A recipe for success

From facilities and estates to health and wellbeing, Rebecca Paddick asks five industry experts how universities can ensure they have all the ingredients needed to create the best student experience.
Q What best illustrates the excellent student experience you are offering?

Pierre Ihmle: Our institutions offer a personalised learning environment where students develop themselves academically, professionally and personally. At both Glion Institute of Higher Education and Les Roches Global Hospitality Education, counselling and support begins before students arrive on campus, with our global network of education counsellors, and continues after they have graduated, through our alumni associations. With our Swiss education model of blended practical and academic learning, we enable students to develop hands-on skills in hospitality operations (guest service, culinary arts, rooms division) and soft skills like teamwork and leadership, as well as business acumen. Students are further prepared for the transition to the workplace by our careers department, which provides one-on-one mentoring, helping students to explore career pathways, arrange interviews and find internships and graduate jobs. As a result, our graduates are highly employable, with Glion and Les Roches ranked by QS World University Rankings 2018 in the world’s top three hospitality management institutions for employer reputation. Finally, with a diverse student body of more than 100 nationalities, opportunities to study abroad on our six campuses and mandatory internship semesters, we provide students with unique international exposure. Our graduates emerge with excellent communication skills and multicultural awareness – soft skills that are valuable in any profession, but particularly in the global industry of hospitality.

Laura Woods: It has to be Teesside’s institution-wide focus on student futures. Led from the top, with full participation from the Students’ Union, it’s at the centre of a whole raft of measures supporting our students from day one to be confident individuals equipped with the skills, experience and mindsets for success. Our Future-Facing learning initiative is bringing in cutting-edge digital technology to transform the way that students learn across the whole academic portfolio. Armed with Apple iPads and apps toolkits, undergraduates are being engaged in new collaborative ways of learning, for the best start in their careers. Through our Student Futures Strategy, we’re providing work-related experiences and mentoring, tailored enterprise opportunities, work-ready skills across the curriculum and a recruitment service for both students and employers. Strong relationships with the outside world are vital in making this happen, from volunteering, coaching, live projects and placements, to collaborative projects, hackathon challenges, curriculum input and upstream talent-spotting.

Kamal Bechkoun: A key part of the University of Gloucestershire’s mission is to provide our students with an experience which prepares them for rewarding lives and successful careers. As well as delivering excellent teaching and learning we’ve put a huge amount of effort into building employability into our programmes and extending the range of opportunities for students to gain work-related skills and experience. We work very closely with businesses to ensure our students have the right abilities, qualifications and confidence that employers look for when recruiting graduates. Winning the top prize in this year’s THELMA awards for our employer engagement programme was a brilliant recognition of the outstanding work of the University’s Growth Hub, which is now integrated and co-located in the University’s brand new £16m School of Business and Technology at Oystalls. With Growth Deal funding support from the Government, this development offers a unique space, bringing together businesses, students, staff and the full range of the University’s business expertise and economic development activities in one place. The work we do to develop our students’ employability skills is central to our role in working with business partners to drive highly skilled, knowledge-intensive innovation and growth in Gloucestershire, which is vital to our graduates and the region’s economic future.

“Ensuring that students from other countries feel welcome and believe that studying here will be both enjoyable and beneficial to their future endeavours remains essential”

VWW: International students have long made a significant contribution to the UK HE sector, and it is vital that UK institutions remain attractive to them if they are to continue to compete in the global market. This is increasingly challenging. International students are charged higher fees and are more likely to be postgraduate or professional students who are making sacrifices to be here. They may also have to deal with linguistic and cultural barriers, have different expectations than their domestic counterparts and fear having to repay fees to sponsors if they do not pass their course.

Given these factors, it is unsurprising that feedback from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator shows that international students, and particularly those from beyond the EU, are disproportionately likely to complain to their university and to escalate unresolved grievances to the OIA. We also know that Visa issues under the Tier 4 system are a significant cause of disputes and that the uncertainty associated with Brexit may make prospective students think twice about applying in the first place.

