

A comparative analysis of the challenges faced by students at University of Lincoln

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Abstract

The primary objective of this research is to identify and compare the challenges encountered by graduate students at the University of Lincoln. The analysis focuses on three key areas: integration into university life, adaptation to the UK higher education system and access to university services. The results show that whilst many international students have successfully integrated socially into the university, there are those that are struggling. Amongst the students struggling, international female students tended to feel most isolated, and identified significant concerns related to mental wellbeing and finding university resources helpful. The findings of this research are crucial when formulating policies and introducing action plans to help students integrate at the university, alongside One Community Values.

Keywords: Integration; students; challenges; comparative analysis

Introduction

The transition to university represents a significant life change for students. Higher education institutions have a key role to play with widening participation and inclusive provision for students from increasingly diverse educational, cultural, and socio-economic background. There is a growing need to for institutions to be adaptable and flexible in developing new approaches and targeted policies, through initiatives to enhance existing practices supporting student integration, retention, and academic success.

This research was interested in One Community Values aligned to the University of Lincoln. By understanding the challenges and complexities involved in the policies and action plans linked to integration of students, this research highlights the integration faced by students. The observations made during the research, and the recommendations provided, present key takeaways to be considered alongside the growing literature on the context of adaptations made by students in integration of university life.

The reviewed literature (Rhodes et al., 2004; Ahn et al., 2023) offers valuable insights into academic, cultural, and financial aspects of student integration. Building upon existing studies which have compared the integration experiences of different cohorts of students within the same institutional context, this research identifies and compares the challenges encountered by students in graduate programmes at the University of Lincoln. The analysis focuses on four key areas: integration into university life, adaptation to the UK higher education system, access to university services, and financial management and living cost.

Project Background

The University of Lincoln proudly commits to its One Community Values and emphasises the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The University is heavily involved in research related to acceptability, and inclusivity, of individuals in all spheres of life, including education. This research aligns with the core research business of the university, and the greater vision of the academic sector, to ensure that all students receive university education without prejudice, bias and socioeconomic barriers. In order to achieve the goal, it is critical that policymakers understand the complexities and challenges faced by students when adapting to university life, a process which is the integral to this research.

Literature Review

Rhodes et. al (2004) explore the factors influencing student integration among undergraduates in the UK, identifying three key areas: academic, social, and financial or practical (such as debt, family commitments, and career aspirations). Similarly, Willcoxson (2010) highlight that student integration is shaped by academic support, alignment of expectations, commitment to the institution and future career, and the risks of social disengagement, which often reflect broader institutional shortcomings. Based on the research by O'Brien et. al (2023), regarding facilitating academic and social integration, they find that structured peer mentoring programmes help students to be more confident in their academic structure, develop close peer relationship and increase a sense of purpose and engagement amongst students.

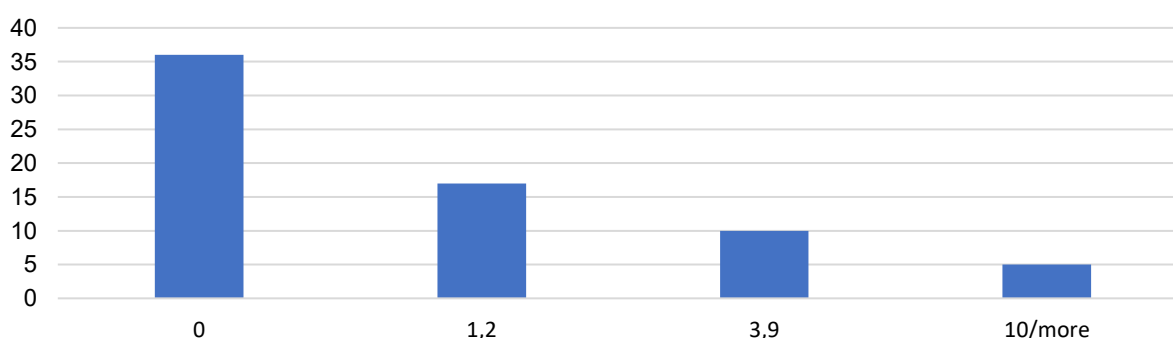
Research conducted by Bangor University (Ahn et al., 2023) conclude that students belonging to less privileged socio-economic background reported a weaker sense of belonging compared to their more privileged peers. However, the research highlighted that social events and academic sessions held at universities did not necessarily address specific challenges faced by students at university. Similarly, research by Johes et al. (2024) also finds that international students are less likely to access academic services due to cultural stigma or the perception that services are not designed with their needs in mind.

