

Careers Advisory Services Adapting to International Students' Needs: The Case for a Holistic Overview

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Higher education careers advisory services in the UK are facing the challenges of adapting to the particular requirements of growing numbers of international students, whilst at the same time endeavouring to meet a range of policy requirements for the services as a whole, all within a limited budget. Drawing on findings from a HECSU-funded study, this paper considers some of the obstacles to change within the careers services and some of the issues which arise during the transition to optimise services for both international students and home students. The importance of considering such a process holistically is raised and includes issues arising from this development such as challenges to careers advisers' role identity and professional integrity.

Introduction

Owing to the continual advancement of policy requirements and changing market conditions, many professional services and corresponding staff roles find themselves under constant pressure to evolve well beyond their traditional boundaries. Higher Education Careers Advisory Services (HECAS) are a case in point. As recently as 2001, the Harris report which reviewed the services described them as 'too often a Cinderella service, out on the remote edges of Higher Education' (DfEE, 2001). Since that time, a number of further reports have made wide-ranging recommendations for best practice within the services, including better monitoring, extending collaboration and improved targeting of provision (UUK, 2002; Morey et al, 2003; NICEC, 2005).

The HECAS have been making considerable efforts to respond to a series of recommendations for enhancing their overall service provision. At the same time, HECAS face the additional challenge of meeting the needs of the rapidly growing number of international students. There is no lack of ideas as to how provision might be enhanced. The most recent 'Going Global' report, for example, is packed with ideas and guidance about how practitioners can address the needs of international students in order to ultimately enhance their employability (AGCAS, 2005).

It is important to realise that international students in effect represent a new client group, as many of their requirements are founded on differing norms and expectations from those students traditionally using the services. Practitioners are required to address the question of how best they can meet the needs of international students whilst also making improvements to services for home students, which requires imagination and determination in the face of limited resources.

Traditional ways of understanding the workplace regard an organisation as a series of component parts, rather like those of an engine, each of which can be effectively stripped down and remodelled. It is clear, however, that organisations today need to be understood in terms of a much more complex interdependent system, involving both the internal dynamics of the organisation itself and the constant interaction with other systems in the wider world (Carlopio, 2000). Whilst staff may be obliged to embrace wide-ranging plans to improve aspects of organisation and practice to meet imposed targets, what is often not taken into account during times of change and development are such issues as the effects on staff morale and challenges to professional integrity which may arise concurrently, coupled with a loss of clarity in overall direction.

An organisation that communicates clearly with its employees and nurtures their confidence through its transitions benefits from improved staff well-being and organisational effectiveness (Sparks *et al.*, 2001). It is, therefore, beneficial to adopt a holistic view, which balances economic and organisational factors with social, cultural and psychological factors, in order to achieve understanding and facilitate effective and harmonious change. Such an approach acknowledges that accommodating human factors is central to success.

The study

In the face of much anecdotal evidence but little research in the area, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) commissioned a study to examine the experiences of careers advisory services and international students (Cappuccini *et al.*, 2005). As well as conducting a national survey of staff and students using an electronic questionnaire, the research identified 'good practice' through the construction of institutional case studies and aimed to stimulate support for international students by making key recommendations for practitioners and policy makers.

Eight case study institutions were chosen to represent both old and new universities, and rural and urban, including one institution in Wales and one in Scotland. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 41 staff, mainly working in careers advisory services or international offices on their views and experiences of dealing with international students. Focus groups were also held at the participating institutions, to provide the international students' point of view. A thematic analysis was carried out using Filemaker software (www.filemaker.co.uk) to manage the data. For the purpose of this study, international students were defined as those having non-UK domiciles.

The focus of this paper is on findings from the wealth of data gathered in the in-depth staff interviews, which have identified key dilemmas and issues regarding the adaptation of the HECAS to this client group. Although only eight institutions took part in the case studies, which cannot be said to be representative of higher education institutions as a whole, the issues arising in the interviews reflected those raised at the steering group meetings and practitioner forums held during the course of the project, as well as those raised at two events where the findings of the project were disseminated.

The changing service

HECAS guide and enable their clients, but do not find employment on their behalf. Typically, HECAS roles include providing *information* (paper and electronic); *advice* (career direction, occupations, employers, vacancies, further study and funding sources); *events* (careers fairs, employer presentations) and *workshops* (job applications, CVs, interviews, personal skills). Increasingly, HECAS may deliver careers modules or careers guidance embedded within academic modules. Some services are able to provide advice and help with work placements, but they do not normally

place students as such. However, HECAS normally have to refer students to other professionals in other departments to provide information on national insurance and visa regulations. Part-time job vacancies for students are also usually advertised in a separate or complementary unit.

