

Starting From Scratch: Supporting International Students' Engagement on Campus

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Tags

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Setting

This case focuses on a situation that the founding head of the Office of International Affairs at a large private university in India experienced in dealing with their international students. At this university, the total number of students is around five thousand, out of which one hundred are international students. India is one of the fastest growing economies and can boast of a large diverse population in terms of cultures, religions and languages being spoken across the country. However, the number of international students is still low in comparison to local students moving out of India to pursue their higher education abroad.

International students bring vibrance and diversity to the educational institutions. Thus, it is of immense importance to understand issues related to creating a rich experience for them to enhance their learning experience while they are studying at foreign institutions, away from their home.

Internationalization of higher education is a relatively new endeavor in India. Consequently, the system for international affairs related activities is still evolving. There are numerous universities that did not have a dedicated office to deal with international student issues for many years. However, with the recent

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announcement of the National Education Policy 2020¹, there is a directive to have such dedicated offices in every university.

This case study elucidates how international students can have better engagement at university campuses through different initiatives. This case study also reflects how a successful model evolved to take care of the various needs and aspirations of international students.

Case

It was Smriti Gupta's first day at work. She had joined as the founding head of the Office of International Affairs that was instituted to cater to the needs of international students along with other internationalization activities. She was a versatile academician and had a dynamic personality. On the first day, she set up a meeting with international students at the campus. As she stepped into the room, she was pleasantly surprised to find a good mix of students from over thirty nations.

She checked in with them regarding their wellbeing and how they felt about joining the university. Further, she asked them if there were any issues that needed attention. Most of them preferred not to speak much but Smriti could sense that they wanted to speak and certainly had issues that needed more support. A young man hailing from Turkey, smartly dressed, came forward and confidently introduced himself as Ali. He brought up some of the issues.

Most of the issues raised were related to the basic needs of daily life. They wanted to go out on weekends and needed institutional support towards transport as they did not feel comfortable taking public transport. Some of them felt that the spices in the university cafeteria food were too hot for them. Because they were having for all three meals at the cafeteria, they were not eating well, causing discomfort in their day-to-day activities.

These were small issues and could be sorted easily, thought Smriti. The next day Smriti joined them at lunch in the university cafeteria and tasted the food. Well, the spices were quite okay for her. In fact, she would be happy to add some more spices to make it tastier (most Indians enjoy spicy food). However, she did connect with the chef to see if a portion of food could be made less spicy to suit the tastes of the international community at the campus. Students were happy with this decision. For their weekend trips, she connected with the transport department, and it was decided that students would have access to free transport for four hours for local visits every weekend. She successfully resolved similar issues over the next few days.

The students appeared happier and more comfortable as the days progressed. They would drop into Smriti's office occasionally to chit-chat with her. Realizing that the students should be even more engaged, Smriti called for an informal brainstorming session to understand what could give them a higher sense of belonging to their institution and an opportunity to interact with the larger university community.

"Why don't we celebrate the national days for our respective countries? This will give us a chance to display our talent and culture to the rest of the campus!" exclaimed Ali.

"Why not, certainly we can," responded Smriti, with a deep smile. And the smile was reciprocated by all the students sitting around, sipping lemonade that Smriti had organized for them as a small treat.

And then the preparations began. Smriti noticed that the students were highly motivated and excited for the "International Students' National Day" as they named it. When the day arrived, it was filled with grandeur as the packed audience of students and faculty in the auditorium applauded the performances. The stage was lit up not only with lights but also with their brilliant performances. Clapping hard to celebrate their success as the

¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

function ended, Smriti was reflecting on how far she had come in facilitating deeper engagement for the international students.

The international students continued to meet her more often now and tell her stories about new friendships they had developed with Indian students.

Smriti began to wonder, “What could I do that would give them more power to be leaders at the campus?”. She had an idea that she wanted to implement. She and the students planned to have a scrap collection camp on campus. The objective of this camp was to collect unused items (therefore, the name, Scrap!) that can be recycled and then used by those who are economically disadvantaged. The plan was to send the proceeds to a nearby NGO that housed people in need, including those with disabilities, the elderly, and orphans. For this activity, she encouraged the international students to create their own action plan. They all got together and fondly called it the “We Care for You” campaign. They created beautiful posters with “We Care for You” slogans. They proudly went around the campus, met with the leadership, and asked for donations - no cash, just the scrap! They moved from class to class announcing their collection of scrap and gleefully answered queries raised by students. They put up collection boxes across the campus and watched happily as the boxes got filled with old books, toys, clothes, and anything else that could be recycled and reused by the NGO.

It was a sight as many international students took off their own jackets and dropped them into the collection boxes. They wanted them to be filled to the brim. So high was the energy. So high was the emotion. Everyone felt surreal participating in the heartwarming initiative. Soon the truck left the campus, full of over fifty such boxes and the boxes were shining with fluorescent smiley stickers all over the boxes.

The next day, there was something different in the air at the campus!

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think some of the basic issues regarding food and transportation needs went unnoticed prior to Smriti’s intervention? What other measures could be taken to address the concerns raised?
- How did Smriti foster inclusion of international students on campus? How can more stakeholders be involved to increase inclusion of international students?
- The case highlights that Smriti was the founding head of the Office of International Affairs. What do you think were her challenges as she took this new role? How can universities support those who are setting up such offices for the first time at their institutions? How can universities enhance their readiness to welcome international students?
- There are two activities mentioned that students lead – the “International Student National Day” and the “We Care for You” campaign. Can you think of differences in the objectives of the two activities? How might these two activities have different outcomes for participating students?
- Smriti wanted to empower the international students. What do you think motivated her? How did her work change the level of international student engagement on campus? How could it impact the overall teaching and learning environment at the campus? What could she do next?
- The last line states - “The next day, there was something different...”. What differences do you think would be there in the life of international students at the campus?
- How can national education policies support international students?