International Students in Engineering
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1) INTRODUCTION

With an increasing number of international students joining the University of Bristol each year, it is important that we continuously review and improve the services we provide for them. Therefore, before the University takes any future initiative, we should understand what international students expect and how well the University is meeting those expectations. With the sincere will to listen to the voices of international students, this research project started off with the aim to explore the international student experience in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bristol. This was a joint project between Bristol SU and the University of Bristol and was conducted for the University’s evaluation and monitoring process.

The project started on 2nd February with the first meeting and ended with the completion of the report on 2nd April 2015. This project used Qualitative Research as the research strategy and organized a Focus Group Discussion on the 18th of March in the Queens Building. The group included 18 international engineering students who discussed academic, social, well-being and administrative aspects of their student lives.

2) RESEARCH STRATEGY, DESIGN AND METHODS

As we were focused on listening to the voices of students (what they faced, what they hoped their ideal student life would be, how well does the current situation match their expectation etc.) it was obvious that the best research strategy for this project would be “Qualitative Research”, as it emphasises words rather than quantification of data (both collection and analysis). Qualitative researchers are concerned with how individuals perceive their world and these researchers interact with that which is being researched (Creswell, 1994). One of the most important features of this strategy is that it is purely subjective in nature. This was very important for this project: when collecting data on students’ experiences, we understood they came from diverse backgrounds and they might have faced completely different situations at the university. It was crucial to bring out and give space to a diverse range of experiences.

As organisers, we felt it was important that the students felt relaxed in expressing their honest views and engaged with the questions/topics raised. Instead of using the traditional one-to-one interviews, we decided to go for an interactive focus group discussion (semi-structured). Questions focused on fairly specific topics and emphasised group interaction and joint construction of meaning, (Bryman, 2008, p.474). We were concerned with how the group participants view issues that confront them and the advantage of the focus group setting is we could develop an understanding about why people feel the way they do. (Bryman, 2008, p. 475). An individual can answer in a certain way in focus groups, by both modifying and openly vocalising perspectives that they may not have formed without hearing others. This indicates the usefulness of focus groups in elicitation of a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue.

There were four broad exploratory research questions, which shaped the whole research session:

1. How has your academic experience at the University of Bristol been so far?
2. Do you think you are getting enough support from University of Bristol regarding your well-being?
3. What do you feel about your social life at the University of Bristol?
4. How do you find the University’s administration processes?
Students were asked to talk about these topics in groups and were provided with some examples for each topic to make it easier for them to answer. (See appendix)

After analysing the class routines of engineering students, the forum was scheduled for a Wednesday during lunch hours (1pm to 3pm). Students had classes in the mornings and most of them leave for their home after 3-4pm, so the lunch hour was the most suitable time. It was the end week of the term at the University and most of the students were very busy so we needed to offer an attractive incentive to attend the forum. As it was lunch hour, we decided to offer them free lunch, which was a useful way to help students get relaxed at the forum and also interact with their fellow peers.

The forum was organized on 18th March, Wednesday, Room 1.8, Queens Building at University of Bristol. We advertised it through numerous channels:

- social media platforms such as Facebook and Wechat (special attention was given to which forms of social media were popular amongst international students)
- emails by Jack Sharpe (Faculty Senate Rep) and Vera Ngosi (International Students’ Officer)
- posters were put up at several places in the engineering building and made in different languages (French, Mandarin, Arabic, Bengali and Malay) to acknowledge internationalisation and to attract more international students. The sampling technique used here was “convenience sampling”.

At this busy part of the academic term, a total of 18 students turned up for the forum.

Demographics: Nationality

Students came from 8 different countries:

- China (8)
- Nigeria (2)
- Malaysia (3)
- Egypt (1)
- Thailand (1)
- Singapore (1)
- Belgium (1)
- one student did not mention specific country but ticked on the EU Student box

Gender

- Male (14)
- Female (4)

Course

- Mechanical Engineering (8)
- Computer Science (5)
- Electrical and Electronic Engineering (3)
- Civil Engineering (1)
- MSc Robotics (1)

Student Type

- Undergraduates (9)
- Taught Postgraduates (7)
- Research Postgraduates (2)

As a researcher, it is important to discuss the reliability, validity and ethical considerations of this research. Details are given in the Appendix.
3) **Outline of International Students Forum**

The forum was divided into two sessions.

