Discrete library services for international students: how can exclusivity lead to inclusivity?

Moira Bent  
*Newcastle University*

Marie Scopes  
*Leeds Metropolitan University*

Karen Senior  
*University of Bolton*
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Introduction

This paper reports on research being undertaken for the UK Society of College National and University Libraries (SCONUL) to investigate how UK university libraries can best support international students, culminating in guidelines which will be published by SCONUL in December 2007. The research examined the issues surrounding the debate over exclusivity versus inclusivity which affect the provision of library services for international students. Results include what techniques UK university libraries are currently employing; feedback from international students about their priorities for library support and how that matches library staff perceptions; and with whom university libraries need to work to improve service provision. The research identified examples of good practice in providing a truly inclusive library service for international students and explored whether issues faced in UK libraries are reflected by experience in other developed countries.

Background to the study

International students make up 13.4% of the total UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) population, and, in addition to enriching cultural diversity and providing essential income, they also bring a wide variety of needs, experience and expectations. In recent years the international student profile has become increasingly diverse, as in other developed countries, with students world-wide having a diverse range of abilities and subject interests and hence a broader scope of teaching and learning experiences. These changes are reflected in the issues faced by all libraries striving to support international students effectively.
Findings of a major survey of more than 28,000 international students confirmed that the UK is still "a close rival to the US as the best study destination in the world" (Tysome, 2006, p3). However, if UK universities are to maintain their place in the global market, they need to respond to changing needs to attract students from abroad. Academic libraries have an important supporting role in this. Andreas Schleicher, head of the Indicators and Analysis Division at the OECD warns that “the global educational landscape has changed fundamentally” and UK universities must face challenges from China and India, in particular, as well as from other European countries now offering degrees taught in English. He says “Success will go to those institutions and countries that are swift to adapt, slow to complain and open to change.” (Schleicher, 2007, p3)

Globalisation also means that universities need to equip all their graduates with the appropriate attributes for employment and citizenship through internationalisation of the curriculum. As well as providing resources and teaching information skills, academic libraries can also foster an international ethos in the library which enriches the experience of both home and international students.

**Definitions**

*International students*

For the purposes of this research we have used the definition of international students given by Carroll and Ryan: “…we speak of international students when we mean students who have chosen to travel to another country for tertiary study … most of their previous experience will have been of other educational systems, in cultural contexts and sometimes in a language that is different from the one in which they will now study.” (Carroll & Ryan, 2005, p3)
Internationalisation

Internationalisation is a term used increasingly by universities. Knight and de Wit define it as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service of an institution” (Knight & de Wit, 1995) and David Coyne the Director of Education for the European Commission says “higher education in Europe, if it wants to retain both the reputation and the reality of excellence in its teaching provision and its research, must open itself up to the wider world. It must internationalise … If universities cannot manage that adaptation and transition … then they have lost what they should be about.” (Coyne, 2003)

The international student profile

It is predicted that by 2020, global demand for HE international student places will increase from 2.1 million in 2003, to 5.8 million. In the 5 major English speaking destination countries [USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada], the forecast is for an increase from 1 million to 2.6 million places, with Asia dominating the demand. Some of this demand will be catered for by in-country collaborative agreements. (Bohm et al, 2004)

Perceived issues

This research was undertaken against a background of perceived issues, derived both from experience and a review of the literature. We have considered issues from the perspectives of library staff and international students separately, in order to recognise congruencies and conflicts in approaches.

Library staff perceptions

Numbers of international students are increasing in all countries while at the same time UK student numbers are rising. In addition, statistics show that UK student mobility has continued to decline since 1994/5 in comparison with growing figures
from other European countries (Erasmus, 2007). The cumulative effect is that libraries are dealing with increased demand with frequently declining budgets.

Incoming international students may sometimes harbour unrealistic expectations, both of the university and the library. Students are now travelling from a much wider range of countries as more developing nations want to educate their students elsewhere. Furthermore, it is no longer just high achievers who are funded by their governments; now opportunities are available for a wider range of abilities and ages. International students are not a homogeneous group; students from the same country may still have different cultural backgrounds and experiences. Sunuodula (2008) comments that “In China …the disparity between its east and west and between urban centres and countryside is reflected in the students’ knowledge of information resources and information skills.”

**Student perceptions**

It is well documented (Hughes, 2001; McNamara, 1997; Carroll, 2005) that international students face additional challenges to those faced by all new students and these can affect both the academic and social aspects of their study in the UK.

*Language barriers*

In her survey of incoming international students at San Jose State University, Jackson says that “…English language proficiency is a difficulty widely documented in the literature on international students. Both librarians and students encounter verbal and written language barriers and non-verbal communications problems.” (Jackson, 2005, p.199) International students may feel self-conscious about speaking English, afraid of making mistakes or not being understood and this may discourage them from approaching library staff for help. They may find it difficult to understand regional accents and colloquialisms. Reading and writing Roman script may be a
problem and students may also experience difficulties in following what is happening in class, and keeping up with academic work because of constantly having to refer to dictionaries.

