A positive library experience for international students?

Results from a Business Librarians Association survey

Alison Lahlafi
Learning and Information Services
Sheffield Hallam University
a.e.lahlafi@shu.ac.uk

Stephanie Allen
Information & Learning Services
University of Worcester
s.allen@worc.ac.uk

Stephen Bull
Library Services
University of Birmingham
s.a.bull@bham.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the annual Business Librarians Association (BLA) three-day conference held at Stirling Management Centre during summer 2012 was 'Going global? Challenges of internationalisation'. Business schools in the UK attract large numbers of international students,[2] and the conference aimed to explore how business librarians can help provide a positive experience for international students.

To support this theme, three business librarians, Stephen Bull from University of Birmingham, Stephanie Allen from University of Worcester and Alison Lahlafi from Sheffield Hallam University, collaborated on a survey of BLA members services to international students.

Survey methodology

The survey was designed using Survey Monkey and distributed on line to all BLA members (242 members across 118 institutions) at the end of April 2012. It was open for four weeks, and had a good response rate, with colleagues from 65 (55%) member institutions taking part. The survey comprised 14 questions and an additional free comments box. The findings allow for comparison between the 65 member institutions, with a particular focus on support offered by business librarians.

The survey defined international students as students from overseas who are studying at UK campuses at UK universities. Survey findings were presented at the BLA conference in July 2012 along with a breakout discussion to look at certain issues in more detail. Key survey findings and discussion points are summarised in this article.
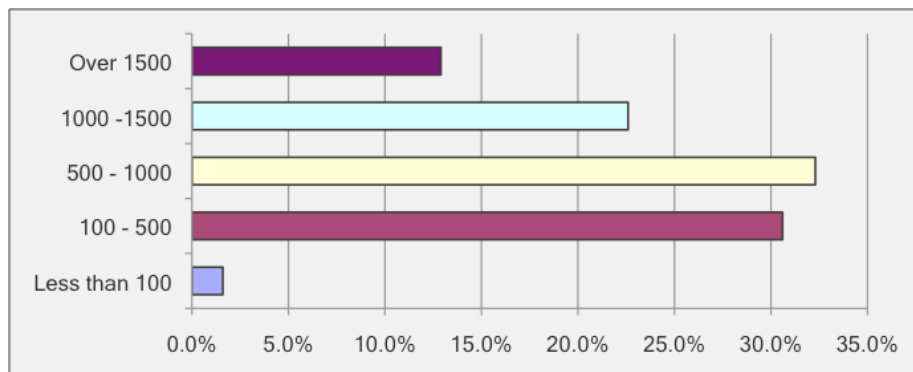
Survey key findings

