

Inside WIHEA – WIHEA and Masterclasses

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Hello and welcome back to the Inside WIHEA podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really pleased to be joined by Sam Wilson-Thain, Echo Zhou and Tom Greenway, three quarters of the team behind the WISE project, a cross institutional initiative that brings together academic and professional services colleagues to explore how we can better support international students and close the awarding gap at Warwick. WISE, the Warwick International Student Experience, began as a departmental pilot in the School of Life Sciences and Warwick Medical School before it was scaled into a full WIHEA masterclass.

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The team co-produces an online staff toolkit alongside it, a practical evidence-informed resource to help staff understand and enhance the international student experience. This conversation will explore what it looks like to embed inclusive practice into institutional culture and how student voice, co-design and shared ownership can make that change sustainable. Hi all, welcome to the podcast. Hi Tom. Hi Tuman. Hello Tom. How you guys doing? You okay? Yes, good thank you. Yeah, pretty good. Yes, good thank you. Good, good. I wonder what brings you to this conversation on the International Student Experience as part of the WIHEA project, please.

01:05

So, I'm Sam, I'm Director of Student Experience in the School of Life Sciences. And we have a large number of international students within the department. And so that's what brought me to this project. And I'm Tom. So, I, the Intercultural Training Program Development Consultant at Warwick. So that was part of why I got involved. And also, I was on a project on the international awarding gap, which is the gap in degree results between students and international students and so that fed into my involvement in this project as well.

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Hello, I'm Echo Zhou. I'm the Deputy Director in Student Experience at Warwick and I lead on international student support and experience. So, as you can imagine, it is naturally quite interesting for me to get involved. Thank you all and I think it's really interesting that you've all come together on this project from such different areas of the university.

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And I know that the project itself started as a departmental pilot, as I mentioned, before being scaled into the larger masterclass. What did that journey look like and what helped make that shift possible? It started with a conversation between me and Emily Róisín Reid, who's director of student experience in Warwick Medical School. And we noticed that as we share a campus up at Gibbet Hill, that we'd both seen a gap or potential, if you like, to do a bit more work with the international student experience, we were noticing sort of in student feedback, but also in staff feedback that there was a bit of a disconnect in terms of what was happening, what we were offering to our students and the experience that our internationals were having in comparison to our home students was different and they of course have different needs.

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So, after that discussion, we approached Tom and Echo Zhou because they are experts in this area and said that we're thinking of running something in the department or at least up at Gibbet Hill campus for WMS and SLS. Would you be interested in helping us to facilitate a workshop that looked at sector-wide awarding gap information, then pulled it down to kind of what our department data looked like and who we have here in terms of an international cohort, and then to approach

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staff and students with kind of where do we go from here? What are the action points? What can we do to improve or enhance the student experience for our international students? Luckily, they were both really keen. We ran the pilot and that sort led them to next steps, which we'll talk about, I'm sure. So, Emily Róisín Reid was the other member of the team who isn't able to join us today. And your point about the experience international students have, I think links really nicely into the next question, which is that...

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Warwick has over, I think, 145 different countries represented in the student body, but too often it seems that international students are treated as almost a homogenous group. How does WISE challenge that assumption and why does it matter for inclusion? So, I'd say the first way we challenge the assumption is that we involve international students in the workshop and they are presenting their own various experiences.

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My part in the workshop is about underlining that while there are similar themes to the international experience. Every journey is slightly different. So, this is something that all academics should be aware of. We do actually get a bit of pushback on academics saying that international students and home students should be treated the same and that good quality teaching caters to all of them, which you could argue is true in some ways, but I still think the international student experience and the range of experiences are still quite unique and the staff needs specific training to be able to more effectively work with international students.

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Can I just add something? I think Tom mentioned about this debate about whether we should treat international students the same as home students. So interestingly, and I have kind of put this question back to international students and asked them, how do you feel? What do you think? And I think most of the international student ambassadors, they can see the rationale behind why we should treat everybody the same.

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But to bring that kind of real equity to the table, you have to acknowledge what is different about international students and what kind of unique circumstances and unique challenges they face. And in

some part of their journey, it is quite pronounced. So, for example, the journey of traveling across continents and countries come to the UK. So, the support that we offer to international students at the pre-arrival stage, it will be very different to our UK students.

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I think academic system is a second part where quite often you hear students talking about, I didn't have to write any essay during my undergrad degree or, you know, during A-level or whatever equivalent that is. But when they get here, all of a sudden, the expectation is there. And I think it sort of comes across in different areas of support as well. So, for example, interactions with staff members where advocating wouldn't come natural to some international students.

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But I think essentially it is also about recognizing that international students as a term is quite problematic really, because we have, as you said, students from so many different countries. So yeah, I think that is really that individual sort of understanding and understanding the context where they come from, their circumstances is really important. Yeah.