*Previous library experience*

In her review of the literature, Jackson reports “It is well documented …that students from other countries are accustomed to different library services and varying degrees of access to information…” (Jackson, 2005, p198). In a similar study of incoming international students at Deakin University, McSwiney (2006) also comments on the diversity of students’ previous library experience. Problems include unfamiliar classification systems and confusing library terminology. Some international students may be used to closed access libraries and to having materials brought to them by library staff. They may need more help in finding information independently and in using self-service systems. Books and other resources may have a Western or UK-centric perspective which international students may find difficult to relate to their own experience. Length of opening hours throughout the year, including vacations and public holidays, is important to many international students who are often more dependent than home students on the library for access to email and the internet, and as place to study.

Levels of computer literacy vary amongst international students and assumptions should not be made. Some students may not be able to make full use of computers because of language difficulties. In addition, there may be issues regarding access to computer programs to enable the reading/writing of non-Roman scripts, such as Chinese, and this may also mean difficulties in communicating with relatives and friends back home.
Culture

International students may feel overwhelmed by differences in culture and may experience the stress often described as ‘culture shock’, the symptoms of which can include frustration, mental fatigue, loneliness, boredom, and lack of motivation as well as homesickness. Pace of life and differences in food are often highlighted by students. They may encounter well-intentioned ignorance which could cause offence. Yoshino comments that “All too often, [University staff] seem to be left to their own devices, with little back-up or systematic information, when dealing with students from fundamentally different cultural and academic backgrounds from their own.” (Yoshino, 2004, p.18). Both McSwiney (2006) and Sunuodula (2006) recommend library staff development which includes cross-cultural awareness.

Teaching methods

Differences in educational culture can be a major issue for international students. They may be used to more formal teaching methods and unused to critical thinking, group work and independent learning. Tweed and Lehman explore the influence of culture on academic learning by examining the Western approach, characterised by questioning and evaluating accepted knowledge in which students are expected “to generate and express their own hypotheses” in contrast with the Eastern approach which values “effortful, respectful, and pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). They suggest the development of a flexible approach to teaching and learning which combines the advantageous elements of both approaches.

Another important issue is plagiarism and research has found a high incidence among international students. Swain suggests that this may be due to language, stress and different cultural traditions or simply because more international students are actually caught plagiarising (Swain, 2004, p.23) but Jackson (2005, p.198)
comments that “many authors suggest that the concept of plagiarism is a Western academic value”. However, home students also plagiarise so this is not solely an international issue.

**SCONUL Project Research methodology**

Commencing with a comprehensive literature survey, the research focused initially on a survey of SCONUL member institutions. Due to the short timescale and practical nature of the outcomes, a mixed methodology was used to collect data. Quantitative data was collected in January 2007 using the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) software by sending a request for participation to the SCONUL Directors mailing list. Qualitative data, from other surveys undertaken by project group members using focus groups and interviews with students, supplemented the comments also collected in the BOS survey. A stratified random sample, representing different types of UK university, assessed the visibility of services to international students on their library and general university websites and gathered examples of best practice. Selected university and library websites were also looked at in Australia New Zealand, and the United States, and personal visits were made to libraries in these countries.

**Preliminary results of the SCONUL UK Directors survey**

The results of the Directors survey painted a disappointing overall picture for the UK, with some areas of good practice in evidence, whilst the literature search and other methodologies revealed good practice being undertaken elsewhere in the world. The Directors survey elicited a 33% response rate, [50 libraries].

**Strategy**

While 72% (36) of respondents had University level International Strategies, only 8% [14] had an International Library strategy or Action Plan in place. However, the
majority of libraries collaborated with other university departments in the support of international students. These covered:

- Academic Departments
- International Offices,
- Language Centres,
- International Student Associations
- Students Union
- Departmental Committees
- Faculties or Colleges

**Designated staff support**

Just over 25% of respondents [13] had a designated member of staff within the library supporting international students and delivering services to them. Of these, only 1 was working full-time in the post, and 10 estimated that up to 25% of their time was spent on such activities. Jackson advocated that “the library should appoint a librarian responsible for international student outreach and instruction” (Jackson, 2005). In Jackson’s Library at the University of San Jose in California, the role has now been defined as that of an overall co-ordinator, albeit with some discrete research and teaching, with subject librarians looking after the international students in their own subject areas. In the UK, existing posts also tend to be combined with other responsibilities such as those of a subject librarian, e.g. at Hertfordshire (Singer 2005), and Exeter (Gale 2006).

