A young man with dark hair, glasses, and a goatee is looking directly at the camera. He is sitting at a desk in what appears to be a library or study area. On the desk, there is a laptop, several papers, and a pair of glasses. The background shows wooden shelves with books. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned overlay.

Managing accommodation for international students: a handbook for practitioners

This guide, compiled and written by Martin Rushall on behalf of Unipol, is one of a number of guides produced with financial support from the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) with the aim of helping UK institutions strengthen still further the quality of the experience for international students coming to the UK.



Unipol Student Homes is a national charity working to improve training, standards and professionalism in student housing. It does so by:

- providing a centralised private sector service for students in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham with straightforward information that allows students to make well-informed choices
- championing best practice and high standards through accrediting over 190,000 student places in three local codes and two government-approved codes of practice
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It does so through research, print and web-based publications, a national training programme, dedicated advice lines for students and advisers, and liaison and advocacy with institutions, agencies and government.

Its members include all UK universities, those further and higher education colleges which are active internationally, and a range of specialist and representative bodies.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Readership

The intended readership for this guide is staff in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) who support international students in residential accommodation.

It will also be of interest to:

- staff within the broader international student support function in institutions
- senior staff within institutions who are responsible for policy-making and strategic direction
- students' unions
- voluntary organisations providing accommodation services to international students
- commercial providers, both major operators developing and often managing large-scale, purpose-built student accommodation, and smaller-scale landlords, typically letting shared houses.

Aim of this guide

This guide aims:

- to set out good practice on the provision of accommodation and associated services for international students
- to map out the issues and points for consideration either where practice is too context-specific for meaningful generalisation or where it has not yet been established in the sector
- to stimulate continuing debate in the education, voluntary and private sectors on evolving good practice

Frame of reference

These aims are located within the following frame of reference:

The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education

The first phase of the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI1), launched in 1999, was concerned primarily with developing strategies to increase the volume of international students entering the UK education system. By 2004 the narrow focus on 'selling' had yielded ground to a strong belief that the quality of the wider student experience – including experience of living in student accommodation – was an important area for evaluation and enhancement if international students were to be properly served and if growth in numbers was to be sustained.

Accordingly, PMI2, while still setting growth as a target, expanded the range of its objectives:

- to ensure international students have a positive experience of their UK studies
- to achieve demonstrable improvements to student satisfaction ratings in the UK

CUBO/i-graduate report: Enhancing the student experience

In 2008 the College and University Business Officers group (CUBO) commissioned i-graduate to conduct a survey on the international student experience of HEI business services (including accommodation) and satisfaction with them. The research found that international students' ratings on accommodation were as follows:

Figure 1a:
Accommodation cost: importance by international/domestic (by percentage)

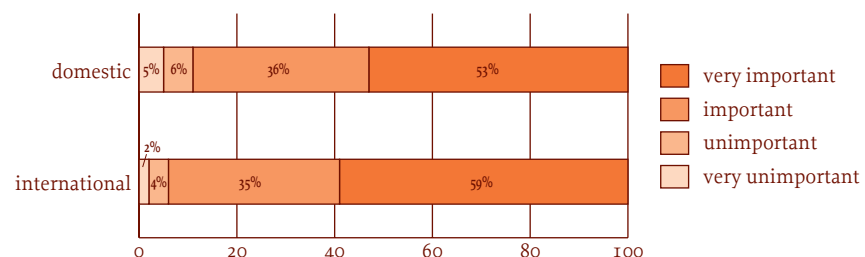


Figure 1b:
Accommodation cost: satisfaction by international/domestic (by percentage)

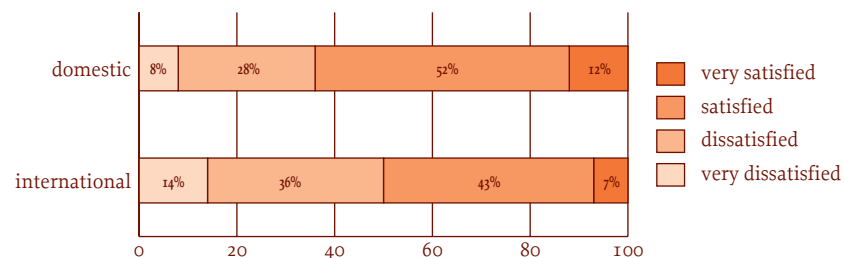


Figure 2a:
Accommodation quality: importance by international/domestic (by percentage)

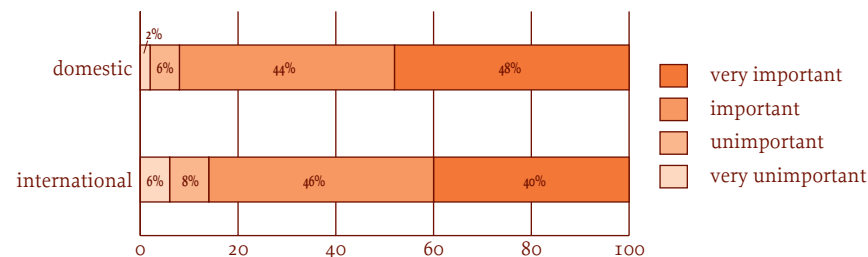
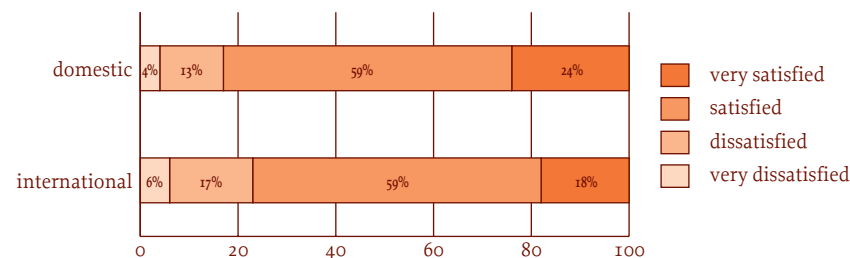


Figure 2b:
Accommodation quality: satisfaction by international/domestic (by percentage)



(Source: Cubo/i-Graduate report 2008)

The extent of the importance-satisfaction gap for these elements is a point of significant concern for the sector, particularly as it reveals a markedly worse position than for UK student ratings.

Part of the purpose of this guidance is to help institutions raise ratings for accommodation cost and quality among international students and so to narrow the gap between the high importance they attach to accommodation and their relatively low satisfaction with the product, facilities and services they are provided with.

Long-term economic downturn

The global recession which began in 2008 has created long-term downward pressure on the UK economy. These forces have and, it is likely, will continue to have a number of effects for HEIs:

- government real-term cuts in funding for the sector
- government cuts in funded student numbers
- a response across the sector to replace some of the lost income
 - a) by growing international student numbers, which are not regulated and
 - b) by setting international student fees towards the top of the global price list (again, unregulated)
- a weak pound currently benefiting UK exports such as international student intake

There is concern that international students will only continue to come to the UK at current price levels if institutions provide an excellent service for them in every aspect of provision, including accommodation. There is a danger that expanding the international student sector might, with little or no enhancement of resources devoted to educational and support services, have the effect of degrading the international student experience. (This is likely to become more significant if, as anticipated, the drive to grow international student recruitment draws in some students requiring considerably greater support and assistance with the transition to study in the UK.) In times when the pound may be stronger in the exchange markets, UK institutions may come to be perceived by existing and prospective international students as an expensive option, supported by services spread too thinly.

A perception of the UK as an expensive option can only be reinforced by already high rental costs for purpose-built student accommodation rising further.

Additionally, there is evidence of pressure from lenders on private sector providers to improve revenue. Similarly, HEI finance directors are increasingly concerned to see not just a break-even position on residential operations but also a surplus returned to the core institutional budget (NUS/Unipol 2010).

Set against these pressures is the prospect that future affordability of accommodation may turn out to be a critical factor in keeping international student numbers buoyant.

The vulnerability of UK institutions in the international market may not be just about maintaining the level of current service. The revival of the USA's popularity as a student destination post-9/11, the sustained popularity of Australia and the emergence of HE courses taught in English across continental Europe may pose added threats to market share. In this environment it is vital that institutions look to reassessing what it is that they do for the full spectrum of international students in providing accommodation and associated services.

The consequences of neglecting the quality of service and affordability of the product supporting this income stream is of particular significance as HEIs

become more financially reliant on the international market. For the year 2007-08 a recalculation by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) put the figure of international students in the UK at 513,570, counted on the basis of nationality rather than domicile. This was over 100,000 more than previously thought.

Scope and methodology

Preparation of this guide has not included any new market research. It relied, crucially, on the good will and enthusiasm of staff across the UK education sector in sharing experiences and good practice. This was solicited and secured through two seminars convened for this purpose. The first seminar included a focus on the position in London; the second seminar included a focus on further education.

Invitation and attendance was broad-based, including representation from across the UK and from HEIs, FECs, student representative bodies and relevant voluntary organisations. Although a range of private providers (ie major commercial operators typically supplying student accommodation to the sector in the form of large complexes) were invited to attend, representation was low. This reflects one of the themes of this guidance – the importance of raising the quality of partnership working between education institutions and private providers to ensure choice and affordability for the broad range of requirements which international students have.

Case studies were commissioned on the basis of the debate generated within the seminars.

This guidance also relies on the existing body of research and literature available. In addition to the CUBO/i-graduate report cited earlier as a catalyst for this guidance, key among these are:

- *Broadening our horizons* (UKCISA 2004), a major and wide-ranging piece of research into the international student experience, much of which continues to have relevance today
- *The international student experience report* (Unite 2006)
- *A UK guide to enhancing the international student experience* (UK Higher Education International Unit/i-graduate 2010)
- *Accommodation costs survey 2009-10* (NUS/Unipol 2010)

This guidance draws substantially on the findings of these survey reports.

It is focused on matters relating directly to international students and their accommodation. It does not extend into mainstream pastoral activities, more properly the concern of other dedicated student support services – except where issues arise out of or affect the accommodation setting.

London, the FE sector, students with dependants and international students with disabilities represent constituencies with specific sets of issues. For this reason, they have their own chapter.

Much of the guidance offered in this document is about good practice achievable at no or marginal cost. However, reinvestment cannot be ignored as a major supporting factor for improving the experience which international students have in relation to accommodation and associated services.

Diversity in UK education

Students

The expression ‘international students’ is a broad categorisation which subsumes a high level of diversity, for instance in cultural, linguistic, religious, pedagogical, social and vocational backgrounds; in age, level of study, personal circumstances and financial means; in tastes, preferences, needs and interests; and in personal motivations for, and expectations of, studying abroad. For some purposes the expression remains of use; for others the guidance will aim for greater specificity. This diversity is the focus of Chapter 2.

‘International students’ also carries an important dual meaning in the education sector. In its inclusive sense it denotes all students who are not UK or ‘home’ students. In its more economically instrumental sense it refers to students from outside the European Union whom institutions are able to charge significantly higher tuition fees. This guide uses the former sense, as any student from outside the UK, regardless of fee status may face similar issues relating to distance from home and a lack of familiarity with UK norms and practices around accommodation.

Institutions

UK education institutions which recruit international students are diverse in their organisational characteristics, traditions, location types, infrastructures and student profiles. They also differ in their internal politics, culture, wealth, educational level (FE and HE) and academic reputation.

Accommodation

Available accommodation provision will vary from one institution to another, both in type and mix. The profile for a UK institution is likely to include some of these elements of provision:

1. accommodation purpose-built and run by the institution
2. accommodation managed by the institution but owned by a third party
3. accommodation owned by the institution but managed by a third-party agent

4. large-scale complexes purpose-built by major commercial providers, some or all of which may be allocated directly by institutions through formal partnership arrangements
5. head-leasing schemes where institutions underwrite bed spaces in privately owned off-street housing in return for direct allocation rights
6. shared houses within the community let by private landlords
7. hostels run by commercial operators (predominantly a feature of the London marketplace)
8. accommodation provided by voluntary organisations set up for the purpose, and offering a socially engineered community focused on the value of cultural exchange (mainly located in London)
9. homestay schemes, where individual students (almost entirely from overseas) pay a fee to a family in return for a room and catering in their home

Given this high level of variability, users of this guidance may need to adapt its application to the specific landscape which their institution occupies.

Chapter 2. What is significant about international students in terms of service provision?

This brief review of needs and preferences is intended to prepare the ground for trying to make sense in subsequent chapters of what it is that needs to be put in place to support international students better in relation to accommodation.

Accommodation: importance and satisfaction

As described earlier there is a significant gap in ratings of importance and satisfaction, which is one of the key starting points for this guidance (see Chapter 1 for detail).

Money

International students are often self-funding, which makes them particularly conscious about what they are getting for their money. In the 2004 UKCISA survey “international students were acutely aware of the cost of their education, not surprisingly given that 71% were paying their own fees, wholly or in part (62% of EU students and 74% of non-EU students)”. For the period covered by that research, the figures for self-funding disaggregated as:

- 95% for pre-HE students
- 85% for undergraduates
- 79% for taught postgraduates
- 30% for research postgraduates

Added to this, tuition fees for students from outside the EU are substantially higher. Non-EU students often reconcile this disparity in cost through expectations of a higher quality of product and service.

There is a minority of international students who come from wealthy backgrounds. However, most, particularly those from developing countries, are on a tighter budget. Currency exchange rates do not generally favour students from most of the countries that form the traditional recruiting grounds for UK institutions. In the UKCISA survey 23% of respondents considered that they did not have enough money to live on. Students with dependants were particularly likely to report hardship. The two main reasons given for financial difficulties were the cost of living being higher than they had budgeted for (72%) and exchange rate fluctuations (50%). It is also worth noting here that international students do not have access to any public funds in the UK in the form of student support or benefits. For international students with dependants there is evidence of widespread shock about the level of childcare costs in the UK (NUS 2009).

For some international students a UK education entails a heavy financial sacrifice not just by them but also by their families. Currently, half of all international students in the UK rely in some part on their families to support their studies and a further quarter are self-funding (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010). More than for most UK students, education is a high-cost investment on which there is pressure to make a worthwhile return.

“... many international students will have borrowed heavily from friends and relatives in order to afford their UK studies; their overseas education represents a huge investment by family/community, and they are expected to repay the investment on their return. This places students under huge pressure to achieve academically, and do what they can to reduce the burden on their family by living frugally and seeking part-time work” (Bailey 2006).

For these reasons international students – both EU and non-EU – tend to place a greater emphasis on value for money.

Study

The study calendar and accommodation needs of international students are less likely to fit the standard academic and letting years. They often need:

- short-stay accommodation (for immediate post-arrival; as a stop-gap pending house-hunting and longer-term arrangements; or for short courses)
- flexible tenancy lengths – for non-standard course start and finish times which do not map squarely on to the standard letting year; for extensions for writing-up (research students); and for bridging a gap between completion of studies and graduation ceremonies
- vacation housing and related services, including catering, security and contingencies for support in the event of emergency

Socialising

For many international students alcohol is not a social norm (60% of non-EU students spend nothing on alcohol (Unite 2006)), whereas for many home students it occupies an important place in socialising.

“A number of respondents commented negatively about the prevalence of heavy drinking and the role of alcohol in social activities in the UK. It is clear that some international students find the drinking culture in the UK a barrier to integration. This also comes up for example in the MORI report (2002) and the report on students in the East Midlands” (Rawson 2004) (UKCISA 2004).

This disjuncture in socialising habits is for one or more of these reasons: cultural background

- religious background
- a greater focus on study
- relative maturity – international students tend to be older than their UK counterparts (37% are age 25 or older compared to UK students at 15%) though this is mainly due to the higher concentration of postgraduate students (59% of the international postgraduate students are at least 25 years of age) (Unite 2006).

International students often have alternative needs to support socialising, including more food-focused social interaction at home. Many would also prefer quieter accommodation.

Ensuite provision

For many international students, pre-arrival, ensuite facilities are not just a strong preference but a firm expectation, a necessary amenity. For some, this preference may endure – particularly amongst students who value being able to perform ritual washing in private as part of their religious observances, and for those who simply value their privacy more highly. However, there is a complex interplay of supply and demand in relation to ensuite facilities which will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 7.

Food preparation

Some international students (and for that matter, some home students) will have specific, religious requirements for food preparation. Meeting these requirements is likely to involve the provision of non-standard kitchen amenities.

Reliance on the institution

International students are particularly reliant on their institution to meet their accommodation needs. There are a number of factors which converge to make this the case.

Expectation

Non-UK domiciled students generally expect that institutions will offer them accommodation in their own portfolio (or in directly-allocated accommodation in the commercial sector) for the first year of their studies. A survey of all students in Nottingham in 2008 (covering 5,264 students of whom 1,190 were international) showed that 31% of international students had a clear preference for institutionally-allocated purpose-built accommodation compared with only 16% of home students (Survey Unit, University of Nottingham 2008).

This expectation is at least in part created by most institutions working hard to make significant if not full provision for first-year international students.

Table 1:

Accommodation preferences for UK and non-UK students in Nottingham 2008

	Accommodation type preference			
	UK student		Non-UK student	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strong preference for private rented house/flat	1,639	48	420	38
Slight preference for private rented house/flat	795	23	184	17
No preference for either private rented house/flat or larger student development	385	11	159	14
Slight preference for larger student development	315	9	154	14
Strong preference for larger student development	249	7	191	17
Total	3,383		1,108	

There is anecdotal evidence from accommodation practitioners in the HE sector of a growing expectation amongst international students that a guarantee of institutionally-allocated accommodation will extend to the full student lifecycle. Again, this is partly attributable to some institutions making the running to gain a competitive edge.

Safety, security and a sense of home

Almost all international students rate “feeling safe and secure” as important and two-thirds rate it as very important. Concerns about safety are somewhat greater for non-EU students and there is a strong correlation between importance ratings and cultural difference from the UK (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010).

People generally feel less secure in places they don't know. This is true for UK students living away from home. But for international students anxiety about social isolation and safety and security in what is an alien environment for them is heightened. Being in an institutionally-allocated complex can help to allay these types of concerns.

Many international students will strongly associate safety with how near their accommodation is to their place of study. Given the level of their concern in this area, they are likely to be unwilling to live somewhere which is either not close or which does not have good transport links. There is also an aspect to this of being socially connected. Even in London there is reluctance to live anywhere which involves more than thirty minutes' travelling time.

Eight out of 10 international students rate transport links between university locations as important. UK students are less concerned (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010).