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And I think that question of equity that you mentioned Echo Zhou is a really good one that can too often be overlooked because it's really difficult to provide equity for students from all around the world, particularly in terms of academic experience, but also student experience as well. And I was lucky enough to be in the masterclass, and it was clear throughout that session that student voice had been central to the way that was designed and run.

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What did that co-creation process look like in practice? Yeah, it's interesting just to look back and think about how we did that. I think the idea of having internationalist ambassadors designing the content was sort of when we're approaching them with a task. I still remember the reason why we thought about this approach is that when we ran the pilot session with medical school and SLS, quite often on the table where students and staff are talking together about a certain topic, you can quite distinctively see that there is a difference in perception.

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I sat on one of the tables and one of the students were talking about how despite her thinking, you know, all her upbringing, he has been taught in English, but still she doesn't think for her it's the same, that her academic experience is the same as a home student, even though she thought she was brought up in an English speaking environment. And then I can see that the, on the table, the academic was quite surprised as well because there is this assumption that, for example, if you come from India, quite often your whole upbringing and education is in English and how students themselves still felt different to home students.

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So, when we were designing the sessions, we asked the international ambassadors to think about in their personal circumstances or in their friendship groups, whether they have had any kind of mismatch in expectation. So, we got a couple of student ambassadors to put those things together. So, they really have to sort go back and reflect. So, some of them reflected on sort of more academic side in terms of study and assessment group work.

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Others were on daily interaction. So, it's quite wide range really. So, Sam and Tom, Emily Róisín Reid and I discussed and then we thought it will be a really good exercise to present to the staff members during the masterclass that we've got some mismatches and those are the students are telling us. So, what do you think? What matches to what and how does it look in practice? What sort of issues they are? sort of really triggered some interesting conversations during the workshop. Who are the interests?

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A part of our jobs is interacting with international students a lot. so, there's, I guess you would say there's a formal co-creation process that we went through in developing the workshop, but there's also because it's a habit, the student voice is almost in our heads, or at least there's a sign always like what would the student voice be on this? So, when we're going through the practice, the student voice is always there is something we're considering and something that we will add into our work.

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Yeah. And I think again, it's interesting. I mentioned at the beginning that you come from so many different disciplines and areas of the university, but you all have this focus on the international student experience, which is important when you're seeing those mismatches Echo Zhou and how we can, as a university, work to overcome those. And something I found really interesting was that the masterclass used a train the trainer model approach, which is not something I've seen in other WIHEA activities. I wonder what was the thinking behind that?

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And do you feel that will help to sustain the work beyond what you've done so far? We were really keen that this work didn't just stop at the masterclass, but that each department or area of the university was able to go and take that work and make impact with it in their own areas. It wouldn't be sustainable for me, for Emily Róisín Reid, for Echo Zhou, for Tom to walk around the institution trying to deliver it in each department. It just wouldn't happen.

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And actually, it's probably going to have more impact if the people delivering it are the people that you know and work in your department and kind of understand the data and know the numbers and know the context. So the idea was that we could still support people to run it in their own departments, but give

them enough in terms of tools and the toolkit and enough of an example, if you like, of how it could run in the structure of the masterclass so that people could feel confident enough to take that back to their own departments and disseminate that as they wish.

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It just felt like a far more sustainable model to show people how it could be done so they could go and kind of plant the seed elsewhere. Have any of you received feedback since the masterclass about how people have taken things into their departments and used them to help for their students? We've had some indications of what people will do, but we haven't followed that up just yet in terms of what people are out there actually doing. We've had a couple of people say that they are wanting to run it within their departments.

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And so, with some support from us, they will do that in the future. But yes, I think this is a long-term project and it would be really nice of this time next year to be evaluating and looking back at anyone who has rolled this out to see what the impact has been. Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's one of the crucial things is it feels like you did it at a very good time for the planning round for next year as well. And I wonder the toolkit itself; it covers everything from assessment literacy to belonging and social integration as well.

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With all of that said, what do you think is the single most impactful thing that staff can do to make a change tomorrow? I think it's an ongoing process. So obviously when we run the workshop, we introduce the toolkit to participants. At that point, I think most people in the room had a look at the toolkit so we can see that the webpage was accessed by probably 40 people. Then I think the challenge is to make it more widely known to other staff members.

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So, we introduced a news item in the staff newsletter a little bit down the line, and we can see from the web clicks that following the news item they are under 200 clicks on the web page. So, I think this is just the kind of things that when they become aware of certain resources and toolkit, they can obviously have a look. And the toolkit is built in a way that we are hoping the staff members will bookmark it or put it in a way where it is quite easy to access because it has quite a lot of very practical links, if you like.

