

## **BIRDS OF A FEATHER : AN EXPLORATION OF THE STRUCTURE OF FRIENDSHIPS AMONGST INTERNATIONAL PGT STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.**

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 In 2007 2008, of the 5,772 PGT students registered at this University, 38% were international students – a greater proportion than that found at any other level of study. Given this fact it would seem crucial to understand the factors that contribute to a successful period of study abroad.
- 1.2 Postgraduate international students on taught programmes are likely to be studying for one academic year only and therefore to have a finite amount of time to devote to any activity other than their studies. At the same time, they are likely to be subject to increased strains in terms of financial stresses, the pressure to achieve at the highest level and the challenges of living in a different city and country.
- 1.3 As a result of the difficulties which might be involved in personally initiating contact – language skills, understanding of cultural norms- international students are likely to rely more heavily on structured opportunities to establish intercultural friendships. Whilst these are increasingly built into the structure of the students’ teaching and learning, they may not exist to the same degree within their social situations.
- 1.4 Key University strategic documents place great importance on the value and significance of attracting increasing numbers of high academically achieving international students

*“An International Institution ..... Identified by world-class researchers, scholars and students as a premier higher education destination” Our Vision : Towards Manchester 2015 strategic plan*

*“The moral responsibility of all staff and students to contribute as educated, informed, tolerant citizens.... To the advancement of human wellbeing in their own communities and around the world” Our Values: Towards Manchester 2015 strategic plan*

*“ The capacity to enroll more and better international students is, arguably, the most critical variable of all among the University’s various revenue strategies” Building an Internationally Competitive Resource Base, June 2006*

### **2. Purpose**

- 2.1 The project is intended to provide accurate, authentic and experience based data which can be used to inform decisions and policy in respect of the experience of international PGT students at the University of Manchester. The research will allow a number of groups of our students to make a direct contribution to the work of the Student Experience Office, of their home schools, of the Office of Student Support and Services and of the Teaching and Learning Support office more generally.
- 2.2 An analysis and mapping of the positive and negative experiences they have in forming new friendships can be expected to provide valuable insights into the actual experience both of other international students and of home students.
- 2.3 We expect that the data will be of particular importance in being able to focus activity in the area of retention practice on those aspects that will yield the most significant returns.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Discussions with key schools**

Discussions with schools and faculties sought to identify those programmes with high numbers of international students and agreement was reached with staff in those schools that they would email relevant students with information about the programme. In having the initial approach co-ordinated through staff whose names were familiar to students it was hoped that students might be encouraged to participate.

#### **3.2 Email advertisements (Attachment 1)**

Emails with additional information (Attachment 2) were sent to students in identified schools or living in university halls. In addition information about the project was posted on the University research volunteering message board for students  
<http://www.studentnet.manchester.ac.uk/volunteer/>

#### **3.3 Focus groups (Attachments 3 & 4)**

Focus groups were held in November and again in July

#### **3.4 Questionnaires (Attachment 5)**

Were distributed at focus groups and circulated by email to those students who were not able to participate in the face to face meetings

#### **3.6 Written responses**

Some students expressed a wish to participate by email and so were sent the focus group questions to comment on and return.

#### **3.7 Individual interviews**

Two students expressed a wish to be interviewed separately in November and consequently two interviews were conducted at this time.

#### **3.8 Sample size and make-up**

In total 34 students participated in some form in the project.

27 took part in focus groups, 2 completed individual interviews, 22 completed questionnaires and 5 returned written responses. There was some overlap in these submissions in that some students contributed using more than one channel.

10 students were enrolled in the Manchester Business School, 14 in programmes in Humanities, 9 in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences and 1 from the Faculty of Life Sciences. None were from the Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences.

### **4. Expectations of friendships**

#### **4.1 Evaluations of the importance of friends**

Of the 22 students completing the November questionnaire, 13 (59%) felt that it would be important to make friends with home students, 20 (90%) to make friends with other international students and 12 (54%) to make friends with co-national students (those from the same country).