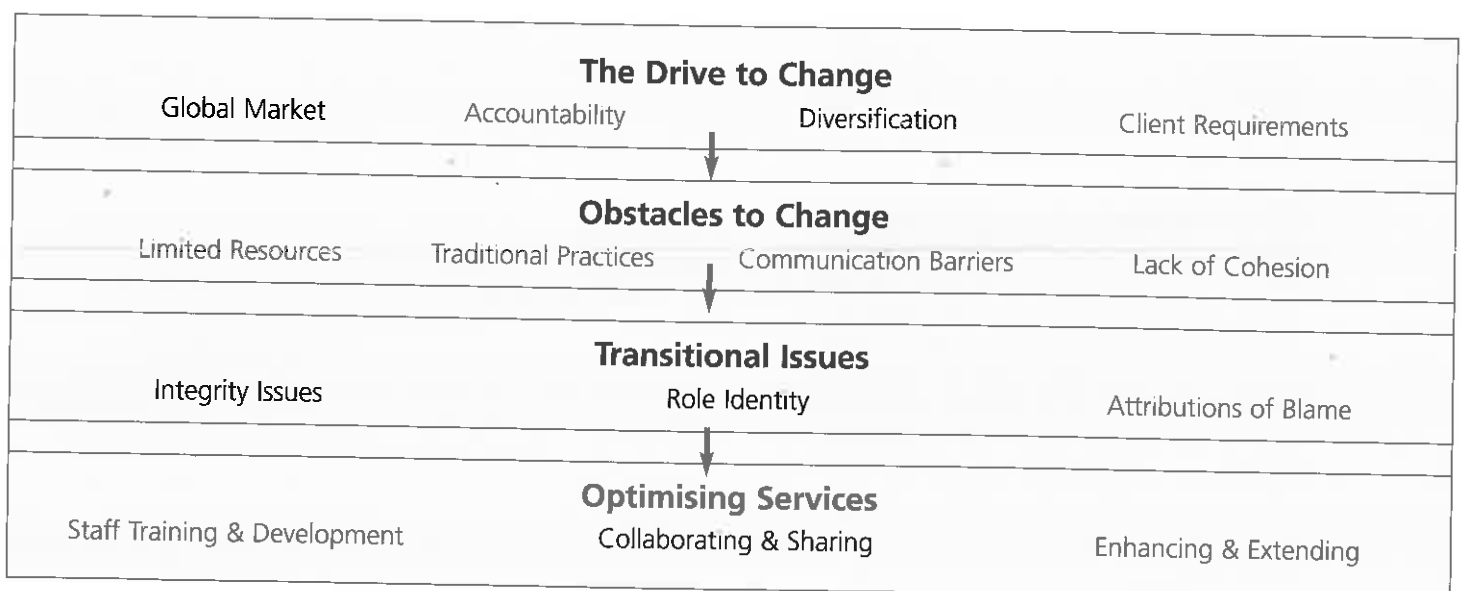
In the remainder of this paper the framework outlined in Table 1 is used to structure the analysis of the research findings. It shows a diagrammatic view of the adaptation process, from the drives to change, barriers to change and transitional issues through to the goal of optimising of services.

The drive to change

Changes in higher education services are largely policy-driven and inevitably lead to additional time and effort devoted to planning and budgeting for adaptations to existing services or development of new initiatives in order to meet recommendations.

International students make a significant contribution to the UK economy, providing an estimated £1.25 billion in tuition fees and spending £1.86 billion on other goods and services (UUK, 2005). They are also seen as ambassadors of UK culture when they finish their studies and move back to their home country or elsewhere in the world. Government policy is to compete successfully with other countries in the *global market* for these students. The Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) in 1999 set targets for a 100% increase in international students in the UK and 25 per cent of the global market share of international students in higher education by 2005 (DfES, 1999). The second PMI in 2006 declared a target of an additional 70,000 non-UK students by 2011. By 2004-2005, 13% of UK higher education students were from outside the UK, of which 100,000 were from EU countries and 218,395 were from outside the EU (HESA, 2006).

Table 1: An overview of the adaptation process



The presence of international students has become critical to the income of individual institutions too, and increasing numbers and competition with other institutions has meant that services are obliged to adapt. As one careers adviser commented:

'...because of the economic benefits of having international students, organisations like ours are vastly increasing their recruitment of them and so basically just the issue becomes much more in our face. So I guess that, over the years we've had international students coming in, all the service involved with them has basically been we've given them what we've offered to our home students and not really a service for their needs at all.'