1. Upon arrival, students were welcomed by the student representatives and forum facilitators, offered free lunch and were asked to fill out three forms: Equality and Diversity Monitoring form, Project Information Sheet and Consent form and a satisfaction survey. In the satisfaction survey we asked them to rate their satisfaction levels regarding their academic, social, well-being and overall student experience at the University of Bristol. This was done to have a quick idea how they felt about their experiences before starting the thorough and detailed group discussions. (See Appendix)

   **Example: How would you rate your overall student life so far at the University of Bristol?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very poor</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>10</td>
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2. After lunch and filling out the forms, the next step was the focus group discussions. Based on the number of people who arrived, we formed three groups. We wanted to listen to each student’s views and avoid overcrowding, so we divided students into small groups which generally contained 4-6 people. Each group had one facilitator to hold the discussion and one Bristol Rep Assistant to write each and every detail from the session. We allocated an hour to the focus group discussions to give time for 4 research topics. We started off by assigning different topics to different groups. After discussing one topic, they could then change to the next one. This was their chance to discuss in a small safe space any issues or experiences they have had so far.

After the intensive group discussions, we gave students a 5-10 minute break. We then asked them to take part in the Life Map Session (Part Three) designed for them. We wanted students to have fun while sharing their experiences at the university, and thus we came up with this idea of engaging them using the technique of life mapping. We gave a single roll of paper and coloured markers to the students. Students used words and images to express how they felt in their academic years so far in Bristol. On the vertical axis, we had ‘Feeling/Emotions’ and on the horizontal axis, we had the timeline (6 months before arriving at Bristol, First year, Second Year, Third Year and a separate section for postgraduate students) (see Appendix). Students enjoyed taking part in the Life Map Session and described their state of minds (in the respective time period) using exciting images and words.

3. Now was time for the final session. In the earlier group discussion session each group came up with a variety of issues that they thought needed improvement and wrote them down on the paper provided to them. One of our main priorities while organizing the forum was to not only ask the students what problems they faced, but also to encourage them to offer ideas about what might solve some of their concerns. While discussing the use of focus groups Thomas L. Greenbaum (1998, p12) mentions two very important uses: (a) Attitude Studies (to collect information about how target student feels about existing environment, different support services and their attitudes towards the University (b) Idea Generation (to stimulate new ideas, any new ways for modifications etc). The last session was entirely focused on idea generation. We collected a sheet of paper from each group with issues that came out of the initial discussion and attached them to the wall. We wanted all of them to see what they and other groups have come up with and engage in a combined group discussion on how to tackle the problems. Apart from the organizers, there was one member of administrative staff from the Engineering faculty to listen to what students had to say. They came up with a wide range
of ideas and the member of staff also answered some of their queries. We ended the session at 3 pm, thanked them all for attending and taking part in the important discussions. Before they left they were asked to leave their email addresses if they wanted us to keep them updated about this project and the findings.

4. METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The method used for this project is Thematic Analysis (which gives emphasis on what is said rather than on how it is said). The general strategy in this process is to organize and synthesize the data based on themes (and subthemes). The researcher here has to go through the collected data, sort it into themes (based on their content) and then interpret. This approach is meant to provide a framework for the thematic analysis of qualitative data and provides one way of thinking about how to manage data and themes. (Bryman, 2008, p.555) While analysing data and figuring out useful themes, the researcher here looked out for: repetitions (topics that were discussed again and again), metaphors and analogies, similarities and differences (exploring how different individuals discussed a topic in his own way) and etc. Though this method is known for its prominence, it has a limitation as it lacks a clearly specified series of procedures.
5. **Research Findings**

**A) Initial Short Questionnaire**

At the very start of the research session, we asked students to rate their satisfaction levels based on the following aspects and the findings are as follows:

- **Academic Experience** (Rating from 1 to 5; 1=not satisfied, 5=very satisfied)

Out of 18 students, 17 filled out the form. The range of rating is found to be 3. The mode is 4 (most common answer, 11 times), which means that out of 17, 11 of the students showed the same higher level of satisfaction (which is 4) regarding their academic experience. Median for the data is 4 and the mean is 3.71, which means on average the satisfaction level of the students was 3.71 on a scale of 1 to 5. Only one student said they were dissatisfied with the academic experience (2 on the rating scale) and only one student was very satisfied (5 on the rating scale).