A clear majority of students prioritised the need to make friends during the course of their study and for some it had been a major factor in the decision to study abroad;

“I feel the same I cannot say that I am here just to study I am here for the experience so for me this a real part of being here in the UK so friendship is very important” [FGNov<sup>1</sup>](#)

“My principal aim in coming to Manchester was to get a quality education and second, as I was coming here I was very happy because I knew I was going to meet people from different countries so that really played a part because if I’d wanted to keep on seeing Nigerians I would have stayed back in Nigeria” [FGNov](#)

Even when students stated that making friends had not been uppermost in their minds when they first came, there was agreement that over time this perception had changed;

“When we are coming to the UK to study it’s not in our minds the most to have a friend if it happens its something that happens by chance” [FGNov](#)

“...when I first came I think that its not really relevant for postgrad students to have in their mind the need to make friends but I think that perception has changed and I think that its very essential for every student to have friends and a friend doesn’t mean only from your academic school” [FGJul<sup>2</sup>](#)

#### 4.2 On the anticipated difficulty of making friends

22 students completed a questionnaire during November (i.e. c1 - 2 months after first enrolling on their current course). Of these, 16 or over 70% thought that it would be ‘easy’ or ‘somewhat easy’ to make friends with home students before they came.

#### 4.3 On the purpose of friends

Students tended to express two main views on the purpose of friendships. Firstly, that having friends served a practical purpose – relieving loneliness, boredom or stress;

“I think you need to make the time, you need it its healthy to make time for stuff outside of study I think its important otherwise you’d go crazy if you just studied all day” [FGNov](#)

“Friendship is an important part of everyday life. Without it the world would be a very dull and boring place” [WRNov<sup>3</sup>](#)

Even at this early stage, though students also saw friendship as fulfilling a larger, more long term role in their lives;

“Friendship is central to all aspects of our lives and to the quality of the friendships we are able to make can determine what we are able to achieve” [WRNov](#)

“I think that the interaction between students is an education in itself” [WRNov](#)

“Friendships make you what you are” [WRNov](#)

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1 [FGNov](#) – November Focus Group

2 [FGJul](#) - July Focus Group

3 [WRNov](#) – written response November

## 5. Actual experience

### 5.1 On the process of making friends

Students' opinions varied as to how someone went from being an acquaintance to a close friend with some feeling that this was an unconscious process of bonding with a very person;

"...everybody seeks for friends and for people who are sharing the same values but you cannot say 'I want to make friends with you' and then its just like that the relationship should just show you that you can be really good friends that they are good people for you and that you can make friends with them and this happens somehow absolutely sub-consciously I would say" [FGNov](#)

"...we just kind of clicked when we met" [FGNov](#)

"I find its kind of going from an acquaintance to a friend is a very sudden thing .... like you can just be talking to this classmate as an acquaintance and then you find out something about them and you are fascinated by this" [FGNov](#)

"I wouldn't completely agree with spending a lot of time together I think it doesn't matter a lot for me personally because you may spend some hours with people but still not feel that you are that connected or something but at the same time you spend a few minutes and you have a feeling that you know the person for so long" [FGNov](#)

Whereas others felt it to be a more deliberate process that required time and effort to accomplish;

".....how to start a rapport? How to start building up a relationship ..... For instance if people are starting to talk about the weather this is a very common thing in the UK but it means that they start to communicate and then maybe it goes further – this is the main thing I think" [FGNov](#)

"I think you have to spend time with someone, socialise to get to know someone, know more about them" [FGNov](#)

".....despite the common interests which might make us gravitate towards people from the same background I think time spent in each other's company also plays a very major factor because you might have a common interest with somebody but if you don't have time you don't spend time together – going to a movie or just visiting each other – over time you tend to lose touch, if you have a click with someone you tend to lose the click cos you don't get to know each other better so I think time is a very major factor in getting you from one stage of friendship to another" [FGNov](#)

It is likely that such variations are reflective of the different personalities and individual circumstances within the group.

Some students had devised techniques and strategies to further the process of becoming friends and these were, for the most part, different from those that they might have used at home where perhaps a greater number of non verbal signals are better understood;

"When I was in (home) I usually turn off my cell phone when I'm studying but here I keep it

on all the time in case someone calls me to ask me out for dinner or something. I think it's more important, the social network is more important than you think" [FGNov](#)

".....the hall for me has definitely proved to be my initial stepping off point and then depending on if you click with the people you meet then its easier to say 'ok then let's go and do something else'" [FGNov](#)

"....my friends will show up at my job if we haven't spoken to each other after a couple of days – just the thought that they would come to my job just to say hello" [FGNov](#)

".....sometimes I just send a text just to say 'oh I miss you' 'I'm thinking about you' just to remind someone about you. Or sometimes when I'm reading something and I know that it could be interesting for that person I just forward that mail or that information so it's a way of showing that I care about someone. So if I read something in a newspaper I read it and then I keep it for the person" [FGNov](#)

".....afterwards when you know your classmates and then obviously you live with other people and then the circle of your acquaintances expands and expands all the time because then they have some other friends" [FGJul](#)