Living in an institutional complex

International students often have a strong wish, initially at least, to locate their lives squarely at the heart of their education provider. They can have a strong inclination to be 'institutionalised', including within their institution's accommodation (or in directly-allocated accommodation in the commercial sector), and preferably in a complex rather than small units.

Ready-made community

More even than their UK peers, international students have strong expectations that being in an institutionally-allocated complex will provide a ready-made community for them to move into and become part of, and will serve as a basis for constructing a social world for themselves.

As a foreign student I prefer a student-only development that has a sense of community as a way to meet people and make friends. If I were a British student, and not worried about being alone in a new country, I would probably prefer private housing.

I'd rather live surrounded with people, makes me feel safer and less lonely, since I'm already an international student coming far away from home to study all the way here.

(Survey Unit, University of Nottingham 2010)

Remoteness

Generally international students do not have an opportunity to visit and view accommodation options and to evaluate and compare what is available. They are significantly more likely to worry about accommodation, particularly pre-arrival (UKCISA 2004). They will have little or no background knowledge or understanding of what is 'acceptable'. They have no basis for trusting

unknown accommodation providers and their best bet is to rely for quality and value for money on the reputation of their education institution. The product is all about reassurance.

Challenges and welfare support needs

The challenges of living in a foreign culture are wide-ranging and can include "racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness etc" at a time when international students may be having to get to grips with the "problems of late-adolescents/young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence" (Furnham 1997). Many international students at some point face a degree of culture shock, exhibiting itself in feelings of "powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self and social estrangement, and social isolation" (Furnham 1997).

Welfare services are in place in all institutions, to a greater or lesser degree, to help international students with these challenges. Some international students are personally or culturally predisposed to make use of the welfare services which they need, which they recognise they need and which their institution offers them. Many are not. Getting the latter to access and make the most of support services is a long-standing issue for many institutions. Those international students who do use them are likely to take more staff time for a variety of reasons. If international students are housed within the institution they may have a better sense of connectedness, feel closer to its support structures and be more likely to use them.

International students, like other students, may direct their support needs to accommodation staff (for example wardens or college tutors), at least as a first port of call for subsequent referral.

Culture shock and related issues and possible responses within the accommodation setting are addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Arrival

International students are generally more reliant on their institution in the arrival and getting-settled phases, given that they do not often have the support of family at hand, they may not have sorted out short- or longer-term accommodation and they are having to navigate their way through processes and settings in an alien environment and often in a language which is not their first. Some will make non-standard demands of the service, for example by arriving unavoidably out of office hours or before or after their due arrival date.

Customer care

International student satisfaction levels with their dealings with institutional accommodation offices are in line with international comparators at 77% (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010). Nonetheless there are some aspects of service delivery for international students which institutions need to keep in view.

Some international students will have different expectations of customer service and different cultural norms for courtesy (particularly around perceptions of respect for women). This can result in dissatisfaction with a service.

Many international students find complaining or raising issues difficult, partly out of a cultural disinclination to offend, partly because of lack of confidence in English and partly because of a poor understanding of UK-type complaints processes and procedures, and rights and responsibilities established in them.

These students may not be exclusively from outside the EU.

Support in house-hunting

International students who know they are not going to be placed in institutionally-allocated accommodation will still require and expect a high level of institutional support in getting them housed, either in the private or voluntary sector or with a host family. The same applies to returning international students not remaining in institutionally-allocated accommodation.

Students with families

International students account for most students with dependants who need housing. For example, of the 197 families housed by Unipol in Leeds, 91% were international students (2010 figure) and this is likely to be indicative of other cities. The lifestyle for this category of students and their needs tend to diverge radically from other students. They are dealt with as a special case in Chapter 8.

Points for further consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- international students do not represent a homogeneous group and should not be treated as one, just as UK-domiciled students do not fit into a single group
- the needs and preferences of international students are diverse and in many cases will diverge from UK first-year undergraduates. Market research and actions taken on the basis of research need to keep this diversity in view

Chapter 3. Pre-departure

Managing expectations

The phase before international students arrive at their destination institution is critical in framing and shaping their expectations. It is worth remembering that dissatisfaction levels are a function not only of the quality of the product students have signed up for but also of how high education (and accommodation) providers pitch the expectations of their customers. Their lack of knowledge and understanding of the reality of UK institutions and their host towns and cities makes international students particularly vulnerable to forming hopes and impressions which exceed what they are going to find on arrival.

For these reasons managing expectations pre-arrival through effective communication is an essential aspect of reducing dissatisfaction.

Communication with international students and particularly prospective international students contains a tension between selling and informing. This may tighten as UK institutions work harder to grow their international student numbers in an era of government HE funding cuts in other areas. The objectives in communicating to this category of students will differ between the marketing function and service providers. This difference can be marked in the case of hired recruitment agents.

Written and recorded information

Written and recorded information intended for international students pre-arrival can be transmitted in a number of media, including:

- hard copy publications (prospectuses and brochures)
- mailings (hard copy and electronic)
- webpages
- email
- text messaging
- social networking sites
- DVDs
- online videos
- podcasts
- virtual tours

It is important for institutions to keep abreast of the media in which students prefer to access information as new communication technology emerges, and to make use of it. Tapping into new media earlier can help to break down the

perception widely held amongst new students that they get indigestible volumes of information all at once:

“... more telling is the result that they [international students] had a very clear preference for receiving information about accommodation electronically – which could suggest that immediacy and accessibility of information are as much the issue as any particular piece of information” (Unite 2006)

Before I arrived I was sent a handbook and a description of my accommodation. It wasn't very helpful. I found it easier to spend time on the web, not listen to any others and just try to find out for myself.

Chinese PhD student (Unite 2006)

The commissioning, copywriting, design, packaging and mailing of information will be influenced or dictated by the institution's internal organisation of:

- accommodation services
- the 'international office' function
- marketing/recruitment
- admissions
- communications
- media production services

Internal organisation and processes may vary, but there are a number of pieces of good practice which apply generally.

Internal communication and collaboration

It is essential that accommodation practitioners retain proper control of what is written about institutional accommodation for the consumption of international students and prospective international students. Sound communication and collaboration between all offices involved are preconditions for:

- ensuring consistency in information produced on accommodation for international students
- ensuring that expectations are brought into line with reality
- achieving consensus across services on all related copy to manage the tension between selling and informing
- co-ordinating the publication and dissemination of information so that international students get the right information at the right points in the cycle ensuring user-friendly linkage between web pages for different internal services. This may include cross-publicising direct lines for further queries, which can reduce the scope for misdirected calls and for the provision of information which is not wholly accurate or adequate.

Clarity

Information – promotional or practical – should be clear, concise, unambiguous, accurate, up to date, and in plain English. In aiming for plain English, care should be taken not to slip into commonly used metaphors and vernacular or colloquial English. This may be even more difficult for non-native speakers to decipher than convoluted or complex English.

Bespoke information

Accommodation practitioners who do not do it already should give consideration to producing information packaged specifically for international students (for instance dedicated webpages, podcasts, brochures and handbooks). This can help to ensure that the right facts and the right messages are getting to the target audience, and to avoid confusion with conflicting information provided to home students. It is also good for making international students feel that they are valued customers.

Practitioners should consider tailoring and contextualising information for specific countries, given what was noted in Chapter 2 about the heterogeneity of international students.

Transparency: the importance of providing comprehensive information

Many institutions report that this is a particularly information-hungry client group, who are prepared to put time and effort into researching choices available to them. They are also interested in comparability and benchmarking. The blog (see text box overleaf), posted by an international student shortly after arriving in his accommodation, illustrates the point – and in frank terms.

Putting the information up front on the institution's website, ideally room by room, can help manage expectations and control any resentment.

The available accommodation options should be set out as plainly and fully as possible – online accommodation floorplans, site plans, local maps and video walkthroughs are all helpful in informing choice. So-called 360 degree spins have become popular but in reality present a distorted and unnatural view of a space and what fills it – it is not the way that someone looks at a room when they enter it.

Institutions should also aim for complete transparency in processes, policies and other formal documents. This means not just making them available on request or limiting their availability to mailshots through the course of the marketing-recruitment-arrival cycle. It means putting them on the institution's website in a readily accessible place and providing links from the accommodation web pages. Some students will want to have a look at the detail of the deal before the institution decides when they need to have it drawn explicitly to their attention. It is a reasonable expectation on the student's part to be able to do this.

Hello. I'm officially blogging from XXXX.

I have settled in, bought my stuff, unpacked, etc. And I'm alone.

Oh well.. The people here are nice. Haven't spoken to that many yet because nothing has begun. No enrolment, no housemates.. Sigh. Anyways, let's talk about accommodation this time around, right? Let's compare the accommodation in YYYY and in XXXX University.

1. The opened door

[Photo 1a]

[Photo 1b]

The left is what you get in XXXX. Open the door, and you see all. On the right, is YYYY.

2. The slumber place

[Photo 2a]

[Photo 2b]

The beds in XXXX are surprisingly similar to that of YYYY's. Hence not very comfortable. I expected more from the beds

3. The workstation

[Photo 3a]

[Photo 3b]

Yeap. I prefer YYYY 's one. Everything is just more quality than XXXX's... the chairs are just incomparable. XXXX's chair is plastic s**t, and made to fit Asian asses. But those here, are made of wood, have a very comfy foam seating, and made for large European asses. When my ass is comfy I would be too.

4. Eau de toilette

[Photo 4a]

[Photo 4b]

XXXX's bathroom seems bigger. However, where cleanliness is concerned.. It's totally different. Try comparing KL streets public toilet to a Mandarin Oriental. It's that different.

(Quoted in i-Graduate presentation 2010)

If there is an organisational reflex not to share some of this documentation (for example, the allocations policies and batching processes), it should be remembered that under freedom of information legislation anyone who makes a request is entitled to be given this information anyway, and, once given, it is in the public domain. The institution is unlikely to have any grounds in law for refusing. If practitioners are apprehensive about disclosure or transparency, they should reflect on why that is. Perhaps the documentation would not stand up to close scrutiny. Perhaps it does not comply fully with other university policies or legal requirements. Transparency and public availability can help in the management of expectations, reduce resentment and save staff time taken in explaining over the phone or face-to-face what a particular policy or process is.

Before I came I had no information about accommodation and no idea which location is best. I had no idea where the accommodation was in relation to the university and the maps weren't much help. More information would have been good. I would have liked to have a comparison. Which is best depending on your choice criteria, eg Location, quiet, cheapest.

Hong Kong Masters student (Unite 2006)

Case study

To help manage new international students' expectations of the physical residential environment, Anglia Ruskin University – as well as having glossy marketing brochures – provides estate-agent-style 'property details' sheets when sending out offers of accommodation. These include an external photograph of properties, and, in the case of dispersed smaller houses, a floor plan. This illustrates, for example, whether there is a communal living room, as well as relative bedroom sizes and the location of the bathrooms. In the future ARU hopes to make available internal photos of all rooms and core communal facilities in all properties.

Feedback

Questions asked by international students or prospective students before they arrive are often answered adequately in an institution's literature already – they may not have looked hard enough for it or they may just want the reassurance of having it confirmed by a representative of the institution in the here and now (see later section in this chapter on establishing a dialogue). On the other hand, if there is a pattern of students asking the same or similar questions, it is possible that the literature:

- does not address the matter
- addresses it inadequately

- is not prominent enough
- is difficult to navigate to
- is in the wrong format

It is therefore important to log and review pre-arrival questions or concerns raised by students to fill any gaps or adjust copy for the following cycle. In particular, the log will be a useful resource in building frequently asked questions sheets and web pages. Compiling pre-emptive questions and answers helps customers and establishes their confidence. It can also be a valuable up-to-date resource for staff (particularly temporary staff) engaging with students, and for recruitment agents.

Peer-to-peer communication

However transparent an institution is about the provision available and however thorough it is in producing comprehensive information, it is helpful – even a growing need – for prospective students to have access to the views of existing students or recent graduates about their experience of living in accommodation, of whatever type. Institutions can facilitate this themselves by offering space on their website for these purposes, including for blogging. Sometimes the use of the students' union website can lend added credence in the eyes of the prospective student.

The value of peer-to-peer communication can be further enhanced by making it two-way. Some institutions and students' unions encourage and facilitate the exchange of information and views on accommodation and other aspects of student living through the use of social networking sites, including Facebook and regional equivalents. Some institutions have established peer-to-peer social media network groups which can be a valuable vehicle for prospective students:

- to gather information
- to evaluate options
- to form judgements
- to begin to form friendships with other prospective students due to attend the same institution
- to form groups wishing to share accommodation either in the private rented sector or in institutionally-allocated accommodation (where institutional allocations policy allows)

The provision of a web facility for social networking of this kind is likely to become a firm expectation in the near future.

Translation and interpretation

Before providing promotional, practical or formal material in translation, practitioners should give consideration to the advantages and disadvantages of providing multilingual formats. The benefits include:

- possible improvement to the institution's recruitment effort and its intake
- giving prospective students a more ready understanding of what is on offer

- making information accessible to other significant parties, for example parents, family, sponsors, who may not speak English
- making students and prospective students feel more valued as customers

On the negative side:

- the scope for imperfect translation can lead to confusion, misunderstanding and, worse, claims of misrepresentation arising from documents, statements or promises which do not match the legally binding English version from which they were derived
- translation into one or two languages can lead to unmanageable demands for translation into other languages and be perceived as discriminatory and preferential
- maintaining up-to-date publications and web pages in more than one language is challenging and resource-heavy
- translation can also give rise to public perceptions that institutions are prepared to admit students with limited English which does not equip them to be successful on their course. Some institutions have a firm policy against translation to drive home the point that all students must be capable of succeeding in a course delivered, examined and assessed in English.

Some institutions use small amounts of translated material to lend additional warmth to the welcome, and this can be effective. Multilingual formats are also successfully used to help guide students round the site map and for glossaries (although legal terms should never be translated into supposed equivalents).

Notwithstanding this cautionary note, in some cases practitioners may find it necessary to translate (possibly for reasons of statutory compliance or to discharge fully a common law duty of care) – for instance pro formas on parental consent for safeguarding purposes where a student is under 18 and fire evacuation protocols intended for people other than the students themselves, including co-habiting family members.

Managing the information feed

We have recommended above that as much information as possible is placed on institutional web pages for international students and prospective international students to look at when they want. This level of transparency is not only good practice in itself, it may also serve as a 'control' on some of the views expressed in peer-to-peer forums.

Alongside this, however, practitioners will want to package information for carefully timed mailing at relevant points in the cycle to maximise its effect and solicit responses from applicants or students when these are needed. For good practice purposes and for legal purposes (for certain types of information), it is not acceptable to rely on students accessing information posted on a website, at least without it being explicitly drawn to their attention.

In selecting information and compiling it for mailing, practitioners will, of course, be mindful of possible information overload for some prospective students, and need to give careful consideration to the balance of what students are sent pre-arrival and what they are given on arrival. (In some instances it may be necessary to do both.)

A checklist of items to cover in pre-departure mailing/accommodation web pages can be found at Appendix A.

Recruitment agents

Some institutions use freelance recruitment agents and some do not. It is worth remembering that these agents, whilst often critical in the recruitment of international students, are generally paid on a commission basis. They also work quite remotely from the institution and are reliant on good communication channels to ensure that they are in possession of the right, up-to-date information to pass on to students and prospective students. Agents should be given information about the whole cross-section of accommodation available. They should be tested to see that they know what is available and that they are not marketing parts of the portfolio negatively. Ideally, although not always possible, agents should actually visit the properties from time to time.

Some institutions have recruitment offices in a small number of key recruitment countries/regions. Where this is the case it is usually easier to forge and maintain a closer relationship and more effective communications between institution and agent. If an institution has offices overseas it is important to maximise this advantage to establish and keep control of information disseminated about accommodation.

If an institution operates with freelance recruitment agents in countries where it has no other institutional presence, care should be taken to ensure that brochures and web-based information are fully comprehensive and current, and to emphasise to agents the importance of using this, and referring students to it, as the seminal source of information.

In some institutions recruitment agents will be required to pay a routine visit back to base, perhaps annually. This is a useful opportunity to give them a refresher session on what accommodation is available and on what basis, and to bring them up to date on any developments. The message can be reinforced that if students have any questions they should contact the accommodation office direct. Dedicated hotlines and email addresses are useful for these purposes.

These steps should help preserve a close match between expectations and the reality of what is being offered.

Case study

De Montfort University focuses on certain international target markets for student recruitment and often uses well-established education agents to help recruit those students. As for most other HEIs in the UK, agents often represent more than one, if not many, universities from the UK and other countries. This means that agents will at best often have some overview of their client universities and their selling points but will not know about detailed procedures or issues at a particular HEI.

Moreover, the distance and time-difference between the institution in the UK and its recruitment countries makes it difficult to update agents other than through emails, webpages or Skype conferences. Accommodation and the welcoming atmosphere and support for international students at a university are particularly difficult to convey remotely. Therefore De Montfort University started some years ago to arrange for key agents and partners at certain times of the year to attend for agent training days/weeks. The dates generally centre around other important events at the institution, such as fashion shows at the Faculty of Art & Design, and involve a range of activities, for instance touring university accommodation, meeting faculties and student services staff.

Training visits now form an integral part of De Montfort's work with agents.

Establishing a dialogue

However comprehensive pre-arrival information is, some students will still want information directly from a member of staff at the institution. This may be because students are having difficulties in pinpointing or understanding the information in what has already been made available to them. Equally, it may be because they feel a need to make direct contact. For some, an email or text message exchange will serve their needs. For others, having a conversation over the phone is important. This is about reassurance and institutions should respond to this need, for example by taking on and training temporary staff and setting up a dedicated institutional email address and a phone hotline for such purposes.

Managers need to understand that this is not unproductive staff time and that it serves an important need. Staff similarly need to retain focus on callers as individual customers and to lend a listening ear and a voice of reassurance. Some institutions go as far as to arrange for members of staff who can act as interpreters to be on hand to refer phone calls to, although as pointed out above, use of languages other than English carries certain risks.

Case study

Anglia Ruskin University has launched a residential introduction module as part of its pre-arrival online induction programme. This guides students through a number of sub-modules designed to help them understand various support mechanisms in place for them. The first sub-module introduces student participants to university personnel in the Accommodation Office and other core support services such as security and student services. Subsequent sub-modules provide core information on fire safety and contract terms, and there are also sub-modules available covering healthy living and nutrition. The final sub-module encourages students to book an arrivals slot, which helps the project team to ensure relevant levels of staffing at different times throughout the arrivals period. This includes links to book airport pickup and an opportunity to confirm attendance on the international students' orientation programme.