**Staff Development**

It is encouraging to note that 70% [35] of respondents have staff development for library staff addressing international student issues and services. The areas covered include:
• Cultural awareness [32]
• Customer Care skills [27]
• Language problems [20]
• Staff communication skills [20]
• Strategies dealing with problem solving [19]
• Learning styles [15]

Jackson (2005), Mu (2006) and others discuss these issues as they affect all international students, while Li (2006), examines the challenges posed specifically by East Asian students. Training library staff effectively will have other benefits. As Li says, “these special customers have offered librarians challenges and opportunities in exploring and addressing information needs of people from other cultural backgrounds…The knowledge and skills gained from helping this customer group will not only benefit the library’s clientele, but will also advance librarian’s professional development.” (Li, 2006, p3)

**Library web pages**

In the survey, only 4 libraries had specific library web pages aimed at international students, and when the project group accessed over 30 UK library websites, the pattern was similar. Elsewhere in the world, there is evidence of good practice. For example, the university of Technology Sydney (UTS) library site details services for international students from a prominent link on their main page. The services include an international students orientation programme; access arrangements including a library guide in Chinese; information skills sessions; a resources section which references the International and Cultural News Centre (ICNC) situated in the library; and MyLanguage.gov.au, an online service providing information links and search engines in nearly 60 languages other than English. Singer (2005) comments that
websites can go a long way towards managing pre-arrival student expectations: “I felt strongly that the support structures should be clearly visible on the website in order to ‘sell’ the facilities and also to enhance the student experience before arrival.”

**Publications**

13.7% [7] of libraries produced publications aimed specifically at international students, and 3 of these provided them in languages other than English. These were mainly general library guides. However, some libraries do produce other resources, such as the University of Birmingham which is producing a multilingual audio tour of the main library in English, French, Arabic, and Mandarin.

**Services provided**

Most libraries in the survey provided some discrete services for international students. These were:-

- Induction [45]
- Information Skills [37]
- One to One consultations [36]
- Non-English newspapers and magazines [25]
- Computing support for Non-English languages [12]

**Emerging themes**

Preliminary analysis of research results is producing a number of prominent themes which need addressing if library staff are to contribute to a positive learning experience for international students, and home students.

**Managing expectations**

- Communication before arrival
• Clear information on university/library web pages
• Library induction
• Information skills teaching

Staff development
• Including cross-cultural awareness in regular ‘customer care’ training for all library staff
• Encouraging library staff to learn a language or brush up existing language skills
• Training in using jargon-free English for library publications including web pages
• Encouraging participation in university initiatives on diversity and international themes

Stock management
Although libraries may feel their main responsibility is to provide access to materials on reading lists, there is a need to consider the provision of resources which enable all students to develop a wider international perspective. In addition, many libraries provide leisure literature and access to other media such as newspapers and TV in a wide range of languages, which can also be relevant to home students.

Information Literacy
• Library induction
• Measuring competencies in information literacy
• Subject specific training in information skills delivered at an appropriate time in the curriculum
• One-to-one tutorials
• Understanding scholarly communication and how it works
• Ethical use of information including copyright and plagiarism issues
• Continuing support mechanisms which students understand and find easy to access

**Social space**
Survey results indicate that many international students value the library as a neutral, non-threatening, safe social space, as well as a key resource for learning. This view is enhanced because of long library opening hours. Library staff may need to consider how much they would like to adopt practices which attract international students to use their space, even though they may not have a direct ‘library’ role.

Services such as the provision of Skype on library PCs; noticeboards for international student use; world time clocks; national flags; the celebration of important national festivals on display screens; and the watching wall of international TV programmes at Canterbury University of Technology are just a few examples.

**Communication**
- Library publications – jargon-free in ‘Plain English’
- Clear guiding

The survey flagged up useful areas and the literature cites many suggestions on how communication can be improved.

**Student feedback and involvement**
Libraries must establish mechanisms for obtaining the views of international students, as well as networking and liaising with relevant sections of the University in developing and evaluating library services and facilities.
Conclusion

Jargon-free library publications; improved access to library facilities and good customer care benefit both home and international students. Information literacy skills which are embedded in study programmes, and based on an understanding of different learning styles, are equally relevant to all students. It is not just about improving the library for international students; it is also about appreciating cultural diversity and creating an international, multi-cultural ethos which will prepare all students for life in a globalised world.

However, it is also important that international students realise that their needs are recognised and addressed. As social networking websites show, joining groups which create a sense of identity is an important communication issue. International students often face greater challenges in using the library than home students and it is sometimes necessary to provide ‘exclusive’ services to achieve equity. Therefore it is helpful to badge certain services and facilities which help international students adapt to the host country’s libraries. Information skills sessions which have been tailored to the pace and specific needs of international students; glossaries explaining library terms, and sections on library webpages are all good examples of these. A welcoming and informative approach will create a positive library experience for international students. However, it important to treat all students as individuals without generalising too much; if we can do this successfully then exclusive activities will enable all students to be included.


Singer, H. (2005) 'Learning and information services support for international students at the University of Hertfordshire', *Sconul Focus*, 35 (Summer/Autumn 2005), pp. 63-67.