Q1   How many international students (i.e. students from overseas studying at a UK campus) does your institution have?
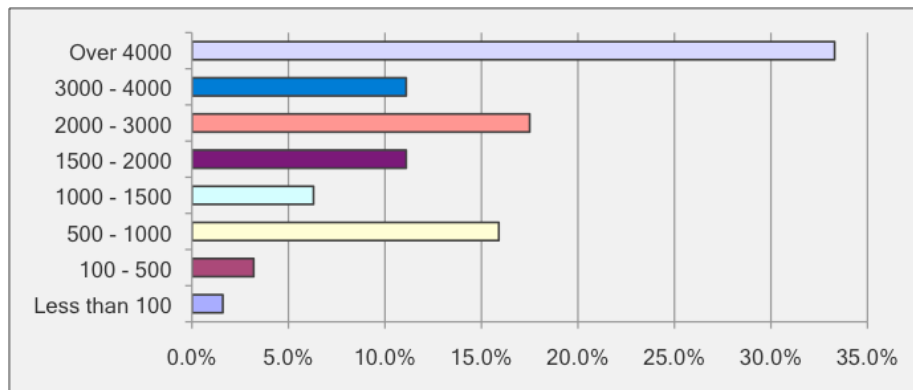
Findings showed that around 1/3 of respondents had over 4000 international students at their institution.
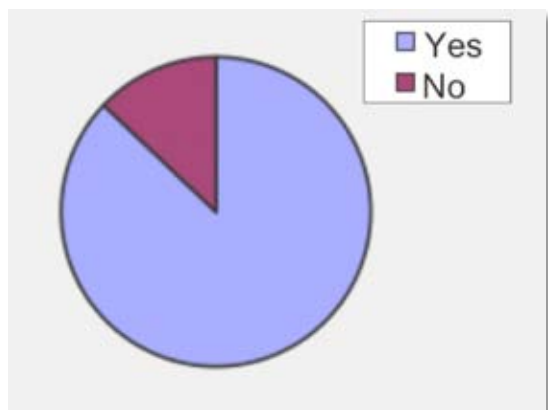
Q2   How many international students (i.e. students from overseas studying at a UK campus) does your business school have?
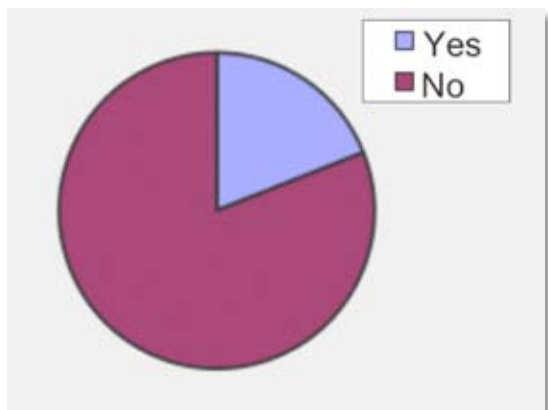
No surprise in the findings that business schools have large numbers of international students.

Qs3 & 4 *Does your institution / library have an international policy, strategy or plan?*

Institution

Library

This question revealed that although most institutions have an international policy, strategy or plan, the majority of libraries based at the institutions do not.

Q5 *Does your library have a member of staff designated to support services to international students? If yes, what percentage of the role is spent on this area?*

The survey found that support for international students mainly falls to subject librarians 'as well as the day job', with the designated person spending around 5–10% of their time on this area of work. The team / group approach is also popular in some libraries and in some cases is coupled with support for other student groups, e.g. distance learning. One library had an international librarian, with 80% of time dedicated to the role, and another had a language adviser spending 50% of their time supporting international students.

Q6 *What services does your library provide to international students that are different to those provided to other students?*

Separate orientation / induction activities	81.0%
Dedicated website / web page	52.4%
Training or courses designed for international students run by the library e.g. IT, information literacy, plagiarism, referencing	45.2%
Specialist book collection	16.7%
Social media	4.8%
Separate library	2.4%
Electronic resources purchased primarily for their use	2.4%
Borrowing of IT equipment	2.4%
Designated space within existing library for international students only – group or personal study	0%
More borrowing rights	0%

Most popular additional services are:

- Separate orientation / induction activities (81.0% of respondents)
- Dedicated website / web page (52.4%)
- Training or courses run by the library and designed for international students, e.g. for IT, information literacy, plagiarism, referencing, study skills (45.2%)

Other points of interest raised:

- Many commented on their library's contribution to pre-sessional 'English for international students' programmes.
- Several commented on additional inductions just before the main induction or the library's contribution to in-sessional 'top-up' courses.
- One institution commented: 'There is a treasure trail / library quiz aimed specifically at our summer school international students'.
- 'We use Cephalonian Slides in large international student inductions to get the students to join in by shouting out questions.'
- There was reference to library videos as a useful promotion tool.
- Many commented that they offer information literacy sessions throughout the year which, although open to all, were mainly attended by international students.
- '… sometimes we "badge" things as being for overseas students to ensure they read them'.
- Many commented about their specific guides for international students, including 'a separate library guide to explain how the system

works'. One commented: 'We have written a guide on finding information and data on specific countries.'

- '… we have specifically purchased books on academic writing, and related areas, and we make them aware of these titles and where they are shelved'.

Q7 Does your library provide guides/publicity material in alternative languages?

Nobody does this.