Evolving higher education policy has led to the requirement to introduce greater transparency and **accountability** in all areas of higher education, employing monitoring procedures and measuring outcomes quantitatively, ultimately to demonstrate value for money in terms of usage of public resources. The second PMI in 2006 stresses the need for benchmarking, establishing best practice and enhancing the employability of overseas students (British Council, 2007), all of which have implications for the HECAS.

Monitoring has uses beyond the requirement to meet quality control and accountability demands. There are a great many pressures on HECAS to innovate in all areas of service delivery, and often improvements can benefit both home and international students. The study found that reviewing and monitoring processes were not very well-developed regarding HECAS provision for international students. There was a strong perception of earlier and more persistent use by international students, but very little hard evidence.

Students are no longer seen as a relatively homogenous body with similar, predictable needs, and even the diversity of the universities and colleges in which the growing numbers of students who study is recognised (HEFCE 2005). **Diversification** in higher education means that HECAS are required to actively cater for a wider range of needs, including increasing percentages of part-time, mature and postgraduate students and those from a range of social and cultural backgrounds, changing the career guidance offered in order to accommodate differing expectations, aspirations and needs. International students are an additional and growing sub-group which represents a range of new challenges, often because of unfamiliarity with UK employment culture and misunderstandings of native English usage, requiring staff training and resources being tailored or created to meet their requirements effectively.

The study confirmed that **client requirements** have a significant impact on their interactions with the HECAS.

International students are often surprised by the nature of the service in the UK and are disappointed by the limitations of the services offered and employment opportunities available. Many of them, probably using their home country as a model, expected to be able to find a part-time job whilst studying that is well-paid and related to their future employment; the idea that working as a waitress or shop assistant will provide useful graduate employability skills is often an alien concept. Many also expected that their university would find work placements for them (the word 'placement' being a misnomer), as well as providing networks which would enable them to secure work post-graduation:

'Often when they visit the Careers Centre they think it's a job agency rather than what we are, which is a guidance service, so we can prepare them for work but we can't find them a job, and I do think that's a misconception sometimes with international students who haven't been through the whole careers scene at school so they don't know just what the culture of the careers service in this country may be.'

Barriers to change

HECAS have major difficulties in having to respond with **limited resources** to a wide range of often competing expectations from a variety of stakeholders. The fact that level of funding is usually at the discretion of the institution also has significant impact (Butcher, 2001). They tend to have access to a much sparser budget than the international offices who give support and advice to international students on matters other than careers guidance such as accommodation, financial guidance and arranging social events. The HECAS have already been developing strategies since the 1980s for squeezing more out of their limited resources, for instance by offering fewer long one-to-one appointments and more group provision (Watts, 1996) and now they are faced with a growing group of clients who require more intensive assistance. There was much concern from respondents about the strain on resources, which was often perceived as being unrecognised by the institution:

'With the increasing number of international students it is really, really stretching our resources because of the additional input, on an individual level the students need the time, and I don't think that's recognised by the institution. I don't really think that's recognised just how much work that involves.'

Despite a plethora of theories of guidance to choose from or indeed to employ in combination, initial findings from a longitudinal study indicate that careers advisers largely still favour **traditional practices**, particularly matching theories of guidance which aim to match the client with

their 'best fit' career (Bimrose, 2006). This perhaps reflects an understandable tendency for HECAS to hold on to a manifestation of their role which is understood and feels comfortable, in the face of a rapidly changing higher educational, workplace and technological environment.

Home students may take these discrepancies for granted, but the arrangements may be illogical and confusing for international students. There is, however, widespread awareness in the HECAS of this difficulty and an impetus to reorganise where practical. For instance, one institution was planning a 'one-stop shop' facility:

'There is a plan in this institution to create a student services type of centre. We would have a presence, a couple of people there all the time, a one-stop shop, so we need to make sure the students don't have to walk around to lots of different places, passed from pillar to post.'

It is important that both practitioners and their clients understand the fundamental purposes of the guidance service. A trawl through university websites demonstrates evidence of **communication barriers** between services and their clients. HECAS can have different names at different institutions, and may be hidden within other departments such as 'student services' or 'academic support' on the website, reducing the likelihood of successful access. Mission statements of HECAS tend to have an overall employment-related aim, such as *to enhance students' and graduates' career prospects* (University of Strathclyde) or, more broadly, *to promote and deliver best practice in lifelong learningfor people making the transition into, through and beyond higher education* (University of Liverpool), and statements of services available are sometimes quite extensive in their objectives. However, most services do not state clearly exactly what they *can* do and *cannot* do, both of which are necessary to guide the international student client who is unfamiliar with the UK system.