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- make sure that pre-arrival information is transparent, full and up front
- provide pre-arrival information in a range of media, maximising the use of evolving technologies in which students prefer to access information
- provide for the growing expectation that students will be able to communicate and share information and views with existing students and recent alumni through social networking facilities
- keep in touch with recruitment agents and keep them up to date

Chapter 4. Arrival and orientation

Welcome programmes

Institutions often put considerable effort into international student arrivals and for good reason: getting the relationship right at the start can serve to allay anxieties and obviate or remove longer-term problems and sources of dissatisfaction. It is all about first impressions.

Welcome programmes are likely to be led by a service other than accommodation – usually the international student support function, if an institution has one. Guidance provided here is not intended as a resource for staff organising institutional welcome and orientation programmes generally. Its concerns are limited to arrival and orientation within the context of accommodation for students. Detailed information and guidance on orientation is the subject of a sister UKCISA good practice guide: *Planning and running orientation programmes for international students*. Mentoring, a significant activity to support welcome and orientation, is also the subject of a UKCISA good practice guide: *Mentoring schemes for international students: a practical guide*.

Managing arrival: the role of accommodation services

The welcome phase for international students is an important aspect of the work of accommodation practitioners. Its focus is on getting newly arrived students to their accommodation (long-term, temporary or emergency) as quickly as possible and settling them in.

The evidence from new research is that “85% of international students have a favourable view of the arrival experience, although only one in ten are very satisfied ... Domestic students are even more satisfied overall (90%) than their international counterparts, and they are much more likely to be very satisfied (28%) with the arrival experience. This suggests that opportunities exist for universities to improve service levels for international students in this regard” (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010).

A key point of difference between international and home students in their arrival experience is what happens when they leave their transport. Home students generally arrive directly at their accommodation or, if they are not using personal transport, they are usually equipped to make the journey from their travel terminus to their accommodation with relative ease.

International students will often arrive at their airport or railway terminus disoriented by an unfamiliar environment and by jetlag. It has become established good practice – and an expectation of international students – that institutions provide some sort of meet-and-greet service. (For smaller institutions and for arrivals at non-standard times in the year, the role of meeting, greeting and transporting may be assigned to taxi drivers by arrangement with the institution.) Whatever the level of meet-and-greet service provided, there should be clarity in pre-arrival information about how it works, whether users of the service need to book in advance, how to recognise whoever has been assigned to meet them and how far the service extends. For instance, students should be informed of whether they can expect a minibus service to ferry them from their terminus to their accommodation; but, equally, they need to know if the institution's service is limited to helping with directions and organising a taxi, or whatever its limits are. It should be noted that, increasingly, an institutional shuttle to residences or to the accommodation office is becoming the new standard of good practice, although the position in London is different.

For institutions, the logistical exercise of meeting and greeting and either directing or relaying international students to their accommodation is an area in which problems may arise and which may account for (some of) the difference in international/home student satisfaction. In particular, international students may arrive:

- out-of-office hours, for example because of limited choice in flight times or delays
- days or weeks before the start of their induction programme or course, perhaps because they want to get a head-start in settling in or because they have no longer-term accommodation arrangements in place and need to sort these out
- days or weeks after they were due to attend induction or the start of their course for a variety of reasons (for example, visa-processing delays)

There are a number of steps that institutions can take to minimise the possibility of new arrivals being stranded.

Above all, it is essential that there is close collaboration between the accommodation office and the international office or whichever function is leading the arrival project. This collaboration should extend back into the planning stages of the project to ensure that resources, staffing, responsibilities, timetables, training and process linkage are agreed and properly provided for.

Out-of-hours arrivals may be reduced and difficulties experienced by out-of-hours arrivals may be mitigated by pre-arrival information or online pre-departure briefing which:

- strongly publicises the hours within which the institution's meet-and-greet service operates
- makes clear when and how accommodation keys can be collected and suggests what students can do if arriving out of office hours (especially in the case of unforeseen travel delays), eg emergency contacts and accommodation options eg local hotels
- includes web links to travel timetables
- emphasises the importance of notifying the institution in advance of anticipated time and place of arrival
- shows students, both in the form of a web video, DVD or podcast and in hard copy (for the purposes of portability), the way from each major travel terminus to each of the institutionally-allocated residential complexes
- includes a strong and prominent message that students must know where they will stay on their first night in the UK
- sets out how much cash (sterling) they will need to cover their first night's accommodation (if they are coming without any firm plans or bookings or as a contingency) plus other immediate costs

Some institutions find that operating a booking system for airport and rail pickups helps to manage the meet-and-greet process. An online facility to do this should be made available.

A 24-hour hotline for new arrivals is a particularly effective way of minimising the possibility of them getting stranded. Budgetary provision for this level of service may, however, be beyond the means of some welcome projects.

A one-stop shop solution can be an effective way to manage the logistical challenge and to increase international student satisfaction with the arrival experience.

It is important to remember to provide, for immediate use, toilet rolls, some toiletries and perhaps a limited amount of food (particularly breakfast) for late night arrivals, as students do not immediately want to start unpacking in what is likely to be temporary accommodation.

Handling the high volume and spread of arrivals can extend many accommodation services to or beyond their capacity. In these circumstances it is essential that staff resources are drawn in from elsewhere. This is readily achievable where there is an integrated approach to welcome programme planning so that staff from various functions can be used to cross-subsidise peak work requirements. Student support can also be usefully mobilised through mentoring schemes or through a volunteer programme. When considering the use of 'volunteers', thought should be given to the benefits of paying students to support welcome programmes or devising some sort of system of benefits or rewards that they will

value. This may improve quality through better attendance, increased scope for securing their commitment to more in-depth training and a generally higher level of reliability.

Effective training for students/recent graduates and staff from other areas is a key to success. It is vital that adequate numbers of supporters of the welcome programme have received training in accommodation issues. It is helpful if the profile of the team reflects the institution's international student intake in diversity, at least to some extent.

Depending on the specific organisation of peak-time services within an institution, training may include being able to:

- provide answers to frequently asked questions
- pre-empt what to do with arriving students who fall into particular categories, for instance students who arrive with their families but with no accommodation booked (see Chapter 8) and students who need short-stay accommodation to tide them over until their tenancy starts
- provide detailed information on the range of short- and longer-term accommodation options
- provide referral options
- lend practical support in house-hunting, including what to look out for in properties and in contracts

They should also receive adequate training in customer service and diversity issues/cultural awareness.

In order to share and spread expertise in accommodation, some institutional accommodation offices find significant benefit in seconding a member of staff from their dedicated international support service or other function for peak business. A similar enhancement to the service might be achieved by focused development of one or more accommodation staff in international student support issues.

Just as many international students arrive early, many arrive late, at a time when staff working in accommodation services are growing tired and struggling to maintain a high level of service for international students, who are often demanding and/or in need of one-to-one attention. Steps should be taken to ensure that frontline staff get some respite so that they remain friendly, welcoming and fresh.

Case study

Unipol Student Homes and the University of Leeds (Accommodation Office and International Services) jointly employ two accommodation assistants to help international students find accommodation in the private sector during the peak arrival time in the summer. The accommodation assistants wear Leeds International Welcome Team T-shirts so that they are easily recognisable wherever they are working.

It was felt that if staff could be recruited and trained to work with international students for a short period of time then they would have the energy, focus and knowledge to provide a valuable service to welcome and support students in making the right choice of accommodation.

One assistant is employed from mid-August to mid-September and one starts on the same date but continues to work at the Unipol office to mid-October to ensure late arrivals are supported. The cost is split between Unipol and the University of Leeds. The assistants are students, normally international students who themselves have experienced finding accommodation after just arriving in Leeds.

The accommodation assistants bridge the International Office meet-and-greet scheme. Students are met at the airport/railway station by the University of Leeds meet-and-greet staff. They are taken to their university accommodation (if they have been allocated this pre-arrival) or placed in temporary accommodation. They are handed a leaflet about their options for accommodation and the service the accommodation assistants can give them.

The accommodation assistants discuss with the students the accommodation options and then help them find accommodation. The assistants are available at the temporary accommodation from 8.00am to 10.00am and again from 6.00pm to 8.00pm. The rest of the day they work in the Accommodation Office, Unipol or the International Office. The aim is that students will find accommodation within a couple of days.

The staff are fully trained in house-hunting by the University of Leeds and Unipol and in tenancy agreements by Leeds University Union Student Advice Centre.

Case study

Teesside University offers to collect new international students from either Durham Tees Valley or Newcastle airports. This service runs 24 hours a day all year round. New international students are encouraged to arrive in time to attend an orientation event the weekend before enrolment.

Students book the free meet-and-greet service in advance. The university confirms the arrangements and reassures them that a representative of Teesside will meet them on arrival. At the airport students are met and taken to their transport. If students have to wait until another flight comes in, soft drinks and snacks are provided.

Students are brought to the campus using a combination of a coach shuttle service and cars, depending on the date, time and location of their arrival. University staff accompany the students and are briefed to answer questions the students may have on what will happen in the first few days.

In addition to making this service as individual and as personal as possible, a key element to the success of the meet-and-greet service is liaison with the university's accommodation service. This ensures that staff know exactly where students need to go on arrival. If students have booked their own accommodation the university will accompany them into their accommodation to ensure that everything is fine.

About two weeks after they arrive and have settled in, students at Teesside are formally welcomed to the university by the Vice-Chancellor, and to Middlesbrough by the town's mayor. This is at an international student reception which includes a quiz, raffle, live music and, most importantly, free food. (UK Higher Education Unit 2010)

For dealing with international student arrivals at times other than the run-up to the start of the academic year, the challenges are less about volume and more about identifying those arrivals and achieving a similar level of service without critical mass. Given the growth of Semester 2 course starts, mini-arrival programmes may be viable – indeed, they may be an expectation and are increasingly a feature of academic calendars in many institutions. For international students arriving at other times, it is not likely, for practical and financial reasons, that an institution is going to be able to replicate the year start or Semester 2 start experience. Nonetheless, support for a meet-and-greet service for all international students and getting them settled in their accommodation should be planned and budgeted for, whatever time of year they arrive.

Case study

At Sheffield Hallam University international students, who are willing 'seniors' volunteer to act as mentors. They provide profiles of their experiences and are employed to co-ordinate transition activities and events – and are empowered by the experience. They help new arrivals to gain familiarity with a new place and find accommodation and appropriate sources of advice to resolve other practical problems. Volunteers share their experiences and encourage new students to join clubs and societies and support them if they are homesick. As trained mentors working with Student Services, they know about specialist services and where to refer students for guidance.

Getting settled

Feedback from some international students is that meet-and-greet services can merely defer the sense of dislocation to the moment when they enter the door to their accommodation. Some students would like meeters-and-greeters, mentors or site-based staff to show them the ropes in their accommodation, for instance, how appliances work – in particular how the heating works. (Bear in mind that some international students will not be familiar with heating systems generally.)

It is a good idea to train and refresh all student-facing staff in accommodation services, particularly in customer relations and diversity issues. This should be done annually, close to the time when most international students arrive. It should include wardens, residential officers, security, porters and cleaners. If any of these services are outsourced or if the accommodation is managed by a commercial partner or agent, institutions should make sure that expectations in this regard are dealt with in the procurement process for the contract.

The dislocation of being newly arrived can also be alleviated by providing international students with starter food packs and linen packs. Some institutions which provide these do so free of charge, others do not.

Short-stay provision and support in house-hunting

In Chapter 3 it was recommended that students are advised not to sign for accommodation with private landlords before they arrive. Having relayed this message to international students, it would be unfair to leave them unsupported in securing short-term accommodation either before they arrive or when they are met at their travel terminus.

Institutions should also be accepting and accommodating of students who already have longer-term accommodation sorted out but nonetheless are eager to get there early. It is advisable though to point out that premature arrival can leave them with not much to do and few people to engage with, unless they have met other, probably international, students online who also plan to arrive early.

As mentioned above, arrival programme staff should be equipped to lend effective support to students requiring short-term accommodation, or at least to refer them to someone who can (and who is available). Institutions should also have worked out a range of options for students in this position on arrival and worked out contingency plans to make sure they are placed in short-term or emergency accommodation quickly. Short-term storage for students' luggage should be planned and provided for on request.

Some institutions providing short-stay provision in their own portfolio do so free of charge, at least up to a specified maximum stay.

Newly-arrived international students placed in short-stay accommodation may network online as a matter of course, but institutions should make arrangements to facilitate this. For those still looking for shared accommodation e-networking can produce better quality house or flat mixes.

If they are in a position to provide it, the best practice for institutions to serve new arrivals without longer-term arrangements is to place them in institutional accommodation for a (flexible) short period and to use their co-location to focus house-hunting information and services and to build potential groups of accommodation sharers. Institutions will need to make a judgement as to whether the accommodation they have available for these purposes would be appropriate for students with families, even for a limited period. If it is not, they should either aim to provide a suitable alternative or be clear in advance that suitable short-term accommodation provided by the institution is limited or is not available.

A model checklist for use by international students in house-hunting is set out at Appendix B.

If an institution plans to rely on the private sector to meet short-stay needs, then it needs to monitor the extent to which this is being delivered, as short-stay availability is closely linked to the level of supply (over-supply) in the private sector. In a market where supply is short, institutions will need to intervene with their own solution.

Case study

The Accommodation Service at Sheffield Hallam University works with a range of internal and external stakeholders to provide outstanding customer service to international students. The office has a culture of continuous improvement that has led to a range of new initiatives.

The team provides cheap, flexible accommodation in catered halls when students arrive, which gives them time to find the right accommodation. It provides a range of information on accommodation in the city which is specifically designed for international students.

One of the most popular services for international students is the house-hunting service, for which students can register when their places are confirmed. Groups of 15 students are taken on a mini-bus to a range of private properties, which helps international students to familiarise themselves with the area and to find the right accommodation. This service also facilitates the development of new friendships so that students can sign up for houses together with people they are getting to know (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010).

Case study

At Canterbury Christ Church University homestay is one of the most popular types of accommodation for international students enrolled on English Language and other short courses.

The university values homestay as an accommodation product which meets particular needs, including short-stay provision, provision for more vulnerable students and as an effective basis for cultural exchange. Students can immerse themselves in English life and improve their grasp of the language at the same time. International students often prefer this family environment whilst getting to grips with a new culture. Students often choose this form of accommodation for the home comforts and family atmosphere that it offers. They are not simply renting a room, but expect to be treated as one of the family.

International students interested in homestay are offered four types of catering level (with escalating tariffs):

- bed and breakfast
- bed and breakfast with use of kitchen
- half board
- half board with weekend lunch

The student's requirements and preferences (for example, allergies, dislike of pets) are taken into account in the allocation process. The accommodation office establishes close working links with the provider families, and knows and understands them well. This enables them to achieve the best possible match. Students apply online, as they would for any other accommodation offered by the university.

The application process for becoming a host family involves:

- completion of a pro forma
- an assessment visit where the accommodation is checked for legal and regulatory compliance, including safety
- safeguarding checks
- the family's formal agreement to an institutional set of rules, including the requirement that no students with a common first language can reside at any one time
- the family's acceptance of the Accreditation UK Code of Practice for these purposes

Host families are visited regularly by a member of the university's accommodation team. Canterbury Christ Church University is accredited by the British Council and so has to meet the high standards of accommodation which its Accreditation UK scheme sets.

Guarantors

Many international students coming to the UK face the conundrum of needing a UK-based guarantor to secure accommodation in the private sector without being able to find one. Landlords can be wary of taking on international students as tenants because of the difficulties in tracking them down and getting them to pay up if the student has defaulted on their rent and left the country. In London, at least, where there is strong reliance on the private sector, institutions are gradually accepting that they need to take on the role of guarantor. Reports received from institutions which act in this capacity are that they have suffered negligible losses as a result.

Case study

University College London offers a guarantee scheme to enable students to take on accommodation that would not otherwise be available to them. The institutional guarantee is simply an undertaking by the institution to the student's potential landlord that the institution will guarantee any unpaid rent. Before the institution enters this type of agreement prospective occupants are required to sign a simple agreement and pay a small fee (currently £30 per person) to the institution. Potential landlords must be registered with the London Housing Service, fulfilling their quality control requirements. On average this scheme has been used by about 90 students a year over the past 10 years, encouraging some landlords to register their property and become more proactive in applying gas safety requirements.

In operating guarantor schemes institutions may be tempted to seek to maximise leverage by providing for the traditional sanction of refusing to re-enrol a student or withholding conferment of their award if they default on rent payments. However, it is important to note that the Office for Fair Trading views such sanctions or their threatened use as unfair under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999. The OFT's reasoning is that in operating sanctions of this kind an institution is abusing its dual role as education provider and accommodation provider. Institutions are advised to respect the OFT's position in this regard.

Institutions may also seek to maximise control over students under a guarantor scheme by making their conduct in their accommodation subject to the institution's general regulations and disciplinary code. However, caution should be exercised in extending the jurisdiction of the institution in this way, as the arrangements may contravene privacy law.

Contract-checking service

As a matter of good practice institutions – or their students' unions – should offer international students a contract-checking service to support them in house-hunting. Specifically, this service should include:

- explaining what the contract means
- advising on whether there are any clauses which should be removed
- drafting of amendments, if necessary
- guidance on negotiating tactics with landlords

Orientation in the accommodation setting

Although international students are likely to be directed and invited to many events in the early days and weeks, their first challenges in acclimatisation, adjustment and getting on with new people will be centred on life in their accommodation. For this reason there is a role for accommodation services to play in orientation in the immediate term.

Many institutional accommodation services stage orientation/social events, sometimes in collaboration with other services internally. Organisers of these events should be clear about their objectives. These may include:

- breaking the ice between new international students, particularly those living together or in close proximity
- breaking the ice between international and home students, particularly those living together or in close proximity
- introducing new international students to accommodation service staff (in particular site staff)
- enabling site staff to identify early on who is vulnerable, who may present challenges for site staff and co-residents, and who might be useful as agents of socialisation, integration and behaviour moderation
- facilitating cultural exchange between international students from different parts of the world
- facilitating cultural exchange between international and home students
- ensuring a captive audience for giving out important messages or for guest speakers, for instance fire officers, community police officers, crime prevention officers and security managers
- showing new international students examples of British culture

It is worth remembering to remove alcohol as a focus for social events as a significant number of those attending are likely to feel uncomfortable around its use (see Chapter 2).

There is consensus amongst staff who organise this type of event that, as social mixers, they work best when focused on participative games and activities, for example, quizzes and events which involve food preparation. These can have a cultural dimension, for instance quizzes with a British theme or making food from different international cuisines.

