

Teaching

# International Students

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

As universities and colleges increasingly compete to recruit international students, you are likely to find a mix of nationalities and languages in any class. Studying abroad can bring enormous benefits to the students, and their presence can enrich and diversify the learning experience of the group. But there are also likely to be challenges and adjustments needed on both sides if the experience is to be a positive one for all concerned.

Here is one tutor's experience of working with international students:

# Case Study

I teach graphic design and typography and have spent 17 years teaching these subjects to students in Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, together with students from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. I have also worked with students from a number of other European countries whilst teaching in the UK.

It is important to be aware of issues when teaching international students, but without going overboard.

## **PROBLEMS:**

The first problems are likely to be practical ones, housing, transport, food and location, to start with. Housing, and in particular the older housing used for student accommodation can be a shock; also sharing digs for the first time can take some adjusting to. In other countries public transport is often much cheaper and more reliable. Here transport is very expensive and often unreliable, also having to wait for transport, or having to walk distances in relatively poorly lit streets can also be a cause for concern. Food can be an item of major importance to overseas students as it assumes a more important role in family life. Here they have a restricted choice, usually at greater expense due to import pricing, so a change in diet is often inevitable, if only to meet budgetary requirements. There is a lot to adjust to!

## **BACKGROUND:**

All of the background things we take for granted can be barriers for international students and they may appreciate advice and support, particularly when things begin to affect their studies. Some institutions have their own societies for foreign and overseas students; however I have often found staff unaware of these societies, so the student is left to find out about these by chance rather than intent.

It can take some time for international students to settle in, and this partly depends on what kind of school they attended. In Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, there are a number of very good private schools for students. On finishing their schooling, students often find that there are an insufficient number of university places open to them, so non-selected students who may be equally as good, have no choice but to go abroad to study their chosen subject. In some institutions, students, once established on a course, are not allowed to change to another course, consequently if they wish to study a different subject they have to go abroad.

Whilst the International Schools teach to a good standard of English and independent study, you may find that students from state schools have less experience of independent study, and greater variability of English. An important aspect to bear in mind is the actual teaching of English as a subject. Apart from local staff, students are taught by staff from America, Australia, Canada, Britain etc. and may have learned different approaches to spelling and grammar. This should be taken into account when assessing essays and reports etc.

I've found that I do need to be politically aware when teaching a variety of students. For instance, if I'm teaching design, risqué photos may offend some students on religious grounds, and I try to give options when setting projects. Where I have a large group with some international students, I sometimes give them extra homework, or make extra time in project days for them to do mini-research.

**SUBJECT OF STUDY:**

International students may not have a broad knowledge of the background to the subject to be studied, so may need additional information and support to begin with.

I try to prepare them for lectures, showing them how to take notes. I explain what's expected and how it should be done. Giving them copies of lecture notes can also be helpful, don't take it for granted that they'll know specialist terms, or, if they do, that their understanding will equate with yours. You can unwittingly be at cross purposes on some occasions, although rarely, thankfully. Such an example would be the difference between English and American Typographic terminology and type classification.

**FACILITIES:**

In many cases staff are unaware of the excellent facilities which exist in colleges abroad – in a number of cases students arrive with computer software which is in advance of that on the courses they will attend. Students may be computer literate at the expense of traditional skills, so a balance may have to be struck in relation to the course content and the values and needs carefully explained. The professional environment to which they will eventually return can be substantially different from here.

**LANGUAGE:**

Language issues vary too, and a student's understanding is often much better than their speaking. Writing is a good indicator, and students often find writing easier than speaking. I've had some great essays! Where students are struggling I refer them to central support for English, this sometimes needs to be specialist and not general. Supplying project briefs to staff teaching in the area can help considerably, especially where specialised terms are being used.

Reading can sometimes be hard work in a second language, so I look for small sections and prioritise the reading where possible. Availability of books in the library can be an issue – never enough copies - and library systems are different, so students have to familiarise themselves with alternative categorisation systems.

**TRIPS:**

When international students first go on trips they may expect to be taken around and shown things. For new students I do start by pointing out a number of things so that they get the general idea about the needs and objectives of the project. Having done this, the individual or group can carry on researching independently.

**WORK ETHIC:**

Most international students are used to working very hard. They may not say so but many worry a great deal about marking because they are used to being ranked by results, so they can get stressed about assessments. Also trying to explain assessment results to their parents can be a daunting experience. Assessment needs to be very fair. I try to explain things very carefully, with clear reference back to the criteria, and I'm careful to criticise the work, not the person – this can be an issue in art and design – for example, something may be good but not to the brief.

The subject of research for course work, its needs and objectives, requires careful consideration and explanation, in order that overseas students fully understand what is being demanded of them.

Overall I have found my experience of teaching international students to be very rewarding, and definitely a two-way process, for I have also learnt much from them.

