



## Investigation of International Students' Perception of 'Community' in a British Higher Education Institute

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the perceptions of members of our international student community by giving them a voice and a platform to explore their feelings as part of a Higher Education institute in the UK and whether they consider that the university is a global environment. Our data is based on a series of structured interviews with twelve students from twelve different countries, inclusive of four postgraduate research students. Our findings reveal that our international students commonly feel part of multiple smaller communities but interestingly, they were less sure of their part within an institute-wide community. The postgraduate students' perceptions of community were quite divergent when compared to the undergraduate perceptions, which we will continue to explore in our future work. Our data supports the perception from international students that their university is a global community, but there were distinct differences in how individuals defined it and some limitations to consider. Some defined it as students and staff of different nationalities being present at a university whilst other definitions relied on cultural characteristics within the institution as a whole. We reflect upon the implications of our research as these perceptions shape international student opinion of Higher Education institutes and what is understood by the term 'global community'.

**Keywords:** International; Higher Education; community; student perception

### Introduction

Coming to any Higher Education (HE) institute to study is a life-defining moment for any student, even more so for international students, who face the same experiences of acclimatisation, academic development and social growth with the added complexity of cultural and/or language challenges (Surdam & Collins, 1984). Add to this broad generalisation the very individual variables of English language proficiency, cultural sociological philosophy and academic ability, and we begin to appreciate the multi-faceted issues that a supportive higher education institute must negotiate whilst ensuring the quality of the university experience has parity with home students as far as possible (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). Often overlooked are the logistical requirements of life as an international student, where there are challenges simply in existing and co-existing within an institute. Some of these challenges most students face, such as complex housing contracts and emotional well-being and other challenges most other students do not face, such as legal paperwork and visa requirements (Stoynoff, 1997). Most institutes provide support for all of these aspects of international student life, especially in the early stages of student induction, but the presence of this support and its perception from the student body are most definitely not the same thing and it is in this distinction that our work is focused. The sense of 'community' in international students is an extremely complex epistemology that is influenced by many factors and in most cases, changes with time. Student perceptions of community in HE evolve as the learners themselves evolve through their chosen programme of study, meaning that capturing a sense of this fluid perception of community is a challenging but worthwhile endeavour (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Communities, defined as groups of individuals with a common denominator, can arise from commonalities in race, language, shared experience, interests and a host of other descriptors all exerting a selective effect on those who are within and without the 'community'. In some instances, a sense of community can be encouraged (e.g. first year students on a course all facing the same assessment) and it can form spontaneously (e.g. a shared interest in the character Harry Potter or through playing the video game World of Warcraft). One of the most curious aspects of community is that it is a layered experience and one that manifests free movement within and between groups, where smaller communities can form within larger ones and entirely new communities can bud-off unexpectedly. As one might imagine, this places a great deal of pressure on educators to try to anticipate, encourage and support communities in their institutes (Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor, 2003).

To help in this, our reading of the current literature has resulted in the identification of four key aspects of the international student experience that are critical to the evolution of these students' opinions of 'community' in their HE setting:

### Academic aspects

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Although it is not universally the case, grasp of and fluency in the English language is a key factor affecting how quickly and, in many cases successfully, the international student can integrate into a UK HE institute and has a powerful correlative impact on academic achievement (Stoyhoff, 1997). Communication skills are an integral aspect of this correlation, with numerous barriers impinging on the academic success of international students fitting into the institute. Communication with peers, communication with tutors and support staff as well as the range of individuals that affect their lives (post office, local shop etc.) hinges on communication, both written and verbal (Barratt & Huba, 1994). Ease of communication also plays a role in determining international students' perceptions of community as it restricts many to specific communities due to a lack of ability to freely move between different communities within the institute as they grow within it (Day & Hajj, 1986). This limitation is never more visible than in student interaction with staff, where effective communication with tutors and assessors is vital to progress and indeed, inclusive educational opportunities. It is with this key need that adequate staff training works in some ways to balance the risks associated with isolated communities of international students feeling less a part of the wider learning community (Anaya & Cole, 2001). Alongside communication, another key player in shaping perceptions of community from an academic standpoint is education about aspects of diversity and race towards maintaining equality and inclusivity, even in the face of the numerous challenges this presents (Rai, 2002).