Ensuring that students from other countries feel welcome and believe that studying here will be both enjoyable and beneficial to their future endeavours remains essential. It requires action at government, sector and institution level so that every aspect of the experience from marketing and obtaining a visa through to admissions, studying, graduating and being an alumnus is covered. Fostering a greater appreciation by domestic students of the value of being part of a diverse global community will also be beneficial to both domestic and international students.
Q: What recent developments at your campus best show your commitment to boosting student experience?

Pierre Ihmle: In response to industry demand and student interest, Glion has developed bachelor’s degree specialisations in Luxury Brand Management and International Hotel Development & Finance, while Les Roches offers specialisations in Hospitality Entrepreneurship and Digital Marketing Strategies. We are committed to reflecting the latest industry trends in our programmes and facilities, and emerging trends such as wellness and sustainability are integrated into both academic and practical learning. For example, following major renovations in 2018, Glion opened a new wellness-based restaurant where students learn to put sustainable practice into action, as well as a new gastronomic restaurant. We have further strengthened our practical arts offering through the hiring of several Meilleurs Ouvriers de France (MOFs), award-winning instructors in cuisine and table arts. Another recently launched initiative is our Career Day, held once per semester at both Glion and Les Roches. This event brings more than 65 companies in hospitality and related fields to our campuses, enabling students to attend workshops, meet recruiters and participate in interviews.

Laura Woods: As part of our Strategic Transformation and Change programme – a suite of step-change projects – we’re delivering a newly refurbished Business School this September, the groundbreaking National Horizons Centre for biosciences in spring 2019, and a vibrant, student-centric Student Life Building in September 2019. Alongside these physical developments, we have expanded the reach of our pioneering enterprise engine Launchpad. It provides a stimulating campus environment for pre-starts, new companies and enterprising students. Launchpad FUEL has recently taken off, a fast-paced programme for teams with promising business ideas, providing graduate and student entrepreneurs with support and funding. New Launchpad satellites in Schools are running their own student-focused ventures, from a multidisciplinary plastic recycling operation, to an animation studio.

Kamal Bechkoum: The University of Gloucestershire’s new School of Business and Technology is a perfect example of how we’re developing facilities to ensure the very best student experience possible. We’ve listened to our students who tell us that they want an enhanced learning centre with even stronger connections to local, national and international businesses, which will improve their entrepreneurial and employability prospects.
As a result we’ve recently started a new engagement programme with employers across the County, inviting them onto campus to see our plans in action and discuss their graduate and research and analysis needs. The skills agenda is not something that can just be left to academics to resolve. Universities have to work with businesses to ensure we’re developing the right curriculum and talents to meet employer shortages and obstacles. This means a defined learning environment for students, which is as close as possible to replicating real-world challenges. We have a wealth of expertise and intellectual capital to help businesses become more productive and develop a competitive edge, whether the need is to make HR procedures more efficient, improve productivity, or keep a company safe online. If we work together to prepare our students effectively, as we have been, for example, in the area of cyber security, we find they are being offered top jobs in businesses such as Raytheon, IBM and Microsoft.

Q: Are we doing enough to ensure that international students have the best possible experience? Are the potential effects of Brexit for our European students any clearer now?

Pierre Ihmle: Cultivating a diverse student body is key to our mission of providing education with a global outlook. International students thus make up the vast majority of our students, at around 90% at Glion and 97% at Les Roches Switzerland, with no single nationality overly represented. Maintaining this diversity is part of how we deliver an excellent learning experience, and our international origins are celebrated through student-led cultural activities and events. At the same time, programmes such as English language support courses are in place to provide students with assistance as needed. As private institutions that prepare international students for global careers, Brexit has not made an impact on our operations and student experience.