Despite the observations in the Harris report in 1999, HECAS are no longer working in isolation and routinely collaborate with international offices, student services and other departments. However, it is unfortunate that clients can experience a **lack of cohesion**. The various services needed are often fragmented within institutions, for reasons which are usually beyond the control of the individual departments concerned. They may not be within easy reach of each other, and may often be run by different departments and housed in different buildings. International students may need to find part-time jobs whilst studying, work placement during their studies, seek help with visas and immigration, assistance with English, as well as assistance in finding and applying for work post-graduation. It is often only the last of these with which the HECAS can help.

Transitional issues

It is notable that there were a number of important **issues of integrity** that respondents were concerned about in relation to services provided for international students. Many of these students have to learn to 'sell themselves' in interviews and on application forms for the UK market, because this approach may be quite alien to the culture in which they have been raised, and it was recognised that HECAS have a clear role in helping students in this regard. On the other hand, despite having to pass an English test prior to arrival, students' English is often not really adequate to meet employers' needs. Many respondents were concerned as to what extent international students should have their grammar and spelling mistakes corrected on CVs and application forms. It was seen as being of doubtful moral integrity to misrepresent a candidate as having a better command of English than they actually have:

'But it would be inappropriate for them to apply for a job writing a letter in perfect English manner if that wasn't representative of what you could do. My own principles for instance are that I'd like... I would help them to write a letter that made sense but not lose their own personality.'

One respondent illustrated mixed feelings in wanting to help international students a bit more because of the additional obstacles they face:

'...but I feel a very strong sense of desire to help international students, because I'm so full of respect for their ability to be able to go and operate in an entirely different language, so I probably, hand on heart, give slightly more help with covering letters and CVs to international students than I would the UK students but not in such a way, I hope, that means I'm doing it for them because that doesn't do them any favours.'

International students may need more in-depth help with interviews and application forms because of language and cultural issues. But there are arguments for and against dedicated workshops for this group. Some such workshops may be particularly valuable, but there are still problems in that international students themselves vary enormously in their understanding of English and English culture:

'I certainly think in those kinds of workshops (psychometric tests, team building, etc.) there's an absolute case for having those for international students only, but if we do that there would still be a vast difference between the understanding... I mean you may have one student whose understanding of certain English phrases is very clear and others that aren't, even within one nationality, so their needs are very diverse.'

Respondents in the study wanted to know if all students should be treated the same, according to their need, or according to how much they have paid? If international students are bringing in a lot of money to the university, is it right or wrong that they should get better services? HECAS are limited in the extent to which they have the time and resources to target their provision at different groups. There are problems in defining those groups too:

'I mean we have that trouble with separation all the time, we do hold the sessions for mature students for instance, which is really successful, they really appreciate and really like it, and we would like to hold sessions for lots of discrete groups. We would love to hold them for UK ethnic minority students... and we get loads of e-mails back saying well, what about UK students... and lots from international students saying, well can I go because I'm an ethnic minority, but they only want UK ethnic minorities.'

Within a constantly changing work environment, problems arising from challenges to staff **role identity** should not be overlooked, as elements of uncertainty in job roles are probably a threat to occupational well-being and coping (Worrall & Cooper, 1998). Careers advisers have been trained for a role which they may now find less comfortable, particularly within an environment of ever-changing parameters. The UK norm is that HECAS enable students to help themselves with regard to identifying a career and suitable vacancies. HECAS do not hunt for and secure employment for students, they generally do not find them work placements nor write student CVs and job applications on their behalf. International students often have expectations which are contrary to these norms. Careers advisers may find it awkward to be faced with a growing client group, who may be heavy users of services, but be unable to meet perceived demands and provide adequate services.

Some respondents felt that careers advice practitioners require guidance themselves as to what they should be doing as the changes have been so rapid and the particular needs of the students have not been specified:

'So although there is loads of stuff around about diversity training and awareness of cultural difference ... there's not very much about ... what is it that these students need that may be different from other undergraduates, and what should we be doing with them? ... and I think everybody is a bit worried that there is something really, really different that we ought to be doing but not quite sure about what it is we should be doing. I mean people are much clearer about what we need to do for ethnic minority home students than international students.'