### Social aspects

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Of all the four identified drivers of perception, this one is the most critical. International students are particularly vulnerable to the impact of social isolation and marginalisation that can occur if they are not supported in making friends, making contacts and accessing healthy social interactions in the HE community they now exist within (Hanassab, 2006). Key to this need is the ability, confidence and encouragement to identify and then access student support services, both in general and bespoke to international student needs.

### Cultural aspects

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As an adjunct to discussion of social aspects of international perception, culture has to be considered and that is a two-way street. International students who integrate well into the local culture tend to acclimatise faster and with more success but those who do not integrate as smoothly (for whatever reason), form different communities as a result (Trice, 2005). Individualist cultures (such as those in the UK) and collectivist cultures (such as many Asian cultures) are two forces that impact on what communities the international students are a part of and further impact on their perceptions of the host culture as well, with convincing evidence that engagement with the host culture is associated with positive experiences and thus, positive perceptions (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Rationalising this key point about the influence of culture on student perception and performance with other work by Krause in 2005, it is easy to see how culture can play a reciprocal role in determining a range of engagement factors, such as in-class engagement, online engagement, engagement with the institution, engagement with peers and engagement with academic staff (Krause, 2005). The final factor in this complex aspect is one of extracurricular activities and although touching on aspects of culture a little (student societies, similar sports backgrounds, etc.), there is a strong need for institutes to consider the potential impacts of extracurricular offers on their international students and their efforts to thrive in a HE environment.

### Logistical aspects

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There is clearly a range of 'hoops' that international students need to negotiate before they even present to their institutes for the first day of study. Practicalities of life, such as work permits, visa applications, contracts of employment (especially for postgraduates) are all sources of perception-making experiences for international learners. There are also a host of other real-life requirements that all students face but that international students in particular are vulnerable to, for example housing contacts and interactions with landlords, healthcare provision and even, in some cases, education to source medical care (Kandiko & Weyers, 2013). It is in these logistical needs that the institute has a leading role to play in ensuring fairness and supporting these learners in getting set-up quickly and successfully to begin their studies. The ease (or lack thereof) of achieving this quick orientation has a powerful influence on the international students' sense of community and academic performance (Dozer, 2001).

### Emotional/psychological aspects

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By far the most personal of the aspects highlighted in our reviewed research is the need for support and awareness of the emotional and psychological needs of international students. Although this aspect of well-being is critical for all in HE (homesickness being particularly common), the international students have additional needs, such as disorientation, depressive reactions to culture change and feelings of isolation and powerlessness, all of which should be addressed by themselves and their institute as part of a positive student experience. Indeed, homesickness and perception of community are two sides of the same core issue, where students with a strong sense of community with their institute feel better supported whilst being away from home (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

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The responsibility for the well-being of the international students in this regard lies with the institute, through student support staff, drop-in 'issue' clinics and a host of other initiatives. The *quid pro quo* for this extensive infrastructure to succeed is an onus on the international student to engage and self-refer if they need to and in some ways, there is a job to be done in educating and managing expectations of international learners to monitor their own needs as a triage first step. There is evidence that the international culture of origin plays a determining factor in the degree of psychological reaction that a student might face, with anecdotal examples of students from Asian, South American and African countries experiencing these stresses more acutely than their counterparts from European or North American countries (Pedersen, 1991). These feelings of isolation and alienation are reported to lead international students to form communities within themselves rather than within the host culture and is a risk factor that many institutes need to be aware of (Mori, 2000).

In this study, we explore the perceptions of "community" by listening to the international student voice within our own institute and ask whether they feel part of the institute and further, whether they consider the university as a global environment. Our work is based upon structured interviews with twelve international students from twelve different countries, inclusive of four international postgraduate research students.

