

## **Support and integration of exchange students at the National University of Singapore and Hong Kong University**

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### **Objectives**

As the International Student Adviser at King's College London I am heavily involved with preparing new international and exchange students for their arrival in the UK, running Orientation activities for them upon arrival and providing support for them throughout their stay in the UK. Both the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Hong Kong University (HKU) have a strong international ethos and are also exchange partners with King's, so I was keen to see how they support students, and in particular seek to integrate students into the wider community, especially those who were only visiting the institutions for a short time, and who had arrived in the second or third years of study, when arguably a community had already formed there. During both visits I spoke to current exchange students as well as students who had returned from visits in the UK to discuss their experiences, toured the campuses and met with staff to discuss in detail support and activities on offer.

### **Main Outcomes**

The staff and students I spoke to at both institutions were keen to stress the importance of providing students with a good all-round experience, encompassing academic, cultural and social elements, and as such have developed many services and policies to assist with this, some of which are already common in many UK institutions. In particular, I found the Buddy schemes at both institutions, and the use of a 'Global Lounge' space at HKU, to be innovative and of great benefit to the students there, and both ideas which could potentially be adapted by institutions in the UK.

### **Introduction to NUS**

NUS has a strong international ethos. 20% of its undergraduate students and 75% of its research staff are international, with around 1,000 exchange students additionally each year. It has over 200 partner institutions in 30 countries, and in 2008/09 20% of NUS undergraduates experienced an international visit of some kind. Its aim is to send 50% of its students on an international visit of some kind (including exchanges, internships and summer schools) by 2012. Many of the students have therefore had experience as international students elsewhere themselves, and as such many I spoke to felt the community as a whole was more receptive to the needs of overseas students.

Exchanges are co-ordinated by the International Relations Office who provide briefings and support for outgoing students. Incoming students are supported by the Office of Student Affairs which assists with immigration matters, provides detailed information both on and pre-arrival (described by one current exchange student as "*tremendous*") and oversees a number of activities including i.Care (see below) and a Host Family programme, where students can visit families within the city and participate in local festivals and celebrations (eg Chinese New Year). They also hold an annual student festival, 'In-Fusion', showcasing different cultures. As in the UK there is also an active Students' Union.

## **The i.Care Programme (“International Connect And Relations Enthusiasts”)**

The iCare programme is a volunteering scheme for students providing support for other international students at NUS. It covers three main areas:

### *Buddies*

Incoming students who opt to have a ‘buddy’ are allocated to current students two to three weeks before arriving at NUS. Their buddy will be in touch with them via email. (The University’s Sharepoint system allows potential buddies to see anonymised information about incoming students so they can pick which students they might like to meet – rather like online dating! This system means that students are likely to be well-matched with their buddy).

Buddies perform a number of tasks. As well as helping to prepare students for their arrival, incoming students can also opt for their buddies to meet them at the airport and travel with them to NUS. Students who were currently on exchange said that they found this service extremely useful and comforting, and students from NUS who had returned from UK exchanges and not been met at the airport felt that this was something which should always be offered. Buddies are then on hand for the first few weeks following the students’ arrival, and are encouraged to meet with them informally for coffee to see how things are going, and take them along to events to help them settle in.

Students who volunteer for the programme usually buddy two or three students, and have often been on exchange themselves. They receive a briefing prior to their charges arriving, and attend cross-cultural training. Buddies are unpaid, but receive expenses to cover reasonable travel costs. Buddies are also useful as they can be used as a student’s emergency contact where they don’t already have a contact in Singapore.

### *Event associates*

These are students who arrange activities such as food tours and visits to famous sites such as local mosques and temples, etc. They receive support from the Office of Student Affairs, but activities are student-led. Again, participating students have often been on exchanges themselves so know what sort of activities students may want to do. One great benefit of event associates is that it ensures that activities to help introduce students to their new home and culture continue beyond Orientation week. Many institutions in the UK do not have the capacity to run or oversee events post-orientation due to a high workload. The lack of such events was one of the criticisms raised by NUS students who had returned from exchanges in the UK.

### *Conversation peers*

These are students who meet up with overseas students outside of classes to practise English conversation. This is arranged by the students and often takes place in social settings on campus.

