



# International Students Support Services: Focus Groups



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# Introduction

Across two focus groups in November, Bristol SU and International Student Officer Bakhtawar Javed spoke with 11 international students from varying demographics, study levels and courses at University of Bristol. The research focused on students' awareness of the University support services, experiences of using these services, and how being an international student affects their usage.

## Key takeaways

### Awareness and understanding

International students have a **limited knowledge and understanding of different support services** available to them.

### Perceived levels of support

Due to a **perceived lack of support available for international students**, they are often more likely to seek support from friends, family and housemates before contacting support services.

### Experiences of services

**Experiences of services vary from being very positive to quite negative.** Some find it difficult to book support services or explain issues and others find they give unhelpful or unrealistic advice, forcing students to solve their issues themselves.

### Issues affecting international students

**Cultural differences and language barriers** affect international students' ability to access and use support services.

## Recommendations

- **Producing accessible information/guidance** on support services and continuing to **disseminate it at various points throughout the year via email and social media** can be effective for spreading awareness and reminding students of services available.
- **Improved understanding of the services and more positive experiences** could improve trust and help students access support rather than solving issues themselves.
- Having a **central hub that serves as a first point of contact** and is able to signpost international students correctly, as well as more **bilingual staff**, would improve experiences.
- More support specifically with **housing, guarantors, visas and finances** would improve international students' experiences of University.

# Themes

## Awareness and understanding of support services

- Awareness of services varied, with each student able to name a select few services. The better known services were: Study Skills, Careers, Wellbeing, Financial, and Visa Services. Less well known services included Security Services, Global Lounge, Residential Life, and I.T. Services. Despite this, **knowledge and understanding of services was generally limited.**
- Students became aware of services through personal use and experience, friends, the Bristol University website, via email or on social media.
- Students emphasised the **emails they receive contain a lot of useful information about support services.** Despite receiving a lot of emails, students said they would refer back to them, such as Welcome emails.
- Students agreed that **social media is the friendliest and easiest way to communicate,** with some recommending the University communicates via WhatsApp or through Chinese social media. They highlighted that Instagram was helpful in raising awareness of services, due to its visual representations and videos.
- All students were unaware of Destination Bristol, highlighting the need to raise awareness around this service. Students suggested a guide book for international students, containing information on support services and their functions, with reminders of this throughout the year.

*“My first thought isn’t to go to student services; I’d probably go somewhere else”*

*“I don’t actually know what to ask the student services as I don’t know what they provide”*

*“You have the students sending emails, the SU sending emails as well as your schools”  
“its clearer”*

*“I’m always on Instagram compared to when I get millions of emails a day”*

*“On the Instagram the SU posts every week what they are doing so I find it useful to write down what I like”*

*“It’s nice to have everything in freshers but we need a reminder as well”*

## Perceived level of support

- Some students felt completely alone since arriving in the UK and that there is **little or no support or guidelines available for international students**, especially regarding issues with housing and finances. For example, there is limited communication on when international first year Undergraduates should start looking for houses. There was also a lack of understanding around how to register with a GP in the UK, causing students to worry about health emergencies.
- As a result, **students do not always go to support services as their first port of call**. Some students felt it may be easier to solve the issues themselves or speak with friends.

*“I had a problem with my tuition fee going through and when I called, they told me to go to flywire and it was a difficult issue, so it was very frustrating, and I felt like I had to do everything myself”*

*“No one told me that you should start looking for accommodation a year before ... this is the sort of information international students wouldn't just know. On top of that, guarantors made it more complicated. I was so stressed ... Students shouldn't have to stress about other issues”*

## Experiences of using services

- **Student experiences of using support services varied**. Some reported positive experiences and others were more negative.
- Students felt booking wellbeing and career services can be difficult, as they can be slow to reply. One student pointed out that student finances does not have an office. Another highlighted that the process of explaining their problems to wellbeing services immediately can deter students from using it.
- A student found the help and advice they received regarding careers was **unrealistic**. Another needed help regarding visas, but found the service **unhelpful**.
- Signposting was an issue for some students, who felt they had been signposted from one service to another too many times. This caused them to **resolve the issue themselves or seek support from housemates and friends instead**.

*“Very empathetic and friendly. You feel like you are being helped and they are putting your concern first”*

*“It's just weird as you have difficulty explaining it in words and you don't know who you are sending it to”*

*“I wanted to register with GP. I went to Global Lounge and they sent me to the Student Services. When I went to the student services, they signposted to the website. At the end I just asked my flatmate for help”*

# Issues affecting international students

- Most students felt cultural differences were a complicating factor in using services. For example, they felt **they faced tougher circumstances than home students with housing/guarantors, part-time work, visas, and finances/expensive fees**. Students noted those from more conservative cultures are also less inclined to share personal issues.
- One student in financial difficulty explained it is assumed that international students are wealthy. As a result, their issue did not seem “credible” without staff backing.
- Although they felt support services mostly do a good job of being culturally sensitive, the students reported that **they face difficulties at University caused by using English as a second language**.
- Most students explained **they feel more comfortable speaking to friends/staff from the same background on a personal level, who speak the same language**. However, being given the option of whether to speak to someone in a chosen language is important, rather than this being assumed, to not automatically undermine English speaking abilities.
- Students agreed that **a central walk-in hub specifically for international student support would be useful**.
- Students felt comfortable giving quick feedback on their experiences of using services, provided they remain anonymous.

*“Shouldn't University pay for guarantor, why do students have to pay for it?”*

*“In some cultures, you don't share anything because it is more conservative”*

*“The assumption is that as an international student, when you come here you have the money, but circumstances change”*

*“I just feel lost as I don't understand what's being said”*

*“The level of English and its fast paced”*

*“If your first language isn't English, it's hard to express yourself and some people are more hesitant”*

*“If staff in support services are more international as well, it would feel more welcoming”*

*“If it's anonymous, you feel like it won't be held against you”*