### Methods and discussion

Initially key stakeholders from within the university were interviewed including the commercial and non-commercial directors of Keele University Students' Union (KeeleSU), members of International Student Support, the lead Chaplain at Keele Chapel, the head of the English Language School and members of the Advice and Support team (ASK) at KeeleSU. These interviews were conducted to assess what the main issues that international students were facing according to stakeholders. The stakeholders were asked: How they interacted with international students as part of their role, what they understood the main issues facing international students to be and how they thought that the international student experience could have been improved within their particular sphere. The answers given to these particular questions varied depending upon the position and experience of the interviewee(s). For instance, the Advice and Support team at KeeleSU (which consisted of three advisers and one senior adviser) noted that their main experiences of interacting with international students were advising them on issues relating to visas, housing and academic misconduct. In their experience, these were also perceived to be the main issues that international students faced; though it was also acknowledged that there were likely to be a number of issues that the international students did not come to the advice service for help with such as culture shock or isolation. The issue of what communities international students were part of at Keele was raised by the lead Chaplain at Keele Chapel, the non-commercial director at KeeleSU and the three members of International Student Support. The question of whether international students considered Keele to be a global community was raised by the head of International Student Support.

These interviews were carried out alongside a literature review which focused upon studies relating to international student experience, with an emphasis upon international student voice. This led to the creation of a twenty question questionnaire which incorporated the main issues surrounding international student experience that were highlighted by the stakeholder interviews and literature review. The questionnaire was then trialled on four international students who had volunteered to take part in the research in response to a social media post. Following on from the previous example, the interview with KeeleSU's Advice and Support team partially contributed to four of the formative questions: 1) "Have you experienced any issues with obtaining your visa or visa extensions?", 2) "Have you or any of your friends had any problems with housing?", 3) "Do you know what academic misconduct is?" and 4) "Has academic misconduct affected you whilst at Keele?". The questionnaire also included two questions relating to community: 1) "Do you feel that you are part of any community at Keele? Which one(s)? Do you think that they give you the support that you would ideally need?" and 2) "To what extent do you think that Keele is a global community?" Furthermore, the interviewees were asked what they perceived the main issues facing international students to be. This question was crucial because it enabled us to understand the international student perspective of the issues that were important to them.

The twelve questions which generated the richest qualitative data from the initial twenty questions were then chosen to be included in the final one-to-one interviews. These included the two questions on community which are listed above. Twelve questions were selected in order to have enough time for participants to answer all questions within the thirty minute interview slots. Because English is not the first language of the majority of international students, we felt it was important to limit the interview time to aid comfort levels. All interviews were carried out by the project research assistant Rachel Tang in a neutral location in order to retain a distance between the interviews and the person conducting the analysis of the data. An invitation to take part in the research was sent out to all international students *via* email in order to obtain as wide a sample size of international students as possible. Of those interested in taking part in the research project, 12 students were selected to represent a broad range of the student nationalities present at Keele. The nationalities of the 12 students were: Greek, Hong Kong Chinese, Korean, Malaysian, Bruneian, Chinese, Macanese, Sri Lankan, Singaporean, Kazakh, Jordanian and Ghanaian. This included four postgraduate research students from Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Jordan and Ghana. The postgraduate research students were the only four that volunteered to take part in the study. These students were included in the interviews in order to create pilot data on the differences and similarities in the perception of community by international postgraduate and undergraduate students and will be discussed later in this report.

The data gathered is reflective of the international community at our institute as a whole to the following extent. According to a Freedom of Information request there were 1,818 international students registered at Keele as of 19 March 2015. There were 603 students from China and 279 students from Hong Kong. Other nationalities with more than 50 students at Keele were: Nigerian (77),

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Bruneian (73), Kenyan (66), Malaysian (60) and Iraqi (59). At this time there were at least 85 nationalities represented at Keele (this figure could be higher because the nationality of some students was listed as unknown). The most populous two groups of international students, both Chinese and Hong Kong students, are represented in the interviews. Students from all of the most populous groups could not be included in the interviews because a student of that nationality did not sign up to participate: A student from Brunei and Malaysia were involved but we were unable to include a student from Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq. Our study does however include students from a range of European and Asian countries. The university only attracts a limited number of students from the American or Australian continents, so a student of one of these nationalities was not included in the interviews and we discuss the potential limitations of this later.