Laura Woods: Value for money is a key concern for international students, and universities have to continue enhancing their offer to meet expectations. While ‘Britishness’ is still absolutely what sells UK higher education, it has to be accompanied by an outstanding teaching and learning experience. The sector is making significant investments in estates and international partnerships, with impact demonstrated by surveys like the International Student Barometer, 2017 (where Teesside ranks number one of 120 world universities for overall average satisfaction). But value isn’t just in the hands of the universities. It does not always prove easy in the UK to provide international students with the opportunities they want to live alongside home students, to work, and often to remain and make a contribution after their studies. Fierce competition in this market means many international students are attracted to other developed countries by generous visa regimes. As far as Brexit goes, its potential consequences for EU students beyond the two-year horizon of the current funding regime are still far from clear. Without being able to state clearly what Brexit will mean in terms of visas and working rights, universities cannot clearly convey the message that they are open for business. What universities can and must continue to do is pursue international initiatives and maintain their focus on delivering a world-class experience for international and EU students.

Kamal Bechkoum: The University of Gloucestershire is in the Top 5 in the UK for international student support (International Student Barometer 2017) and we welcome students representing more than 60 countries. We fully accept the outcome of the EU referendum and our priority now is to work with all of our students to ensure we achieve the best possible outcomes for them, our staff and wider academic and business communities. Leaving the EU will not happen quickly and we expect a gradual exit that will allow UK universities to remain highly attractive to prospective students from Europe and around the world.

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**VWV:** Based on announcements to date, the situation for students and prospective students from EU countries up to 31 December 2020 is now much clearer, but the situation beyond that is still uncertain.

In December 2017, the Government reached an agreement with the European Commission on the steps they would take to recognise the rights of EU nationals already resident in the UK before Brexit takes place. In February 2018, it was announced that the EU’s current laws on free movement of people would continue to apply during the post-Brexit implementation period which is scheduled to end on 31 December 2020. Under the terms agreed with the European Commission, the rights of EU citizens and their families living in the UK will not change until 1 January 2021, so EU citizens who take up residence in the UK before that date can have an expectation that they will be able to continue living here lawfully.

EU citizens and their family members who commence their residence in the UK before 1 January 2021 will be eligible for ‘settled status’ on completion of five years’ residence in the UK. Before accruing five years’ residence they will need to apply to the Home Office for confirmation of their ‘pre-settled status’, so that they can demonstrate that they are resident here lawfully.

The process which will be in place for those applications is currently being trialled with employees and students of certain universities in the North West and employees of NHS trusts in the same region. The wider launch of the scheme is expected to take place towards the end of 2018, and EU nationals and their family members will have until 30 June 2021 to submit their applications for settled status or pre-settled status. However, it is still important to note that all agreements to date are subject to the caveat that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”, so if no agreement can be reached on the UK’s future relationship with the EU and the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019 without a deal then the agreements reached so far might not be honoured.

The status for EU students arriving in the UK after 31 December 2020 remains uncertain though. The Government have commissioned research into the UK’s immigration system, with a view to designing a new post-Brexit immigration system. It is possible that as part of that new system EU citizens coming to the UK to study will need a visa to do so, possibly in line with the existing Tier 4 regime for non-EU citizen students. However, it is hard to imagine that the HE sector would allow such restrictions to be put in place without a fight.

**Q** With tuition fees continuing to rise, how might students’ expectations change?

**Pierre Ihmle:** With so much content available online, today’s students see higher education as an investment of time as well as money. For this investment to be worthwhile, students expect to gain skills and experiences that cannot be obtained through books or digital media. Learning needs to translate into practical knowledge and employability. This is why we focus on providing a personalised learning experience with close faculty guidance and individual career support. It’s also why we ensure that students develop their hard and soft skills in real-world settings, such as through practical arts rotations and professional internships.

**Laura Woods:** Students will quite rightly place an increasing emphasis on achieving the best experience and outcomes for the fees they pay. It means an ever-growing focus for universities on delivering an excellent student journey, incorporating teaching and learning, accommodation, student life and the best opportunities for career success. It means, too, offering more options, including degree apprenticeships and accelerated degrees. In all this, we do need, however, to avoid the danger of commoditising higher education. It’s not simply a transaction, but a life-changing experience, equipping students with the ability to question, challenge and understand, and to transform their own futures.