Feedback from students indicates preference for sit-down meals rather than buffets, because the former give more structure to social interaction and work against a natural inclination to stick with co-nationals.

The subject of institutional objectives in cultural exchange and the rise of the internationalisation agenda in HE will be looked at in more detail in the next chapter.

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union

- Collaborate closely with welcome event organisers and from an early stage to ensure that the meet-and-greet phase connects effectively with processes for getting students into and settled in their accommodation and for handling students who arrive at an 'irregular' time.
- Extend the initial welcome exercise to include showing students in institutionally allocated accommodation the ropes, including how the appliances work.
- Put in place arrangements for placing new arrivals with short-stay or emergency accommodation needs, preferably linked to house-hunting services.
- Review and evaluate the possibility of the institution acting as guarantor for international students who need to provide a guarantor to secure accommodation but are otherwise unable to do so.
- Organise early social events based on accommodation allocations with a view to stimulating integration between all types of resident students and site staff.

Chapter 5. The student mix: allocations and internationalisation

I hate the way accommodation office arrange [for] the Eastern students [to] live together and English students live in their culture. I come here to learn something new... not everything I have already know!!

Thai female postgraduate (UKCISA 2004)

I didn't come all the way from China to study in England just to be surrounded by other Chinese students all the time! I just wish they'd asked me what I'd prefer first.

Student juror (National Student Forum 2009)

The process of allocating

The allocation of students to bed spaces is about:

- matching an individual to their accommodation preferences or as close to them as possible (for example self-catering, no smoking, on-campus, below £X rent a year)
- achieving a mix of students within shared units that works or is likely to work

The first of these may present a short-term challenge and there will inevitably be some students who are disappointed and some who will push for release or transfer because they don't like what they have been given. As discussed in Chapter 3, many of these difficulties can be headed off by maximising transparency of the product and associated services and minimising the potential gap between expectation and reality.

The second of these is more challenging. Got right, it can produce harmonious units, happy, sociable students, lasting friendships and an enhanced student experience. However, if the unit turns out to be dysfunctional, this can lead to some students feeling isolated, lonely, miserable and in some cases marginalised. Institutions should be concerned about units that don't work for these reasons alone. But isolation, including in the domestic setting, can also be a significant contributing factor to international students in particular leaving their institution:

“Also appearing in the top five reasons for [international students] dropping out or considering to drop out of university, included ... ‘I was feeling isolated and lonely’ (18%)” (Unite 2006)

This translates as both a significant loss in tuition fee income and voids which are likely to be difficult to fill, particularly where a prospective replacement is being invited to join an unhappy home.

The factors involved in allocations

The formulation of an allocations policy (as well as the practice of allocating bed spaces) is a complex calculus in which many factors need to be taken into consideration. Some of these factors may be in conflict.

Institutional factors:

- the institutional position on providing opportunities for cross-cultural enrichment*
- what is affordable for the range of student means
- economic drivers (specifically maximising occupancy)
- the types, configuration and location of residential accommodation*
- the institution's student profile, in particular the balance of international and UK students and the breakdown by nationality of international students*
- single sex provision*
- provision for students with a disability
- provision for students with dependants*
- the prevailing culture within each part of the portfolio (eg noisy complexes)*

Individual factors:

- nationality*
- religion*
- level of study*
- student age*
- course start and end dates*
- accommodation needs during vacation periods*
- food preparation requirements*
- smoking
- the needs, interests and preferences of students, as stated on their application forms*

All will affect international students, or at least a proportion of them. The asterisked factors can be of particular significance for international students.

A key focus of this chapter will be the first item on this list.

Internationalisation and allocations

There are a number of options open to institutions when considering how to allocate international students. At one end of the spectrum institutions can opt for a full mix of students (possibly going so far as to avoid any co-nationals within the same unit). At the other extreme institutions can house co-nationals exclusively together. In between, possible mixes include all non-UK students together; all students of the same religion together; small groups of co-nationals together within a wider mix in the unit; and random mixes (often generated by automated systems) which can produce any permutation.

Common characteristics amongst international students other than nationality or being non-UK can impinge on allocations decisions. For instance, a disproportionately large part of an institution's postgraduate/research student profile may be international students, who are also therefore likely to be older. This may incline allocators to place them together in halls which are not noisy or accommodation reserved for postgraduates. International students may therefore find themselves being housed together not in virtue of them being international but because they are postgraduate, older or because they have some other common need or preference (for example, single sex provision or food preparation requirements). Such factors may restrict the scope for achieving a high mix, if that is the institution's objective.

These factors apart, institutions will need to reach a position on whether, fundamentally, it is better to put co-nationals together or to go for a thorough mix – or somewhere in between. What follows are some pointers for further consideration when formulating a policy. They are not intended as either scholarly or definitive but as a stimulus for debate. It is suggested that debate take place at a strategic level and involve or be led by staff with particular responsibility for internationalisation and those with expertise in cross-cultural interactions within the institution (usually represented in senior management and/or the academic community).

Research on the friendship groups of international students shows that they are most likely to befriend and socialise with co-nationals (common cultural and linguistic background); second most likely to befriend and socialise with international students from other nationalities (common status as incomers but generally not shared first language); and least likely to befriend and socialise with students from the host country (different cultural and linguistic background and different status – host/outsider) (Furnham and Alibhai 1985).

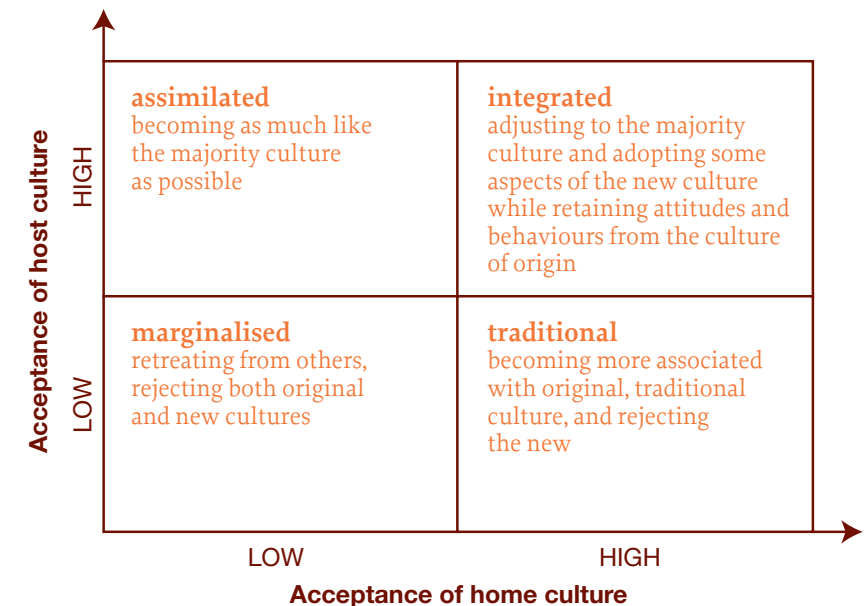
The stressors involved in entering, navigating and engaging with an alien environment cannot be overstated. Many international students come to the UK with a strong desire to integrate with UK students and with international students from other countries. Many of them work hard at this. Nine in ten international students in the UK say that meeting UK students is an important part of university life:

“... international students are ... quicker to see the value of contact with people from other countries. Ninety per cent of international students agreed that international contact was a valuable part of the student experience, compared to 75% of UK students” (Unite 2006).

However, a significant proportion of international students (36%) think it is hard to get to know UK students (Unite 2006). Even international students who are confident and highly competent in the host language may adopt a strategy of seeking out and sticking with their co-nationals, particularly during the transitional phase.

On a well-known ‘acculturation’ model (Berry 1997), responses to the experience of a foreign environment can be located within this conceptual framework:

Figure 3:
Berry's acculturation model



What the model points up is the importance of striking a balance between opportunities for cross-cultural enrichment/integration and facilitating co-national support networks.

The benefits of integration are well documented, for example:

- an overall positive correlation between integration on the one hand and academic achievement and social and cultural comfort with living in the UK on the other
- the prospect of greater career and economic success in an environment where graduates are likely to need to function in a global context (Thom 2006)
- the acquisition of intercultural awareness and skills which are a valuable asset towards ensuring employability (Knight 1994)
- “graduates who have the ability to accommodate difference and perceive that diversity is an advantage will have developed attributes likely to lead to their success ...” (Thom 2006)

The availability of co-national support networks is no less important. Although many international students will construct these for themselves, institutions (and students’ unions) need to facilitate or create these networks for example by setting up co-national buddying schemes and societies based on nationality or religion. Without them, students can become withdrawn, isolated and unhappy. In extreme cases this can lead to mental health problems and dropping out.

The question posed here is whether accommodation is a sphere of institutional life where it is appropriate to create an opportunity for cultural exchange or where it is appropriate to allow or facilitate the development of a co-national support network (or perhaps peer support network among non-UK students).

It could be argued that international students should be allowed to withdraw from the otherwise unremitting pressures of engaging with a foreign culture and language to their ‘home’, a place with familiar cultural reference points and a shared first language. Domestic relationships of this kind can be an important support structure for many students, acting as valuable repositories of:

- knowledge and practical help for survival
- shared cultural values and identity
- emotional and spiritual support

There is a sense that in putting co-nationals together institutions are just giving international students (and possibly UK students) what they want, and that this fits with the current political mantra of choice.

Furthermore, support networks elsewhere within the institution may not be adequate, while opportunities for integration elsewhere might be (typically, sports and course-related activities):

Students who had participated in any type of activity on campus (eg joining clubs or societies, doing sport, drama, music or volunteering) were more likely to have UK friends than those who did not (UKCISA 2004).

Against this argument, an institution – often through its internationalisation strategy – may hold to the position that opportunities for integration should be maximised, including in the domestic sphere. There is evidence that after the transitional phase spending most of their time with co-nationals can be a serious inhibitor for international students to integrate and extend friendship groups into other nationalities. It can lead to reversion to the ‘traditional’ type response in the acculturation model.

I am aware of some international students forming together in close-knit groups they may miss opportunities and find it harder to break out of these groups and socialise with others later.

Postgraduate computer systems students from Pakistan (Unite 2006).

It is also the case for many international students that opportunities to integrate through other spheres of institutional life are not as full as they had anticipated. Many research students do not have access to peers of any nationality in the way that students on taught programmes do. Also, some courses are specifically designed for, and promoted to, the international market with the result that students can find themselves in classes dominated by their own nationality or by a small number of non-UK nationalities.

I don’t have a lot of British students as friends. In class there are less than 10 in 30 UK students.

Hong Kong masters student (Unite 2006)

Similarly, in the area of recreation, although research continues to show that international students attach a higher level of importance to institutional sports facilities (possibly in lieu of alcohol-based socialising), the same research also indicates a high level of frustration among international students at the cost of using these facilities. It is not clear, however, for how many this cost is prohibitive or a deterrent to frequent use (UK Higher Education International Unit 2010).

In preparing the groundwork for a debate on policy in relation to the student mix in accommodation, institutions will want to map out the relative strengths and weaknesses of opportunities outside the domestic sphere for cross-cultural exchange and for support networks amongst co-nationals and international students from other countries. It should be borne in mind that many international students perceive good opportunities to integrate as an important and integral part of what they are buying.

Opting for student mixes which reflect a compromise position may work effectively to achieve the best of both worlds in respect of integration and support. They may equally produce the worse aspects of the more extreme models. Institution-by-institution experience is likely to show what works and what does not at a local level. The effectiveness of whatever mix or mixes are used should be kept under review.

Formulating and applying policy

It is good practice to have a written allocations policy, which is the result of careful consideration at a strategic level within the institution. Policy formulation should include consideration of:

- current thinking on internationalisation
- the profile of the institution's students overall and its international student community
- the level and quality of opportunity for cross-cultural enrichment elsewhere in the institution
- the level and quality of support networks for international students available elsewhere in the institution
- the profile and configuration of available accommodation
- the profile of the institution's student body (specifically the balance of international and home students and the makeup of the international student body by nationality)
- the results of any surveys of what international students (and sub-categories of international students) say they want
- any national guidance provided for these purposes, for example, the *Handbook for student accommodation providers: support and guidance for equality and diversity*, produced by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), a charitable company supported by Universities UK, GuildHE and UK HE funding bodies

The ECU handbook was put together, in the context of compliance with equality legislation, as guidance for private sector operators working in partnership with institutions to provide accommodation for students, but much of what it says is relevant to institutions themselves as a standard of good practice. The ECU asserts that “there should be an opportunity to promote integration through allocation policies” and, locating the issue in the context of equality legislation, it identifies “some key points to consider ...:

- guarantee systems should be non-discriminatory, well-publicised and transparent
- religious beliefs should be respected through food and food preparation equipment and practices, and opportunities for accommodation in single-sex flats/social areas

- a sympathetic approach to conflict resolution where tensions may have arisen through religious or cultural differences (eg cooking practices)
- undergraduate and postgraduate students may have different requirements
- not segregating students of different nationality/religion (unless there are specific requirements connected to food and gender)
- monitoring diversity in halls (applicants, residents, leavers etc) through statistics.” (ECU 2009)

Where the policy is informed by an institutional internationalisation strategy, this should be made clear in the policy, which should contain a signpost to the strategy's availability.

The policy should have formal approval from a senior body of the institution and be made publicly available, as noted in Chapter 2. It should be actively drawn to the attention of applicants.

The policy should be subject to periodic review and allocation practice should be regularly reviewed against the policy.

An institution's allocations policy should not be over-prescriptive and should allow allocators space, within its parameters, to exercise their judgement, based on their experience of what works and what does not.

As the ECU guidance suggests, account needs to be taken of potential clashes of lifestyle in the allocation process, for example, level of study, social life, differing use of facilities (eg strong social focus on food and kitchen use).

It is important that a focus on integration does not detract from characteristics other than nationality, race and religion. Where there is such an over-focus, the resulting mix is likely to throw together students with incompatible characteristics with a strong chance of conflict arising. An example of this is where, for the sake of a full international mix, postgraduate students (including international postgraduate students) are housed in units with younger, undergraduate students. A similar result can be produced where allocators have it in mind to keep together international students, irrespective of their age or level of study. Strong institutional intervention to ensure full opportunity for integration in the domestic setting can therefore yield allocations which students do not want or which are not suitable for them.

On the other hand, some factors – for example, course start and end dates and ring-fencing of accommodation for early reservation – can reintroduce segregation by the back door. Allocators and policy-makers need to be mindful of this drifting effect within the context of logistic and economic realities.

A formal policy is helpful to applicants, but it is also helpful to staff charged with the job of making allocations, as it should give them a sound basis for operational decision-making and an authoritative legitimacy to their decisions.

Software is currently available to support the allocations process by sorting and matching applicants' preferences, interests and requirements. As it evolves through auto-allocation towards self-allocation, institutions should be aware of the impact on policy of procuring and using software of this kind – ie it may, depending on the sophistication of its functionality, afford a higher level of choice than the policy allows. The parallel emergence of social networking sites and their use by institutions as a tool for pre-arrival friendship-forming and buddying may also exert pressure on how allocations are made, as groups of international students – sometimes groups of co-nationals – present themselves for allocating together within an accommodation unit.

A related issue emerged in the seminars convened to take forward the identification of good practice in the sector. This concerns cases which occur from time to time where students specify in the preference section of accommodation application forms that they are not prepared to share with students of Nationality X or Religion Y. The best practice for dealing with these cases is to cover it in the allocations policy, which should then make due reference to the institution's equality/diversity policy documentation. It is suggested that the allocations policy should require appropriate designated staff to challenge this behaviour/attitude and formally to notify or remind the applicant of the institution's position. It is further suggested that disciplinary action would not be appropriate partly because the applicant (if a new student) should be allowed time for making the required cultural adjustment, and partly because, from a technical point of view, they are not yet likely to be a registered student of the institution and therefore do not fall within its jurisdiction.

If appropriate action is not taken in these cases, there is a risk of the institution being seen subsequently to be complicit in the applicant's intolerance.

Allocations and gender

Single gender occupancy is a closely related issue. The evidence is that although there is low demand for women-only accommodation (and to a much lesser extent men-only accommodation), it is strongly felt, usually but not always related to religious conviction or cultural norms. In the context of equality legislation, institutions should give careful consideration to meeting this demand. Failure to do so is also likely to reduce the potential recruitment base of the institution.

It is important that, in providing single gender accommodation, the institution makes it clear what it is offering and what obligations it has in respect of single gender occupancy. The institution is unlikely to be offering, in the case of a women-only flat or corridor, to exclude all males or to stop male visitors. Often single gender-allocated accommodation can imply a number of policing actions that will not be part of that package.

The other point to note about segregation is that it is inflexible in letting terms. If a void occurs in-year in a unit given over to single gender occupancy or a particular national or religious group, it is likely to prove more difficult to fill. Lower annual occupancy for this type of accommodation needs to be factored into financial plans and income targets.

Where genders are mixed within units, there should be an even balance, at least as far as the gender profile of the institution permits. Experience of accommodation managers is that balance tends to result in fewer social, behavioural and cleanliness/tidiness issues.

Accommodation configuration

What has been said in this chapter about mixing different types of student will be significantly affected by what the accommodation 'unit' is – a cluster flat, corridor, floor or block. The larger the unit the more scope there may be to achieve a mix where meaningful numbers of co-nationals can be allocated together while still providing good opportunity within the unit for cross-cultural exchange.

Case study

To enhance the student experience, Unite has designed an automatic online allocation process designed to enable students to choose preferences with regard to flatmates and location of rooms, but it does not allow for discrimination on the basis of age, race or other equality areas (ECU 2009).

Case study

Allocations at Anglia Ruskin University are focused on achieving culturally diverse yet balanced communities. Recent years have seen increasing numbers of pre-sessional students who arrive during August and early September to study pre-degree English language modules prior to commencing substantive study. These students are initially clustered together for operational reasons, but the Accommodation Office then endeavours to allocate remaining rooms in blocks and on corridors to students of other nationalities so as to achieve multicultural residences. The university's view remains that a large part of the experience of studying abroad is meeting new people and experiencing life living communally with those from varying cultural backgrounds who will invariably have a different perspective on life.

Case study

De Montfort University tries to strike a compromise in answering the question of whether to house international students separately or to offer them mixed UK/international halls for integration. The university aims to reserve certain halls or shared flats in halls for international students, and tries to group them together with other postgraduate students as the majority of the institution's international students are postgraduate. Due to the recent increase in UK student numbers and a revised accommodation allocation process, the reservation for international/postgraduate students is always under review.