The research was carried out within an ethical framework. All participants were sent copies of the questions over twenty-four hours in advance as well as a copy of the information sheet and the consent form that they would be asked to sign on the day of the interview. All consent forms were signed by both the researcher and participants. Data collection and storage were all conducted in line with institutional expectations of an ethically evaluated project; briefly, participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time pre- and post-data collection, whilst being fully aware of the nature of the research project they were contributing to *via* full disclosure from the researcher. All participants were also given information on who they could contact should they feel aggrieved by our study design. No students decided to follow up on these procedures.

### Results and discussion

In this paper we probed how communities are formed amongst international students at Keele and the extent to which they feel that Keele is an international community and what this involved. This was done through the use of twelve structured interviews with students from twelve of the different nationalities that are represented at Keele. All students understood the concept of communities within Keele and were able to comment upon what constituted a community for them at Keele. However, the students were less clear upon what they understood by the term global community. This term had little to no meaning for some international students.

Thematic analysis of structured interview data is a useful way to impose a scaffold on the data from the outset of collection because each participant is answering the same questions, therefore allowing for inter-participant comparison of perception data to be explored. This facilitates the detection of emergent themes from the data, where opinions and perceptions group together naturally as the data is procedurally analysed. In our case, we used a thematic analysis approach because it offered an accessible and flexible method of interpreting our qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although far from perfect as a methodology for qualitative data handling, we feel that the structure imposed by our interview process ameliorates at least some of the 'anything goes' critique usually levelled a thematic analysis from some quarters.

Using a thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), the data naturally divided into three main themes which emerged from the analysis of the responses to the interview questions:

- Multi-national vs. international
- The relationship between the local and the international
- The international and the communities which exist within communities at the university.

Where possible, we will highlight within the three emergent themes, overlap with the factors identified earlier (academic, social, cultural, logistical and psychological) as we explore the perceptual data emerging from our work. We will also examine the postgraduate opinion separately to aid clarity in interpreting our work.

### Theme 1 - multi-national vs. international

The main findings within the multi-national vs. international theme were that the majority of students considered Keele to be a global community because students from a range of nationalities were present at the university. When the students were asked "To what extent do you think that Keele is a global community?", students' responses generally came under two headings: Firstly, whether or not Keele was a global community as a result of the different nationalities that are present at the university i.e. Is it a multinational environment? Secondly, the impact that a multinational environment has upon the culture of the wider university and its students.

#### *Keele as a multinational environment*

Seven students responding that they felt that Keele was a global community supported their assertion with the evidence that there are many nationalities represented at Keele. However, four students problematised this relationship by questioning what a global community is and whether many countries being represented actually equated to a 'coming together' of global groups and UK students. The student from China said they did not see Keele as being a global community. The student from Singapore was unsure of what globalism meant. This raises the question; to what extent does having multiple countries represented in the student population equate to the creation or existence of a global community, particularly if it has little or no meaning to some students and it is thought to be not the case by others?

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Andrade (2006) showed that international students can feel more lonely and homesick than domestic students, however we should not assume that this has a negative impact on their studies. This questions how global a university with over 80 countries represented is, when it is possible for a research student to not meet or interact with other people. This point feeds well into both the cultural and emotional/psychological factors detailed in our introduction, where differing student interpretations of 'community' are vital to understanding precisely how international students feel and that this is likely impacted by the sorts of communities the students end up in, thereby affecting both their in-class and social lives.

### *Multinational environment: issues*

The fact that half of those students questioned cited students from different countries as being a feature of a university global community presents an opportunity for the university as it can enable international and home students to develop a global perspective. Montgomery & McDowell (2009) argue that "superficial" relationships between UK and international students do not appear to bring about a global perspective, however in terms of UK students living and studying in a multi-cultural community there may be opportunities missed to create an international perspective through less superficial social contacts with international students. They challenge the assumption that international students "lose out" if they chose not to integrate with students from the UK. Zhao and Kuh (2004) argue that accomplishing educational goals and encouraging intercultural learning is intrinsically linked to the interaction of domestic and international students. This ties well with the academic factors from our introduction, as communication and movement within and between communities are critical to success in a multinational environment.