**Kamal Bechkoum:** With fees at over £9,000 a year, students, parents and guardians expect that university will not just be a great experience, but that it will also lead to an excellent career. Studies show that students
increasingly have a consumerist view of higher education and want value for money. Universities need to better explain the relationship between fees and the value of their degree. There's also a need for better financial information for students on how universities are funded and where their money goes, as there is still a lack of understanding around funding universities in a new way. The University of Gloucestershire is working hard to offer excellent support to our students to build their employability credentials. The work we do to develop our students' skills is central to our role in working with business partners to drive highly skilled, knowledge intensive innovation and growth in Gloucestershire. Recent figures show good progress for the University’s graduates in this respect: 95.3% of the University’s UK graduates from full-time, first-degree programmes went on to employment or further study in 2017. This is an increase from 94.4% last year and is the University’s best result for at least a decade and well above the England average for all universities of 94.4%.

**VWV:** Whilst we know that rising tuition fees have not had the depressive effect on total student numbers that might have been expected, it is apparent that what students want from their higher education providers is changing. This is unsurprising given the high-profile emphasis placed on choice and value for money by the Competition and Markets Authority and Office for Students and we expect this to continue. Higher education is now increasingly viewed as a significant investment of both time and money to be weighed against other options rather than simply a rite of passage. Priorities for students entering higher education now are likely to include:
- Measurable service delivery – contact time, feedback, group sizes
● Adequate consumer protection (e.g. in the event of strikes)
● Access to higher levels of support
● Courses linked directly to current and future employment opportunities (e.g. vocational options at prestigious institutions).

Q: Finally, how would you sum up the best ‘student experience’?

Pierre Ihmle: Personalisation and standards of excellence. The best student experience should empower students with the resources to achieve their own goals by nurturing their academic, professional and personal development.

Laura Woods: A student-friendly campus with a highly active Students’ Union; academics who put the interests of their students first and foremost; research-informed teaching and learning experiences that challenge, empower and stimulate; opportunities to contribute and learn from work experience and volunteering; close and multi-layered relationships with schools, colleges, employers and stakeholders, including Local Enterprise Partnerships; and real student involvement in the life of the University. That, in a nutshell, is what we seek to offer at Teesside University.

Kamal Bechkoum: Students are quite rightly expecting more from their university experience in increasingly competitive higher education and employment environments. I’m convinced the University of Gloucestershire continues to stand out from the crowd in this respect. In my own area of expertise the University of Gloucestershire’s new School of Business and Technology is in a better position than at any time before to improve our students’ experience and benefit the wider business community. We have nearly 40 programmes across areas including engineering, computing and cyber security, leadership and management, accounting, law, hospitality, and tourism and finance. Excellence in all of these serve and respond to the needs of our graduates and industry. Within five years’ time I would like our graduate employability rates to be at the 90%-plus level while clearing becomes obsolete. These aspirations are highly achievable as the reputation of our teaching and courses is growing rapidly.

VWV: Recent student experience surveys rate institutions using categories including academic experience, security, welfare, accommodation and societal experience, which illustrates well the breadth of factors that are believed to contribute to the quality of student life. What is deemed to constitute a strong student experience will, of course, differ widely according to individual preferences and circumstances but in general terms the following features are likely to be valued by most students:
● Delivery of what was promised and expected
● Responsiveness and evidence of service customisation to the particular needs of individuals
● Tolerance and safety
● Access to facilities 24/7
● Access to technology
● Staff-student ratio
● Belief that the qualification obtained has genuine long-term value.

We would expect that those students most satisfied with their higher education experience will be able to point to a strong mixture of tangible features such as high-quality and accessible facilities and intangible ones such as feeling welcome and secure in an environment which is responsive to their particular needs.

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