

How important is a multicultural learning environment for international students compared with domestic students?

Simon Bush, Chris Tzourou, William Archer

Introduction

The Council for Industry and Higher Education commissioned i-graduate to report on how important the multicultural learning environment is for international compared to domestic students. Results from the International Student Barometer™ (ISB) and Student Barometer™ (SB) are used to investigate whether there is a difference in the relevant importance ratings.

The ISB and SB measure the opinions of international students who are currently in higher education institutions around the world. Specifically, 35 generic importance elements of the learning and living experience at higher education institutions are measured. Particular focus will be given to the multicultural importance ratings, and how these compare to importance ratings for other areas of the learning experience.

Survey method

The ISB Autumn Wave ran in October 2006 with 38 UK universities taking part, 9 of which participated in the SB. Online questionnaires were produced for each university and universities then forwarded an internet hyperlink to all their international students.

The online questionnaires included questions on the demographics of the respondents, how important they rated university services and how satisfied they were with university services. The questionnaire was divided into two importance sections: the 'learning experience' and the 'living experience'.

Ratings of importance were scored using a 4-point Likert scale where respondents selected a rating of 1 - 4, corresponding to 'very unimportant', 'unimportant', 'important' and 'very important' respectively. These rating scales were applied to 35 different elements of the university experience.

Analysis method

The ISB response base for the 38 participating universities combined was 29,968. The response base for the 9 universities participating in the SB combined was 7883. Mean importance scores for the 16 importance elements from the 'learning experience' were calculated for all ISB universities combined and all SB universities combined.

Two-tailed heteroscedastic two sample t-tests were carried out comparing ISB data with SB data (the international vs. domestic comparison). These were done for each of the 16 learning importance elements.

Results

Of particular interest was the difference for the ‘multicultural’ element (importance of studying with people from other cultures). This difference was significant between the ISB and SB groups, with international respondents indicating significantly higher importance ratings than their domestic counterparts.

Table 1: Mean importance scores where elements are more important for international respondents (ISB) compared to domestic respondents (SB), t-test p values indicate significant differences between the two groups

More Important for International Respondents	ISB Mean	SB Mean	Difference (ISB - SB)	t-test p value
Language support	2.91	1.68	1.23	0.000
Multicultural	2.96	2.47	0.49	0.000
Research	3.15	2.89	0.26	0.000
Flexibility	3.24	3.11	0.14	0.000
Work experience	3.20	3.08	0.12	0.000
Learning spaces	3.15	3.10	0.06	0.000
Careers advice	3.19	3.14	0.05	0.000
Technology	3.53	3.49	0.04	0.000
Employability	3.38	3.34	0.03	0.004
Expert lecturers	3.58	3.57	0.01	0.087

Table 2: Mean importance scores where elements are more important for domestic respondents (ISB) compared to international respondents (SB), t-test p values indicate significant differences between the two groups

More Important for Domestic Respondents	ISB Mean	SB Mean	Difference (ISB - SB)	t-test p value
Library facilities	3.56	3.58	-0.01	0.127
Course content	3.60	3.63	-0.03	0.000
Learning support	3.41	3.51	-0.09	0.000
Assessment	3.52	3.67	-0.15	0.000
Good teachers	3.66	3.81	-0.16	0.000
Academics' English	3.25	3.55	-0.31	0.000

To put the results in context it should be noted that the ‘multicultural’ element is ranked 2nd least important of all the 16 learning elements in both ISB and SB overall results. This is illustrated for international respondents in figure 1, and for domestic respondents in figure 2 below.

