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by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The researchers helping universities understand the global student experience

Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey and Dr Daniel Dauber's benchmarking tool allows universities to measure the effectiveness of the global education they offer.

Demand from employers for global graduates has made internationalisation and diversity a priority in higher education. However, Helen Spencer-Oatey, Professor of Applied Linguistics at The University of Warwick, suggests the steps universities should take to develop 'global graduates' is unclear. "Giving students an international experience is a priority for most universities, but there is little understanding about what this means in practice", she argues.

Helen is an expert in pragmatics - a branch of linguistics which considers the way people communicate and build relationships. "Communication is more than words and grammar. So much meaning comes from culture and shared experience", she explains. "Moving students out of their comfort zones and encouraging them to reflect on their experiences is vital. It is a critical way to develop their cultural awareness, and the communication skills they need to succeed in international careers."

Helen believes the higher education sector often overlooks the most critical factor in developing the competence to work in a global



context. "Rankings such as Times Higher and QS measure the proportion of international students and opportunities to study abroad. However, they ignore the critical importance of building friendships with people from different backgrounds and finding situations that stretch them", she cautions.

Helen and colleague Dr Daniel Dauber developed the Global Education Profiler (GEP), to help universities understand this crucial - yet difficult to measure - component of what she calls the 'global student experience'. The result of a partnership with student benchmarking experts from Tribal Group's i-graduate division, the GEP survey asks students questions on critical areas such as social integration, communication skills and global development. These responses are then analysed using statistical modelling techniques to give universities a thorough overview of how well they support students to develop international skills. Institutions can also use the results to benchmark their global student experience against the rest of the higher education sector.



The idea for the GEP came in 2015 when Daniel and Helen were looking for a way to apply their research to create a more robust measure of students' international experience at Warwick. "We worked with our student experience colleagues to add three test questions to the annual i-graduate survey", Helen recalls. "When we shared our findings with the company, they were extremely interested and this encouraged us to develop a full tool which we piloted successfully with universities in UK and Europe."

i-graduate agreed a licencing deal with Helen and Daniel and launched the GEP in 2017. The first benchmarking survey of its kind in higher education, the tool also explores staff perceptions of internationalisation. "The challenges academic and professional staff experience working in an international context, whether with colleagues, students or international partners has a direct impact on the global student experience", notes Helen.

The company's Marketing Business Partner, Mat Kirby believes the GEP has improved the sector's understanding of what makes an excellent global student experience. "This tool goes beyond

reporting raw numbers", he emphasises. "It explores the value students place on the parts of university life we know contribute to the development of international skills."

By comparing the importance students place on aspects of the student experience to their actual experience, Helen believes the GEP's design avoids a common pitfall of many student surveys. "Few students realise the vital skills they can learn by mixing with people from different backgrounds", she explains. "So, their self-reported satisfaction is not the best way to assess the quality of the global student experience they have received."

Now used by universities in the UK, Europe and beyond, the GEP has given Helen and Daniel valuable insights on building a global student experience. "People naturally seek out, and bond with others they believe are like them. It is a great source of comfort, particularly during challenging periods such as university", Helen says. "Building a sense of community helps students break out of this comfort zone and gives them the confidence to form more diverse networks."

The licencing agreement with i-graduate has allowed Helen and Daniel to make a more significant contribution to the university sector than they would have alone. "We have the academic insights, and i-graduate brings the expertise and resources needed to have a broader reach in higher education. It is an equal partnership because we could not do it without each other", she suggests.

Mat believes GEP's basis in research and higher education practice has been fundamental to its success. "Helen and Daniel's expertise and inside understanding of the issues universities face has helped us create a benchmarking tool that is streets ahead of any other in the sector", he adds.

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