".....call, visit me in my house you know show that care that's the major thing" [FGNov](#)

"I couldn't say that I have a kind of recipe or something for this but how to warm up the conversation, how to start, what to speak about especially when you first I mean first you need to know who are these people and where they come from or something just to warm up the conversation and how to ask the questions, how to listen to them, how to interpret, how to interact I mean all these things all these skills have been more developed here for me" [FGJul](#)

Interestingly, students at the July focus group seemed even more conscious of the need to adapt or modify their natural responses to particular situations in order to maintain a friendship;

".....joke back or even to just laugh at yourself – it helps a lot" [FGJul](#)

if you think that its very necessary for you to be amongst the group then you have to bear the cost and most of the time when these kind of things happen I just don't mind about it because I need the friendship so I keep going [FGJul](#)

## 5.2 On the purpose of friends

Students tended to see the value and purpose of friendship part way through and at the end of their programmes in the same terms as they had expected to see it i.e. as an alleviation of stress and loneliness;

".....it helps with the stress of academic work" [FGNov](#)

"I'm sure that we all have felt really lonely at some time because we're away from home all our good friends are back home and so you're sitting by yourself in your room maybe working or watching a movie and you feel really lonely and if you have some friends to go and see here it all just melts away" [FGNov](#)

“.....you stay in your room doing your work you look backwards like back home to your many friends and you think about how they would have come and checked on you if they hadn’t seen you for two to three days and they’d call up and say ‘what’s happening? I’ve not seen you’ and so I think we’ve all experienced that loneliness and so you want to create this network in this new environment” [FGNov](#)

“.....if you don’t make time to socialise it means that you’ll just be stuck with academics week in week out because you can get into a frame of mind that I just have to keep on working working working so yes social networking is very important because it relieves stress and it also, how can I put it now, it also prevents you becoming nerdy” [FGNov](#)

“For me like the academic is the most useful to interact with because its of benefit to you but from my personal experience going to the library with an academic colleague doesn’t mean our discussion is just limited to our work” [FGJul](#)

“.....its better for you to I think if you came for your academic study to limit your social life to your academic friends because then you serve as a reminder to each other of the real reason you came” [FGJul](#)

Although it was noticeable that, at the end of the year, a number also mentioned the value of friendship in terms of collaborative study;

“I think social life is very important it really helps you to be successful in your academic life – even before coming here I was sure that it wasn’t just the academic life that I wanted but the social life was also very important” [FGJul](#)

“..... we have almost come back to a small original group based on the programme so we sometimes jokingly call it the dissertation support group and we try to meet and catch up ‘what have you found out? What have you done?’” [FGJul](#)

### **5.3 Positive influences/ experiences**

One of the perhaps unexpected points of agreement for students was a very clear majority who expressed a strong individual faith and the wish to interact with people who shared this aspect of their lives;

“I think personally I’m a Christian so to say so sometimes I do invite my friends to come and worship with me in my particular denomination” [FGNov](#)

“.....apart from my church friends I don’t have any British friends” [FGNov](#)

“I pray in the mosque, so I’ve met some Pakistanis, Arabs, Indians – I met somebody from Uzbekistan” [FGNov](#)

Something of this same feeling also underpinned the point of view expressed that to create a friendship there had to be some clear shared characteristic. This opinion was variously and separately mentioned in each focus group and included references to race, ethnicity and religion as well as other situational characteristics such as being an international student;

“.....there must be something that you can do together, something that you feel the same about so some of these values its difficult to find in other nationals” [FGNov](#)

“It’s easier to accommodate someone with common values, values we share” [FGNov](#)

“.....we share some African values so most of the time I have discussions with Nigerians”  
[FGNov](#)

“.....we share some common values so that facilitates discussions so that’s just like a mutual common understanding so we’re black and we share values so its like that and we build up from there” [FGNov](#)

“.....what’s important in friendship is this common world view and philosophy not necessarily nationality” [FGNov](#)

“.....all of us are international students here so we have that common bond in terms of likes/ dislikes, advantages and disadvantages of being an international student so that makes that bond stronger regardless of language” [FGNov](#)

There was general agreement among the students that the University of Manchester having a very diverse population offered a good chance of being able to find people with whom they did share values or characteristics;

“..... Manchester is like a community it’s like a small planet earth really cos there’s virtually no creed or any race that you will not find here” [FGNov](#)

“.....coming here I can meet such a wide variety of people – I’m not just stuck with the Americans you know. My friends who I go out with are from all different nationalities and I love this cos I love a multi-cultural experience” [FGNov](#)

Students also appreciated the wide and varied social opportunities that the University offers;

“ The second major aspect for me are the university sports clubs” [FGNov](#)

“Definitely the societies” [FGNov](#)

“Volunteering” [FGJul](#)

#### **5.4 Negative influences/ experiences**

Of those 22 students completing the November questionnaire, only 2 (9%) had actually found it ‘easy’ or ‘somewhat easy’ to make friends with home students although only 2 reported very significant issues with creating any supportive relationships at all.