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- formulate an allocations policy on the basis of considered debate within the institution
- take account of opportunities for integration and co-national support elsewhere in the institution
- make the policy clear and transparent and draw it to the attention of applicants
- do not sacrifice more significant characteristics (eg level of study, age) for the sake of a full international mix or keeping all international students together

Chapter 6. Welfare support and accommodation management

Managing the mix

Whatever the institutional policy, the mixes that it produces will require significant resource input and management if they are to be successful. On the one hand, cultural difference carries with it the strong possibility of misunderstanding and conflict. On the other, allocation on the basis of shared religion or culture can put pressure on local site staff to become involved in the policing and enforcement of religious or cultural norms, which should be avoided.

International students: management issues

There are a number of recurring issues for international students in institutionally allocated accommodation, and many expect and necessitate additional support from accommodation managers and residential welfare workers.

Noise

A sensitive allocations policy will go some way to preventing noise complaints. The provision of a quiet building or quiet flats is a common response, and can be effective. So too can careful allocation to avoid co-locating first-year undergraduates and international postgraduates (see previous chapter) or perhaps even first- and final-year undergraduates.

Expectation plays a key role here – if a quiet hall is not a feasible option, then a realistic impression of halls as lively and often noisy needs to be given in marketing materials. Many international students are surprised by the level of background noise in halls and expect rigorous enforcement of noise rules by staff at all times.

A common approach to low-level noise complaints is to ask the students to attempt to deal with the problem themselves in the first instance. International students may protest that it is not their responsibility to do this and insist that staff should deal with the issue. International students in particular may benefit from practical written advice on how to discuss their concerns with other tenants. By encouraging them to take responsibility for their complaint, accommodation managers also give them the tools to deal with future issues themselves.

Repairs

Having no prior experience of UK property standards and maintenance can make international students apprehensive or have unrealistic expectations about repairs. International students may:

- not report items of disrepair because of a disinclination to ask for assistance or lack of understanding of fair wear and tear
- believe that they will be held responsible and made to pay for items of disrepair
- have unrealistic expectations of the timescale for repairs

To counter these tendencies, institutions should:

- put together and implement schedules of inspections to pick up unreported items of disrepair
- produce and publicise clearly and simply written procedures for reporting repairs
- determine and publicise response time-frames for completion of repair works
- publicise a system of prioritisation of repair works (if there is one) with timescales for action
- provide a written repair receipt, detailing who will carry out the repair and within what timescale in order to reinforce the message and allay worries about security and unexpected visitors

Access for repairs by maintenance staff can be an issue, particularly in family or couple accommodation provided for international students. Sensitivities about male contractors working in close proximity to lone female international students or lone female partners/family members should be taken into consideration where possible. Access times and the provision of keys should be explicitly discussed with residents in advance of repairs being undertaken.

Food preparation and cleaning

Differences in cooking style and use of communal areas are a frequent cause of friction with international students. Spending large amounts of time cooking and socialising over meals can lead to other residents feeling excluded or unable to use facilities. This can be a particular problem with international students who have pre-session courses, resulting in kitchens that are in an unsatisfactory condition when the remaining tenants arrive. It may be necessary to police kitchen standards in the pre-session period and if necessary to engage in additional cleaning to clear the worst excesses. A clear policy on passing on the charges for this to resident students should be established (unless the institution takes the view that passing charges on to residents so early on in the let is inappropriate).

Interventions by residential staff and international student buddies can be helpful in dealing with cooking and cleaning differences before they develop into serious fall-outs or incur charges for deep cleaning.

Case study

In partnership with the University of Leeds, Unipol houses 110 students in shared flats dedicated to postgraduate students on taught courses. Students stay for around 51 weeks and generally arrive over a period of 30 days in late September and October.

A tenancy support officer arranges kitchen meetings for all flats at the start of the year. The kitchen meetings have been successful in helping students to find common understandings on cleaning standards and the operation of the flat before any problems arise.

The tenancy support officer needs to be well briefed on the practical operation of the flat (how heating systems work, security arrangements and so on) so that they can offer immediate face-to-face practical information to students.

The tenancy support officer also follows up any issues that arise. Where there are such issues, a follow-up meeting is arranged to take place about two weeks later to see if progress is being made.

There is a limited turnover of students throughout the year but where a new student arrives mid-year, a new kitchen meeting is arranged to help introduce the new student, and the same issues are covered.

Petitions

It is not uncommon for institutional providers to receive petitions from international students raising an issue about their accommodation, whereas this is a rare occurrence amongst UK students. Many international students are comfortable with appointing a spokesperson or leader, and communicating through them via a petition. Sometimes petitions follow an issue which is of concern to international students, where action has not been taken promptly or where insufficient information has been provided. Sometimes, however, the petition will be the first information a service receives about a set of issues.

On receiving a petition, accommodation services should not be defensive and should simply deal with the matters raised. They should meet with the appointed spokesperson and, following this, should confirm what has been agreed to all students in a general circulation.

A petition should be seen as just another method of communication and does not necessarily imply criticism.

Culture shock, social isolation, homesickness and mental health issues

Feelings of homesickness and loneliness are frequent among international students. It should be emphasised in pre-arrival material that these are common emotions. Culture shock is also a common experience, however thoroughly a student believes they have prepared themselves, including with information and tools with which the institution may have provided them in the pre-departure and arrival phases.

Culture shock has been described as “cultural confusion and disorientation” resulting from experiences which violate the individual’s “basic sense of morals, values, logic and beliefs about normality and civility” (Winkelman 1994). It can often take international students by surprise and have triggers ranging from the significant to the apparently trivial – lack of access to food that is familiar, differences in the weather and light levels. It is not the case that culture shock is something which only students from distant cultures experience. A student from France or Germany may be profoundly affected by differences which they had not anticipated. In monitoring international students for culture shock and in planning to help students through it, accommodation practitioners should not overlook this fact.

These responses to being in a new and alien environment can be compounded if a student does not settle well into accommodation or feels isolated from their co-residents, particularly where they have no co-nationals or international students from other countries living within their accommodation unit (see Chapter 5).

In the early stages, if the student arrives at a ‘standard’ time within the cycle (academic year start or Semester 2 start), they may find benefit from institutionally-organised welcome programmes and social events run by accommodation services (see Chapter 4). For the benefit of students who continue to struggle with integration and tapping into support networks, institutions should continue, including in the accommodation setting, to publicise the point that disorientation can often be emotionally and psychologically challenging and more than short term. It may also help them if accommodation staff and residential peers continue to organise social events (preferably, not alcohol-focused) throughout the letting year. These can be designed to draw in particular groups of international students, for example celebrating religious or cultural festivals such as Eid and Chinese New Year. Care should be taken, however, that tailored events do not become perceived as marginalising or exclusive by students or groups of students from other religious or cultural backgrounds.

Feelings of isolation can be acute for students who arrive at non-standard times after welcome activities have ceased. It is good practice to offer all late arrivers a welcome meeting with the other residents in allocated accommodation to ensure residents are introduced to one another and any flat rules are discussed openly from the outset.

An information sheet on culture shock is provided on the UKCISA website.

In navigating transitional challenges international students may suffer distress which can manifest itself in a number of ways. In most cases these will be short term but the more serious emotional responses may become more deep-seated and result in the student becoming mentally unwell. In this context residential staff should be aware of and look out for distress presenting:

- *physically* as lack of or disturbed sleep, headaches, stomach problems etc
- *psychologically* as confusion, memory lapses, poor concentration, depression, anxiety or the development of a panic, eating or self-harming disorder
- *behaviourally*, as unexplained absences, erratic attendance, loss of interest in personal appearance, changes in academic performance, problematic drinking, drug abuse or social withdrawal, including retreat into the student’s own room

Interventions should range from the provision of information through to referral to specialist services within the institution. In making interventions residential welfare workers should take account of cultural difference in attitudes to mental ill-health and its treatment. They are advised to seek the guidance of local professionals on this issue.

Where international students become mentally unwell – whether as a result of unresolved culture shock, a pre-existing condition or pre-disposition or other factor or combination of factors – their illness may constitute a ‘disability’ as defined by UK equality legislation. The legal duties of institutions to international students in these circumstances are covered in Chapter 8.

The ECU handbook sets out some key pointers to good practice for staff dealing with students who may be becoming mentally unwell:

- It is important that students with mental health difficulties are communicated with in a non-discriminatory, non-stigmatising and positive manner
- Students with possible mental health difficulties should be encouraged to seek support
- Sources of support should be clearly communicated to both prospective and current students
- Understanding and recognition of mental health difficulties should be promoted to all staff and students
- Guidance and training should be provided for staff involved in the support and care of those with mental health difficulties
- Where there are immediate concerns about harm to the student or to others, the emergency services should be called
- Where concerns are less immediate and there is time to consider the most appropriate intervention, the HEI support services can be contacted for consultation and assistance

Frontline staff (not restricted to wardens and residential welfare workers but including, for example, security staff) would benefit from training in:

- recognising students in distress – developing reflective listening skills
- understanding mental health issues – policies and procedures
- being able to direct students to sources of support
- self-harm
- anorexia
- gender identity
- dealing with crises including erratic behaviour, extreme depression, threatened suicide and suicide
- confidentiality

When faced with a student in crisis, staff must ensure their own safety:

- staff should not do anything they are not comfortable with
- staff should not attempt to exceed their skills and experience – they need to try to contain the situation and look for support, but not put their personal safety, or that of others, at risk (ECU 2009)

Further guidance on international students and mental health is provided in the publication *Higher education institutions and international students' mental health* produced by the YoungMinds Stressed out and Struggling (SOS) Project in 2006, from which this section draws.

Inter-tenant disputes

Differing expectations of communal living are the norm rather than the exception in halls, which can come as a surprise to international students. Seemingly insignificant differences in lifestyle can be the cause of distress and fall-outs. If left unchecked, these can escalate into accusations of bullying and eventual drop-outs. Mediation can be a suitable approach where more formal or disciplinary approaches are not appropriate.

Mediation is a structured process which brings people together in the presence of an independent, impartial, skilled, third-party representative to agree their own constructive resolutions. The aim is to allow all parties to speak confidentially in a safe and secure environment, and to encourage a mutual understanding to try to improve working relationships in the future. Mediation focuses on achieving a satisfactory solution for both or all parties, in order to resolve issues early on.

For these purposes, accommodation staff can be trained to host flat meetings, or series of individual meetings, allowing residents the opportunity to discuss issues in a non-confrontational manner. This has the benefit of allowing residents to devise their own solutions while accommodation staff remain impartial. For this to be successful international students may require jargon-free written guidance on

the concept, process and likely outcomes of mediation. Staff and literature may also have a job to do in 'selling' the benefits.

Case study

Dundee University has a dedicated student support worker whose job is to look after the welfare of students in institutional residences. He leads a team of student support assistants and is supported by peer connectors, assigned to these residences.

There are two student support assistants in each residence, helping to provide welfare support. They are all students with experience and understanding of student life away from home and have undergone specialised training, such as peer connection, peer mediation, suicide awareness or suicide alertness or suicide intervention. They live in the university residences and are a convenient first contact for everyone with a welfare problem. The student support assistants, working together and under the supervision of the student support worker, will deal with any issues which affect the welfare of residents within the residences, and in particular with:

- flat disputes
- noise-related issues
- relationships between two or more flat mates
- loneliness
- homesickness
- self-harm
- depression
- alcohol misuse
- stress-related issues
- bullying and harassment

They also help to direct students to appropriate services within the university. Although they will not deal with discipline matters as such, they will provide full co-operation with the authorised officer in the university when necessary.

Members of both groups, the student support assistants and the peer connectors, are trained in peer mediation. This peer mediation service provides students in university residences with direct assistance to resolve interpersonal disputes. Common issues include noise levels, study habits, phone and utility bills, relationship problems and misunderstandings, work-related conflicts and minor forms of harassment.

Neutral, trained mediators encourage both parties to define the issues themselves and work towards creating a resolution agreeable to those involved. Initially the mediators will meet with each party individually. Then both sides will come together at a meeting with the mediators. If the parties reach an agreement, it can be formalised and put into writing. The process typically takes one to two hours altogether.

Online advice on dealing with conflict is available for students in university residences. This includes:

- a tolerance scale to help students assess their own feelings about their co-tenants
- a four-part conflict resolution message to help students raise and explore issues with co-tenants in a productive and non-confrontational way (see Appendix C)
- an eight-step procedure for dealing with conflict (also see Appendix C)

Vacation services

Vacations can be difficult and stressful for international students. Other students within the accommodation are likely to return to their family home during vacations (unless they too are from overseas). This can leave international students short on company or they might be unsettled by having to move into alternative, unfamiliar accommodation either to make way for conference delegates or to consolidate vacation stayers within institutional accommodation in order to make service provision more effective and efficient. Even so, many normal services may be closed. The effect is most acute during the Christmas period, when:

- there will be even fewer people around
- there are likely to be fewer services
- there is the prospect of end-of-semester formal assessments, including exams, which for first-year international students are often the first real test of their ability to study successfully in English
- the days are short, dark and cold

It is important that proper financial and staffing provision is planned to cover vacations adequately, for example maintaining levels of security service, catering and emergency cover, including for boiler breakdown and handling a student personal crisis.

It is not uncommon for IT services to undertake major works in public holidays, particularly at Christmas and Easter when international students find these services an important and, to some, vital communications link with their friends.

It is important that they are notified well in advance of times that a service might be down. It should not be assumed that, say, on Christmas Day, nobody needs the service. It is also important that international students can contact IT staff if there are any problems with their service over those holiday periods.

It is good practice for accommodation managers to liaise with student support services to ensure that information is available on voicemail, web pages and in student residences to enable students to gain access to basic facilities, social company and emergency services during such periods. Accommodation staff need to be particularly vigilant in relation to students at risk during vacations, particularly Christmas, as they are likely to be the first to see the warning signs.

Staff training

From the range of guidance in this chapter it is clear that the roles of onsite staff can be complex, demanding and stressful. They are often confronted with conflict and crisis, sometimes when other services are not available to give support or receive referrals.

For these reasons, broad and quality training, underpinned by regular refreshers, is vital. The support that site staff give to the accommodation service is the glue that holds together the quality of the student experience, nowhere more so than for international students.

The organisation of site staff and responsibilities will vary from institution to institution, but training coverage should make specific reference to international students in the following areas:

- accommodation management
- customer care (for all site staff, annually)
- diversity and cultural difference (for all site staff, annually)
- mediation / dispute resolution
- disability (including mental ill-health)
- basic counselling skills
- confidentiality and data protection

If frontline services are outsourced, it is important that institutions ensure a proper level, breadth and frequency of training in appropriate areas are written into contracts and are adhered to.

Publicity of residential welfare services

The CUBO/i-graduate research found low awareness of residential welfare services amongst international students (although some students may not have understood what 'halls welfare' is) (CUBO/i-graduate 2008). It is important that

having invested in residential welfare services and regular staff training and refreshing, institutions take every opportunity to raise awareness of them amongst the target user group, the residential community.

Rent arrears: debt management

Like other students, international students can experience problems with debt, including rent arrears. Their difficulties may be compounded by unstable currency rates, unfamiliarity with the cost of living in the UK, a cultural stigma attached to indebtedness and lack of access to benefits or student support funds.

Institutions should regularly review the student experience of dealing with internal debt recovery services and the organisational culture in which these services are located.

Case study

At Aston University, as elsewhere, it is imperative for finance staff to collect all outstanding fees but the process of pursuing student debtors can lead to a negative relationship developing between finance staff and students. In annual student surveys evaluating contact with university academic and central services, finance consistently achieved the lowest score.

Despite there being a number of systems in place to assist students experiencing financial difficulty, including an option to negotiate instalment payments, students were frequently not contacting finance staff until the situation had escalated to the point where sanctions for non-payment of fees were being applied. The aim of the university was to engage with students at an early stage and in a way that encouraged them to reach realistic agreements over the payment of fees before the situation escalated out of control.

As part of a move to improve services for students, the university created an Advice Point to respond to an extensive range of non-academic queries from disability advice to Council Tax exemption. Staff working in this area are customer-focused and provide a service easily accessible to students, friendly and responsive to their needs. It was agreed that finance staff would be based in this area and would be available to talk through the payment options available in a relaxed, open space and also to refer students to specialist advisers who could follow up on delays in student loans, assess students for entitlement to the Access to Learning Fund and to advise on financial issues in general.

This integrated approach has now operated for a year and feedback from students has been very positive. Students are discussing issues at an earlier stage than previously, reducing their stress levels while ensuring the university collects outstanding fees. There is now discussion about moving more of the finance staff into this area.

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- review processes for handling noise nuisance, repairs, inter-resident disputes and debt recovery with the international student experience in mind
- ensure that training for frontline staff is adequate in breadth, depth and frequency to deal with the particular issues that international students might have
- ensure that relationships with other service providers (especially student services) are sound and that joint working is properly co-ordinated to support international students in residence

Chapter 7. The product

The process of choice

As noted in Chapter 2, international students as a group exhibit a higher level of worry about the process of securing accommodation that suits them – 36% compared with 27% home students (Unite 2006). In this context, there are, for students without dependants, other constants:

- the accommodation product is about reassurance and allaying pre-departure and early concerns
- students coming to study from outside the UK prioritise having a more standardised environment
- they prefer to live in a larger development close to their institution with onsite security and management, because they perceive complexes offer greater safety, security and social opportunities
- they perceive that in choosing a larger development they are taking much less of a risk than renting a private house or flat in a place they are not familiar with (regardless of age or type of study). This preference is shared by first-year home students and/or their parents
- after the first year UK students prioritise freedom of choice and independence while non-UK students look to minimise the risks associated with choosing a place to stay (international students are more likely to stay in institutionally allocated accommodation than home students)

[I prefer a larger development] because it was easier to secure the accommodation from my home country before arriving to Nottingham.

