

Filling in the International Gap A British student's viewpoint

Gemma Mitchell took a placement working in International Activities in January 2008 and as part of this, she interviewed several students about their experiences of studying in the UK. Gemma wrote this piece after talking with these students and her experiences of making friends with international students. She is currently studying on the second year of BSc (hons) Psychology with Creative Writing.

During the second year of my degree, it is compulsory to take a Professional and Academic Development course, which includes a two-week work placement. Most students know all too well about this. I am taking mine in International Activities at Bath Spa University. I currently live with two students from Japan who have become great friends, and as I'm moving to another country myself next year, I wanted to gain an advantage by working with internationals.



Gemma, right, with housemate Yuki

Students visit Bath Spa University from all over the world, including America, Europe and the Far East. The other day I had the opportunity to meet with some of the current international students that are leaving us this semester in 2008. Eliza (International Student Advisor) and I attended a leaving party where students could come to say goodbye and socialise with other students.

It may be difficult to see our own culture from the perspective of another, especially if you're someone who doesn't travel frequently. Three of the six students asked about student life here mentioned a "drinking culture"; something that most foreign students were surprised by. Regardless, all of them said they tried to adapt to British life by visiting pubs. Then there are social rules; things that may seem natural and unsaid to a British national, but can be very difficult for others to adapt. For instance, a culture that greets others with hugs may seem unusual and forward to another. Yuri Masuya from Japan mentioned that "British students are much more independent and have confidence in making their own decisions" - something that was said to be a learning experience. She also admired the "time-management between studying and socialising". Fumika Masadome from Japan claimed "British students can be noisy but they work very hard".

While foreign students are learning more about life in the UK, do British students have something to learn from internationals? Perhaps we can learn from their work ethic. Think about your last assignment; how many marks did you lose for poor punctuation or essay-writing skills? Many of the students that come from other countries were anxious about their academic output; their essay structure, their vocabulary, their grammar and their time

management skills - something that British students may find they neglect in their own work – and work extremely hard to perfect this.

After speaking to some of the students that were leaving, I realised that they enjoyed their experience very much but that many of them found it difficult to communicate with the British students. The university encourages interaction by mixing these nationalities through classes. The international students themselves also make some of the effort. Kagari Saisu, Yuri Masuya and Yuko Toda have set up a ‘Japanese Culture Society’ where Japanese students can feel more at home whilst giving British students the chance to learn more about other cultures. As many as eighty people attended Japanese parties and an Anime film night. Japanese language classes held at Newton Park have also been successful. However, if British students are genuinely interested in other cultures, why is there a barrier between them and internationals? What can be done to break down the barrier of communication?

From the perspective of a British student, it is difficult to imagine what it’s like to travel to a foreign country to study, especially when there is a language barrier. Some international students tend to stay within their own group and use their home language and for this reason, British students find it difficult to approach them. I know that when I tell a friend about my Japanese housemate for instance, the first question is often “does she speak English?” International students have usually studied the English language for many years before even coming to the UK; and then there is attendance of the language school at the university. Foreign students that you find taking the same modules as you have passed a crucial test to show that they are capable of understanding the language. Saki Arimoto, from Japan says that “you need a strong mind to study here and improve your English” as it is so tempting to speak in your native language.

Despite this, international students find it hard to communicate with native students, especially when they’re constantly practising their English in their heads before they speak. There is also a factor of social behaviour; people from other countries aren’t necessarily as forward as the British. International Activities are constantly attempting to fill in the gap between nationalities. You could help by simply introducing yourself the next time you spot an international student around campus. Make them feel welcome at Bath Spa.



Gemma with international students



International students at the pub