Students tended to categorise the difficulties they faced in terms of time, language and closed or unresponsive groups. Where students are experienced particularly problems making friends with home students they cited the fact that there were either very few home students on their particular programme or that there was a very significant majority of home students indicating that perhaps the dynamic at these two extremes was problematic.

#### 5.4.1 Lack of time

“.....it takes some people months to make friends and I think it’s affected by the level of study I can’t spend that time now” [FGNov](#)

“.....we’re here for the academic programme and allocating that time to socialise if we don’t have that interaction in class (is difficult). In north America the weighting is heavier to the group work so it’s worth your while to build those relationships regardless of programme” [FGNov](#)

“I just don’t see the point – you have to really sell yourself to other people to let people know you it takes a lot of effort – I guess I’ve given up trying...” [FGNov](#)

#### 5.4.2 Language

“.....definitely I think the language has been is a big factor. If you’re not comfortable speaking English even as a second language it really limits you in terms of who you can socialise with so if you happen to meet someone from their own country or their own community then they’ll instantly try and bond with that person and stay there because its comfortable” [FGNov](#)

“Cos I think I’ve noticed that people read a lot of things into what you say, things you didn’t mean to say – I’m going to say mostly whites or the white British – for example and this has happened to me more than once I say something and then someone’s upset or annoyed and I felt really embarrassed because I was thought to be something different and awful from just a simple statement that I made” [FGNov](#)

“.....at that time I felt ‘if I could speak English more fluently I could be friends with her’ ..... still I think the most no the biggest barrier the biggest challenge for me is language” [FGNov](#)

#### 5.4.3 Closed/ unresponsive groups

“....there are some groups that pretty much all travel together which is understandable for a variety of reasons” [FGJul](#)

“What I see is people clustering around their own kind that’s definite over and over I’ve observed that” [FGNov](#)

“.....yes some people they tend to like form friendships within their own culture so they just circle within themselves” [FGJul](#)

“.....in the first months they’d say ‘break time 20 minutes’ all the different ethnicities all gravitate to one place – you have the Chinese in one area, the Europeans grouping together, the Indians coming together and I was the only one” [FGNov](#)

“The thing is in my class if I wanted to talk to my classmates the only thing I could talk about is the academics but sometimes I want to talk about something else outside academic stuff but it seems like there is a huge gap between us and we don’t really know how to cross that gap” [FGNov](#)



“.....you can’t discuss freely with your classmates some of them everything you discuss there is academic everything is academic and some of them they are not overly friendly in what they contribute even in an academic way” [FGNov](#)

“.....and then I say please can I have your mobile number and they say, not all but some, what are you going to do with that? And so there have been certain problems in creating a social network through the Facebook or email some of them are just not interested” [FGNov](#)

#### 5.4.4 Imbalance of home and international students on a particular programme

“I don’t think I’ve succeeded in starting a friendship with any Englishman so to say” [FGNov](#)

“.....in class it’s quite a diverse community actually we only have one English guy there in a class of like 40 or so” [FGNov](#)

“.....cos (there are) no British on my study programme and none in my flat so I was surprised” [FGNov](#)

## 6. Conclusions

The experience of postgraduate international students enrolled at the University on taught Masters programme was, according to this sample, a broadly satisfying and enjoyable one with regard to the relationships they were able to make with other students. The work though being of a qualitative nature, the sample is correspondingly small and there was certainly one individual for whom the situation was a very poor and disappointing one;

“I feel like I’ve lost so much of my interests that I used to have when I was at home and here it becomes like the only focus of my life is academic and basically my social life is I’d evaluate it as crap” [FGNov](#)

“I can’t really recall doing anything outside of school but basically I spend most of the time going to the city centre alone walking around between Market Street and Piccadilly Station and then walk back home” [FGNov](#)

It is clear that international students studying at this level are subject to certain pressures that are not unique to them but perhaps because of the condensed nature of their programmes throws their situation of all students into greater relief;

