandemic, there is still an appetite for international student mobility. These students mainly seek education abroad to enhance their employability, gain wider international experience and develop their personal and professional skills, according to **research**.

The **QS International Student Survey** strongly suggests that future international students will want to receive a range of on-campus formalised support services. This includes student counselling, mental health advice services, 24-hour helplines and the ability for these services to provide referrals to healthcare professionals.

It is also vital for higher learning institutions to provide international students with services such as employment and housing assistance, financial and banking services and access to discounted and subsidised goods.

The range of what is needed is a large one and matches much of what was available before the pandemic, and demand is not going to fall.

But what can host institutions and stakeholders involved in the international education ecosystem provide, and what positive actions can they take in advance to recruit and enrich their incoming international student experience prior to arrival?

Current international students, international graduates and alumni and academic and professional staff members can in fact be proactive about looking after international students' welfare and enriching their experience. These students can be happy and integrated even before they physically attend a campus.

### **Enhancing the student experience**

An **empirical study submitted prior to the pandemic** by Dr Jasvir Kaur Nachatar Singh suggests useful and carefully thought through strategies to recruit students and improve their experience post-COVID.

Current international students in a host country can provide incoming students with advice and assistance. It is vital for them to leverage their existing 'student ambassador programmes' or 'buddy programmes' in the host country.

Current students can give practical advice and share experiences about issues such as quarantine and vaccination, academic and social information such as teaching delivery modes, housing assistance, updated travel information, funding and scholarships and work placements on offer – a full, practical range of help based on direct experience.

This can be done via online platforms such as Zoom or even by email.

Such assistance is needed now because incoming students may not have prior connections through friends or colleagues studying in the host country. A strategy of information provision can increase the level of awareness of the new academic and non-academic environment so that students can adjust and adapt to it quickly.

The first contact point with inbound students should be through current enrolled international students from the same country of origin because services provided to the students need to be diverse but also targeted.

Information, knowledge and experiences related by co-nationals are much more readily trusted due to linguistic and cultural similarities and this does provide a level of confidence to incoming students.

Such assistance increases the sense of belonging, expectation and positive experiences of incoming students prior to arrival. Incoming students will have a sense of assurance that the university cares about their well-being and connects them with others to ease their transition to a new environment despite the unprecedented impact of a pandemic.

### **Pre-information**

Vital pre-information, using 'virtual' contacts, that is provided by friends in the host country and strategic partnership with colleagues who have studied there are strongly encouraged. Word-of-mouth marketing is extremely powerful.

Academic and social information from friends and colleagues acting as brand ambassadors is accepted positively because of the trust students place in them and their accessibility.

Knowledge and guidance from these same people before arrival are known to be important in creating positive, long-lasting experiences.

Information on university facilities, accommodation, structure and systems, how to register for courses and living costs can be provided. Academic information can explain what subjects are available or should be taken, what workshop assistance is available and what research assistance there is.

All this reduces challenges and issues faced by postgraduate international students, especially in these current times, and it also enhances their involvement and engagement in academic and social activities in the new university.

Academic staff members can build rapport with students prior to their arrival. Staff can attract – and retain – postgraduate students by replying promptly to email inquiries. And, by providing relevant academic and social information before the first step is taken onto campus, international students can integrate easily into the university ecosystem once they arrive.

A personalised conversation with academic staff is important for attracting students. The 'personal touch and care' in email are greatly appreciated. It enhances a sense of belonging as well as meeting emotional, practical and information needs.

These suggested strategies will have a positive impact on levels of international students' engagement, satisfaction, motivation and sense of belonging when they commence their studies in the future.

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