## **Theme 2 - the impact of opinion: local and international**

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The second theme, of the relationship between the local and the international revealed that a number of the students connected to their international heritage through the formation of more localised communities within the university, such as through the 'Asian' or 'Korean' societies. It was also noted that many of the students belonged to or had created local communities such as the 'LGBT' society or through taking part in Christian fellowship. Interestingly, this is clearly connected to both the cultural and social factors touched on in our introduction and links to our previous point that social drivers for international students may reciprocally impact on engagement with numerous activities, such as clubs and societies. Students remarked that these communities gave support, opportunities to travel and to share their culture and also had a range of ideas about the extent to which they were part of local communities and whether they were influenced by their status as international students. Their comments fell under the three areas outlined below.

### *Localising the international*

A number of the students that were interviewed implicitly suggested that they had tried to connect to their international heritage through the formation of more localised communities, seen through the students who have joined country specific societies such as the 'Asian' and 'Korean' societies. One student specifically commented that the main community that they felt part of was that of "international" students in general. This gave the student the grounding to then be able to go on 'Encounter Trips' organised by International Student Support that enable students to visit culturally significant places within the UK that they might otherwise struggle to get to. However, Student Nine noted that this process could be quite limiting because they wanted to see more international things beyond student societies, touching on the needs and wants of emotional/psychological factors previously identified in our study. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) argue that in their study of factors influencing the personal adjustment of international students within higher education that "the number of strong ties established with other co-culturals was found to have the strongest relationship with the personal adjustment of international students". Similarly, Kashima and Loh (2006) found that international students with ties to other international students (whether of the same or a different nationality to themselves), adjusted the best to HE study in Australia. Our research shows that international students do, to an extent, form communities with co-culturals but they do, at the same time, realise that this can be limiting and at times actively avoid forming communities with those from the same culture as themselves.

### *The forging of new localised communities*

It was also noted that many of the students interviewed had either created or belonged to different forms of localised communities. For Student Four, this was through taking part in Christian fellowship and through going to services at Keele Chapel, linking both with the social and cultural factors outlined earlier. A Chinese female student had created a community by taking part in the LGBT society. Another localised community was considered to be a student's academic course. These practices can be linked to Rawlings' (1999) notion that international students join local communities as a way of connecting to their host country with a view to attaining a kind of citizenship. Zhao and Kuh (2004) have also argued that the student engagement (that can be seen in connections being made to localised communities in our research) positively links to participation in learning communities within a students' course. This suggests that there could be further benefits to joining a localised community within the university.

### *Perceptions of the local*

Here the students noted that the localised communities that they belonged to could give them "support", opportunities to "travel" and opportunities to share their culture and respective cuisines, explicitly linking their thoughts to both the social and cultural factors previously outlined.

### Theme 3 - communities within communities

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Our third emergent theme of communities within communities revealed that most international students considered that they were part of communities within Keele rather than belonging to the greater Keele community. The students developed these smaller communities through belonging to clubs and societies and through interactions between local and international students; for instance activities such as food sampling, linking neatly with the cultural and social factors previously outlined. Looking deeper into our data, there were a few central ideas that emerged when considering perceptions of community in international students in our institute. These were:

#### *Clubs and societies*

Many of our interviewed students were a member of more than one club or society with most belonging to a specific society (usually based on their culture) and at least one other club that was more mixed in membership, typically to explore a common interest or sport. This is another example of the range of communities and their social drivers that exist within an HE institute and has previously been referred to in the literature as "communities of difference" (Tierney, 1993). The underpinning idea emerging from all of these outlets of social interaction was their supportive nature but it should be noted that even a diverse selection of clubs and societies cannot be all-encompassing, given the sheer diversity of the communities that they service. An example of this from our findings would be the lack of granularity in awareness of very different Asian cultures within an 'Asian society' and this perhaps needs a greater awareness from the institute. This touches on the cultural aspects we discussed in our introduction, where the level of engagement in multiple aspects of university life are reciprocally linked, in our opinion, with cultural morays and that this will logically impact on membership of intra and/or inter cultural societies and ultimately, perception of community in their HE institute (Krause, 2005).