- **Social Life** (Rating from 1 to 5; 1=not satisfied, 5=very satisfied)

The range of rating is found to be 4. The mode is 4 (most frequent answer, 8 times), which means that out of 17, 8 of the students showed the same higher level of satisfaction (which is 4) regarding their social life at Bristol. Median for the data is 4 and the mean is 3.59, which means the average satisfaction level of the students was 3.59 on a scale of 1 to 5. Two out of 17 students said they were not satisfied (2 on rating scale) with their social life whereas 3 students said they were very satisfied (5 on the rating scale).

- **Overall student life so far at University of Bristol** (rating from 1 to 10; 1=Very poor, 10=Excellent)

The range of this set of data was 7. The mode, most common reply, was 7 (Seven students chose 7 as their level of satisfaction). Median for the data is 7 and the mean is 7. This means that the average satisfaction level of students about their overall student life so far was 7 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Apart from these 3 rating questions, we also asked two other open ended questions to the students.

- **Do you feel the University of Bristol has supported you in maintain wellbeing?**
  (Handling personal issues, homesickness, stress management etc.)

With respondents from such diverse backgrounds, from no answers at all to multiple reactions, a wide range of response was noticed in these sections. 5 students said that they never seek support regarding their well-being, never tried to look for help and handled the issues themselves. One student mentioned, ‘there are services that I haven’t approached but there seem to be a decent number of support’.

One student mentioned about how supportive his/her private tutor was and another student said, “UoB provides more than I thought it would, personally I am fully satisfied”.

- **If you could change one thing about your university life what would it be?**

As mentioned earlier, students responded to these questions differently. Quite a few students showed their interest in attending more extracurricular activities, and expected more large scale international events (like an International Village). One student mentioned about bringing these societies to international students’ attention, whereas another stated they ‘would research more about societies and get more involved in future’. 3-4 students wanted
more events organized for them to participate and one student expected that university might help them balance between extracurricular activities and academic life.

Starting from improvement in teaching quality, changes to academic content to the possibility of signing up for more units outside the faculty (open units), responses regarding expected changes in their academic aspect of life also varied. One student suggested that synchronized reading weeks between departments might help them, so that students taking modules from several departments get a fruitful week to study. Only one student commented about changing the housing situation of Bristol.

B) FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

I) ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE:

Students said that professors sometimes provide marking criteria but thought it should be more frequent and assessment criteria should at least be released for the first year students. They mentioned that it would be useful if they knew what should be included in coursework to get a certain mark and they thought samples of coursework would be very helpful for them. In general they would like more information and guidance on how to execute work, especially for those who are not familiar with coursework. They felt that home students have an advantageous position as they are more familiar with British assessment methods.

Many students said that when they received their assessment results they didn’t know what their grades meant and whether they were good or bad (mechanical engineering). They said that the marking systems didn’t give a real indication of where they stood in terms of the main student body. Most felt that the feedback given was very general and often they were not sure why they received low marks. However, the Computer Science student found the feedback given to be good as it showed what they had done wrong.

Overall, students were happy with group projects and the fact that the group members changed with time. They thought this was a good chance to work with a diverse range of people. But many students said they didn’t like being able to choose their own group, as that lead to them choosing their own friends meaning they spoke their home language rather than English. Many found group work to be hard because everyone has a different approach to it and because of language differences and would perhaps like some guidance on how to best work together.

International students commented that the language classes happen only during the first term and thought it would be great if they took place throughout the year. Masters students said they are usually too busy to practice their language skills and felt it would be good if they had more timetabled chances to communicate and learn English, as for some of them their entire course was made up of international students and no home students. While discussing the possibility of subject specific English language courses, students said they never heard anything of this sort, but they think that this would be a good idea and students would be interested in this (especially for one year courses such as robotics).

Some students said they had difficulties understanding lectures due to the accent of the professors. They asked if there was any chance of recording them, as it was sometimes difficult to follow what is being said. They felt recordings could help them listen to the lectures again in their own time. One student mentioned the usefulness of lectures with audio and visual aid, instead of just monotonous slides. However, students said they did not experience too many language related problems (only one student struggled with language difficulties while writing coursework). One student mentioned that all of them have to sit for an English test when they start off, even if they have done their A levels in English Language and English Literature. Students felt that there was a lack of clarity about the eligibility for this test. They also
recognised that a student could do well on the test, but may benefit from the language support courses anyway.

When discussing plagiarism, no students said they had experienced any issues. However, students mentioned that many international students in the past have faced problems regarding this. They asked if the university could provide more referencing guidance, perhaps included into a language specific course. The students also said they would like to meet their supervisor more regularly and if the department could arrange more seminars with academics.

