

NOTES

Helping international students make academic and cultural transitions

Ms Julie Bray, Director, The Language Centre

This session explored some of the challenges that international students face when coming to study in the UK. In leading the session, Julie drew upon her extensive experience of working with international students to give an insight into some of the academic and cultural backgrounds from which our students come. All members of the group had their own knowledge and experiences to contribute to the ongoing discussion.

Describing the extent of the cultural challenges that many international students face on arrival, Julie questioned the extent to which 'front-loaded' academic induction events can be of real value. She stressed the importance of a holistic approach to students' personal, social and academic transitions into university life. As with a number of other points raised during this session, the group expressed the view that much of what was being discussed applied equally to all students, whilst recognising the additional challenges faced by international students.

The group was particularly interested in the requirements and standards of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) language tests that international students are required to pass before being admitted to study in the UK. Of particular note and comment for the group were the subjective approaches and lack of evidence-based arguments, both of which are encouraged by the IELTS 6 test.

Julie also alerted to some of the significant differences that exist between academic writing practice in the UK and in some of the countries from which we recruit our international students, including China. These included emphasis on knowledge display over own argument, critical thinking and the concept of writing for an informed reader who is expected to make the required connections between points. In the subsequent discussion on critical thinking, the group agreed that this is something with which many students struggle, irrespective of country of origin.

The session concluded with agreement that international students need to receive explicit guidance on the expectations and procedures of academic and discipline-specific practices. This agreement was extended to include all students as they often have to negotiate transitions between different disciplines during their programme of studies.