#### *Interaction between local and international students*

Many students and institutes use food and food-sampling as an ice-breaker to bring together local and international communities, bringing a social element to life in HE that transcends their course or their usual activities. In this regard, initiatives like this one can be viewed as an explicit attempt to foster 'new' communities (communities of difference) or at least to establish a social mechanism to allow movement between existing communities (Tierney, 1993). All of these are implicitly linked to the emotional/psychological and academic factors previously outlined. Interestingly, we also picked up on the idea that some students considered the teaching and in particular, lectures on their course as a common denominator of community, reinforcing our thinking about the importance of institutional awareness of larger communities (students on a course) containing smaller communities (other determinants) and their responsibility to cater for and support them (Rai, 2002).

#### *Awareness of isolation*

Although isolation can impact on every student in a HE environment, the feeling of isolation can be particularly prevalent within the international student community and links explicitly with the emotional and psychological well-being factors we discussed in our introduction (Sawir et al., 2008). Lenning and colleagues (1999) explored the impact of learning communities within HE institutes and their work identified two critical aspects: (1) primary membership, examples of which would be faculty learning committees or student learning groups and (2) primary interaction format, examples of which would be physical, virtual or indirect (email) interactions. Their work is principally concerned with learning communities and it is striking in relation to the data presented in this paper, that there are a number of commonalities between international students and their sense of community and the four learning communities that Lenning et al. postulate: curricular, classroom, residential and student-specific. The main overlap with our work strengthens our finding that perceptions of community are linked with the benefits, especially for international students, of enhanced academic achievement, better retention rates and reduced feeling of isolation.

### The postgraduate view

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Although we only have a small postgraduate sample size in this pilot work on student voice, we felt that it was appropriate to include these opinions as a natural complementary view to the undergraduate perceptions, as we thought that it was useful to include even this small number in an attempt to highlight any contrast in the views of these two groups of students and to emphasise that we were aware that there might be differences in opinion between these groups. Our findings relating to postgraduate perceptions of global community at Keele are thus preliminary findings but interesting nonetheless.

Despite the presence of multiple nationalities at Keele, our findings did not discover this having a significant impact upon the way in which postgraduate students formed communities, principally because of the limited number of students that they are connected to by nature of the relative (compared to undergraduate) isolation of postgraduate research. One of our postgraduate students actually questioned how the presence of multiple nationalities at Keele translated into a global community, particularly when they had perceived that certain university staff treated home and international students differently. In a similar vein, the student from Ghana answered that they knew that there are people from different communities and when asked "to what extent is Keele a global community", this student identified themselves as postgraduate and shared that they had limited opportunities to meet other students beyond the lab environment in which they worked. A postgraduate research student from Kazakhstan showed an awareness of the various nationalities represented within Keele's student population and also questioned how this translated into a global

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community. Importantly, they questioned the cultural awareness of some of the staff at the university, linking neatly with the cultural factor from our introduction. They also observed that some people were able to empathise with the position of international students, whilst some were local people with a more limited world view. As part of the students' postgraduate research, they had noticed disparities in the way in which certain members of university staff treated home and international students. They further commented that the presence of such staff, limited the ability of the university to be "truly global".

Our findings suggest that for some postgraduate students, forming communities is not a high priority because of a mixture of demands upon their time and a postgraduate specific tension as to whether or not prioritising forming communities was appropriate at their current stage of study. One of the most self-aware and mature comments made upon the topic of global community came from a postgraduate student from Kazakhstan. They remarked that if "you work with local people you see the university from a completely different perspective". They perceived that "the attitudes of certain people within the university are quite prejudiced [towards international students]". This made the student question whether the university is "truly a global community or is it only the image that is being sold". This links to the work of Sherry et al. (2010) which found that 44% of international students questioned at the University of Toledo did not feel connected to the local community. The research also discovered that some international students had had negative experiences with locals: "A female postgraduate student from Indonesia also commented that a 'lot of people I run into are not familiar with diversity, so sometimes I felt like I was being left out'" (ibid). This suggests that the experiences of the Kazakhstani student in our study were not isolated incidents.