---

**REFLECTION/CONTEXTUALISING**

---

Having read the case study, how does this relate to your own experience, or what kind of things do you think you will need to consider if you are about to start teaching international students?

International Students	Learning/Teaching			Assessment	Social Interaction/ group work
	Preparation	During session	Follow-up		
Issues					
Strategies					
Benefits					
What other support or information might you need?					
Where or who can you get this from?					

## Points and Strategies

**OF COURSE ALL STUDENTS ARE DIFFERENT AND DO NOT FIT INTO NEAT CATEGORIES! HOWEVER, WE HAVE LISTED SOME COMMON POINTS AND SUGGESTIONS THAT MAY BE HELPFUL.**

### **CULTURE**

- Be aware that international students may be used to a different form of learning, and a different relationship with their teacher – possibly a much more respectful one! Examples might be giving you presents, or reluctance to ask questions in class as it implies that you are not a good teacher. Be clear what you expect, but don't be surprised if it takes them a while to adjust to different cultural expectations – it would be the same for you studying abroad!
- Approaches to learning may also be very different from what some international students are used to. If they come from a culture where learning does not involve criticism, evaluation and independent thought, it may be hard for them to adjust to an approach that seems "disrespectful". Don't jump to the conclusion that they are being lazy, or just copying from course texts instead of thinking for themselves – again they are being asked to make a big cultural shift. They will need plenty of positive, formative feedback and examples of what you expect from them
- When writing briefs take care with references to culturally specific knowledge eg. media, companies, artwork, products that might not be known to international students
- When recommending reference books, be clear what you expect them to extract and that they do not have to read every word – "cherry picking" is a convention they may not be used to
- In some countries art is collective, and there is no culture of individual artists. For these students, adjusting to individual creativity and reward is a cultural shift
- Our art and design history tends to be taught from a Western-European perspective. For a more global approach to contextual studies, have a look at [www.glaadh.ac.uk](http://www.glaadh.ac.uk)

## Points and Strategies

- Students from some religious traditions may have a problem with activities such as life drawing, and you may need to discuss alternative strategies with the programme leader
- You also need to be sensitive to religious/ethical issues for any students; for example they may not be happy to work with certain foodstuffs or materials, or may behave differently during festival periods
- Getting to know and understand a bit about the student as an individual, their culture and learning history, will not only help you to understand their assumptions and expectations, but will shed light on your own as seen from another perspective
- Most importantly, think through the skills, academic and practical, that a student needs in order to pass the course, and focus on these

### LANGUAGE

- International students getting used to the language will take it literally, and are unlikely to understand jokes, metaphors and jargon. Try to keep language straightforward and clearly pronounced – and if you do lapse into topical jokes and allusions be aware that you may need to translate for them or they'll feel left out!
- Make sure you are clear and explicit with guidance and instructions
- Allow them time to think, absorb what you have said, and ask questions

### TERMINOLOGY

- Understanding terminology in higher education and in art and design is difficult enough for native English speakers – most international students have an additional barrier!
- Providing a glossary or list of key terms will be very helpful in understanding specialist language. If you introduce new terms, write them on the board and explain them

# Points and Strategies

## ESSAYS/ASSIGNMENTS

- Explain assignment/essay topics to them – including the meaning of words like "discuss", "evaluate" etc
- When setting essays, be clear about expected length, and how much weight will be given to vocabulary, spelling and grammar or they may worry unduly
- Academic essay writing is a convention which can be hard even for a native English speaker to get to grips with. For someone with a different first language and a different academic background, it can be incomprehensible! The international students will need a lot of help, patience and examples of successful essays that they can read
- Remember there is also plenty of help within the institution, but this may not necessarily be art-and-design orientated; specialist language and skills may be needed in addition

## GROUP WORK

- Try to give international students as much notice as possible if you want them to speak in a group or present their work – they will be keen to join in but need time to plan and prepare
- Group work may need extra time and planning. The logistics of working in a multicultural team will need to be taken into account for all the students' sake, and it is important that "home" students don't feel resentful or disadvantaged because of the extra task of working in a mixed group. If the task is assessed, try to include the process and the ways that students tackle cultural and learning differences as part of this, rather than just looking at an end result which students may feel is "unfair"

## PRACTICAL ISSUES

- Be aware that international students may have other issues outside of the classroom to contend with, such as being lonely, homesick, practical accommodation problems etc, and that these may impact on their confidence and work. Sympathy and support may be needed, and don't hesitate to refer them to the appropriate support teams if you think they need extra help

Teaching  
International  
Students

---

**LINKS AND RESOURCES**

---

**[www.glaadh.ac.uk](http://www.glaadh.ac.uk)**

Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History project website – includes resources, literature and links.

**[http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2\\_learnth/briefing\\_papers/international\\_students.pdf](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnth/briefing_papers/international_students.pdf)**

A helpful paper published by Oxford Brookes on working with international students