In an atmosphere of feeling under siege in terms of services expected of you it is natural to make **attributions of blame**. Careers advisers in the study often blamed their difficulties on a paucity of resources. There was plenty they *wanted* to do, but they had often had neither the time nor the money. Many attributed international students' unrealistic expectations of the UK labour market to misleading marketing messages from the UK government and higher education sector and alleged false information disseminated by the recruitment agencies used by the universities.

Anecdotally, international students were sometimes thought to be regarded as too 'demanding'. However, a number of careers advisers offered reasons for this impression. It could be that they need reassurance because of their unfamiliarity with the culture:

'They are demanding in that they use the service a lot and they come back ... I don't know, sometimes it's like reassurance, you know, that if you talk to a home student you will say, right, these are the resources, go away and do this research. The international students will come back and double check, say, I've done this, so what's the next stage ... But I think again that's, you know, cultural, you know, I'm dealing with a different set of criteria here so I want to make sure that I'm doing it right, so in that way they are heavier users.'

The 'demanding' behaviour could also be rooted in the 'dependency' culture of their home country, whereby the student only had to study and the rest would be provided for them:

'Now this lady was a postgraduate and she had worked in China and she said, this was the first interview she had ever had because when she graduated she was just told to turn up at such and such a bank because it had all been arranged for her by her parents you see. And so that really taught me a lesson because I thought this sort of, what is often called 'demand culture', you know, you hear ... the international students are so demanding, it put that in a new light for me because it was more in a way a sort of almost, in her case, dependency culture. She just had been led to believe that if she went and she did the studies that was her bit done.'

Optimising services: implications

Where possible, providing a more seamless service to international students would benefit them as clients. Although HECAS may be doing a very efficient job with the limited resources provided, each client is only concerned with whether his or her own needs are met.

As with any client group, it is of course vital to understand their needs if these are to be met properly: even the

concepts of 'career' and 'vocation' can have different meanings in different cultures (Heinz, 1999, p8.). Arulmani (2006) makes a clear case for a re-examination of the concept of career development in the global context as social cognitions rooted in cultural background have a significant role in developing orientations to work. As observed by Yang *et al.* (2002), **staff training and development** must clearly be ongoing in order that careers advisers can better understand the cultural backgrounds, expectations and needs of their international student clients sufficiently to provide an optimum service. This in itself is a challenge as institutions may have to provide for students originating from as many as 120 different countries (Cappuccini *et al.*, 2005, p13.). And as Bimrose (2006) points out, training support for practitioners has often lagged behind the implementation of new initiatives.

Collaboration and sharing good practice have been key concepts for the HECAS for a number of years. An example of sharing good practice suggested in the study was to communicate ideas about the most effective ways of providing workshops to suit both home and international students. It makes sense to share resources between institutions: databases of employer information, overseas links; and information about the job application processes in a multitude of different countries. All parties can benefit from the avoidance of repeated effort.

Higher education institutions provide a range of employment-related services in many different formats, which may be determined by a number of factors including the layout of the campus, budgeting, staffing expertise and the composition of the student body. Within these differing structures, the impetus of limited resources leads to reaping the benefits of sharing best practice and collaborating with services within and external to the institution, to optimise usage of resources and improve planning for future developments.

Despite resources restraints, HECAS in the study were exploring ways of **enhancing and extending services**. There are issues relating to some areas of provision which would benefit from an overall consensus as they are effectively matters of integrity. Careers advisers are clearly concerned about how much international students should be assisted with their English on application forms; the degree to which provision in terms of seminars and workshops should be the same for everyone or should be tailored for international students or other groups; the degree to which resources should be targeted towards those paying the highest fees and to what extent should services simply be tailored towards the demands and expectations of valuable 'customers' in terms of the UK and higher education economy.

Conclusions

Overall, there are dangers in developing a purely pragmatic response to international students' requirements for information and assistance in securing the jobs and careers they have already decided upon. It could be argued that many international students are not requiring 'careers guidance' in the sense that is understood by careers advisory professionals and it is the gulf between expectations and practice, rather than that between resources and needs, which poses the greatest challenge for the HECAS.

Meeting the challenges of service developments should go beyond the service addressing a list of recommendations, and is better regarded holistically. If moral dilemmas are raised concerning adapting provision to meet the needs of a group of clients, this should be treated sensitively and seriously and addressed in an appropriate discussion forum. Likewise, it can be argued that helping staff to re-establish work role identities and addressing new training needs must be given sufficient attention in order to ensure the success of new initiatives. An approach to change and development which gives sufficient weight to human factors as well as organisational policies and targets will clearly benefit HECAS as they adapt to the dynamic environment of modern higher education.

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