“.....when I first came to the UK last year I was a tourist it was last year before I graduated from college so the first experience was it was quite nice to be honest but the second time I came here as a student I just think that the two roles are quite different. As a tourist here you don’t have that much pressure you can you’re free to do whatever you want to do you don’t have a burden on your back but being a student here you feel a lot more stress” [FGNov](#)

“.....as the first assignments came due it was too easy to be just ‘no I don’t have time to do the social things’” [FGJul](#)

Many of the students expressed positive comments about the benefits of studying abroad and the opportunities the university had given them to meet so many people from such a variety of backgrounds and places;

“I appreciate our diversity and difference as human beings” [WRJul](#)

(its) “made me more accepting of others” [WRJul](#)

Although this was tempered by a recognition that a majority of people will always ‘flock’ towards what they perceive to be their own kind;

“Yeah for me if I have to say who is my best friend he’s a black guy even though I didn’t start out with him because he was a black guy it just happens that most of the time most of the places I probably would be we’re likely to meet there – it just happened” [FGNov](#)

“.....you find that most people want to gravitate towards their kind ..... its human nature I guess there ain’t nothing much anyone can do about that” [FGNov](#)

Students understood and appreciated the need to see the making of friends as an active process even at the beginning of the academic year and were, for the most part, anxious to do their part to facilitate the process;

“making friends and maintaining the friendship is a two-way process..... It’s all about reaching out to people and not just sitting back and waiting for them to reach out to you. It’s about being proactive” [WRNov](#)

## **7. Recommendations**

Given that students understand that the formation of sustaining and supportive friendships is, for the most part an active process, it seems logical that the University might give some thought to assisting in this. Students, whether international students or not, enter the University with cultural norms that are not universal. This means that the non-verbal clues which they have previously used to pick up and respond to another’s moods and signals are not likely to be as effective in this setting.

### **7.1.1 A facilitated process**

It may be that schools, faculties and teams might feel it appropriate to make international students explicitly aware of techniques that they might use that have been successful or by incorporating the opportunity to work in small groups/ speak with a neighbour more obviously into all staged events;

“The University should create an enabling environment for students to reach out and make friends/ socialise..... because it is not quite easy from experience” [WRNov](#)

“.....the hardest thing is having something to talk about... Because you can say ‘hi I’m \_\_\_\_\_’ but there’s nothing to say back” [FGNov](#)

“.....you have to have the skill to make that kind of discussion interesting” [FGJul](#)

“.....so you can say ‘hey guys subtitles please I need something to work with if we’re going to have a conversation’ and sometimes some people take offence, some people laugh and understand and do their best to speak” [FGNov](#)

Additionally, students would perhaps of benefited from an increased understanding of the different ways that home students can express themselves and of the differing nature of

friendships across cultures and backgrounds which means that friendships can sometimes be quite more fluid than they might perhaps be used to;

“.....at the very beginning I told something or I just told them a story or something and one girl made a joke and I kind of didn't like it and I was thinking 'is that me? Or is that mean' and then I tried to analyse it and then I decided that it was really me that's why it takes time to get used to the jokes, to the way that people tease you and you shouldn't be annoyed immediately” [FGJul](#)

“I had a case whereby I spoke with someone and he seemed friendly and then the next day he ignored me and he wasn't the only one” [FGNov](#)

Where programmes have a greater imbalance of students from different countries, it may be that staff involved in the teaching and support of those students will have to be more mindful of the particular issues that this situation might expose;

“..... the proportion of students from different cultures might affect the construction of friendship” [WRNov](#)

#### 7.1.2 A staged process

Students commented particularly on the difficulties that they felt had occurred as a result of being given all the information about their programme, the University and the support available in the very first weeks when they were struggling to absorb everything. One individual in particular who had arrived too late to participate in induction events because of visa issues (a not uncommon occurrence for international students) felt especially disadvantaged by this. Students themselves suggested that some of these issues might have been resolved by having events and information spread out more throughout the year;

“I don't even remember getting some of this information cos it was packed into such a short time and it was such a hectic time and you go straight from the international student orientation to your department orientation and moving in and everything else so I guess it would have been nice to do a follow up for some of those activities and pieces of information ..... if some of it had been delayed a little bit or had a follow up after we'd gotten our feet on the ground, over our jet lag and more acclimatised I would maybe have been able to benefit more from it cos a lot of it it was too much too soon” [FGJul](#)

“I came late and I'd missed the introductions and the orientation so immediately I came it was just straight to my course and ever since everything I know is specific to my school” [FGJul](#)

“.....that I got so much information during the induction week it was too much I was thinking 'oh my gosh, what to start with? How to start?' and then suddenly that was it I mean I got this information then of course you can just go and find out more but it was just too much and I overlooked stuff” [FGJul](#)