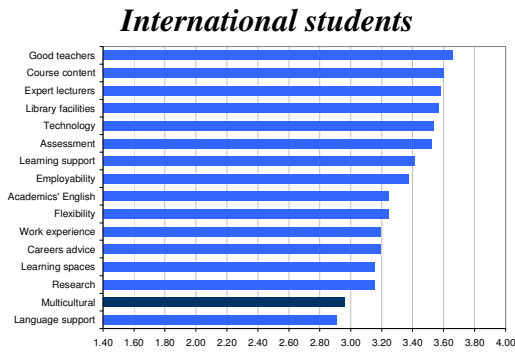


Figure 1: Chart showing mean scores for importance elements in ranked order for the ISB group

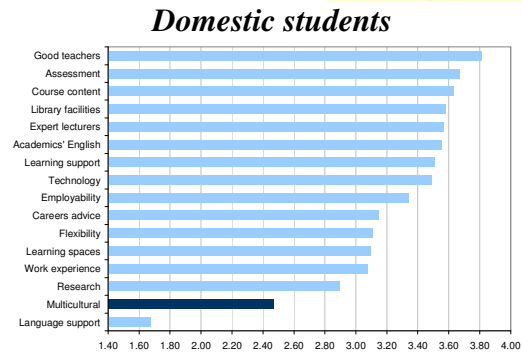


Figure 2: Chart showing mean scores for importance elements in ranked order for the SB group

Despite the relatively low importance rating of ‘multicultural’ overall, clear differences are seen when looking at the percentages of international students compared to domestic students (at UK institutions), who rate the ‘multicultural’ element as important. These percentages are shown in Figure 3 below.

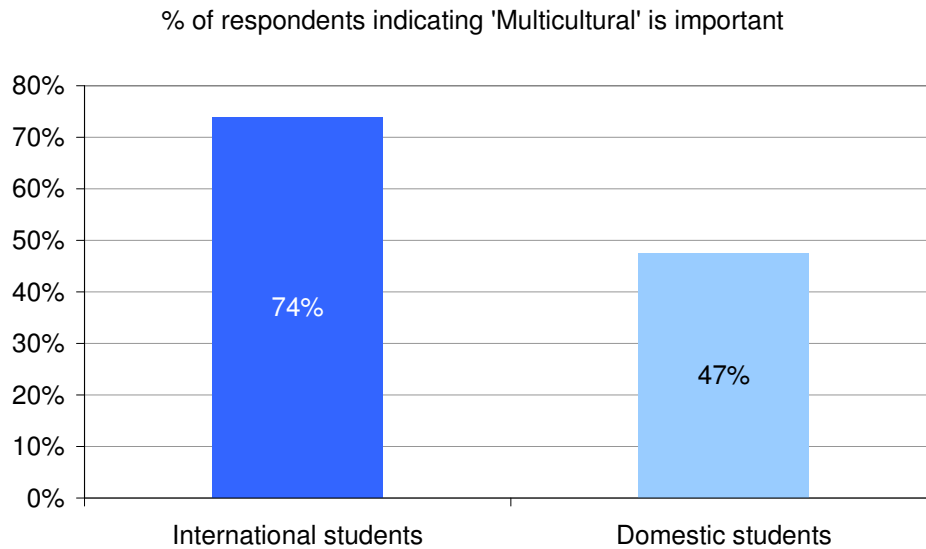


Figure 3: Percentages of respondents from the ISB (international students) and SB (domestic students) who rated multicultural learning environment as important

Discussion

Results from the ISB and SB Autumn Wave 2006 indicate that ‘multicultural learning environment’ was significantly more important to international compared to domestic respondents. When all 16 elements of the learning importance section of the questionnaire were examined, it was noted that ‘multicultural’ is ranked second least important compared to other elements.

The results show that, as could be reasonably expected, students travelling abroad for their studies want to meet and study with other cultures, more than those staying at home for their studies. However, in context there are numerous other leaning elements that are more important for both domestic and international university students in the UK.

About i-graduate

i-graduate is a professional research service specialising in online opinion research and analysis for the education sector.

The company aims to assist international educators to plan, understand, adapt and to measure more accurately the opinions, expectations and experience of the international students who will determine their future success

About the International Student Barometer™

The International Student Barometer is a global benchmarking tool enabling education institutions to track and compare the expectations and experiences of international and home students.

The Barometer tracks up to 60 elements of the student experience and establishes the relative importance of each – as seen through the eyes of the students. The Barometer has taken feedback from over 120,000 international students from 187 countries in its first 2 years of operation.

International Graduate Insight Group
29 Harley Street, London W1G 9QR
0207 222 7890 www.i-graduate.org