Methodology

The methodology of this research involves data collected through surveys of graduate students enrolled at the University of Lincoln. The survey received 72 responses, of which 36 students identified as males, 35 students identified as female, and one student identified as non-binary. Most respondents reported living on campus (42), while over half of the respondents (43) identified themselves as international students.

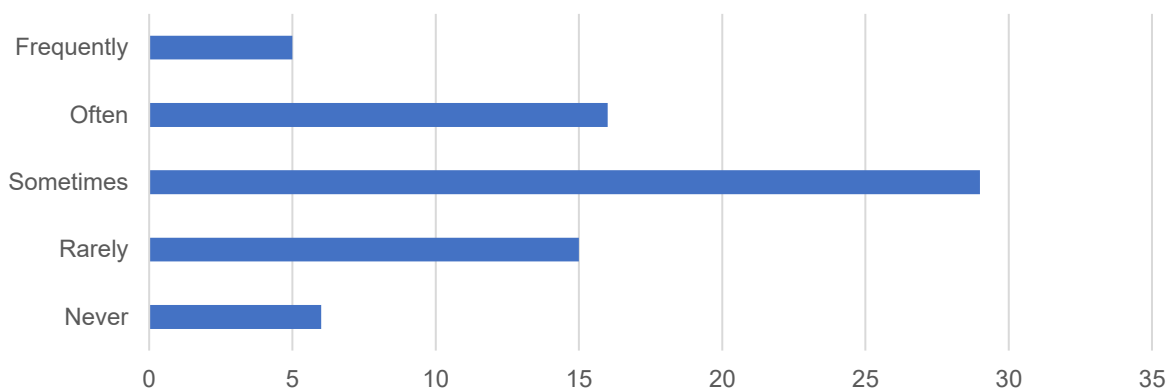
From a cultural perspective, 33 students said that they took part in at least 1 cultural event at university, while 74% of the international students said that they regularly attempted to interact with international peers or societies. When asked whether students had a changed opinion about the teaching practices of their home countries, 40 respondents stated that based upon the academic practices at University of Lincoln, students did reflect on the teaching and pedagogy styles that existed in their home countries. On the social side, most students (61) reported maintaining regular communication with family and friends, and nearly half (31) said they spoke to them daily. Students were also asked to compare their current social life to the one before university. 34 students reported an improvement in their social life, while just under half (35) indicated relative ease in forming new friendships. Figures 1 and 2 below

Figure 1: How many cultural events or activities have you participated in since arriving at university?



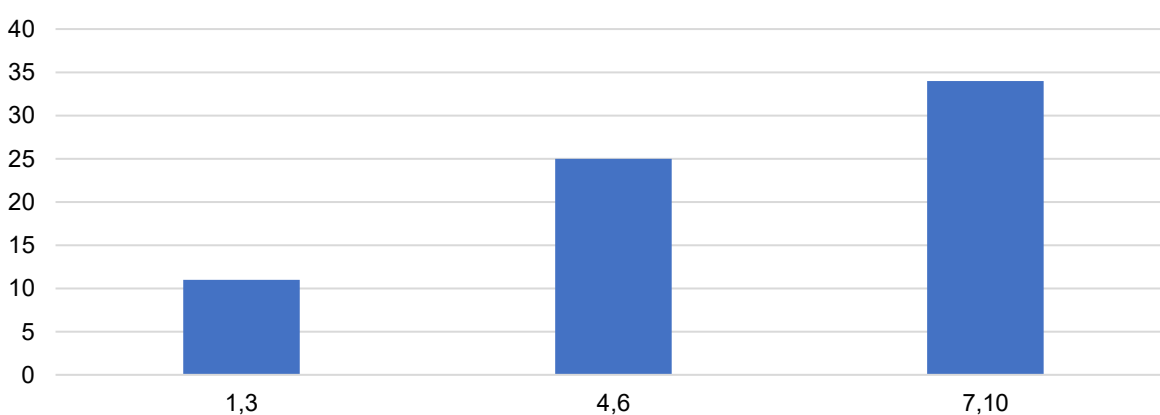
denote student responses to questions related to cultural activities at the university:

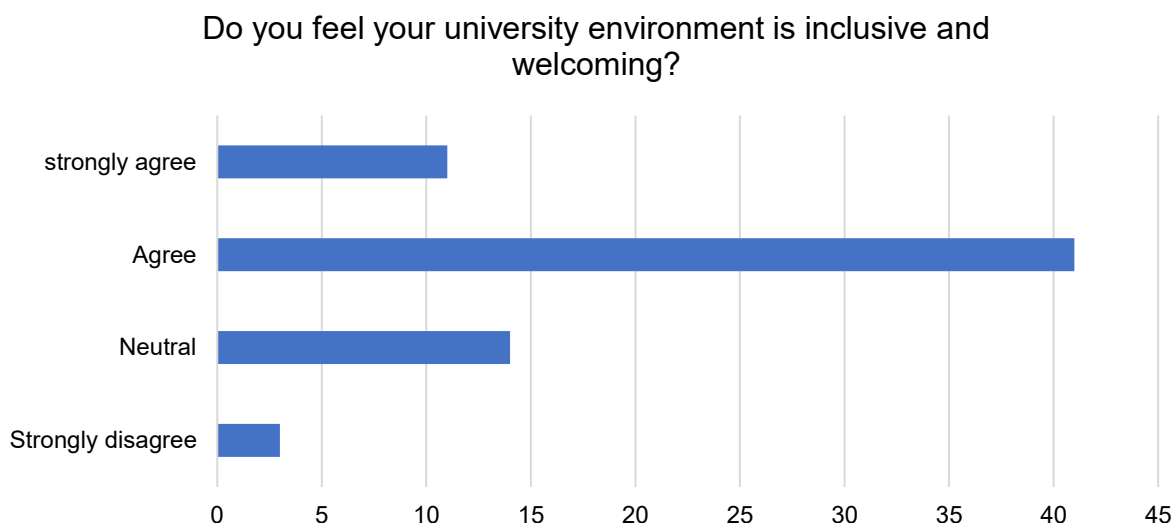
Figure 2: How often do you reach out to peers for help or advice?



Students were also asked about their mental wellbeing and willingness to seek support. Only 33 students reported finding it easy to adjust to university life. In terms of stress, 31 students said they were stressed only sometimes or rarely, while 13 reported never feeling stressed, and 14 indicated that they experienced stress more frequently. When asked about seeking support, only 30 per cent of students said they often or frequently sought advice from peers. The same pattern emerged regarding emotional challenges, with 29 per cent of students feeling comfortable seeking help. However, a strong majority (47) of students rated their emotional wellbeing as 4 or 5 out of 5, though 11 gave low ratings of 1 or 2. Moreover, 52 students agreed that the university had an inclusive and welcoming environment, while 54 students stated that they found the university resources helpful. Figures 3 and 4 below denote student responses to making new friends and the environment at the university:

Figure 3: On a scale of one to ten how easy has it been to make friends at university? (1 = Very difficult, 10 = Very easy)





Results

Out of the 43 students that stated that they were international, there was an even split of 21 female and male identifying students and 1 non-binary individual. A majority of international female students (13) and just over half (11) international male students, have been to at least 1 cultural event. This shows that whilst there is a majority of students that attending cultural events, there is still a noticeable number of students not attending, highlighting that current events may have gaps in inclusivity or accessibility. Of the international students, 1 non-binary, 10 male and 14 female students faced international challenges or differences. These statistics show a need for better support for cultural changes and intercultural exchange. The difference in male to female students also highlights a need for gender-specific approaches, as there may be different cultural expectations based on gender that should be addressed. The 1 non-binary student in the entire survey also indicates a need for LGBTQ+ support for international students.