When students talked about the online portal, they said they were happy as most materials were available online. One student was unhappy about the fact that they submit work through one portal but receive results through another (SAFE). They said they didn’t receive any notification from SAFE, and found the grades by chance. This led to problems applying for a scholarship as they faced troubles compiling their grades. A few students talked about the lack of optional units but thought this had already been brought up at faculty meetings. All the students said their academic expectations were met, while a few said that lecturers should improve their handwriting. One student in this group spoke about wanting to be able to do an extra 10 credits as the university website mentioned this as a possibility, but upon enquiring he found out that he had to pay for those additional units.

II) WELL BEING:

Largely, there was a mixed response regarding the role of personal tutors. When asked about how they felt about their personal tutors for maintaining their well-being, some said their personal tutor was useless for first and second year students, but in third year when they have project supervisor that was much more useful. One student said that their personal tutor also saw the whole process as useless - just as a “tick box exercise”. Another found “it depends on the tutor you get. My tutor was really good and genuinely cared about me and helped me to think about my future career”. One student said their personal tutor was a part time member of staff, so they never got to meet with them. One student described his supervisor as “kind” but overall the group talked about the undefined roles of their personal tutors.

Many said they were unsure as to whether their tutors were for pastoral care or academic concerns or both. Some thought they were only for dealing with academic issues while others thought they could talk about their personal issues too. They certainly felt there was a loose definition of what they could go to the personal tutors about. Some students talked about their experiences of peer mentoring. They said they applied to be given a peer mentor by the university which was really good.

When dealing with stress, students said they knew certain services were available but never really reached out for them. They talked about feeling homesick when coursework was hard and how it was worse at the end of the term. They said they motivated themselves by saying, “You need to pass this term so that you can go home”. Many students said they felt the NHS was difficult to use and they would like more guidance about it. This is worrying as one student said he didn’t know what to do when he fell sick so he just tried to avoid getting sick. One important point mentioned was that they didn’t know if their visas covered access to the NHS as there is no introductory briefing given on the use of NHS.

On accommodation issues, students felt UBU letting and the Accommodation Office was very useful but found it really stressful having to start looking for accommodation after only 3 months living in Bristol. One student mentioned they had to pay the whole year’s rent in advance because he was an international student and was asked to do this because they could not provide a UK guarantor. Some universities act as a guarantor for international students. He said it would be helpful if the University of Bristol could do this too. Some students talked about how incredibly pleased they were as they share a room now and pay less than half of what they
paid before. One student experienced problems with a landlord who made them sign a contract which said the landlord could enter their flat any time he wanted, which is worrying.

III) SOCIAL LIFE:

When discussing their social life, the common reply from students was that socializing in the UK was heavily drinking based, which can be quite different from their home cultures. This can sometimes make them feel left out. Students felt that there was more variety of social activities in their home countries and would like a wider variety of social events other than a “bar crawl”. They said this resulted in most of their friendships being with other international students. Students said that they knew about the good range of societies offered to them and the Fresher’s Fair was mentioned as a very positive experience. Students really liked this and found it useful in making friends and learning about societies. However, they also said about they didn’t observe any specific initiative for international engineering students which would have been nice.

They also mentioned their disappointment as they could not combine their tough courses with high intensity sport activities. They thought creating departmental sport teams would be fun on both a casual and competitive level. One student identified society timetabling as a key issue, as they signed up for two societies (paid annual membership fees) but later on their timings clashed and they could only go for one. During the group discussion on involvement of international students in sports and other societies, it was found that only one person in the group currently took part in a sport. Many said they do not take part in sport due to lack of interest and that they feel they have fewer chances to communicate with other people. Some mentioned that they do not know how to take part in societies and join clubs.

On discussing a sense of community within the faculty, students said they didn’t see that a sense of community existed between year groups on the same course; they thought this would be very useful for getting guidance and advice from the older years. However, many students said they never had any problems engaging with home students. They recognised that there existed cultural differences but they never faced any explicit discrimination based on that. Overall the students were content with their social life and they admitted that it depends a lot on the individual and that people have to go out of their comfort zones to socialise. They also identified how well you fit into the home culture depends on how open you are.

IV) ADMINISTRATION PROCESS:

Fees and funding were an issue for everyone in this group. They said fees are high already and increase every year arbitrarily. The students generally knew about the increase before they joined the university but felt that the fees rise irrespective of inflation. One student mentioned that payment processes are tedious and she left it up to her sponsor. Many talked about the varying exchange rates which can result in them losing out on money, especially when they have had to transfer all the money in one go. These students didn’t seek any support or advice regarding this from the University.