(Survey Unit, University of Nottingham 2008)

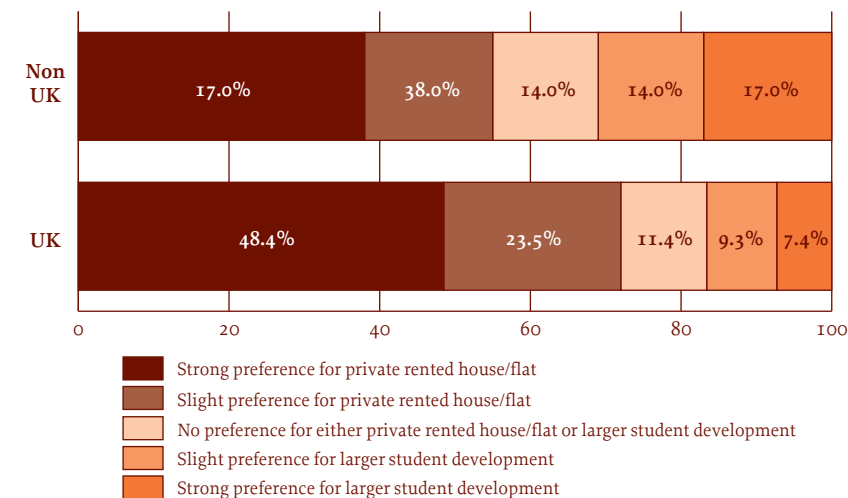
As a foreign student I prefer a student-only development that has a sense of community as a way to meet people and make friends. If I were a British student, and was not worried about being alone in a new country, I would probably prefer private housing.

(Survey Unit, University of Nottingham 2008)

I'd rather live surrounded with people, makes me feel safer and less lonely, since I'm already an International Student coming far away from home to study all the way here.

(Survey Unit, University of Nottingham 2008)

Figure 4:
International/UK students' housing preferences



Source: Unipol

Having established these constants across most international students, the evidence is contradictory for what kind of accommodation and level of amenity they want and what they can afford.

International students are less concerned than home students about:

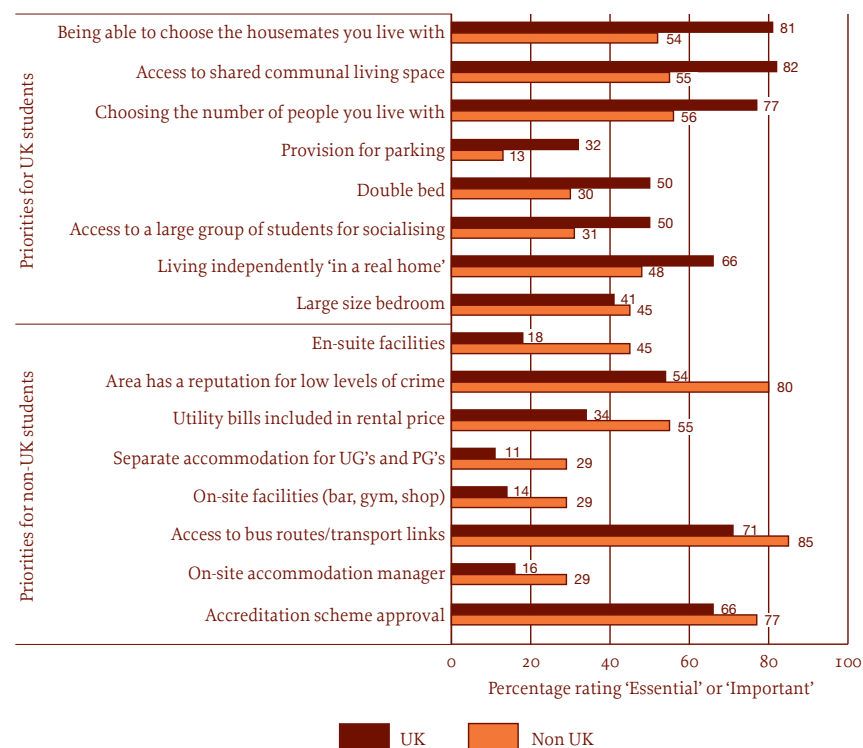
- choosing their housemates
- access to a shared communal living space
- how many other students live in that flat
- parking
- the need for a larger bed
- living independently in a 'real home'

It is self-evident why some of these simply do not matter to international students.

On the basis of the Nottingham research, they are more concerned about:

- a larger bedroom
- ensuite facilities (18% home, 45% international)
- crime
- utility bills being included in the rent
- separate accommodation for undergraduates and postgraduates (home 15%, international 29%)
- on-site facilities and manager
- accreditation

Figure 5:
Different priorities for UK and non-UK students when choosing accommodation features



Source: Survey Unit, University of Nottingham

In contrast to these results, research at the University of Leeds into postgraduate student residence requirements (2009) finds “diverse needs of a cost-conscious audience seeking a level of accommodation that is very much closer to a home than hostel” (University of Leeds/Curtis Associates Research Ltd 2009). The detailed requirements profile resulting from the Leeds research are set out at Appendix D.

A bad fit: fragmentation of requirements and homogenisation of the product

Bearing in mind that international students account for 51% of the postgraduate community, the results of these pieces of research show a marked inconsistency. International students appear to want larger rooms without ensuite facilities and yet prefer ensuite facilities. They prefer to live with students of the same age/study level and like a homely environment but they prefer complexes. There is, however, no contradiction here. The conflicting preferences merely reflect the fragmentation of needs, preferences, lifestyles and other personal characteristics beyond the limited range of constants identified.

When considering accommodation requirements, many providers and institutions have treated international students as homogeneous. In so doing, they have postulated a one-size-fits-all solution and catered for what they perceive to be a specific need. In reality, however, they have disregarded the needs of different sections of the international student community, not least postgraduate international students. Although many older taught and research postgraduates would prefer to be in institutionally-allocated accommodation, many seek out second best in the private rented sector because the institution would bundle them together with those that have deep pockets and prefer ensuite ‘luxury’ complexes.

Some institutions and particularly the private sector have established a fixed notion of a product as expensive, luxury and ensuite, and have simply reproduced that off-the-shelf option.

Expensive, luxury and ensuite

The emergence of the commercial sector as a key player in purpose-built student accommodation over the last two decades has brought with it a welcome improvement in the level of specification and amenity. However, it has corresponded with significant rises in development costs and rents. The increasing focus on the luxury end of the market is pushing up rents to the point where a large proportion of international students are losing access to affordable accommodation of an appropriate type and quality. The NUS/Unipol Accommodation Costs Survey 2010 shows that significantly higher rent attaches to ensuite accommodation – on average £22 per unit per week on top of what is a high non-ensuite rental cost.

For many students, high-specification self-catered cluster accommodation with ensuite facilities has become the standard product offered by or through institutions. The same research shows that whereas in 2001 only 20% of purpose-built student accommodation was ensuite by 2006-07 the figure had risen to 43% and by 2010 to 47.8%. This trend has been driven by higher returns, marketing strategies, parental influence and modishness. Nonetheless, the available research strongly indicates that while ensuite facilities are popular at the application and pre-arrival stage, they are not a priority for most students, and less so for returning students. In spite of this, the evidence is that ensuite provision continues to be commissioned. Institutions should consider the true level of demand for ensuite facilities and for cheaper non-ensuite provision or for space usage dedicated to social or study purposes as an alternative.

Given that UK institutions charge towards the top end of the international scale for tuition fees, it is important that rent remains affordable if the full UK package is to remain attractive to prospective students from overseas. 'Affordability' can be elusive in its meaning because it varies according to an individual student's means. However, it is clear that as developers have upgraded the quality and specification of accommodation, students – including international students – have been spending a greater proportion of their available resources on where they live.

Oversupply of luxury provision and undersupply of affordable accommodation may also result in higher levels of voids, if international students opt for off-street housing in the private rented sector, an option which we know is 'second best' for the many international students who prefer to live in complexes.

Choice and affordability

If institutions and private providers are to meet the accommodation needs of international students, they must respond to the diversity of demand among international students by focusing on:

- a broad range of product types and levels
- a broad range of rent levels
- the separation of undergraduates from postgraduates
- a more homely environment

The development and management of purpose-built accommodation should reflect:

- a balanced rental structure, with a proper focus on affordability
- choice from a range of accommodation types, with breadth and depth of provision
- provision of specialist and low-cost housing

A recommendation of the NUS/Unipol Accommodation Costs Survey is that "as a rule of thumb, 25% of all rents charged by (or through) the institution should fall within the bottom quartile of the institution's rent structure."

Maintaining breadth and balance is, at least in part, a function of maintaining a balance of old and new provision. Whilst upgrading and replacing are essential to sustain an appropriate level of quality, institutions should:

- recognise that this has a tendency to erode the availability of affordable accommodation
- remain focused on the need to maintain a balanced portfolio.

Formulation of rental structures and portfolio planning should take account of strategic priorities within the institution's corporate planning framework. In an era where international student recruitment is a universal driver in HE strategic and economic thinking, institutions will want to give priority consideration to the cost/benefits of tailoring the design, layout and servicing of new or existing provision to fit the requirements of the range of international students who form their overseas target market.

An opportunity for institutions to re-set the agenda

An opportunity to re-set the agenda is emerging, as it becomes clear that:

- while demand for purpose-built student accommodation – particularly amongst international students – is strong, it is not currently being met because current provision is out of balance and out of step with the requirements and means of many international students
- luxury accommodation, often developed with international students in mind, is under-occupied in some parts of the country
- growth in international student numbers is a strategic priority across the HE sector
- land values are low
- private developers and managers now recognise that they need the support of institutions to help shape accommodation solutions appropriate for the range of international students
- HEI support for private sector schemes is increasingly necessary to secure funding and planning consent

The opportunity is for institutions:

- to engage sub-communities of international students in order to gain a deeper understanding of how demand for accommodation fragments and what their detailed requirements and preferences are
- to work with commercial partners in order to rearticulate provision in imaginative ways so that the range of international students has access to appropriate accommodation which they can afford

- to work with students' unions and the range of international students at an institution to review housing needs and satisfaction periodically and to feed findings into strategic processes within the institution

Case study

York St John University worked closely with developers, neighbours, students and the city council in the planning of their newest halls of residence. The accommodation was one of four shortlisted schemes in the 2009 *Times Higher Education Award* for National Outstanding New Residence because it could demonstrate that it won the approval of those for whom the halls are home; improved energy efficiency; and provided exceptional facilities for disabled students (National Student Forum 2009).

Possibilities for institutions and private providers include:

- revisiting shared rooms (especially in London)
- establishing a niche market in the commercial sector for short-term accommodation (again, especially in London)
- increasing numbers sharing facilities within a living unit
- more compact and environmentally friendly developments
- the provision of larger communal areas and less circulation space

A significant proportion of students, international and UK, would not countenance sharing a room. However, it should be remembered that in some sectors overseas shared student rooms are a prominent feature, including in the USA. Designed imaginatively, they can afford a moderate degree of privacy and, priced competitively, could persuade many international students that a compromise on meeting their requirements was worth making for the benefit of affordability. This option can be particularly attractive in high-cost host towns and cities (for example, Edinburgh and London).

Short-term provision is important for many international students for emergency and interim accommodation, for attending short courses or in lieu of extensions to contracts. In an oversupplied market providers have been willing to make provision in this area in order to fill voids. It remains to be seen whether any will try to create a niche in a more buoyant market, charging higher rents over shorter periods and bearing the risk of higher voids.

As well as lowering rental costs, enlarging cluster units to accommodate, for example 10 or 12, may help to mitigate the challenge faced by allocators in creating opportunities for integration while at the same time establishing accommodation as a basis for co-national support.

Other priorities for review include:

Provision of separate postgraduate and undergraduate accommodation

It is evident from the Leeds and the CUBO/i-graduate research that the large international postgraduate community favouring institutionally allocated accommodation prefers to live separately from younger, undergraduate students because of lifestyle and possibly study differences.

Provision of broadband or the evolving equivalent as standard

High-speed broadband or WiFi which works is now a firm expectation, and failure to provide it is likely to incur strong dissatisfaction among resident international students. Charging separately for connectivity is also likely to fall short of expectations. In 2006-07 one in five providers included internet access in rent. By 2009-10 this figure had risen to nearly four in five. (NUS/Unipol 2010). IT services should be treated as a utility included in rent alongside other utilities.

Flexibility in contract length

Flexibility in contract length is particularly important for postgraduate students and for students with families. Where there is provision specifically designed for these groups, there should be more scope for flexible arrangements.

Sustainability

The sustainability agenda and energy efficiency should feature as core criteria in any design schema. Although Energy Performance Certificates are not legally required for students renting individual rooms in a complex, all students should have access to this information. International students are likely to have awareness of energy use and cost at least as low as first-year UK-based students living in institutional accommodation. For international students unused to heating systems and for those more vulnerable to the prevailing UK climate, raising awareness is a significant issue. Institutions and private providers should therefore make every effort to give them information on how much energy their accommodation unit is using plus further information to enable them to compare their energy use with an average use. Awareness-raising of these issues needs to be understood in the context of rent inclusive of utility costs obscuring energy use and cost.

Accreditation

Given that a sizeable proportion of international students will live in the off-street private rented sector beyond their first year, it is important that institutions recognise they have a significant role to play in monitoring and promoting both physical and management standards in off-street properties through the active development and extension of accreditation for their students (NUS/Unipol 2010). As a model of good practice accreditation schemes should pay due reference to the ECU Handbook.

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- Institutions and private providers should develop, upgrade, retain and manage accommodation which meets the key criteria of affordability and choice in type and cost
- Market research and meaningful consumer input should be cornerstones of portfolio planning
- Periodic review of portfolios should be undertaken – what may have looked anachronistic and out of step with the market some years ago (for example, shared rooms) may re-emerge on the horizon as worthy of consideration
- Strategic planning and review of accommodation provision should include periodic (ideally annual) satisfaction surveys which are constructed to enable data capture and analysis relating to international students and significant sub-sets of the international student body
- Institutions should be aware of their wider obligations to maintain and protect housing standards outside their immediate provision by actively supporting accreditation and promoting its benefits to their international (and home) students and staff
- As sustainability grows in importance, institutions should be attaching heightened priority to this set of issues

Chapter 8. Special constituencies

Students with families

What's special about international students with families?

The vast majority of students with dependants requiring accommodation are international students. Many are postgraduates.

There is recent research into the experience and requirements of students (both UK and international) with children in further and higher education (NUS 2009) and it provides valuable insights into the challenges that they face, and makes important recommendations. However, the dearth of research specifically into the accommodation needs and preferences of students with families is an indicator of the historical neglect of this area. The last major survey focused on these students, their dependants and their accommodation needs was undertaken in 1995 for the universities in Leeds.

Their accommodation needs may vary but are likely to include:

- furnished provision
- accommodation with two or more bedrooms (of the students surveyed in 1995 51% required two bedrooms, 35% three and 5% four or more)
- accommodation made safe for children
- a location close to healthcare services, childcare provision, schools, parks/play areas, buses, supermarkets, car parking, parent and toddler groups, ante-natal classes and other forms of local infrastructure that can support family life and mitigate the risk of isolation for non-studying parents
- a quieter location, removed from undergraduate residences (incompatible lifestyles)
- a stronger emphasis on the quality and quantity of social space
- a stronger emphasis on the quality of study space
- longer contracts (ie the offer of an agreement for the duration of the student's course of study, which also tends to benefit the provider)
- affordability – international students have higher outgoings than other students (NUS/Unipol 2010) and cannot access any benefits or funding to help with living costs, childcare or rent, so affordable accommodation near their place of study is vital
- all the above combining to create the sense of a genuine, longer-term home

From this list it is evident that purpose-built student accommodation is unlikely to meet the needs of students with families.

Current provision

According to new research, only 17% of private providers and 32% of institutional providers make any provision for family accommodation. Numbers of family accommodation places equated to 0.71% of bed spaces over 2008/09 and 2009/10 (NUS/Unipol 2010). These figures indicate that students with families are having difficulty in securing suitable, affordable accommodation.

The apparent reluctance of much of the HE and private sectors to make adequate provision is likely to be economically driven. Family housing generally gives a lower return, because accommodation for single students is charged per bed space whereas accommodation for families cannot be.

It may also be the case that shared houses in off-street properties close to the institution are not affordable as they are more profitably let as HMOs to single students.

Pre-departure and arrival

The 1995 research revealed that 18% of students with families received no pre-arrival information or advice. It is not known whether there are still such cases, but clearly it is unacceptable. So too is the message “Don’t bring your family because there isn’t any accommodation for students with families”.

If the institution is unable to offer suitable accommodation for students with families, it should send the clear and prominent message pre-arrival:

If you are looking for private sector accommodation:

- *either come on your own first and stay in temporary single accommodation while you look for a family home. Once you have fixed up your family accommodation, and only then, you can send for your family* (This was the advice received by 71% of the families surveyed in 1995)
- *or, if you must arrive with your family, bring funding to cover the high costs of temporary family accommodation*

It should be clear in pre-departure information what the minimum needed per night is (for example, for a family of four) and that, typically, it takes several weeks to secure family accommodation in the private sector.

Short of providing suitable institutional accommodation for students with families, it is good practice to make special provision for short-stay accommodation and house-hunting support for this group of students.

Providing purpose-built accommodation

From the seminars convened to produce this good practice guidance, there is a strong sense amongst accommodation managers in the sector that planning for

and providing appropriate accommodation for students with families (generally international) is important.

Given the current position noted earlier, there is a major opportunity for institutions to invest in this provision and to establish themselves in a niche market. While the outlay costs may be significant, being able to market accommodation appropriate for students with families would give an institution a clear and strong competitive advantage in an era where international student recruitment is universally a key strategic driver.

There are three main ways in which institutions can make provision:

- building a small number of subsidised family accommodation units into larger developments
- head-leasing – provide lower rents in exchange for security of income to owners
- partnering with a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) to draw down funding as part of an affordable housing scheme

Ability to attract funding of RSL from the Homes and Community Agency for family housing depends on the group being given a priority within the relevant housing strategy. Bids should be made through an RSL for a Social Housing Grant (SHG). Bidders will need to be able to demonstrate:

- a regenerative focus (plus sustainability)
- that the provision will improve the local tenant mix.
- compliance with the Decent Homes Standard, an initiative sponsored by the Government to improve standards in social rented homes
- the availability of matched funding

A major spin-off benefit for international students with dependants and for institutions is that provision of accommodation to meet the specific needs of this group serves, in co-locating them, to establish the basis of a community, where it is easier for both institution and students to work together to support other important needs, as identified in the NUS research. These relate to the challenges of isolation, financial hardship and childcare, and include more effective communication and peer support amongst student parents, the organisation of social events which students with dependants want, arranging informal childcare, establishing baby-sitting networks and sharing the school-run (NUS 2009).

Case study

Unipol Student Homes houses just over 200 families. The majority of tenants are research students and most of these are international students. The average length of tenancy is two years and nine months.

It is vital that the family housing provided is affordable. Costs vary from £290 per calendar month to an upper limit of £445pcm. Students pay their own water and energy charges but receive guidance on these before arrival. Because families range so widely in their energy usage it is not possible to have an inclusive charge.