Of the international students, 2 students (both male) stated that they viewed their culture more critically, 14 students (9 female and 5 male) view their culture more positively and 16 students (8 female, 7 male and 1 non-binary) have both positive and negative views on their culture. These results show that most international students undergo some level of reflection within their own culture. The male students are more negative or neutral about their culture. Moreover, there were fewer male students involved within cultural events at university and this result further enforces the idea that perhaps missed opportunities of getting male students involved in cultural activities may cause a more negative outlook on their culture.

For the social aspect of the survey, it was found that of the 11 students that struggled to make friends at university, 6 of them are international students, 5 of whom are

female. Of the 35 students who found making friends easier, 20 students were international students and 8 of those students were female, with 11 males. These results show that whilst many international students have successfully integrated socially to the university, there are those that are struggling. Interestingly, of the 5 females that struggled to make friends, 3 of them attended at least 1 cultural event. Of the 14 students that described their social lives as worse since starting university, 11 of these students are international (7 female, 4 male). This further reinforces the idea that the university needs to improve encouraging socialisation for international students, considering the majority of those with worsened socialising are international. It also reiterates the need for more gender-based support.

Lastly, regarding mental health and wellbeing, 7 international students (compared to 4 UK students) rated their overall emotional wellbeing as 1-2 out of 5. Within this, group 6 students were female. The overwhelmingly high number of international female students rating a low score of emotional wellbeing must be reduced through gendered peer support groups and a more proactive outreach to international students. It is clear that international female students do appear to have a more difficult time with their mental health according to this survey. This insight is further reinforced by the data showing that 13 international students (8 female, 4 male and 1 non-binary) feel uncomfortable seeking help for their emotional challenges. Moreover, 5 international students (4 female and 1 male) stated that they did not view the university as inclusive or welcoming. In all such instances, the majority of students with a low score are international female students. Although this cohort represents a minority in comparison to students with a neutral or positive perspective, it does highlight the need to address issues related to international female students. This means that the university's inclusivity initiatives under its One Community Values need to further provide support to the international students, especially females, if it needs to fully implement its One Community Values.

UROS Experience

Student Experience: As students, throughout the UROS project, we were able to develop our survey design, written analysis and writing skills, through a real-life application. These skills will be valuable for further academic and professional work. Moreover, working as producers of this work, we learnt the value of ownership, responsibility and time management, to ensure that the project is delivered in the most effective and efficient manner. As students, these skills are extremely relevant in terms of employability, and we are grateful to the UROS team, and our faculty members at Lincoln International Business School for providing us with a wonderful and insightful research and academic experience.

Lead Author: This is the third UROS project I have participated in as a researcher. I am extremely satisfied with the UROS initiatives and am a strong advocate of the UROS projects for several reasons. Firstly, UROS provides a great platform to connect students and staff to collaborate on research related initiatives as peers and

colleagues. Secondly, UROS projects help develop student's knowledge base and skillsets, by applying their learning at university to real life research problems. Thirdly, projects like the one we are currently working on help in identifying areas for improvement from a university perspective and provide a platform to discuss policies and action plans that help improve the academic journey of students. Fourthly, UROS projects are a great initiative to work on goals linked to the University's mission and One Community Values.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges faced by graduate students at University of Lincoln. Using the data collected through surveys and questionnaires, the research finds heterogeneous effects across gender. International female students tend to struggle the most when it comes to integration. The findings of the research are crucial when formulating policies and introducing action plans to help students integrate at the university. This means that the university's inclusivity initiatives need to further provide support to the international students, especially females, if it needs to fully implement its One Community Values.

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