Students felt that the attendance monitoring check they had to do in their first year was unnecessarily arduous and did not help to create a welcoming environment. Students said they would prefer if this could be done with the personal tutor, they said this would feel a bit more welcoming.

When talking about their visas, they said they usually last until October, and their program ends in June. They felt the time for finding a job within these 4 months was very tight. Some had experienced problems applying for their ATAS certificate, which didn’t come until the last minute. But they also added that this was more of an issue with the Home Office than the university. Students thought the university should put more effort to help international students find and apply for jobs as they only have 4 months after graduating to do so. They mentioned an email list for jobs but suggested that it is mainly focused on home students. Often
international students end up applying, but then find out that the companies wouldn’t take international students.

When asked about what they felt about the Study Abroad aspect of their program, all the students felt it is a positive element and that it’s very good that it’s optional and flexible. However, students felt other Universities offer better internship opportunities and try to ensure internships for all. A Nigerian student talked about scholarships, and said, “Many international internship schemes are targeted towards Asian students, which is not always desirable”.

During the first week of University when international students have to fill out administration and registration events, these clashed with other social induction events. Students also felt that retaking exams in September is inconvenient. Some of them had received job offers but had to re-sit exams and the University was not flexible on changing these dates.

One student with a family discussed troubles opening a bank account for his wife (the bank needs a proof of accommodation, while the accommodation contract has only his name on it). He said he had to run from one office to other (International /Accommodation/Faculty Office) but still couldn’t solve this problem. The general opinion was that the University is bureaucratic; people feel moved around and that nobody is willing to help you.

C) FINDINGS FROM LIFE MAP EXERCISE

When asked to take part in this interesting and engaging exercise, students were asked to use images and words to describe their student life and experiences. The main reason for using this technique was to bring out certain emotions from the students about what emotions they felt during their time at Bristol (the image of the Life Map exercise is given in the Appendix.) Summary Findings are given below based on the timeline of their university life:

6 months Before Joining University: an interesting range of words and images were used by the participants to express their state of mind at this particular time. Words included, “proud”, “happy”, “worried”, “can’t wait”, “excited”, “nervous”, “impatience” and “very free”.

1ST YEAR: Some were “happy”, “adventurous”, “liberated”, “in the mood to party” and “learn new things”, while others felt “confused”, slightly in panic”, “reserved” and “homesick”.

2ND YEAR: The most common expression used by students was “settled” along with “in control”, “confident”, “finding myself”. Students also emphasized an increasing pressure of studies by using terms like “a lot to study”, “group projects” and “no time”.

3RD YEAR: As this was the third year of their undergraduate, the use of words such “in despair”, “Stressed”, “worried” were not surprising. But apart from the pressure felt by students about their final year projects, students also described emotions such as “settled”, “sporty” and “University life is fun”.

4TH YEAR: Students used terms like “very busy”, “happy”, “Excited”, “too much work” and “Dissertation = Evil but Fun).

POSTGRADUATES: Students described their year using words such as “exhausted”, “accurate”, “stressed”, “short time”, “Colourful” and “Massive things to learn”. One student used the following phrase to express what they felt: “I wish I was still in undergrad”.

This simple engaging way to bring out emotions of students is very insightful in terms of the university planning any support services or events for them. As we can see, the 1st year students felt a mixture of happiness and confusion, which makes sense as they have just shifted to a whole new country. Homesickness is an important issue that could be worked on, so that students feel included in their new environment. For 2nd year students on the other hand, they
seemed better in terms of settling in but they start facing the pressure of study. Students in this year will need more support for stress management and academic support. A similar approach will be needed for students in their 3rd /4th year, who feel worried and stressed with project/assignment pressure. For postgraduates, the time they spend at the University is small compared to undergraduates, which makes them feel they lack the time needed to engage in meaningful social activity. This smaller timeframe gives them less scope to engage with the new city and new people. It’s very important for the university to support postgraduates to make the most out of their study life here, but also their social life.

6) ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATION

At the end segment of the forum, we organized a solution session for students, where participants could talk and suggest, together as a big group, how the university could solve or handle the issues raised by themselves and their fellow mates. The suggested solutions/recommendations are as follows:

The University

- The University to provide clear guidance to potential international students about the level of difficulty faced by non-English speakers on that course; the level of support available when non-English speakers get here and check that the IELTS scores are at the right level.
- Make student services more accessible to international students: include visits to the student health service in welcome week, have videos online of what a consultation is like and have video testimonials from international students about how good the support services are. The counselling service have a Mandarin-speaking counsellor, it would be useful if they could do a video or blog in Mandarin about the counselling service.
- Attendance monitoring to be done via personal tutors to create a more welcoming feeling between the University and international students.
- The University to act as a UK Guarantor for international students seeking private rented accommodation.