Accommodation varies from small off-street 'family' houses to flats in complexes with up to 55 student families living together. Properties and flats vary from two bedrooms (for smaller flats) to five bedrooms.

There is no expectation of a luxury home, but all homes have a lounge, kitchen, master bedroom, children's bedroom/s and a WC/bath and shower. The flats and houses are let fully furnished, including soft furnishings. Furniture can be added or removed depending on the size of family. Normally, there is space in the complexes for a communal garden with benches and a play area for children. This is an important meeting place for residents who come from many different cultural backgrounds.

Families frequently self-support and assist each other with child-minding and school runs.

Many of these students form a stable part of the local community and often become involved with their local schools, for instance as parent governors.

Specialist satellite TV systems are installed allowing use of both 'Hotbird' and 'Astra' satellites. These help families keep in touch with their native TV stations and enables children to watch programmes from home, although there is a big following for CBBC.

An annual community fun day is held bringing tenants and surrounding residents together.

Case study

Ustinov College which is part of Durham University has 70 flats available for students bringing partners and children, the majority of whom are from overseas.

The college offers a wide range of support to students with families, including:

- contacting students before they arrive to ascertain their needs and help them navigate the UK educational system
- providing a 'Family Guide' with useful information on services and facilities for families, such as health services, child and family services, cultural norms and expectations in the UK, and things to do and see in the local area
- a current student who acts as a 'buddy'
- a family welcome pack on arrival in family accommodation, including some provisions for the first evening in Durham
- separate arrangements for registering with health services and a 'Family Information' session during the Induction period
- transport from the family accommodation, which is off-site, to the induction and welcome programme

In addition, throughout the year the college arranges various events such as a Hallowe'en Party, Christmas Party, with presents for all the children, Ustinov Day, which takes place in April and involves egg-hunting and decoration, and a family barbeque. The college also has close ties with Community Education and offers English classes, family learning, the International Women's Group, a homework club, art classes, fitness classes for women, and various other activities. In the last year, the site has also gained an external play area with swings and slide and additional indoor play equipment located in the communal social room.

Case study

Lancaster University has provided family accommodation for many years. Flats built for staff in the 1960s evolved to become flats for students with dependants. Demand always exceeded availability and when Lancaster embarked upon a partnership with UPP to develop further student accommodation, a number of couple and family units were negotiated into the agreement to enable the provision of purpose-built family accommodation.

The university now has 120 self-contained flats on campus. A mixture of one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom types is provided. The number of family units is only 1.8% of the university's overall portfolio but the university believes that the benefits of providing family accommodation go beyond rental income.

Many private developers dismiss the provision of family accommodation as unprofitable but many students who bring their dependants are able to pay market rents. They are often older students who are taking breaks from established careers. They expect decent accommodation to be provided. In the recent UPP development of "eco houses", four of the blocks were configured as 24 self-contained flats for couples and families. The university was able to show that the rental income for these four blocks matched four blocks of the mainstream student residences (in fact it slightly exceeds the mainstream blocks). Some compromises had to be made on the sizes of the smaller one-bedroom flats so that more of these could be provided to offset rents and achieve more affordable figures in the larger family accommodation. The longer contract periods that can be achieved for family accommodation helped us make the case that this type of letting could achieve an equivalent rental to the student blocks. Moreover, the provision of this type of accommodation can have spin-off benefits for the University.

With increasing competition for the international student market, the provision of secure on-campus accommodation for those with dependants means that the university can offer something different to many HEIs and can be seen as an aid to the recruitment of students who are often undertaking high-fee programmes such as MBAs.

There are many studies that show that accommodation is very important to international students and this is heightened for students with dependants. Lancaster carried out its own research prior to developing family accommodation with UPP. Students were asked to what extent the accommodation affected their choice of university. Some of the responses of the international students with dependants interviewed illustrate this point very well:

"When browsing Universities, the first thing we searched was accommodation. We sold everything to come here."

"It was very difficult for us. The University has a good reputation but if this basic provision cannot be dealt with effectively.....people will go elsewhere."

"Students with families have a hard decision to make. Supervisors and the University are good.....but housing affects how we can work....it affects our research."

"... British Universities make it difficult for families to live here, other countries welcome them. We did it despite the system. Britain is losing a lot of students."

Case study

Staff and family housing

The University of Warwick owns and manages 133 properties on the campus (purpose built) or located very close by (purchased by the university). The properties provide a range of accommodation from one-bedroom apartments to a four-bedroom house and are made available to full-time staff, visiting academics, researchers, new postgraduates (requiring accommodation for a family) and, very occasionally, undergraduates who require family accommodation.

The staff and family portfolio is managed by Warwick Accommodation, the department dedicated to managing the accommodation requirements of students, visitors and staff of the university, both campus and off-campus.

The rents range from around £600–700pcm for a one- or two-bedroom apartment to around £800–£900pcm for a three- or four-bedroom house (exclusive of fuel bills). All properties are fully furnished to a high standard and also include internet, crockery/cutlery, bed linen etc, making the accommodation suitable for visitors from overseas who may be visiting the university for a relatively short period (eg six months).

The fact that Warwick is a campus university means that the prospect of being able to enjoy the convenience of living on the campus is attractive to staff visiting the university for a relatively short period and the service has been able to maintain occupancy levels of almost 95%. The staff and family housing portfolio generates a gross annual income of just over £1m and produces a net surplus which is reinvested in university activity.

The most popular residences (Lakeside and Heronbank) are purpose-built blocks of around 100 one- and two-bedroom apartments allowing visitors from all around the world and from a variety of academic disciplines to meet and socialise. Lakeside and Heronbank are also located close to the

university nursery making the accommodation convenient for families with young children.

Demand for the university's staff and family housing often exceeds supply (particularly at the start of the academic year) and/or the cost of the accommodation can prove prohibitive for some visitors. The service is able to provide staff with information about private sector accommodation that is available in the areas surrounding the campus (Coventry, Kenilworth, Leamington and Warwick) and postgraduates seeking accommodation suitable for a couple with or without a family are able to apply for off-campus accommodation managed by Warwick Accommodation (Head-leasing scheme – see below).

Head-leasing scheme

For over thirty years the university has been leasing private sector housing through a head-leasing scheme that is then sub-let to students. Warwick Accommodation currently manages just over 1,750 bed spaces, located in south-west Coventry, Leamington and Kenilworth. The properties range from large hall-style accommodation, offering individual lets – similar to those available on campus – to housing for between three and six students to share with 'joint and several liability', and include some smaller units that are suitable for families or couples.

All properties must meet the standards and conditions set by the university and the Local Authorities Accreditation standards (Warwick District Council and Coventry City Council).

Accommodation is let either through our interactive website which allows students to search, reserve and sign contracts for houses of their choice (term time), or by direct online application to Warwick Accommodation (through the summer).

The head-leasing scheme is self-financing with a gross annual income of over £5m and produces a surplus which is reinvested in university activity.

Further information can be found at:
<www.warwick.ac.uk/accommodation>

London

What is special about London?

Students

London houses an important concentration of international students. Despite a commitment from the London Mayor's Office that it recognises the importance of international students in the capital and the importance of reinforcing London's position as a top destination for international students, precise statistics on London and the number and type of international students studying there are difficult to find.

'Study London' states, in a figure which is much quoted, that in 2006-07 over 90,000 international students from over 200 different countries studied in London. The top three countries of origin were China, the United States and India (also quoted on <www.london.gov.uk>)

According to figures produced by HESA for 2007-08, 26% of postgraduate students were international (compared with 10% of undergraduate students) and it therefore follows that a similar, or perhaps slightly larger, proportion of HE students in London will be older students working at postgraduate level.

This guidance has already noted the importance of making inclusive, institutional accommodation available to international students. However, because of the difficulties of developing affordable and well-located accommodation in London, both HEIs and private sector providers are able to provide only 17% of all students with hall-type accommodation. This is a much lower proportion than elsewhere in the country, where that figure would more typically be around 30%.

Although priority is given to international students in the allocation of accommodation, the uncertainty of arrival, late arrivals and difficulties in longer-term planning mean that many international students enter the accommodation market when much of their institution's own accommodation has already been allocated. There is also a general acceptance that "if HEIs are to attract international students, there will be pressure on them to provide a range of accommodation for all budgets" (King Sturge 2009).

As a major world city, London has an obvious allure for international students, but the prospect of engaging with a diffuse and challenging accommodation market just before beginning to study an equally challenging course is daunting.

Some of the concerns of international students noted elsewhere are magnified on the London scene. These include:

- commuting time and costs
- fears about safety and security
- unremitting anxiety about expense

There is an irony that, while they may have been transported to the midst of London's cultural riches, international students are often denied access to them because their resources do not stretch far enough, as they contend with a high cost of living.

There are other issues for students in London. The demand for short-stay accommodation for those on modules or undertaking shorter courses is significant. This contrasts with the significant number of London-based international students undertaking postgraduate research, whose studies, and therefore accommodation needs, extend to between three and four years. As recorded elsewhere in this guidance, international students are a diverse group with considerably variant requirements.

Types of accommodation in London

Not-for-profit providers

London is unusual in having a number of dedicated not-for-profit organisations which focus on housing international students. Of these, the main provider is International Students House (ISH), which has 700 beds, including 56 flats for students with families. ISH's mission statement gives an insight into the important role it has to play in providing a social and cultural centre for international students in London:

- "To help students to achieve the academic, personal and leadership aims that have brought them to the United Kingdom
- To provide the best possible opportunities for overseas students to experience the many facets of life in the UK and to give them a deeper understanding of British society
- To give British students an opportunity to broaden their horizons through friendship with people from widely differing backgrounds and cultures; and
- By these means to make an effective contribution to better international relations" (International Student House website)

Other significant not-for-profit providers are:

- Goodenough College, consisting of a community of 650 postgraduate students from over ninety countries which has a similar mission and purpose to ISH
- Cass and Claredale, which houses 247 students

HEI providers

Universities house about 15% of their students (King Sturge 2009). Average rents are about £130 a week with an average rental length of 40 weeks (NUS/Unipol 2010).

The current volume of accommodation provided institutionally is accepted by many HEIs in London as inadequate, but development costs and corresponding

rent levels have surged in recent years. Rent has increased by over a fifth (21%) over the 2006-10 period (NUS/Unipol 2010).

Some cost increases have been mitigated by the growth in shared rooms, offering a low-cost option to some students. Shared room accommodation, unfashionable for so long, may be a counterbalance to the higher prices attaching to ensuite accommodation, the expansion of which has been a defining feature of the London scene in the last decade or two.

Private providers

There has been a considerable growth in private hall places built and developed within the last few years. Many of these places have been geared to the supposed needs of international students.

Although there has been much comment about the number of new flats coming on line, private providers still house only about 4% of the London market. Rents in this sector are high, averaging in 2009-10 £168 a week for a minimum contract length of 44 weeks, rather than the shorter institutional contracts (NUS/Unipol 2010).

Although an estimated 3,500 bed spaces are due to come on line between 2010-12, the summer of 2009 saw increased demand from greater numbers of international students needing accommodation but a higher volume of empty rooms in these new developments than had previously been the case. Despite high supposed demand and increasing rent levels in most student accommodation in London, in these new developments rent levels actually fell from an all-time high of £175 a week per room in 2009.

The conclusion must be reached that many international students could not afford the accommodation which had been developed for them as its target market, and took the less preferred option of looking for accommodation in smaller houses and flats which were lower-priced. Even though rent levels fell back over the last year, there is evidence that further rent falls will be required to ensure no further empty rooms in some developments in 2010-11.

One unforeseen advantage of this surplus of higher-cost accommodation has been to provide a flexible pool of short-stay accommodation for those students not wanting to rent for a whole year. This willingness to fill rooms for any period of time has been a major gain for better-off students studying shorter courses or looking to find somewhere to live for a few weeks whilst they explore other options.

Smaller houses and flats

The majority of international students rent accommodation in the general private sector market in smaller houses and flats. As has been mentioned previously, this type of accommodation, particularly for new arrivals, is 'second best' for students

who would prefer accommodation arrangements made through their institution or some third-party body nominated by their institution. Privately renting smaller houses brings with it the issues of paying variable water and energy charges and seeking exemption from Council Tax, all issues that even home students frequently have problems budgeting for correctly.

Most education institutions recognise their obligations to offer assistance to international students who need to access this market. They either run services themselves or contract into the University of London Housing Services (ULHS, based in the University of London Students' Union, which provides a central private sector vacancy service and housing advice service), or both.

Access to web-based information has dramatically improved accessibility to information about how to rent in the wider private sector and the use of photographs and descriptions makes choosing properties easier. The downside is that occasionally students have been fooled into parting with money through bogus entries on websites. This reinforces the case for institutions to develop their own websites or link into more regulated sites such as is provided by ULHS or Unipol. Some institutions broadcast online alerts to warn about particular scams as they arise.

Case study

The post of International Accommodation Officer was set up at London Met in 1998, funded half by the Accommodation Office within Student Services and half by the International Office. Its establishment was in recognition of the importance of accommodation as a factor in the recruitment and retention of international students.

Based physically in the Accommodation Office, the postholder ensures that processes, activities and written material relating to accommodation take full account of the needs, interests and requirements of international students. The postholder also supports international students on an individual basis before and during their time at London Met, co-ordinating responses from different departments as necessary.

More choice?

Although choice in accommodation types has improved, it is only of use if good information is available. It is still the case that, although location is important, the lowest-priced halls book up first and currently there are not enough of them.

The challenge for the London-based HEIs is to increase institutionally-provided accommodation (whether in partnership or directly), whilst meeting the evident

needs of international students for affordable housing and for them to deal directly with their institution or have a supplier recommended by them.

Policy perspectives on development

The London Plan

If London is to see its reputation grow as a centre for international students, it will need to meet the challenges that have been outlined.

The London Mayor's Office is considering placing a surcharge (known as a section 21 charge) on new private student developments except those which have a formal link with educational suppliers. Although controversial, it is unsurprising, since recent developments have concentrated on luxury accommodation for richer students to the extent that policy makers are now hard-pressed to distinguish them from other forms of luxury let development which are subject to section 21 requirements.

The plan may have merit if three things are recognised:

- that lower-cost accommodation is fulfilling a much wider international student need than higher-cost accommodation and should be exempted from any surcharge arrangements
- that not-for-profit provision aligns closely with the desire of the Mayor himself to promote London as an internationalist centre, and that, to support this, private developers should be encouraged and helped, not discouraged, from developing directly
- that the link with educational suppliers for other developers may be a good thing because it will ensure that correctly priced developments are built in locations of interest to students and may avoid empty rooms occurring when miscalculations are made by the private sector.

Affordability

If it is to be affordable, the development of accommodation in London must embrace at least one of the following:

- the growth of shared rooms, with proper study and recreational facilities
- location in less fashionable parts of London, entailing some additional commuting
- a lower level of amenity than is offered in high-priced accommodation

These developments must offer that essential institutional link which international students demand. They must have good internet facilities and be all-year-round communities. Many institutions successfully marry up short and longer lets with vacation traffic. This ensures 52-week occupancy and maximised revenues which result in lower rent levels for their students.

The private rented sector

The private rented sector is coming under increasing planning control and regulation. A major effect of this will be to deter some potential investors and existing landlords. There is, however, at the time of writing, a surplus of rented accommodation in London, which is holding rents down. Currently, therefore, it can represent very good value for longer-term students after their initial period of settling into London.

Institutions should give consideration to head-leasing or direct management of good quality houses to let directly to their international students. In doing so, they need to ensure that:

- rents are inclusive
- lettings and payment are made through them
- they marry up this lower-cost and flexible provision with their normal induction and social activities

Many private landlords would welcome a link with a major institution and would lease their properties at very competitive rents that would allow institutions to add a charge for their administration and still offer a product which could be attractive to a proportion of international students. Elsewhere in this guidance details have been given of a successful scheme in Warwick. There is scope for devising and running a similar scheme in London.

Institutions should also provide more information to international students about web-based information on what is available to rent, tapping into the expertise that already exists through certain regulated and subsidised sites. Wider and more detailed information should be given about standards. Accreditation, particularly the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme, should be more rigorously promoted.

The challenge

The case has been made elsewhere for accommodation to be treated as an integral part of the international student experience. London is a particularly illuminating case in point: international students find themselves surrounded by the icons of Britishness (red buses, telephone boxes, Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament). They also discover a welcoming and enormously culturally diverse city – indeed, so diverse that Britishness is often defined in terms of buildings and icons. This leads to very high expectations of accommodation, but few international students will be living near to the tourist sites they admire, just like most Londoners themselves.

Advice has to be productive and realistic but the supply of a wider choice of accommodation, bookable and approved through the institution they are studying at, must be increased to meet rising demand. For a moment, it looked as if larger private sector suppliers alone were going to be the drivers of growth and change

in accommodation but that has proved to be a false dawn, both for international students and the developers alike.

The special expectations of international students in London need to be more clearly understood, acknowledged and used as building blocks for greater involvement in the development of appropriate accommodation by the London institutions.

Further education

What is special about the FE sector in relation to international students and accommodation?

Some key findings of UKCISA research in relation to international FE students and accommodation were as follows:

- Accommodation and security were of concern pre-arrival, and both before arrival and in the first few weeks of their stay students' main worries were the use of English (both social and academic), homesickness, food and mixing with home students. Students' concerns about these aspects decreased to a great extent once they were further into their stay.
- The main sources of information students used before coming to the UK were the college's website (42%) or prospectus (33%). Agents were used by 26%.
- When students received information from the college, they were generally satisfied with it – over 90% of students who received information about applying to the college, living and studying in the UK, what to do on arrival and immigration issues, found it helpful.
- Satisfaction with information about accommodation and fees and costs was slightly lower than for other aspects of college life (although still 80% or over).
- Students' associations and accommodation services were rated slightly less highly than other services.
- Students were generally happy with their accommodation with respect to ease of travel to college (71%), quality (72%), warmth and comfort (74%), but only 49% agreed that the cost was reasonable.
- A large number of students (42%) made their own accommodation arrangements without asking for help
- 21% were placed in homestays on a long-term basis, 14% were put in temporary accommodation with a homestay or in a hotel while 9% were given places in a hall of residence and another 9% were given help finding somewhere in the private sector.
- 81% of students in homestay accommodation agreed that their hosts were friendly and welcoming, and students who went into long-term placements with homestays when they arrived were more satisfied generally with their accommodation than those in halls of residence (80% versus 66%).
- 21% of students were unhappy with the accommodation they had when they first arrived, while only 8% were dissatisfied with their current

accommodation. One third of students said they had had to move at least once to find suitable accommodation (UKCISA 2006)

Good practice arising out of UKCISA's *New horizons* report is still of value – FECs should:

- explore ways of ensuring all students receive comprehensive pre-arrival information
- consider how best to manage students' expectations about the cost and quality of accommodation, including temporary arrangements on first arrival
- provide flexibility where possible, and advice and support for students wishing to change accommodation
- increase awareness of accommodation offices
- conduct regular research into international student satisfaction within their own colleges to inform policy and practice.