Our data also detected an awareness of isolation in the postgraduate students and we were surprised to discover that the postgraduate community in particular felt this to be an important driver in institutional thinking (Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Somewhat controversially, our data also suggests an implicit desire to preserve the freedom of choice *not* to integrate into wider communities and may be a reflection of an independent postgraduate mind-set and further work is needed to determine whether this was a true reflection from the larger community or whether we were looking at an artefact of our small postgraduate sample. In this regard, our follow-on research will focus specifically on communities of international postgraduate students to explore what enables them to form communities, how these students respond if a potential community is not available and if the formation of communities was perceived to be an important feature within the postgraduate experience.

### Limitations of this study

The perceptual data we present here does not include the opinions of students from either Northern or Southern America due to our institute having a very small number of students of this background in attendance. Therefore, one possible limitation of our work is that we do not have a transatlantic perspective on community from our institute. Our further planned research into student perceptions of community at Keele will make attempts in participant recruitment to ensure that input from this region is included in our follow-on work.

Asking various international students about their perceptions of a concept as nebulous as 'global community' is challenging because it is fraught with context and meaning and can be interpreted as simply as 'we have international students, so we are a global community' or be subject to a more theoretical and social construct based on work and idea, culture, language ability, lexicon and many other factors (Välilmaa, 2004). In our work, we have tried to let the participants define what is meant by the term 'global community' themselves in order to explore their understanding. In terms of limitations for our work, the study was conducted in English and so we cannot completely exclude language confounders from the data however, in all cases our participants had sufficient English to participate in this research and our researchers did not feel that anyone had a fundamental lack of comprehension in answering our questions. Equally, it is always possible that misinterpretation of either the question or the concept may be present in our data, but given the clarity of our results (see Appendix 1), we feel that this is a relatively minor risk in this study but definitely not one that can be discounted. Additionally, given that our participants were reflecting on quite personal experiences, we must take into account the possibility that limits in the nuance of their English language may impact on their ability to articulate their feelings accurately, which could be a confounding factor in our study.

### Lessons learned and recommendations

- International students commonly feel part of multiple, smaller communities
- International students were less sure of their part within the institute-wide community
- Postgraduate international student opinion was significantly divergent with undergraduate international student opinion, even taking into account the small postgraduate sample size
- International students define the concept of 'global community' differently and although not without limitations, factors which influence this definition range from personal experience, postgraduate/undergraduate status, engagement in other institutional communities and cultural characteristics.

Following on from this work, we would recommend other institutes to similarly explore the student voice within their own student populations, paying particular attention to any divergent opinions between undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts. We would also recommend that caution is exercised in using/exploring nebulous concepts such as 'global community' whilst noting that valuable

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information on student perception of community in higher education can be gleaned if the inherent limitations we discussed above are taken into account.

Giving a voice to our international student population in this study was both useful and informative, allowing us to both refine our experimental methods and make a contribution to the HE sectors' understanding of the international student experience and the factors influencing this valuable group of learners.

### Biographies

*Kathrine Jackson* is currently the lead researcher on the 'International Student Experience Research Project' for Keele University Students' Union and the Learning and Professional Development Centre at Keele. Her research background is in the humanities but she has also developed an interest in Education Studies.

*Fay Harris* is the Student Experience Manager for Keele University Students' Union and has worked in student support for over ten years. She is responsible for the Student Activities and Volunteering department, Jobshop and ASK, the union's impartial student advice service.