The Faculty

- English language classes to run not only in the 1st year but also in the consecutive years. If a student passes the initial eligibility test, but later on feels the need for language support, they should have the flexibility to join classes; if this system currently exists, this should be advertised more to students.
- Training on how to reference properly to be incorporated into the 1st year language courses.
- The roles description of personal tutors to be made explicit and shared with students so they know what they can talk to their personal tutor about without feeling ashamed.
- Tailored guidance and support should be given to international students regarding their career and work opportunities, especially considering their visas run out 4 months after graduating. This could include specific workshops or a document that outlines which companies hire international students or a dedicated member of staff that international students can seek advice from.
• Create a specific event for international students in engineering which includes international students across all year groups.

• The faculty to liaise with CELFS about subject-specific language training.

• Optional group language sessions to be timetabled in all years, including for postgraduates to give students the opportunity to develop their language skills.

**Schools**

• Sample coursework and marking schemes to be made available to students for each course, as often it is unlike anything they have had to do in their home country.

• Run more course specific events that all years are invited to so that 1st year students can create links with 2nd year students studying the same degree.

• Departments to provide lists of technical terms at the start of term for each of the courses.

**Bristol SU**

• Bristol SU to provide more cultural events throughout the year to celebrate the international community here at Bristol.

• Bristol SU to work with international engineering students to set up an intramural team for the next academic year.

• Bristol SU to encourage societies to hold more non-drinking based events.

The focus group discussions based on our research questions yielded many different issues (some were overlapping) about international students’ current experience at university. On their academic experience, the most commonly raised issue by students was their lack of knowledge on how they are being marked. Students often felt they didn’t actually know why they received the mark they received, and many were unaware of the criteria for assessment. Many students mentioned that their course feedback was ‘general’, which did not help them to correct any future mistakes. They also wanted to know if they could have sample coursework provided to them as they feel they are not used to the assessment system in the UK, which puts them at a disadvantage. Language courses were another topic discussed amongst students, who felt that there are students who might need language support throughout the program timeline, not just in their first year. Plagiarism was not found to be a major problem for the participants however, some suggested that referencing could be taught as part of the language course as this would increase their academic writing skills for the future. People felt differently about group projects; many found it useful as they could work with a diverse range of people, however others found it tough because of differences in language and people approaching it differently. The majority of students appreciated group projects as they felt it stopped them from always choosing the same friends to work with and not getting out of their comfort zone (in terms of language and building relationships). However, this was only the case when they were not allowed to choose their own groups.

On the social aspect of their student life, the most common issue raised by participants was the heavily drinking based social culture in the UK. It is important to understand that people came from different cultures and participants expressed interest in more non-drinking based social activities and international events. Those students who were interested in sports activities found it was difficult to manage such demanding engineering programs and sports interests together. Students really liked events like the Fresher’s Fair but wanted more international and cultural events. It was also found that there has not been a specific event for international engineering students, which the student felt would be an excellent opportunity to know and socialize with other international students in the faculty.

Many important views came out from the discussions regarding how students maintained their well-being while studying at University of Bristol. The most significant topic raised was the lack
of definition for the role of personal tutors. The majority of the students said they were unclear whether they were supposed to go to the tutor with their personal problems. It is certainly important for the university to make sure both students and tutors know what their relationship/support has to be, so that students can communicate freely with their tutors. Another crucial point that came out from the discussion is the student’s confusion about the services provided by the NHS. First of all, many of them didn’t even know if their visa covered the use of the health service and secondly, many of them said they had no idea on how to use the services provided by the NHS. The University needs to make sure students know what services they are entitled to and provide a brief introductory session on the use of NHS. Another aspect of well-being that was discussed was living conditions. Many students were happy with their living situations, but a few complained about their personal contract with landlords. One student had to pay a whole year’s rent because he could not arrange an UK guarantor. The University should analyse this more and find a way to better support the international students in private housing. Homesickness and stress was commonly observed amongst students but none of them sought help from the university services. Most of the participants attempted to tackle these issues by themselves, but we cannot be sure that students tackled these problems successfully. The University should work to ensure that students not only know about the available services but encourage them to use them so they feel comfortable to do so.