“.....sometimes need somebody to remind you just to make you think 'oh yes there is something that I can do, there is something else that I can do. I mean if people just followed up on the induction, gave more information part way through the year” [FGJul](#)

“I guess it would have been nice to have something mid way through just as that friendly reminder and I also think just as a point of organisation cos I think people would definitely

have gone but no one was willing to take on the responsibility of scheduling it because people even at that point most of us were really unsure about what would make a good event – we weren't familiar enough yet with Manchester to know what would be good"  
[FGJul](#)

#### 7.1.3 An inclusive process

Students were aware that, on occasion, those events that were organised to enable people to meet socially, had not always met their objectives;

".....get people out and have mutual activities that didn't necessarily not intentionally but inadvertently be excluding..... And they don't want photos taken – that was definitely something that we talked about some people said 'well I can't have pictures on Facebook of me in a pub'" [FGJul](#)

"I think sometimes too the efforts that are done to help particularly for international students sometimes end up isolating them because there's not really an emphasis on the idea of everyone being welcome" [FGJul](#)

#### 7.1.4 An empathetic process

Although this was not a strong theme in discussions with students, there was concern and agreement expressed that the attitude of some University staff was not especially helpful to the needs of international students. Even where students themselves expressed themselves more than satisfied with their own treatment, most could relate incidences of indifference on the part of other international students;

".....people could have been more supportive, they could have been more helpful but they don't disturb themselves a lot for everybody whereas I do think if someone asks for help you can spend some time on everybody on anybody so it was a bit sad to see that some people are not as supportive as they could be" [FGJul](#)

#### 7.1.5 A managed process

Discussion with the students involved in this project suggests that their experience might be enhanced if staff were able to be more attuned to the changing nature of students' relationships and needs over the course of the academic year. This might mean that initially efforts are focussed on increasing the possibilities for social contacts within the school and within the individual programmes. Later, students might gain by being encouraged to look further afield in terms of their social lives, to become more involved in SU or careers based activities or to participate in the International Society social evenings and trips. Still later, students are likely to profit by a greater emphasis on being able to create effective study groups;

".....friendship like we said it goes in stages" [FGNov](#)

"I do think that several months ago I was really trying to get out and meet people that weren't always talking about our subject and the work we had to do" [FGJul](#)

"I think that a social life can have its own timetable" [FGJul](#)

".....at the very beginning we were mostly orientated and focused on the studies and we

were discussing this kind of stuff but when we had a bit more information about each other and when we knew that we knew each other better then we then people started to speak about something from their past, something about their personal life” [FGJul](#)

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**ADVERTISEMENT SOLICITING VOLUNTEERS**

**To be sent by email.**

**Dear (insert name)**

As a member of staff in the Student Experience Office, I am interested to understand more about the quality and network of friendships which international postgraduate students make whilst here at Manchester and I am looking for volunteers to take part in a project exploring this.

In particular, I would like to be able to explore the topic with international students with a view to being able to suggest instances of good practice and possible future further areas of research in order to improve the experience for all students.

I am writing to you, as a new student on a postgraduate masters programme in the hope that you might be prepared to work with me on the project.

If you were willing to participate, I would like you to take part in two focus groups – one in November 2009 and one in February/ March 2010. I will schedule a number of different groups on various dates in order to ensure that they are held at a convenient time. If you prefer to speak to me on your own, or you cannot attend a focus group I am happy to schedule an individual meeting for you instead. At each meeting there will also be a short questionnaire for you to complete.

Ideally, we would like you to take part in all the scheduled contacts but if you do have to miss one, we would still value your involvement and contribution.

If you are interested and would like to find out more then please email me back, phone me on 0161 275 2073 (52073 from an internal line) or call in and see me in Room 3.206 in University Place.

With thanks and best wishes,




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**I N F O R M A T I O N   S H E E T**


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**Project Title:**            **BIRDS OF A FEATHER : an exploration of the structure of friendships amongst international postgraduate taught masters (PGT) students at the University of Manchester**

**Name of researcher:**    **Karen Badat**  
    [karen.badat@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:karen.badat@manchester.ac.uk)  
    **0161 275 2073**

**1.        What is the research about?**

Successive surveys have indicated that international students have not always been satisfied with the opportunities and possibilities of creating significant friendships with home students. This is, in fact, a topic of study internationally since researchers in the UK, in the US and in Australia have all found that international students encounter the same kind of difficulties.