The buddying system at NUS seemed to have huge benefits both to the students who were ‘buddied’ and the students who volunteered. Incoming students said that they felt a huge burden of responsibility was lifted by the fact that they were told by students in advance what sort of things to bring with them and what to expect, and that they were met at the airport. They felt that it helped them to integrate with local students as the impetus was on the buddy to introduce them to people and activities,

rather than on them to take the initiative themselves at a time when they were trying to get to grips with so many other things.

Buddies themselves felt they benefited in that they had the opportunity to mix with students from other cultures. This was particularly valuable to students who were planning to go or had already been on an exchange themselves. Students also felt the opportunities offered by the programme enhanced employability, both in terms of the work undertaken and the exposure to different cultures. One student said she felt *“a personal belonging to NUS”* as a result of her involvement in the programme, and another described it as *“an enriching and rewarding experience and a fantastic opportunity to learn new things and add more vibrancy to one's life.”*

Further testimonials from volunteers can be found at <http://www.nus.sg/osa/international/icare/icare.html>

NUS has a system whereby if second or third year students wish to remain in on-campus housing they must earn points in order to do so. Points are earned for participation in the life of the community, for example organising events. NUS students felt this was a good incentive to building community spirit as students were always eager to get involved in and take the initiative in organising different activities.

### **Introduction to HKU**

HKU has over 180 exchange partners in 25 countries throughout the world. Currently around 20% of its students are from overseas (including mainland China) with around 800 incoming and outgoing exchange students each year, but they are actively looking to increase this. Like NUS it provides structured, comprehensive support for its overseas and exchange students, with incoming students supported by the Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) who provide detailed information in advance, which students I spoke to felt covered everything they needed to know, and a basic Orientation programme.

A large Students' Union arranges sports and other activities (one student described facilities on campus as *“fantastic”*), and a special 'Global Launch' team organises trips and activities throughout the year open to overseas and local students that explore the local region and culture, including celebrations for Christmas, Chinese New Year, St Patrick's Day and other festivals. Staff in the Global Launch team felt that exploring festivals from other cultures was a valuable way of encouraging integration and internationalisation amongst the student community as a whole.

### **Buddying Scheme**

Like NUS, HKU operates a large buddy scheme open to all international students, including exchange students to help with the transition to a new culture. They felt that, particularly for students from markets such as the UK and USA, this was particularly important as such students were more likely to experience culture shock in their new, unfamiliar environment than, say, students from mainland China, so having students from that region as a guide was useful. Students volunteer for the programme over the summer, and those who have been on exchange themselves are particularly targeted to help as it is felt they can empathise with incoming exchange students.

Buddies undergo training where they are given various facts and figures, as well as cultural awareness training, to ensure they are able to answer most questions they may be asked by incoming students. They are then encouraged to contact their

students several weeks before the start of the year to answer any questions or concerns they may have. Like NUS, students can be met and taken by their buddy to HKU, and travel expenses are refunded, though students arrange meet-ups at Central Station because it has proved difficult to find suitable meeting places at the airport. Students are encouraged to use the airport shuttle service into the city.

### **Global Lounge**

The Global Lounge at HKU is a large, multi-purpose space which is open to all students, all day, including at weekends. As well as incorporating a large social space (the room has a café at one end and is full of comfortable sofas as well as informal work space, and there are several televisions showing programmes from around the world) the room is also large enough to host talks, small events and club and society meetings. Throughout the week many events such as talks, cultural showcases and meetings are held there, though the rest of the space remains open as a social space. The space also acts as a library, holding materials from all HKU's partner institutions for students considering studying abroad, and also including lots of travel and tourism information both on the local area and countries within travelling distance of Hong Kong, to encourage students to explore and make the most of their time there.

Of the students I spoke to, several agreed that the lounge was *“a really useful place if you're lonely or feeling homesick, because you always know you'll find someone from your own country or close by that you can talk to”* and all had used it at some point during their exchange.

The students I spoke to at HKU on the whole did not seem to feel as integrated within the university community as those at NUS, and they felt it was up to exchange students to make a concerted effort to get to know local students and participate in activities. This is in contrast to NUS, and could perhaps be explained by the large number of NUS students who have themselves participated in some sort of exchange. Local students I spoke to at NUS felt that the fact that they and/or many of their peers had experienced life as an exchange student meant that they were both more willing and better equipped to empathise with and support incoming students.