In terms of administrative processes, most of the students were content with how to navigate these. The topic of attendance monitoring was raised during the discussion and students asked if they could do the formalities with their personal tutors, as they thought it would be more welcoming. Another problem pointed out by students regarding their visa was that it only lasted until October. Most of them felt 4 months was a very short time to apply and secure a job, especially with little support from the University. The University could analyse this situation more to understand the difficulties of international students trying to apply for jobs in the 4 month time frame which can be a big barrier to the process. One last important issue raised by students was that the university could provide more support to students with dependants. Few students (mainly postgraduates) mentioned the lack of support for dependents (in cases of bank account opening, house renting etc.). The University could look further into what exactly are the troubles faced by this section of students and improve their support towards them and the dependents.

7) Conclusion

This project was initiated to explore experiences of international engineering students, to hear what they felt about the current services and the support they received (in terms of academic, social, well-being and administrative aspects) and most importantly because they were never heard before. The University and the Students’ Union are eager to learn what the student expects from their ideal student life and what could be done to fulfil their expectations. Considering it was the first time that a research project of this sort has been done in the Faculty of Engineering, it can be deemed a great success and good starting point for future research. The forum was successful in engaging the participants and bringing out a lively environment during the focus group discussions. A small limitation of this study is the relatively small number of students who turned up for the forum but this can be put down to the fact that many students were very busy in their coursework. Perhaps to combat this, a further online survey may be useful to gather more wide-ranging opinions. If a future forum is to be organised, it should take place earlier in the year so that more students are able to attend. Seeing how enthusiastically students participated it is certain that a further forum would be just as successful.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY CONCERNS

For qualitative research like this, **EXTERNAL RELIABILITY** means the degree to which a study can be replicated. This sometimes could be a difficult criterion to meet by qualitative research as it is almost impossible to “freeze” a social setting of an initial study to replicate in future studies. However different approaches could be introduced in order to approach external reliability. On the other hand, this study completely complies with **INTERNAL RELIABILITY**, which means whether, when there is more than one observer, members of the research team agree about what they see and hear.

**EXTERNAL VALIDITY** (appropriate for this study) refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings. This might represent problems for qualitative studies like this mainly due to the use of small samples.

ALTERNATIVE CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION


**TRUSTWORTHINESS** is made up of four criteria:

- Credibility (This is achieved by the research team successfully ensuring that the study is carried out under canons of good practice and submitting findings to the members of the social world, confirming that the study has correctly understood that social world.)
- Transferability (Findings from this study is oriented to contextual uniqueness and significance of the social world being studied. But, thus study produces thick description, which might serve others as a database for making judgments about the possible transferability.)
- Dependability (This ensured by ensuring complete records are kept at all phases of the research process- problem formulation, strategies, participant records, fieldwork notes, data analysis papers etc.)
• Confirmability (Though complete objectivity is impossible in social research, but in this study the researcher has not allowed any personal values to influence the conduct of the research and its findings)

This study fulfills the assessment based on Authenticity, which is made up of five criteria:

• Fairness (Does the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of the social setting?)
• Ontological Authenticity (Does the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu?)
• Educative Authenticity (Does the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of their social setting?)
• Catalytic Authenticity (Has the research acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?)
• Tactical Authenticity (Has the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?) (Bryman, 2008, p. 379)

Ethical Considerations: The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2003a) suggests some ethical considerations related with the respect for all participants in the research projects. The participants of the focus group discussions have been kept completely anonymous and the names and e-mails that the interviewees shared in their consent form are saved and protected.

All data collected and field and draft notes have been secured by the researcher and the outcome of the research is handled in a way that the scope of the research and results are clear and they could not be used in different ways. It is also ensured that the effects of this research on the participants will be null.
Project Information Sheet and Consent Form

International Students in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bristol

You are being invited to participate in a group consultation (focus group) conducted for the purposes of a University of Bristol Students’ Union (UBU) led-project that will be conducted for union and University evaluation and monitoring purposes. This consultation may be recorded and the Research Assistant will take written notes. Before you agree to take part please read the following information and ask any necessary questions.

This UBU led-project aims to explore the experiences of international students in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bristol. Your views are important to us and allow us to work on improving the student experience. This project aims to provide localised data on international student’s experiences at the University of Bristol. Practical recommendations will be made to the University in the form of a report to help make Engineering at Bristol an environment in which internationals students can excel.