I am interested to understand more about the experience of international students at this University with a view to being able to suggest instances of good practice and possible future further areas of research in order to improve the experience for all students.

**2.        Who is doing the research?**

The research will be conducted primarily by the Student Retention Officer with help from other school based, students' union and central support staff

**3.        Why have you been chosen?**

I have tried to ensure that this study is conducted with reference to a number of different disciplines located in different Faculties. I wanted to look at students on PGT programmes since I have assumed that you would be likely to experience the same positive and negative influences as other international students albeit in a condensed and heightened fashion which is reflective of the shorter duration of your study. Programme Leaders and Administrators in your home Schools, societies and halls have given their agreement to your participation.

**4.        What will I be expected to do?**

We would like you to take part in two focus groups – one in November 2009 and one in February/ March 2010. We will schedule a number of different groups on various dates in order to ensure that they are held at a convenient time. If you prefer to speak to us on your own, or you cannot attend a focus group we are happy to schedule an individual meeting for you instead.

At the first focus group we will ask you to complete a very short questionnaire (a copy of which is attached). During the second focus group we will ask you to complete a short booklet of questions, (a copy is attached).

Ideally, we would like you to take part in all the scheduled contacts but if you do have to miss one we would still value your involvement and contribution.

DATE	EVENT	WHAT WILL HAPPEN
<b>October - November</b>	Explanation and completion of consent forms	You can call in, phone or email me any time to talk about the project and discuss any aspect of your involvement. You will be invited to complete the consent form and can do this with me if you prefer.
<b>November/ December 2009</b>	Focus group 1 : 1 - 1.5 hours	This will be a small group of about 8/12 people. We will be guided by participants but we hope to talk about your expectations of your life here in Manchester, your friendships back home, what is important to you in a friend and how you structure your social life at home. We will ask you to complete a short questionnaire.
<b>February/ March</b>	Focus Group 2 : 1.5 – 2 hours	Again this will be a small group of around 8/12. We hope to talk to you about your experiences of making friends both with home and with other international students. We will ask questions about the influence of culture, language, identity, personality, proximity and similarity in the creation of significant friendships. We would expect to discuss the effects of differing systems of education and elicit from you any suggestions as to effective strategies that might assist in the process of making friends. During the meeting we will ask you to complete a short booklet of questions
<b>Total time allocation</b>		<b>3.5 hours maximum</b>

In addition to participating in these events, we have some general expectations of you that will contribute to a successful outcome. These are that:

- ° you will treat contributions made by others with the same respect that we will afford you
- ° you will respect the confidentiality of contributions made by others
- ° you will let us know if you are not able to attend a scheduled meeting.

#### **5. Do I have to take part?**

No, you do not have to take part and your declining our invitation to do so will not in any way affect your progress at University. Similarly, you are free to withdraw at any time without this adversely impacting on your academic career, and without having to tell us why. If you withdraw and do not tell us that you have done so, we may contact you again by email to see if you have missed a meeting because you were sick or forgot; if you do not reply to this contact then we will not contact you again.

#### **6. Will my contribution be confidential?**

Yes it will. I will assign you a reference number on the consent form and all remarks you make will be attributable to this source. We will endeavour to remove any details that would allow a person reading the final report to be able to identify you, although it may be possible from the stories you tell us for your close friends or associates to recognise you. All data relating to the project - audio tapes, transcripts, and written materials will be suitably anonymised, stored securely and destroyed after a period of five years in accordance with University practice.



**6. What can you expect of me/us?**

- ° I will schedule focus groups to be as convenient to you as possible
- ° I will advise you of all dates, times and locations of meetings in a timely manner
- ° I will organise venues for all meetings that are appropriate and allow for confidential discussions
- ° I will actively listen to what you have to say and not be judgmental, recognising that it is your experience which is fundamental to the work of the project and that negative feedback is as valid as positive
- ° I will not expect you to respond to every point raised and will respect your wish to keep some experiences and views private
- ° I will ensure that all participants are met with respect
- ° I will invite you to view the final report. I welcome your comments on this document although I am not able to commit to making any or all of the amendments which you might suggest.
- ° While you can leave the project at any time, you should be aware that it is not possible to remove records of what you have previously said in focus groups.