### **Module adjustment initiatives**

Staff at both HKU and NUS acknowledged that an issue faced by exchange students was making the correct module choices. Due to anxiety about the different academic systems and the complexity of credit transfers, students I spoke to said they were tempted to opt for more familiar courses, rather than taking the risk of trying courses which may be more challenging or interesting or perhaps unique to the institution in which they were studying.

Both institutions have introduced administrative procedures to deal with this – known as ‘Module adjustment’ at NUS and ‘The Add/Drop period’ at HKU. Under this system students are allowed to enrol for up to two extra modules at the beginning of the semester and drop two at a later, agreed date, having been able to attend classes and make an informed choice as to which modules will be best for them. This is a good system and encourages people to be more adventurous, and takes away the administrative burden of actively changing courses. The exchange students I spoke to found this system very valuable.

## Recommendations for King's College London and other institutions

Both NUS and HKU have introduced various innovative ideas and practices to the implementation of their exchange programmes and support of the students who attend them, both to the benefit of the students on exchange and the university community as a whole. Some of these ideas could be adapted to benefit students attending exchange programmes in the UK:

- Consider introducing new exchange opportunities rather than just one semester/year, for example Summer Schools, so there is a broader range of choice. Students at NUS didn't all want to be away from home for a whole semester/year, but would have been interested in a summer programme; others were keen to go to more than one institution, and wished to attend one institution for the academic year and another for the summer. It is also worth considering the benefits of encouraging a higher proportion of Home students to undertake exchanges themselves. This could help in making UK institutions a more attractive option to potential exchange students.
- At King's, and no doubt at other institutions, difficulties sometimes arise with regards to module choices. Students unfamiliar with the UK system and concerned about how their grades will translate into their own system are often unsure which modules to take, and sometimes play safe with regard to module choices. Although there will of course be administrative constraints, it's worth considering whether it is possible, like at NUS and HKU, to allow students to take one or two extra modules if desired, and then drop the one they do not wish to take by an agreed date later in the term.
- Consider introducing a 'buddy' scheme. This will allow institutions to cover certain areas not covered by other, overstretched services, (eg airport pick-ups), create opportunities for the students participating and help ease exchange students into their new environment. At King's, for example, we do not run airport pick-ups as we have found no practical way of doing this. Students can arrive into any of the four main airports around London, and will be travelling to residences and campuses all over the city. Matching individuals to new students and requesting that they meet them on arrival, perhaps at the main railway station where the Express trains arrive, may be a way of addressing this and providing a valuable service to students. Buddying schemes also have the benefit of providing valuable experience to students who volunteer, and could be run in conjunction with Students' Unions at many UK institutions.
- Although space in many UK universities is at a premium, and facilities dedicated to social interactions and activities may not be given priority in terms of economic and space planning, the provision of a combined social/information space for overseas and exchange students could be considered where possible as it served many purposes and brought many benefits to the students who used the space at HKU. Such a space could potentially cut down on some of the workload of other services as much of the information is available there without students needing to ask for it. It would also be a useful space for students both to find out about and encourage one another in activities such as travelling within the UK and Europe.

## **Conclusion**

I am extremely grateful to the PMI, through UKCISA, for providing me with the opportunity to visit these institutions, and to the students and staff at NUS and HKU for being so welcoming and providing me with so much information. The visit served to highlight many areas for possible innovation and improvement to our own services, and gave me some interesting insights into how such improvements could be addressed to improve the experience offered to Study Abroad and other international students, particularly during a time where many institutions are increasing the number of both incoming and outgoing exchange students.

## **Useful Links**

National University of Singapore: [www.nus.edu.sg](http://www.nus.edu.sg)

Hong Kong University: [www.hku.hk](http://www.hku.hk)

i.Care Programme: [www.nus.edu.sg/osa/international/icare/icare.html](http://www.nus.edu.sg/osa/international/icare/icare.html)

Hong Kong University Office of International Student Exchange:

[www3.hku.hk/oise/eng/intro.php](http://www3.hku.hk/oise/eng/intro.php)

CEDARS: [www.cedars.hku.hk/cedars/](http://www.cedars.hku.hk/cedars/)