



JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

Contact with Cultural Others – The Friendship Family Programme

Sidonie Ecochard and Kirsteen Wright, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

ABSTRACT

The Friendship Family Programme is a cultural exchange initiative piloted this year at Edinburgh Napier University. It is designed to give international students a chance to have first-hand experience of the local culture and way of life, in addition to life on campus. Students are paired with volunteer staff families, who also get the chance to better understand international transitions and learn about the students' home countries and cultures.

The programme was grounded in research findings which indicate that social support and friendship with host nationals reduce the acculturative stress and ease the transition of international students. Indeed, international students do not have a full-scale support system in the United Kingdom (UK) and tend to experience loneliness and homesickness during their stay. Meanwhile, the literature also indicates the need for all university staff to understand the background of their students and to be aware of the unique challenges that confront them in the UK. Internationalisation includes mutual cultural awareness and respect.

This 'On the horizon' piece introduces the Friendship Family Programme and the rationale behind the initiative, along with testimonials from participants.

Keywords: international transitions; support; sociocultural integration; staff-student interactions; multi-cultural awareness

The programme

Overview

The Friendship Family Programme is designed to give international students a chance to have first-hand experience of the local culture and way of life in a local family, in addition to life on campus. The programme is for international students and staff at Edinburgh Napier University with the term family being loosely applied to cover families with children, single parents, young couples, and singles with no age barrier to the international student. The idea of the programme is to spend time together, doing things that are mutually interesting and enjoyable, and get to know each other outside of the university environment. For instance, activities include dinner at the family house, holiday celebrations such as pumpkin carving for Halloween or Burns Supper and attending local events. After pairing, the families and students exchange contact information and can then contact one another independently.

Expectations

Participation in the programme is conditional upon reading and agreeing to a few simple guidelines. A time commitment is expected from both the student and the family but it is up to the student and the family to decide how often they meet and how they spend their time together. The family is not expected to spend any money on the student, provide housing or transport and should not ask the student to work for the family. Students are expected to communicate with their friendship family – returning phone calls, text messages and emails – and are advised to bear in mind that this is a volunteer programme. Friendship families are not reimbursed for any expenses that may be incurred and it is appropriate for students to offer to pay for themselves, and highly encouraged to always thank families for their generosity and kindness.

Context

Promoting international students socio-cultural adjustment

The Friendship Family Programme was initiated under the auspices of Edinburgh Napier University's answer to QAA (Scotland) Enhancement Theme Student Transition. The institutional enhancement theme team at Edinburgh Napier University chose international transitions as focus for year two and three of the theme, in order to reflect the growing number of international students on our campuses as well as the University's strategic objective to internationalise our work. In 2016 (year two of the theme), Dr. Monika Foster led the university-wide international student transition scoping project, investigating the support provision available to international students as they articulate onto their programme of study at Edinburgh Napier University. The findings highlighted limited transition support towards socio-cultural adjustment, while the literature describes the role and responsibility of Higher Education (HE) Institutions in supporting all three dimensions – academic, linguistic and socio-cultural – of international

Contact with Cultural Others – The Friendship Family Programme

students' acculturation (QAA, 2015). Indeed, these three dimensions are interdependent and affect international students' overall level of acculturative stress (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). More particularly, Bai (2016) describes how international students "do not have a full-scale social network in the host society and often lack social support when in need" (p. 96), therefore contributing to feelings of loneliness and homesickness. The Friendship Family Programme was designed so as to address this gap in provision and support international student's socio-cultural adjustment. The family can make the study period abroad easier and more enjoyable by making international students feel welcome within a different country, and helping them adapt to new circumstances and life at Edinburgh Napier University.

Developing staff and student cultural awareness

Furthermore, Burdett & Crossman (2012) describe internationalisation of HE as the process that enables cultural differences to be understood and respected towards meaningful interactions and enhancement of social and academic engagement. This process starts with the awareness and understanding by HE staff of the cultural diversity within the student body (Akwana, 2015). We believe that the Friendship Family Programme gives the opportunity not only for international students to further their understanding and knowledge of the local culture, but also for the staff participating to develop their own cultural awareness, and to provide a better student experience to international sojourners. Therefore, the Friendship Family Programme aims both to provide better support to students directly, as well as indirectly through staff valuing internationalisation on a personal level (Ramachandran, 2011).

Pilot year

Advertising the programme

The Friendship Family Programme was advertised in November 2016 and the initial pairings were completed in January 2017. The programme was advertised within the University to both staff and students. To market to students, information was hosted on a page on MyNapier, the student portal, as well as using the advertising screen points throughout all campuses and computer lock screens. To market towards staff the intranet site was used, hosting an announcement and a banner on the home page, and all staff computer lock screensavers were also used to advertise. Due to limitations on sending all staff emails within the University this method could not be used although the programme was advertised by email through an update from the Dean of Learning and Teaching. The various advertising directed students and staff to complete an online application which was developed using the University's Novi Survey. This survey format was used as the data could be gathered directly into one Excel report to allow easy access for pairing. This format also gave the ability to target questions differently towards staff and students but still gather the information into one source file.

Participants

By January 2017, 13 families and 22 students had completed the application to join the programme. To date a further eight students are on the waiting list. In anticipation of there being more students than staff members, one of the application questions asked whether the family would be willing to take on more than one student, and similarly the student was asked if they would be willing to be paired with another student. All families agreed to take more than one student and only one student did not want to be paired with another.