UBU does not intend to publish the findings in any peer-reviewed academic journal and raw data will not be shared with other parties for the purposes of other academic research. UBU does not intend to use this data for any purpose other than this project and developmental use only. UBU may later promote this work through its collaboration with the National Union of Students (NUS). UBU also promotes its student experience monitoring projects and may publish key findings from this investigation on the UBU website. The final report may also be made accessible publically through its website. Your identity can be kept anonymous with reference to your quotations if you prefer, or you may consent for UBU to state your name/identity. You may withdraw from this participation (i.e, tell us you do not want your views included) for up to two weeks after this consultation. Any records of your personal details will be kept confidential. We aim to adhere to the highest standards of research integrity and ethics.

☐ I have read and understood the project intentions

☐ I agree to take part in this discussion. I agree to have the discussion be recorded in note-taking and audio-recording.

☐ I understand that my words may be quoted in presentations, reports or UBU web-promotional/communications content.

☐ I prefer to have my identity kept anonymous – do not quote me by name.

☐ I agree to have you use my name in any written reporting

☐ I understand I can withdraw for up to two weeks after this consultation

Name (print)  Signature  Date

International Student In Engineering  March 2015
Group Discussion Questions (guidance for facilitators)

1. How has your academic experience with University of Bristol been so far? (You can analyze your thoughts in terms of the following aspects)

   - Assessment (grading)
   - Language
   - IT System
   - Teaching
   - Group activities
   - Plagiarism
   - Any other additional support.

2. Do you think you are getting enough support from University of Bristol regarding your well-being? (You can analyze your thoughts in terms of the following aspects)

   - How helpful has the personal tutors been in dealing with personal issues?
   - Are you happy with your state of accommodation (University halls or private ones)
   - Support for Mental Health
   - How might the university have helped you to deal with issues like homesickness?
   - Your experiences of stress management

3. What do you feel about your social life at University of Bristol? (You can analyze your thoughts in terms of the following aspects)

   - Engagement with Societies (academic or non-academic)
   - Integration with local/home students (culture)
   - Are you aware of the sports options provided by the union? Do you participate in any such activities?
   - What do you miss, in terms of sport activities, which could improve your student experience?

4. How do you find the university’s administration processes? (You can analyze your thoughts in terms of the following aspects)

   - Visa process and registration
   - Attendance monitoring
   - Fees and Funding
   - Study abroad programs or year in industry
Photos of Life Mapping Exercise
Equality & Diversity Monitoring Form

The Students’ Union is committed to providing accessible services. The information you provide will in no way be linked to your personal details, and will be treated as strictly confidential. Information will be used by the Students’ Union to produce statistics enabling us to conduct meaningful research on the experiences of international students in Engineering.

You do not have to answer all of the questions - however the more information you provide, the better we can evaluate what we do.

How would you describe your gender identity?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender man
- Transgender woman
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify) .................................................................

Current age:

- Under 21
- 21-24
- 25-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50+

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual
- Gay
- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify) .................................................................

What country are you from? (Please specify) .................................................................

Do you have a religion/faith?

- No
- Yes

If yes, please specify: ........................................................................

Do you have a disability that is covered by the Equality Act 2010?

When answering this question please note that under the Equality Act 2010 you are considered to be disabled if you have a mental or physical impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect upon your ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

- No
- Yes

What age were you when you started your course?

- Under 21
- 21-24
- 25-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50+

What is your current level of study?

- Foundation Year
- Undergraduate
- Taught Postgraduate
- Research Postgraduate

Are you registered as a ..

- Full-time student?
- Part-time student?

Which best describes your University fee status?

- EU student
- Visiting or exchange student
- International fee paying student

What is your programme of study?

- Electrical and Electronic
- Aerospace Engineering
- Engineering Maths
- Engineering Design
- Computer Science
- Civil Engineering
- Mechanical Engineering
- Other (please specify) .................................................................
International Students Focus Group

1. How satisfied are you with your academic experience at Bristol so far? (1 = not satisfied, 5 = very satisfied)
   1  2  3  4  5

2. How satisfied are you with your social life at Bristol so far? (1 = not satisfied, 5 = very satisfied)
   1  2  3  4  5

3. Do you feel the University of Bristol has supported you in maintaining your wellbeing? (Handling personal issues, homesickness, stress management etc.)

4. How would you rate your overall student life so far at University of Bristol?
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very poor</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>6  7  8  9  10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. If you could change one thing about your University life what would it be?