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The university has a vast number of resources and sometimes it can be quite tricky for staff members to find exactly where to find certain information. So, the toolkit is one of them. And I think if there is any takeaway for staff members, and I think once you have looked at the toolkit, it will be quite obvious that the one thing that everybody can do is to treat international students as individuals and if there's anything that you are not sure about, ask questions, be aware of the barriers and be aware of existing support. I think the university does quite a lot of things. We have an International Student Experience Advisory Board

where we routinely look at the barriers and challenges and things that we can do to enhance international student support, break down barriers to support staff.

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So hopefully the content of the toolkit will continue to be enriched with the advisory group, but also with this project group. And I think it's great to hear that the project isn't done with the creation of the toolkit, but the toolkit itself is almost the beginning of more work for others. And you mentioned it will continue to be kind of enhanced and developed as people use it more and more. And Echo Zhou, you mentioned the advisory group as well that you have for international students and the impact that that has on their experience.

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A lot of the feedback that universities generally receive points to the fact that co-creation with students is a key area for development for them moving forward. And I wonder what would more meaningful student co-creation actually look like at Warwick? So, I would say that more meaningful co-creation at Warwick is about incorporating the student voice at every stage of what you're doing. And I think a lot of departments don't do this.

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So, for example, I know some departments when they're creating a new module, you get to present that module to a student panel for evaluation and feedback. But then other departments don't do anything like that at all. The module just gets created by the academic deciding what they think is best. And then you also look at student services or what we offer to students, and you should have co-creation at every stage. I think one other part of it is we don't want to reinvent the wheel.

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And because co-creation, I think, does take longer, but is a more rigorous process. There are often other projects that have taken place across the university that already had co-creation that we need to make sure we're not replicating the same thing. I would also say, and this is kind of a side issue, but if you're having students co-create, they need to be paid. And that's one of the big obstacles, but for it to be fair because we're being paid to do our work and if students are doing work as well, they should be paid as well.

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And I think putting that in place and making sure that you allocate budget to that is another obstacle that I think a lot of departments haven't quite managed to overcome yet. And I think it's really difficult and I speak from my own experience on this; it becomes a bit of a chicken and egg discussion where to convince departments sometimes of the value of students and therefore paying them for their work.

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You have to get students to do that work in the first place, but we're always very conscious of that unpaid labour for whatever better term that we can engage in with students. And I know WIHEA does a lot of work, particularly around the way that learning circles are led and other opportunities that students have to be reimbursed essentially for the work that they're doing. But yeah, I take your point. I think creating space to pay students is also really important as well from a graduate employability point of view, because you're giving students actual roles they can put on their CV, they can reflect on them and they can talk about.

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I also think if they're paid, they approach it more professionally because they're being paid to do a job. Whereas if you're just asking them to give you their time as students, they'll give you the same amount of time as they give attending lectures and seminars, which could be variable. Yeah. I think the other point is it's an inclusive process. If you include the student voice, it's automatically inclusive. Yeah. And I think it's important to always try to get people in the room who aren't necessarily always the keenest in coming forward with their student voice.

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And if paying them is the way to do that, I mean, the way we've done it before as well as with free food and other opportunities that we can offer, but paying is always the easiest way. And the last question for all of you is what steps do you think we can take to ensure a more sustainable and inclusive future for international students in UK higher education? I think probably just to be mindful that this is not a one-off sort of done and dusted kind of activity.

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So obviously they are enduring challenges that international students would always face, which is associated with the transition into higher education, the transition into living and studying in the UK. But I think every year we do a kind of international student roundtable interviewing students joining the new cohort, just asking about their expectations, their experience, and you can almost sort of see that shift evolving sort of expectations.

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It can be the generational differences, the technological advancement, the use of AI, for example, how does that change student behaviour and expectations. So, I think for me, it would just be that we have to be mindful of enduring challenges, but also the new and emerging ones and not to treat it as a one-off. So, it's always changing, always involving, always something new, always something different. So yeah, keep us on our toes.

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Well, it brings us back really nicely to that question of equity, which I think is where we started this conversation as well and where the project originally came from Sam, from your work in life sciences in the med school with Emily Róisín Reid through to the work that you've done with WIHEA around the masterclass and the toolkit. And I think it's a nice bookend to the conversation. I think where you are right now, it would be really interesting to have another conversation in a year and to come back, Sam, to what you said about being able to reflect on how this has been used and how it has developed from when you did the session back in March.

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Thank you all for joining the podcast and for kind of sharing your experience of this project. It sounds really great. It was really useful. And hopefully people can have a look at the toolkit and other things online as well to see how they can implement some of this in their own practice. Thank you all for joining and have a lovely rest of the day. And I'll speak to you all again very, very soon. Thanks so much. Bye. Thanks, Tom. Bye. Thank you, Tom.