Pairing process

The pairing process took place over one afternoon in early January 2017. A report was processed from the applications with staff and students separated into different categories according to answers. For example, students were asked if they preferred a family with children, pets, languages spoken, hobbies, allergy and dietary requirements as well as special requests. All preferences were taken into consideration although these could not always be accommodated and this had been articulated to both families and students on application. Families were asked similar questions so the pairing could be simplified and allow easier, more successful, matching. The matching also took into consideration the School of the student and staff member in order to facilitate cross discipline partnerships.

The pairing was made easier by the low number of participants in the pilot year of the programme. However, it is expected that if numbers were to increase, the process would become more challenging. Further simplifying the pairing, most students expressed that being welcomed and an open-mind were their main wish for the pairing. On the part of families, preferences mainly regarded languages spoken by the students. One request for a particular nationality could not be accommodated.

Soon after the application opened, it became apparent that more students than staff were interested in the programme, so that all applicants were asked if they would agree to a configuration including two students for one family. Another adaptation was made when one family's situation changed due to personal circumstances, resulting in an inability to meet with the student. Another family then temporarily looked after the student. We received some positive returns regarding the pairing, and no negative comments to date.

When the matching was completed, an email was then sent out to all participants with contact details of who they had been matched with. The families were encouraged to initiate contact with the student to ensure the student would feel more comfortable and also reflect the host nature of the programme.

Testimonials so far...

We interviewed two participants near the start of the programme – one staff, one student – to gain some insights into their early experiences with the programme. The quotes below were extracted from the interviews:

International students do not come here just to study, they also want to know what it's like to live in another culture and country. But often you don't actually experience what the host country is really like because you stay in your own community: it's easy to shop, study and go about your life without getting out of your own bubble. Until someone is ready to open their heart and their home to you, it's about being this link.

You will get more than you give by participating in this programme. University is about experiencing something different and challenging your thoughts, your perceptions of yourself, it is about lifting one's sight and looking into the horizon. And that's not just for students, we should all do that. So I'm giving the opportunity to two young students to challenge themselves, but it's about challenging myself too: I get to learn a bit about China and Gibraltar. It's all the more essential and vital in the current global context to take on board other perspectives. You can only gain by opening your heart and your home to someone from a different culture.

I first met each student individually over coffee and then we met the three of us and the Chinese student gave both of us a gift! We talked about what they like to do and they both like nature, so I'm taking them to the Kelpies this weekend. I have bicycles so when the sky gets lighter, we'll go cycle along the Forth. This programme will enrich people's lives in so many ways, and that's what they will remember when they're older. They probably won't remember the University here, but they'll remember the Kelpies.

Staff participant

I learnt so many things about Scotland I never knew, and my friendship family is eager to learn about Nigeria too. They know about it a bit but now they can ask someone. And I'm happy to do that, to give them the real picture, the good, the bad, not like in the media. The media here don't talk much about Africa, the UK is pretty closed. Africa is so diverse in cultures, languages, food. What we all share though is brotherhood, looking after each other. I have to create a family for myself here, with all the different people I have met. That is the best part of education and that is what the Friendship Family Programme has given me.

Student participant

What's next?

As indicated by the quotes above, testimonies to date are very positive on the part of all who are taking part. The programme is still in its infancy but through feedback from the participants within this pilot year, we hope to improve and enhance the programme so as to firmly ground it within the offering for international students at Edinburgh Napier University. To this end, a survey will go out to participants at the end of May, catching international students before they return home. The survey will examine if the programme met the expectations and aligns with the findings of the literature, in terms of easing international transitions and developing the multi-cultural awareness of staff. It will also investigate how the programme enriched the lives and experiences of staff and students at Edinburgh Napier University. The data from the survey will feedback into how the programme will continue next year. So far, we anticipate that with the end of the three years QAA (Scotland) Enhancement Theme Student Transition, the programme should be rehomed and taken over by the International Support team at Edinburgh Napier University.

Biographies

Sidonie Ecochard is a research assistant at the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University. She is involved in Edinburgh Napier University's answer to the QAA (Scotland) Enhancement Theme Student Transition, and conducts initiatives and research on international transitions, internationalisation of the curriculum and the nexus culture-learning. Starting October 2017, she will move on to complete her PhD at Strathclyde University.

Kirsteen Wright is a Publications Officer in the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University and also a zero-hours lecturer supervising dissertation students on the Masters in Publishing. She is also the Journal Manager for JPAAP. Kirsteen has worked in publishing for almost 20 years, varying her roles from editorial to design, and from Scotland to Japan. She continues to freelance and samples of her work can be found at www.kirsteenwright.co.uk.

References

- Akanwa, E. (2015). International students in western developed countries: History, challenges, and prospects. *Journal of International Students*, 5(3), 271–284.
- Bai, J. (2016). Perceived support as a predictor of acculturative stress among international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 93–106. Available from: <http://jistudents.org/>
- Ecochard, S., & Fotheringham, J. (2017). International students' unique challenges – Why understanding international transitions to higher education matters. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, Special Issue Student Transition.

Contact with Cultural Others – The Friendship Family Programme

Burdett, J., & Crossman, J. (2012). Engaging international students: An analysis of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reports. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 20(3), 207–222.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09684881211240286>

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2015). *Supporting and enhancing the experience of international students in the UK*. Retrieved from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/International-Students-Guide-15.pdf>

Ramachandran, N. T. (2011). Enhancing international students' experiences: An imperative agenda for universities in the UK. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 10(2), 201–220.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240911413204>