

International Student Forum, February 2021 – Getting Involved

Introduction

From The SU's international student survey on 'Plans for Semester 2' in light of the Covid-19 pandemic undertaken in January 2021, several issues from the international student community were identified including difficulties making friends and feeling lonely due a mostly or completely virtual student experience. The feedback supports PGT responses to the University's Week 8 Check In Survey where students (many of which are international students) also noted difficulties meeting other students in a virtual environment and suggested more activities at earlier times in the day to allow students studying remotely in different time zones to join more easily.

These comments, along with others from recent International Students' Association (ISA) events (Christmas World Café, Ask a Student), indicated a need to explore international student engagement with SU virtual activities and to provide solutions enabling those studying remotely from abroad to become more involved. An international student forum was therefore held on Thursday 4 February inviting students to share their thoughts and experiences of SU virtual activities, as well as raise other issues arising from the international student community. This report highlights the key findings and responses to prepared questions which will be used to inform a guide for The SU on making virtual activities more inclusive for international students while activities continue to be delivered online for the foreseeable future.

Key findings

- Involvement in extracurricular activities is an important part of being a student – they contribute to wellbeing and a healthy work/life balance. In-person activities are highly valued and may form the highlight of this academic year for some students.
- Students are more likely to join a virtual event if they can see that many students (including their friends) plan to join and they understand the significance of attending.
- Engaging with a virtual activity depends on a student's own motivation and priorities, this may be focussing on "getting through" the current pandemic situation in their own way.
- The requirement to quarantine for 14 days after travelling from abroad may impact international student engagement with virtual events.
- In-person activities by SU sports clubs were well received, however there has been limited or no communication from some SU societies after becoming members.
- Students want more virtual opportunities where they can get to know other students, especially those from the same course, through longer interactions in a social capacity. The Housemate Finder events were useful, but 10 minutes is not enough time to get to know someone.
- Finding housemates for next year is a major concern for international students right now, particularly for those in their first year who have not come to Bath or returned home early. Students from cultural minorities with no associated SU cultural society may find it more difficult to find housemates.

Of the 15 students who signed up for the event in advance, only 3 attended who were all undergraduates and had spent some time in Bath at the beginning of the academic year before returning home. Two of the students provided most of the participation as the third student had some technical problems throughout.

Topics discussed

During this academic year so far, have you joined any SU virtual activities?

One participant noted they had attended a recent Housemate Finder event along with quizzes at the start of the academic year. They added that it is difficult living at home trying to engage in activities online when you can easily be with friends from home. Another participant noted that they had never engaged with any ISA events until this occasion.

If you haven't joined any virtual activities, or only a few, why is this?

One of the participants shared that they are aware of activities available from weekly emails and sign up to attend many but completely forget about them, not seeing the reminder emails due to getting caught up with studies and other things.

How important are extracurricular activities in your overall student experience?

The participants agreed that involvement in extracurricular activities is an important part of being a student. One participant described playing tennis, football and golf during Semester 1 (before in-person activities were stopped) as the highlight of the year so far but noted it is difficult to do sports online as you cannot interact at the same level. Another participant added that activities contribute to students' wellbeing by providing a good work/life balance and opportunities to meet new people, as well as expanding your own horizons.

How accessible do you think SU virtual activities are? Do they fit into your timetable or routine?

The participants agreed that engagement is centred around students' motivation and priorities, rather than how well activities fit into their lives, especially as students "just want to get through it (pandemic situation)".

"If it's not in person we lose the sense of seeing people, we naturally become more passive and don't engage very well. Lack of motivation is the main problem."

"Everything is accessible, it's a matter of importance and priorities. When online I don't feel like I'm signing up to something, it doesn't matter if I'm there or not as I'm essentially a face on a screen."

What are your suggestions for improvements that would encourage you to join virtual activities offered at the moment?

The participants acknowledged the difficulty in delivering online activities and praised The SU for their efforts in engaging students all over the world in a challenging situation. They agreed that they are more likely to join a virtual activity if they know in advance how many students, including any friends, are attending (the more the better) which would psychologically make the activity seem more interactive and appealing. They added that it is useful to have an indicator of the importance or significance of an event and suggested icebreaker games to get to know each other better.

What kind of virtual activities do you think the SU should provide? Are there any activities you enjoy that aren't included?

More events where you can get to know other international and UK students were suggested, particularly students taking the same course. It was noted that breakout rooms are often used in lectures and afterwards students often remain in touch asking where others are or from and which accommodation they're living in.

The participants acknowledged that although The SU has offered a wide array of virtual activities, it ultimately "comes down to what you make of it yourself".

Do you have any other thoughts about virtual activities you'd like to share?

The participants discussed the need to quarantine as a possible factor for some international students not engaging, as new rules require students to self-isolate for 14 days after travel along with long travel times depending on where students are coming from.

If this was a normal year (i.e. no Covid-19), are the any SU clubs and societies you would've joined?

One of the participants noted that they had started the academic year by signing up to everything they wanted to do; the sports clubs (tennis, football and golf) offered in-person activities initially but there hasn't been any communication from the societies (Finance and Economics) apart from Bath Entrepreneurs.

Are there any issues you'd like to raise as international students?

It was highlighted that finding housemates for next year is a major concern for many international students, particularly first year students who haven't come to Bath or returned home early. Many "feel left behind" and nervous about their living arrangements. It was also noted that it is essential to get to know others before signing a housing contract, however it is very difficult to find someone suitable to live with in only 10 minutes at the Housemate Finder events.

"It's such a big problem for first year students this year, I don't know anyone and I'll be lucky to find someone. It's a matter of putting yourself out there and finding someone with the same budget as the first step, and on the same 'wavelength'. It's sad for students living alone in second year, a lot of people are panicking finding someone to stay with."

One of the participants suggested that some international students may struggle more than others if there isn't an SU cultural society linked to their country or cultural background. They noted that international students join these societies because they can meet many other students from the same culture who often become flatmates and friends. Therefore, cultural minorities without an associated cultural society may find it more difficult to find housemates.