Q8 Does the library promote database or catalogue searching in any languages other than English?
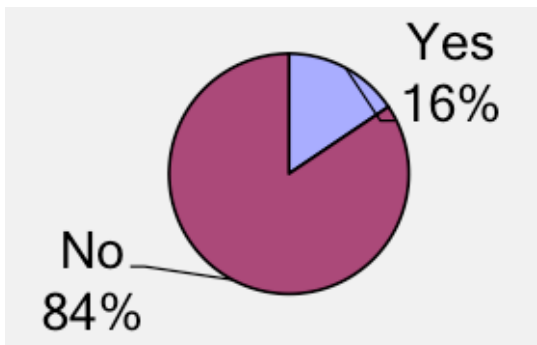

Those that do generally pointed out alternative language functionality in databases such as Business Source Premier, Factivia or Resource Discovery Services. One respondent replied: 'Some surveys were done of our international students, and they generally wanted stuff in English, but clear English'; another replied 'No, but we are planning to move towards this direction.'

Q9 Does the library purchase course-related books or other business sources in languages other than English?
Only 16% of institutions did.

*Q10 Have library staff been trained in cultural awareness issues?*
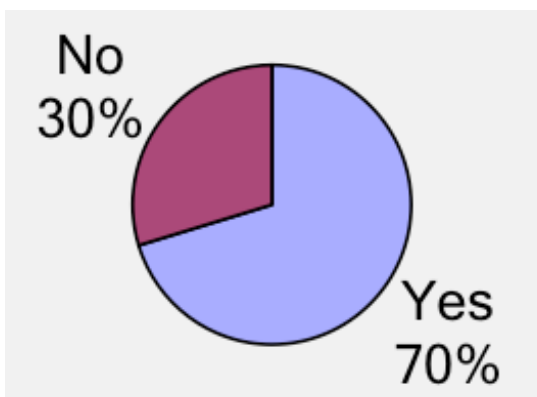
Surprisingly, nearly 1/3 of library staff have not been trained in cultural awareness.

Q11 Does your library have a separate budget for international student materials?

Only 5% of institutions did.

Q12 Has your library surveyed your international students on the services they use and what new services they would like?
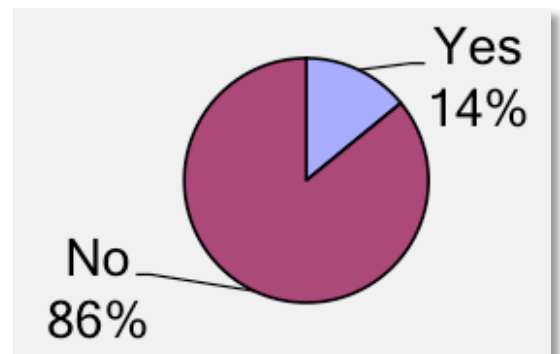
Perhaps surprising, only a small percentage of libraries have actually surveyed their international students. Those that do, use the international student barometer survey, or internal surveys and focus groups.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS

Whilst the survey confirms the high numbers of international students studying in UK institutions that has been reported elsewhere (see, for example, UK Council for International Student Affairs [n.d.]), it emphasises the high percentage of international students studying business-related courses. The services and provision of academic libraries need to reflect these figures. Although around one third of libraries have yet to undertake cultural awareness training for library staff, it is encouraging that many staff have received training in this critical area. Many libraries do offer services specifically aimed at international students, such as separate induction / orientation activities, training courses and dedicated web pages, but very few have a library-specific international policy, strategy or plan or a designated member of staff to co-ordinate library activity for international students. The amount of material available in languages other than English is small, with small percentages of institutions buying course-related books in alternative languages or promoting database or catalogue searching in languages other than English. It is interesting that only a small percentage of libraries have surveyed

their students on the services offered and the services this significant cohort of students would like.

Breakout

The results of the survey were discussed by the 67 conference delegates in small breakout groups. Each group was asked to discuss one of six questions. This generated some useful feedback – the key points (which were noted on flip-charts) are summarised below:

Q1 Was there anything that surprised you in the survey results?
- High number of international students
- Some institutions had a specific budget for international student materials.