Many of the findings of the *New horizons* report which bear comparison with HE display similar patterns of response. There are, however, significant differences and special considerations in respect of FE:

- far smaller numbers of students requiring residential accommodation per institution
- consequently, few dedicated accommodation services within FECs (at best part-time) and only a small volume of direct provision of accommodation (none on offer at some colleges)
- shorter courses on offer, requiring flexibility of lets
- greater unpredictability about international student recruitment intakes
- the need for additional pastoral support, supervision and legal and regulatory compliance to support under 18s and to discharge the higher duty of care which institutions owe to younger students and specifically to meet the requirements of Ofsted's National Minimum Standards for Accommodation for Students under 18

Homestay

Many institutions use homestay accommodation instead of halls because it offers a number of benefits including flexibility of let for the student in a more supportive environment, plus no financial risk for the institution. It also has the advantage of providing a suitable environment for under 18s, as the host family gives supervisory and pastoral support. However, FECs need to recognise that with these benefits come certain administrative necessities which require adequate planning, staffing and resourcing:

- variable accommodation (type and quality) within homestay portfolios requires close monitoring, including annual visits
- arranging accommodation on an individual basis in properties with differing rents and amenity levels

- securing adequate numbers of host families of sufficient quality and proximity to the college
- compliance with the bureaucratic requirements established under the Independent Safeguarding Authority's vetting and barring scheme (from April 2010 all new homestay providers will need to be vetted, and from January 2014 all existing providers will need to be vetted)

To these can be added financial management, if the FEC takes a hand in administering transactions between homestay and student. Taking a non-interventionist approach can lighten the administrative burden but it is important to make this position clear in writing and up front.

Halls of residence

A minority of colleges offer accommodation in halls, with a mix of direct provision in institutionally-owned halls and nominations agreements with private providers. Following the national trend in HE, there are decreasing numbers of FECs offering their own accommodation. However, in the context of international FE students on shorter courses, this is often the only kind of halls accommodation that offers the required flexibility of let and affordability. The fixed contract lengths, the increasingly prevalent requirement to have a UK-based guarantor and often higher rents mean that private sector halls available through nomination arrangements are often not a practical or desirable option for international FE students. The unpredictable nature of FE recruitment can result in high levels of voids in any kind of halls of residence, representing an unacceptable cost to most FE institutions.

Private rented housing

Some institutions provide assistance in the form of advice to students looking to find private rented housing, but this accommodation option is seen as problematic and offered as a last resort where homestay or halls accommodation is not available. An issue raised by several institutions in the seminar for this guidance was the variable quality of private rented housing and the risk this posed to younger international students who were seen as more vulnerable.

Under 18s

The regulatory framework for FECs is to discharge their duty of care in a 'reasonably competent' manner in respect of students who are aged under 18. The definition of this duty of care and what 'reasonably competent' means are set out in Ofsted's National Minimum Standards for Accommodation for Students under 18. The standards fall under six headings:

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution

- achieving economic well-being
- organisation

Many of the standards will be met by existing institutional provision or by extending existing facilities and policies to cover younger students. The emphasis in the guidelines is on there being an appropriate level of support available to the student 24 hours a day and students being aware of where they can go for help. However, it is not essential for the student to be supervised continuously, and the guidelines encourage institutions to define clearly the level of supervision provided and to make this information available to both students and their parents/guardians before they book accommodation. Institutions are encouraged to have clear residential policies and processes in place, with a specific and identifiable member of staff being responsible for student residential and welfare supervision. Halls accommodation for under 18s is required to have 24-hour staffing on site which is prohibitively expensive for FECs with smaller halls of residence.

International students with disabilities

Under Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act, HEIs must:

- not discriminate against disabled people
- not treat disabled students or applicants less favourably than non-disabled students
- make reasonable adjustments for all disabled students to ensure that they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with someone who is not disabled

These institutional duties apply no less to international students than to UK-domiciled students. However, for most disabled international students no additional funding is available to support their needs, in the way that it is available for UK students through the UK funding councils and Disability Living Allowance (DSA). To discharge their duties properly, institutions therefore need to identify internal funding (for example from international tuition fee income) as early as possible, preferably in advance of the student's arrival.

Further, detailed guidance and information on international students and disability can be found in *International students with disabilities in Higher Education: notes on good practice*, UKCISA/Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, 2005.

Points for consideration for institutions/colleges and their students' union:

- Institutions should review how best to make arrangements for the provision of accommodation suitable for students with families and for supporting them in finding suitable accommodation if they do not want or cannot be placed in institutionally-arranged provision
- Working with private and third-sector partners, institutions in London should consider gathering improved intelligence on the range of requirements which international students have in London, and, on this basis, seek to ensure a wider choice of accommodation for international students, bookable and approved through institutions.
- FECs should review their pre-arrival information to ensure it is comprehensive and well-publicised; should consider undertaking regular research into international student satisfaction with their accommodation; should review arrangements for achieving and maintaining full compliance with safeguarding requirements; and should review the effectiveness of how international students' expectations are managed in respect of the cost and quality of accommodation
- Accommodation practitioners should work closely with international offices and specialist disability services to promote and publicise the benefits of pre-arrival disclosure of disability and should, again in collaboration, strive to provide, as early as possible, accommodation solutions which work for each disabled international student and which are reasonable within the law

Appendix A. Checklist of items to cover in pre-departure mailing/accommodation web pages

- **The range of choices by type of accommodation**
This should include institutionally-allocated purpose-built accommodation, voluntary sector provision and off-street housing in the private rented sector and whatever else is available locally.
- **Detail of the different pieces of provision which make up the institution's portfolio**
Internet connectivity features strongly amongst the expectations of international students in recent research (Unite 2006 and UK Higher Education International Unit 2010), and there should be clarity on its availability for each residence.
- **Guarantee of institutionally allocated accommodation for the first year of study**
It should be clear from the outset whether there is such a guarantee or there isn't.
- **What is available for returning students in institutionally-allocated accommodation**
It is worth removing any expectation at this stage that institutional accommodation is available for the full study lifecycle, if this is the case.
- **Details about the location of each development within the institution's portfolio**
It should be clear whether students can expect to live on campus and if not how far away the campus is or the campuses are, whether their place of study is walkable and what the alternatives to walking are.
- **Details about parking facilities**
It should be clear for each development whether there are parking facilities available and if so what the level of availability is, whether there is a cost and how much.
- **Accommodation costs by each type within each piece of the institution's provision**
What is included in and what is excluded from headline accommodation costs should be transparent and set out in simple terms. Specifically, any administration fee, deposit or up-front rent requirement should be spelt out.

This is particularly important where students are being invited to contract online. Institutions can improve student perceptions of value for money and satisfaction by being clear that their accommodation (generally) includes utility bills whereas costs in the private rented sector generally do not (NUS/Unipol 2010). There should be a clear basis for comparability with other types of accommodation, including off-street housing in the private rented sector. An indication of utility costs per month or per year should be given. Institutional accommodation may also include other services (for example, security) which set it apart from off-street accommodation and which institutions could make more of in the literature that they provide.

- **Payment terms for rent**
This should cover any limitations on methods of payment, payment periods and instalments and the consequences of defaulting on payments.
- **A budget planner (or a link or referral to an online student calculator, for example, the International Student Calculator or one on the Directgov website)**
These are of particular use to international students unfamiliar with the cost of living in the UK.
- **A checklist to help students assess and evaluate their own needs and preferences and the fitness and appropriateness of accommodation which they are interested in**
- **Further sources of information, both university-produced and other, and how to access them**
- **Explanatory notes in simple, plain English on how to secure a residential agreement for institutionally-allocated accommodation before they arrive**
- **All application documents for institutionally-allocated accommodation, including contracts (specimen only, if you do not offer contracts online)**
- **Copies of, or signposts to, related formal documents**
These should include all documentation referred to in accommodation agreements (as they probably wrap in rights and responsibilities established in these documents as part of the agreement). They should also include allocations policies and batching processes and timetables for these purposes, codes of acceptable student behaviour, discipline procedures, serious and critical incidents guidance (who to contact when), emergency accommodation provision for students, disability information (expectations, level of service), release from a tenancy protocol for students facing exceptional circumstances, institutional anti-discrimination guidelines and information.

- **A warning about the risks of signing up for unseen accommodation in the private rented sector ahead of their arrival**
There are currently signs of a shift in this advice away from blanket warnings about ‘the private sector’ and towards more specific warnings about the risks associated with off-street housing in the private rented sector (specifically around the unknowns of safety, quality and reputation). Many institutions have felt the need to make this adjustment because they often have partnership arrangements/nomination agreements with, or substantial reliance on, major commercial providers and the purpose-built product which they offer – a relationship which of itself implies recognition of reliable standards.
- **A message about the implications of signing an accommodation agreement**
This should be as clear, strong and plainly stated a message as possible about the nature and implications of signing an accommodation agreement in English or Scottish law. There have been patterns historically of international students signing contracts for accommodation pre-arrival without understanding what they mean, what they entail and what obligations this imposes on them. On arrival some students believe they can walk away from their accommodation and their contract, having found alternative living arrangements which suit them better. It is worth spending time on getting this message and its transmission right rather than expending resources later on reacting to the difficult challenges presented by a student trying to ignore and reject their legal obligations.
- **House-hunting advice**
This should include a description of any institutional services and timetables to support house-hunting in the off-street sector (for example, organised events and contract-checking services) and detailed guidance on what to look out for, including common pitfalls (for example, surprises buried in the small print of contracts, unexpected costs,) and how to inspect and assess a property.
- **Advice on insurance or where to get further information and guidance**
UKCISA research in 2004 showed that “only 35% of international students had taken out medical insurance, and only a quarter had possessions insurance”.
- **A general warning about ‘scams’**
Scams are a feature of parts of the private rented sector from time to time, more prevalent in some towns/cities than in others.
- **Some preliminary advice on safety**
This is important for many international students. However, if this falls within the responsibility of the accommodation function, the shape and depth of the advice may need negotiating with the marketing function, given sensitivities around this issue (particularly pre-arrival).

- **Details of short-stay accommodation available**
This may be to meet an immediate need on arrival, to allow time to make longer-term arrangements or to meet the needs for a short course. Students will want to know how long they can stay, where it is, at what cost and how to apply for it.
- **How to make travel plans**
This should include advice for students on when to arrive, train and coach timetable web links, an indication of the cost of travel costs (transfers from airports), the detail of any travel terminus pickup and meet-and-greet services offered by the institution (see Chapter 4), the best ways to travel to the host town or city, essential travel advice (about safety and luggage and important documents to keep with them when travelling). This information may be put together and transmitted by a function other than the accommodation office. If accommodation practitioners plan to re-state this information for the benefit of new international students, they should take care to ensure consistency with messages sent from other parts of the institution.
- **Advice about how and where students can collect their keys and get access to their accommodation**
- **Advice about their first night in the UK**
Many students will arrive in a position to move straight into institutionally-allocated accommodation as soon as they arrive. However, a significant number will not – either because of their time of arrival or because they have not got any. This advice should be in the form of a strong message that students must know where they will stay on their first night in the UK. They should also be given an indication of how much cash (sterling) they will need to cover this and other immediate costs.
- **A checklist on the essentials – things students need to do before they arrive**

Appendix B. Checklist for use by international students in house-hunting

International Students House Hunting Guide Leeds University Union

*Disabled students:
if you would like this information in larger type or printed on a different coloured paper, or if you need the information in another format, please contact the Student Advice Centre on [TEL]*

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Essential checklist

To complete before you agree to rent

Before you look for a property, make a list of what is important to you. If you move in and discover it is too cold or the bedroom is too small you cannot move out because you have signed a contract and still have to pay the rent. The following checklist covers the basic things you need to consider. Use it with your list of what you want so you are not disappointed when you move in.

Make sure you look at different properties with different landlords. This will let you compare properties and help you make a decision. Use this checklist to compare different properties and the scores you give them. Further copies of the checklist and information on the code of standards can be found at [web address]

Property checklist

Name of landlord: _____

Address: _____

Rent per week: _____

What to consider

- Size of rooms
- Would you be happy with the bedroom? (Think about studying space with a good desk and comfortable chair)
- Does the kitchen have enough equipment and space for you all to prepare and store food?
- Are there enough bathrooms?
- Is there enough natural light in your room?
- Is there a 'social space' to meet others? (How would you feel if you are in your bedroom all the time?)

Your comments

Tick or cross box as appropriate

Location?

How long will it take to get to university? (check the bus times)	Short <input type="checkbox"/>	Average <input type="checkbox"/>	Long <input type="checkbox"/>
How much will a weekly ticket to university be?	Cheap <input type="checkbox"/>	Average <input type="checkbox"/>	Expensive <input type="checkbox"/>
Will the cheaper rent make up for the bus fare?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do you know any friends living in the same area?	Lots <input type="checkbox"/>	Some <input type="checkbox"/>	None <input type="checkbox"/>
Are there any local shops?	Plenty <input type="checkbox"/>	A few <input type="checkbox"/>	None <input type="checkbox"/>
Would you feel safe in the area? (especially at night)	Safe <input type="checkbox"/>	Average <input type="checkbox"/>	Unsafe <input type="checkbox"/>

Cost?

Do you know what the weekly rent is?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know when the rent payments are? (eg monthly/three monthly)	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

Can you afford to pay it all yourself?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have to pay the bills? (eg gas/electricity/water)	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can you afford the deposit?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Furniture?

Are you happy with the condition?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
If not will the landlord replace any of it?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there enough furniture in your room?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a desk and chair for studying?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there enough chairs for the dining table?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Heating?

Is there central heating in the property?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there central heating in your room? (test the heating to make sure it works)	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the radiators big enough for the rooms? (think about the cold winter)	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Condition?

Are there any repairs that need doing?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there any signs of damp patches?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would you be happy with the décor and carpets?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the heating boiler look quite new? A new boiler is more reliable and cheaper to run	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Security?

Is there a burglar alarm that works?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do ground floor windows have locks?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the outside doors strong?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would you feel safe in the property?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Landlord?

Has the landlord asked you to pay to have the contract checked?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the landlord signed up to a code of standards?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think the landlord is treating you well?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix C. Advice for co-tenants on dealing with conflict, Dundee University

Four-part conflict resolution message

Use 'I' statements – assertive and challenging (not confrontational) and let the other person know that you have strong ideas and convictions. Using 'you' statements can be perceived as aggressive and attacking. You can start the conversation on a slow level and gently raise or lower the intensity as needed as the conversation develops.

Conflict resolution message builder:

When you	I feel	Because	I would like
Describe the other person's behaviour in specific, non-judgemental and concrete terms	Disclose your feelings about the offending behaviour in a non-judgemental manner	State the concrete and tangible effect on you in non-judgemental manner	State the specific and tangible behaviour you would like to see changed again in a non-judgemental manner
"When you embarrassed me in the kitchen this morning"	"I felt surprised and caught off guard"	"I found I was unable to concentrate for the next 10 minutes or so"	"I would prefer it in future we could talk about things like this on a one-to-one basis and in private"
Avoid the words: always, never, and every time	Avoid the words: disappointed as it is judgemental	Be objective rather than subjective	Future oriented, asking for behaviour that you believe is acceptable so as to encourage an opportunity for change, share what you are willing to do to help the resolution be successful

It is useful to ask yourself before you begin "Do I have the right to confront this person?" so as to determine your motivation and whether there are different approaches you could use.

An eight-step procedure for dealing with conflict

1. Present the issue or problem unemotionally and as neutrally as possible using an 'I' message, ask the other person to help
2. Clarify and define the issue, "Here is how I see the problem ... what do you think?" until everyone is satisfied with the definition of the problem
3. Ask the other person how they are affected by the problem, listen to their response without judgement and try to understand it from their point of view, ask for more detail if necessary to clarify and make sure the other person feels they have been understood
4. Using 'I' statement express your point of view, taking ownership of your position, expressing yourself in a straightforward and clear way so that others can understand your viewpoint. If it appears the other person is not listening, or not understanding, ask them to describe your position as they see it without interrupting them, even if it is inaccurate. When they have finished, express your position again, using different words and ask if your views are clearer now. You are not trying necessarily to get their agreement, only to make sure you understand one another
5. Work together to develop a condition on which you can all agree. Define mutual ends, aims, goals that you can agree and work towards (this is the 'there' that is often included in "How are we going to get there?") – ask, "What are we both after?"
6. Create alternatives – try to think of as many ways as possible of achieving your mutual objective
7. Evaluate the list of solutions and jointly choose one as a tentative solution, writing down the agreed solution and the specific actions that will be taken
8. Decide how you will each know the solution is working, design the criteria that will make this clear

NOTE: You do not have to follow these steps before coming to us for help. You can contact us at any point and we will try to resolve the situation. However, you might find it useful to try the steps above first.

(Source: Dundee University website)

Appendix D Detailed survey findings on postgraduate accommodation requirements, University of Leeds

Micro-design**Bedroom**

- the ideal bed/study room is a hybrid, affording comfort and supporting study as well as all the modern connectivity available
- there were two different requirements for storage: work storage and belongings storage
- adequate shelf space to accommodate the weight and quantity of materials that the student will gather over their programme
- belongings storage which requirement predominantly centres on clothes storage and the request for a large wardrobe space and cupboards
- the notion of larger rooms was very attractive to most respondents

Bathrooms

- though bathrooms should be well provided, students would prefer living space rather than bathroom space
- many understood that the ensuite bathroom would inevitably encroach into the overall space, and were therefore willing to sacrifice bathroom space in order to preserve as much living space as possible
- monobloc or mixer taps were requested by all, particularly the international students

Kitchens

- the provision of fridge and freezer space as key – the suggestion was that there should be a maximum of two people who have to share one fridge
- dishwashers were mentioned but received mixed ratings

Lounge areas

- comfortable sofas for lounging were a must
- did not want functional sofas – they did not want chairs with exposed, hard wooden arms or upright backs
- wanted a feel that evoked relaxation rather than a 'reception area'

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