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## Appendix I

Table 1: Full responses given by each student

Identification number	Student nationality	1. Question 1. Do you feel that you are part of any community at Keele? Which one(s)? Do you think that they give you the support that you would ideally need?	Question 2. To what extent do you think that Keele is a global community?
One	Greece	1. No.	2. Definitely a global community. It's got a very good diversity of nationalities. It has its own clubs and societies for each nationality that want to participate in the whole thing.
Two	Hong Kong	1. International students. That's it. [...] [They go on] Encounter Trip, which is going other cities and travel around. I quite like this idea.	2. If you say people from different nationalities and then come to Keele and study, that's called global, yes. [...] Local students will make friends with international student.
Three	Korea	1. Well I'm part of different societies. I'm also the president of the South Korean, Korean society.	2. To a greater extent, I guess. I mean there's plenty of different nationalities of students here. Although there are, you know minorities, like there are people from some countries that don't have any other people from their own countries.
Four	Malaysia	1. I like to participate in fellowship, activities like the societies and chapel. They're all very good friends. Very supportive.	2. There are events that like celebrate different cultural food festival things. I think that it's good. People know [...] they can taste different cultures' food and know about the history, about their countries. [...] Um hm (yes). You can see on my course there are different people of different nationalities.
Five	Brunei	1. It's really supportive because it's really easy to get anything here. Whether emotional support, or you need to talk to someone about anything, any direction, you can ask people, it's really organised and very useful.	2. It is a global community, it has a lot of international students. At times I do see like people just hanging out with their own groups and stuff but on the other side I also see the others like mixed groups.
Six	China	1. LGBT [...] Actually for the academic part, the lecturers they are really good.	2. Global community? I don't see it in that way. But even in the other universities you would have met a lot of international students as well? UK is a very mixed culture but there are a lot of immigrants, people. And Keele is a part of England so.

Identification number	Student nationality	1. Question 1. Do you feel that you are part of any community at Keele? Which one(s)? Do you think that they give you the support that you would ideally need?	Question 2. To what extent do you think that Keele is a global community?
Seven	Macau	1. I joined basketball team. [...] I went to their training, but not really often, but I liked to be. It seems quite easy to get involved in some sports in Keele I think.	2. Yeah, of course. [...] Because you see loads of people there from different countries.
Eight (PGR)	Sri Lanka	1. Yes, to a certain extent though. I'm in a community of the course that I follow.	2. It is, as far as postgrads are concerned, I know that there are not many postgrads from the different countries really.
Nine	Singapore	1. I'm in Asian society. [...] It's quite hard to blend with them because it's like I'm from Singapore and they're all from China. [...] That's why I really think that international stuff would be really good and not limited to just like being in a society.	2. I'm not really sure. [...] I appreciate how they are promoting internationalism. But I don't think that it's very good. [...] I don't really know what global means. Well if you are talking about where it is, then that's definitely a problem, because people don't know where Keele is. [...] People are still quite ignorant – people still do not know where Singapore is. They still think that I'm from China.
Ten (PGR)	Kazakhstan	1. At the moment I'm not part of any community at Keele, in terms of that I don't go and actively participate in, be it Phd's student community, be it Green party. [...] Sometimes you don't have that enthusiasm to go an [sic] interact with people when you feel like, oh shit I'm stuck. [...] I have friends that I see but I wouldn't say that I'm part of a community.	2. There are plenty of nationalities at Keele and there are opportunities for interaction for students with a lot of different backgrounds if you are part of a society. Because I do think that societies tend to be multicultural. Erm, but in terms of people who actually work at the university, estates department or Keele security department – they tend to be, they are local people – they're from around. If you work with local people you see the university from a completely different perspective. You don't see it from the perspective of international students, you see it from a local person. And this is when you start questioning the extent to which it is actually global. [...] When you see them interacting with international students and you keep observing them for a very long time you can see that they're not global in a sense. [...] The attitudes of certain people within the university are quite prejudiced and you confront with it on a number of occasions then you start questioning, is it truly a global community or is it only the image that is being sold?

Identification number	Student nationality	1. Question 1. Do you feel that you are part of any community at Keele? Which one(s)? Do you think that they give you the support that you would ideally need?	Question 2. To what extent do you think that Keele is a global community?
Eleven (PGR)	Jordan	1. The student chose not to answer the question.	2. They are coming from different backgrounds and being in Keele but I'm not sure if they come together.
Twelve (PGR)	Ghana	1. Not really, because I'm doing a PhD. The people that you know are only the ones that you see in your room and in the lab. You don't get the chance to meet anybody, there's no opportunity to meet other people.	2. I know that there are people from different countries...