Q2 Do you have any new ideas for international support (from this and other sessions from this conference) to take back for consideration?
- A welcome map and feedback card (see breakout discussion section)
- 'Tell me about your country' (also good for home students?)
- Importance of collaboration with academics, particularly at induction as well as with the Student Union and other support services
- Use visuals / signposting
- Scheduling later inductions for those held up with visa issues
- Use plain English, e.g. what's a database; what's the OPAC / catalogue?

Q3 What do you think is the one most important thing which libraries should do to support international students?
- Communication – listen to them; explain clearly what we can do and whom they should approach
- Conduct a survey if not already done

Q4 When preparing material for students in general, are there any 'quick wins' we can make to ensure material we produce is just as useful for international students as home students?
- Use plain clear English – jargon free
- Use bullet points – keep things short
- Use visuals – include images – use podcasts / videos / audio guides / screencasts (with some text)
- Consider alternative formats (tutorials / guides)
- Use international students (in videos etc. or to test out materials)
- Include QR codes

Q5 If you were tasked with creating a webpage especially with international students in mind, what would you include on it?
- Previous student positive feedback
- Advice – in different languages (blogs, videos)
- Video tutorials
- List of databases available in different languages
- Whom to contact – if in difficulty – easy to ask for help/support
- Induction / training / workshop calendar
- Basic library info – clear
- Other useful department links
- Glossary

Q6 If you were tasked with surveying international students what questions would you ask?
- What one thing would you change about the service?
- What year / level are you?
- Where are you from?
- What surprised you most about the library?
- How would you like to get information from the library?
- What do you use the library for?
- Do you know that you can ask the library staff questions?
- What confuses you most about the library / what challenges have you found using the library service?
- What is your experience of the library in your country?
- What is your experience of using other libraries?
- Which one piece of advice would you pass on to students coming here to study?

Breakout discussion

Some general good practice emerged from the discussion which, as well as assisting international students, would also benefit 'home' students. These included: using plain clear English, using images as a substitute for text and considering a variety of media for presenting information (e.g. podcasts, videos, blogs and tutorials). Communication is important; ideas for engaging with students included: asking them about their country; a 'welcome map' (trialled by one university during welcome week 2011, where the word 'welcome' in many different languages was superimposed on a world map; students could identify their country and add to the map if their language was not there). The importance of collaboration with academic staff, administrative teams across the institution and student unions was emphasised in enabling libraries better to support international students.

A wide range of ideas emerged for what a good quality library webpage would offer. Besides making it clear what material was available in alternative languages, other ideas focused on clarity, demystifying library terminology and making the key points of contact clear. The value of displaying feedback about the library from previous international students was also suggested. One group felt the most important thing libraries should do to support international students was to survey them in order to reflect on current provision for this significant user group and to highlight areas for additional provision. There were lots of ideas for possible survey from the breakout session, including finding out more about the students and their needs, identifying their perceptions and knowledge of the library and how it compared to other libraries they had used. Asking international students about difficulties they have found in using the service, advice they would offer new students and one thing they would change about the library are all useful in the quest to offer better library services.

CONCLUSION

Whilst conducted from the perspective of business librarians, the BLA survey has been useful in identifying a quantitative and qualitative picture of the support and services that academic libraries offer to international students. The breakout session following presentation of the survey results provided some useful suggestions and ideas of how libraries can enhance their services. The results and good practice which emerged are not only beneficial to international students but to all students, regardless of country of domicile.

The authors wish to thank all BLA members who took part in the survey and subsequent breakout session at the BLA conference.

NOTES

1   The Business Librarians Association (BLA) was formerly the British Business School Libraries Group (BBSLG). The latter first met in 1975; its name was changed to the BLA in 2010. More information on the BLA can be found at www.blalib.org.

2.   UK Council for International Student Affairs. *International student numbers by subject area 2010–11*. Retrieved 30 August 2012 from http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php#table6