Visiting Student Support in CHSS – SSTN Overview

Visiting Students in CHSS: Context

Visiting students (VS) are mostly hosted in CSE and CHSS, with few based in CMVM. CHSS receives the vast majority of VS applicants and students, and a dedicated VS office has existed in HSS since the College was formed. Originally established to process offers, our remit has increased considerably since then, and now includes all on-programme student support for VS in HSS.

There is currently no equivalent office in CSE or MVM, where the admission of VS is generally dealt with by the respective College Office, and on-programme support devolved to individual Schools.

Visiting undergraduate (VUG) students in CHSS include Erasmus/International Exchanges and independent Study Abroad applicants from partners across the globe. Last year (2011/2012), students were from universities in 38 different countries, and composed of 61 different nationalities.

This September, we welcomed 879 VUGs for semester 1 or the academic year, and expect around another c. 400 to arrive in January.

This includes c. 30-40 students who participate in the Parliamentary Internship Programme, as well as our 2 VUGs Summer Schools: Business in the Arts and the Summer Parliamentary Programme.

VS provide an important source of fee income, provide our own students with international experiences through exchanges, and add to the diversity of the student body.

Role of the CHSS Visiting Student Office (VSO)

The VSO has expanded in recent years to cope with ever increasing numbers of applicants and students. We manage admissions for all VUGs and visiting PG (VPG) students and Summer Schools across HSS.

We are responsible for issuing all CAS numbers and Letters of Acceptance required for VS to obtain the appropriate visa to enter the UK for their period of study with us. We also chase up VS for Attendance Monitoring purposes as required.

We are the Student Support Team – in conjunction with our VS Personal Tutors (VSPTs) – for VS in HSS, providing all on-programme support. We work closely with the International Office to provide induction events, including an Academic Orientation talk and accompanying Academic Guide for Visiting Students. We also liaise regularly with partner universities and study abroad providers whose students are studying with us for a semester or year.

We provide support, guidance and administrative assistance to our network of VSPTs, and other colleagues dealing with HSS VS across the College and University. We should usually be the first point of contact for VS in HSS regarding any academic or personal issue, and usually deal with such issues on behalf of our PTs, including extensions, Special Circs cases and so on.

In addition to the above, we manage VS transfers (i.e. those students who come to UoE for a semester or year and decide they would like to transfer and graduate from here), plus programme extensions/reductions/withdrawals.

We work with colleagues across the University to develop and improve policy and procedures in relation to admitting, supporting and recruiting VS.

We are:

- Alexandra Baker, Head of VSO (Alex.Baker@ed.ac.uk)
- Kirsty Robertson, Senior Visiting Student Adviser (Kirsty.Robertson@ed.ac.uk)
- Hillary Cementina, Visiting Student Adviser (Hillary.Cementina@ed.ac.uk)
- Morna Firth, Visiting Student Adviser (Morna.Firth@ed.ac.uk)
- Calum MacDonald, Visiting Student Adviser (Calum.MacDonald@ed.ac.uk)

We also have three general email accounts, which are usually the first point of contact for most students and academic colleagues. These are:
VS Personal Tutors

VSPTs are often the key advocate and academic mentor for VS, and therefore have a vital role in relation to our reputation with our partner institutions. Efficient Student Support is vital to increasing student mobility in both directions, and to generating valuable income for the University.

Many Schools in HSS struggle to allocate all their own degree-seeking students to PTs, so we are especially grateful to Schools for providing colleagues to undertake this essential role, and to those colleagues themselves for volunteering to do it.

The VSO strives to constantly review and improve the experience for all VS – and their VSPTs – following the rolling out of the new PT system. We are involved in many aspects of the Enhanced Student Support Project, including participating in the Student Support Team Network and various relevant working groups.

VUGs are also potential postgraduate students of the future (receiving a 10% discount on PG tuition fees as VS alumni of the University). Some Schools hold specific events for VUGs to publicise their PG programmes.

Visiting Student Support: Challenges

The VSO introduces VUGs to the academic environment at the University of Edinburgh by way of an Academic Orientation lecture during Freshers’ Week/week 1 in January and our Academic Guide for Visiting Students. The purpose of both these activities is to familiarise VS with academic norms and teaching/learning styles that they will experience whilst at UoE. Inevitably, some adapt more readily to this than others.

VS have to deal with homesickness, difficulty adjusting to an often more rigorous curriculum than they are used to, personal issues, health concerns, and a host of other situations that most degree-seeking students can also expect to encounter. The difference with VS is that they are often away from home for the first time and, particularly if they are here for just one semester, may have just about adapted to life in Edinburgh before they head home. For this reason they can often rely on their PT and the VSO more than other students might rely on similar support.

In addition, VS from some countries expect far more of academic and support staff than we are accustomed to in Scotland. In the US, for e.g., it is perfectly normal to expect to go to dinner fairly regularly with your professors! Obviously we don’t expect colleagues to go to those lengths, but we are constantly aware that the demands on their time and the expectations of their tutees are often vastly different to those of “home” students.

Our aim is to create and nurture a network of expert academic, administrative and support staff who work with the support and assistance of the VSO in enhancing the experience of this important, if complex, cohort of students.

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College of Humanities & Social Science
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