

Special Feature

Interview: Bob Athwal



Bob Athwal is the newly appointed Director of Student Experience at the *University of Leicester*. The aim of his role is to bring together and further develop strategies to support the student experience, working closely with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Students. The role oversees the Student Support Service, Career Development Service and Sports and Recreation.

ISEJ interviewed Bob to ascertain how he felt his role related to international students and their experience at Leicester.

ISEJ: The role of Director of Student Experience, how did that post come about? Could you outline what it involves?

BA: In January 2014, I was asked to take on this role. For the last two years, we really transformed the Career Development Service, and I was asked if I could do similar good work with other areas, and Sports was one, and Student Support Services so Welfare, Counselling and Accessibility, they all come under my remit now. And that's because as a university, if you look around the sector, there are Student Experience Directors emerging. Manchester has one, Birmingham University has a Director of Student Life, and it's becoming really clear that there are three key drivers.

The tuition fee landscape has made it much more competitive in terms of the funding which means that parents and students are much more concerned with the outcome of university in terms of employability and that then in itself manifests in terms of student recruitment with home or international students. International students are just as focused on the employability agenda and that's going to increase.

So we made the decision as a university that we are serious about this, we do want to help our students' transition and it would be good if we could join up the three areas to really start to promote that experience, to help that transition. Because not everyone is going to be in the Career Development Service, not everyone is going to use the Student Support Services and not everyone is going to use the Sports Clubs, but between the three areas that I look after, we've got a pretty good chance of reaching the majority of our students, to try and help them, through different ways.

ISEJ: You mentioned Birmingham and Manchester, do you have contact with the people in similar roles to yourself, I know they are competitors but...

BA: Yeah, the person in Manchester is a very good friend of mine, he and I wrote a book together a couple of years ago. He was at Liverpool at the time, Dr Paul Redman, so he's just about to take up the post as Director of Student Life. But the person in Birmingham I don't know as well, but they focus around the sports side and the guilds, the athletic union type of

model. It's early days for some universities. You'll have a Pro-Vice-Chancellor for students, a Deputy-Vice-Chancellor for students, who is essentially responsible for student experience. Here at the university we've got a Pro- Vice- Chancellor for students who I work closely with.

It is really important to speak to other universities because they can help us plan and mitigate against some of the pitfalls and vice versa. But also just to look at their approach. This is a universal thing, not a UK phenomenon, it's a global phenomenon. And essentially we really need to get that experience right for all our students and not have one size fits all. Working with and so looking at other universities and how they approach it is very useful.

ISEJ: Obviously you know there are lots of international students at Leicester, I just wondered, do you view them differently, is their experience in your experience different?

BA: We shouldn't view them differently and anyone, any of our colleagues who does view them differently I would want to challenge them. International students are critical to UK Higher Education institutions, to global HE institutions and that's why it's become extremely competitive in terms of student recruitment. The thing though, and I'm saying this personally, is universities have failed international students, to help them enrich that cultural experience on why you go to a foreign country in the first place. And at the same time, we have failed our home students whether they are UK or EU in getting to them to understand the cultural diversity, the beauty of different nationalities and cultures, and kind of almost try and manufacture opportunities for our students to really integrate and engage with each other. We need our home students engaging with our international students and vice versa. But we also have to break down and demystify the sort of misconceptions around international students and perhaps their attainment level, which is perhaps one of the reasons why home students get frustrated. The challenge is to build international student's confidence, especially if they are from the Asian Pacific region, it's about confidence, it's about understanding culturally they don't want to lose face, it's really important to them, so anything that makes them look like they are not able or look like they are not as confident, they won't do it. Because they would rather keep their face than lose their face, it's a massive cultural thing.

ISEJ: So what kind of practical things do you think we could and should be doing?

BA: We have an international students' welcome programme, it needs to be a bit more extensive, in terms of coordination across the university and I know this is going to happen because my team are looking into that.

We also need to get the buddy system working correctly, to really get the home and EU students integrated and understanding that actually the beauty of this, it's within our gifts, because the knowledge in the classroom of different parts of the world is a brilliant precursor to when they get into the world of work and have to work with people from all around the planet anyway.

ISEJ: Could you briefly explain the buddy system?

BA: If I arrive from Taiwan and I'm paired up with somebody from the UK in terms of an ambassador type of role, mentoring type of role, one of our home students can show you how you get things done around here, how you catch a bus, the etiquette of queuing and stuff,

some of the pitfalls they might find, where they can go and look for information, some of the places to visit, some of the beautiful things you can visit across the East Midlands or across the country, just try and take them under their wing, to be a signpost in the first few weeks, month or so of transition. But I think we could improve that, I don't think it's quite where it should be, and one of the things I'm trying to work on at the moment is the principle of work shadowing because I believe it is in our gift as a university to help each and every one of our students with the work shadowing experience. And I'm talking about a maximum of two to three days but there are a number of departments within corporate services, within the academic departments that could host an international student for two or three days just to give them an insight into the working practices of the UK. And all of these things will unlock their confidence and help them understand certain things.

ISEJ: How can Academic Departments help with this?

BA: Academic departments can really help with the education of our home and international students. It's about self-direction gaining that curiosity but actually sometimes initially the first year is about bringing these guys up to the standards, if they are undergraduates. If they are postgraduates it's about manufacturing perhaps a bit more in terms of different groups and very purposely making sure there are different people, different countries represented, as best as you can. Sometimes we have got courses where predominantly it is one country, essentially, but what can we do then to cross collaborate with different departments that perhaps you could do extracurricular activities, or you could do stuff with the career development service, you could do some volunteering stuff. But where it is not always possible, the academics could be really helping to manufacture, broker those opportunities outside of their departments or with ourselves as a central service.

ISEJ: We often talk about international student experience without ever talking to the students themselves. What are you doing to get out there and talk to the students and find out what's really happening to them?

BA: We are running schemes with the students to understand what is it about the experience that's really helped them, which has helped their transition, what could we do more or be better at. These are the things I'm working through at the moment.

It's really important to us as a university. It's be part of a global village, we have to play our part in that and help those students, educate those students and help those emerging economies. And at the same time, it's a great opportunity for our students to learn about different parts of the world. If we do it right, we will continue to attract people from all over the world and they will all want to come to Leicester because hopefully we did right by them, they came here, we helped them transition and we helped them get to the point they wanted to be.

ISEJ: Finally, if you are looking ahead, in maybe 5 years' time, I know you are new in the post but what are your shorter and longer goals?

BA: The first one is to have a coordinated approach across the University, that is absolutely paramount, and a very clear offering of what that student development journey looks like for all our students whether they are mature, home, they have got disabilities, they are international, distance learners, PGRs, whatever, but having a very clear student journey for each of our students. It's not a one size fits all, it's about a very clear bespoke journey that

signposts things, that helps them make the most of themselves and the experience. If you look at just one of the teams I look after in terms of careers, the strapline for careers is: “Make the most of you”. Unless you choose to make the most of you, no one else can help you, and I suspect that’s the message we want to take across the whole student experiences, make the most of you, make the most of the opportunities you’ve got, because it will be soon over and it will probably help you for the rest of your lives actually. In 5 years’ time I’d hope we have a coordinated approach, a coherent approach and an approach that is bespoke to each of our students and the fact we are recognised as someone who does the student experience really well and it’s probably the key component, along with some of our academic colleagues obviously, the key component of why they choose to study at the University of Leicester.