**8. What will happen to the results?**

- a. I will prepare a report to be published internally and disseminated within the University.
- b. It is likely that I will also prepare a report to be published externally and disseminated at relevant conferences/events

**9. Contacts**

**Karen Badat**

**Student Retention Officer**

Student Experience Office, The University of Manchester, Room 3.206d, University Place, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

0161 275 2073

[karen.badat@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:karen.badat@manchester.ac.uk)

**10. Ethical Approval**

**This project has been approved by the University's Research and Ethics Committee.**



## **BIRDS OF A FEATHER : an exploration of the structure of friendships amongst international postgraduate taught masters (PGT) students at the University of Manchester**

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### Focus Group Discussion Guide : Focus Group 1

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#### Introduction

- ° You might be aware that the University carries out surveys of its students, including our international students. Recent surveys have highlighted some issues and areas of dissatisfaction amongst overseas students and the purpose of these sessions is to explore one of these issues in more depth and to look at how and whether you have been able to make significant and important friendships with other students and with students from the UK in particular.
- ° We will work through a series of questions and topics which are outlined overleaf
- ° There are no right or wrong answers. I want to know what you think, even if it means disagreeing with someone else in the room
- ° Everything you say will be treated in confidence, so please feel free to say whatever you think or feel about the issue
- ° I will be recording the session in order that I can make the report as accurate and relevant as possible. However, any remarks that I quote in the report will be attributed to your reference number.

PTO

Question Outline

1 Tell us more about how you view close friendship

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2 What happens to turn a friend into a good/ best friend?

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3 Do you think that the good friends you have at/ from home are very similar to you?

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4 Thinking about the non-academic aspects of your life in Manchester, what do you think is going to be important to you in your social life?

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5 What strategies (if any) do you have for creating a network of friends in Manchester?

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## **BIRDS OF A FEATHER : an exploration of the structure of friendships amongst international postgraduate taught masters (PGT) students at the University of Manchester**

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### Focus Group Discussion Guide : Focus Group 2

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#### Introduction

- ° You might be aware that the University carries out surveys of its students, including our international students. Recent surveys have highlighted some issues and areas of dissatisfaction amongst overseas students and the purpose of these sessions is to explore one of these issues in more depth and to look at how and whether you have been able to make significant and important friendships with other students and with students from the UK in particular.
- ° We will work through a series of questions and topics which are outlined overleaf
- ° There are no right or wrong answers. I want to know what you think, even if it means disagreeing with someone else in the room
- ° Everything you say will be treated in confidence, so please feel free to say whatever you think or feel about the issue
- ° I will be recording the session in order that I can make the report as accurate and relevant as possible. However, any remarks that I quote in the report will be attributed to your reference number.

PTO

Question Outline

1 Do you feel that you have changed from the person you were when you first came here?

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2 How might those changes have affected your interactions with other people?

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3 Who are the people you talk to on a daily basis?

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4 Can you think that was anything the University might have done to improve your social experience in this year?

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5 Do the friends that you have in Manchester all know each other?

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6 Does anything that any of your friends do bother you?

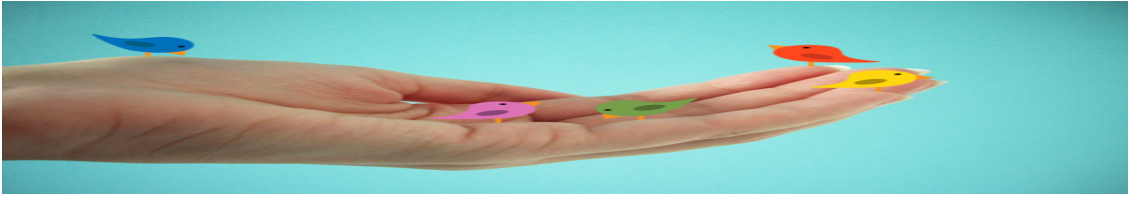
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7 How do you deal with that annoyance/ irritation?

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8 Is there anything that you think is important about friendships that we haven't asked?

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**BIRDS OF A FEATHER : an exploration of the structure of friendships amongst international postgraduate taught masters (PGT) students at the University of Manchester**

Name : \_\_\_\_\_

Questionnaire 1

1 What country do you come from? \_\_\_\_\_

2 What nationality are you? \_\_\_\_\_

3 What age are you? \_\_\_\_\_

4 What Faculty are you enrolled in? \_\_\_\_\_

5 Are you living in University accommodation? Yes  No

If yes, is this self catering? Yes  No

6 Before you came to Manchester how easy did you think it would be to make friends with home students?

Easy  Somewhat easy  Somewhat difficult  Difficult

7 What has your actual experience of making friends with home students been like so far?  
\_\_\_\_\_

8 Thinking about the person who is your 'best friend' at home, can you tell us a little about them;

How did you meet?

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When did you first meet?

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What qualities do they have that you like in a friend?

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PTO

