

# **Universities Partnership International Civic Reception – 11 October 2023 Event Report**

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**Working together for  
Leicester, Leicestershire  
and Rutland**



## Introduction

The civic universities agreement is a commitment between De Montfort University, Loughborough University, University of Leicester, and the city and counties of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland to work together for the benefit of local people and the prosperity of our places.

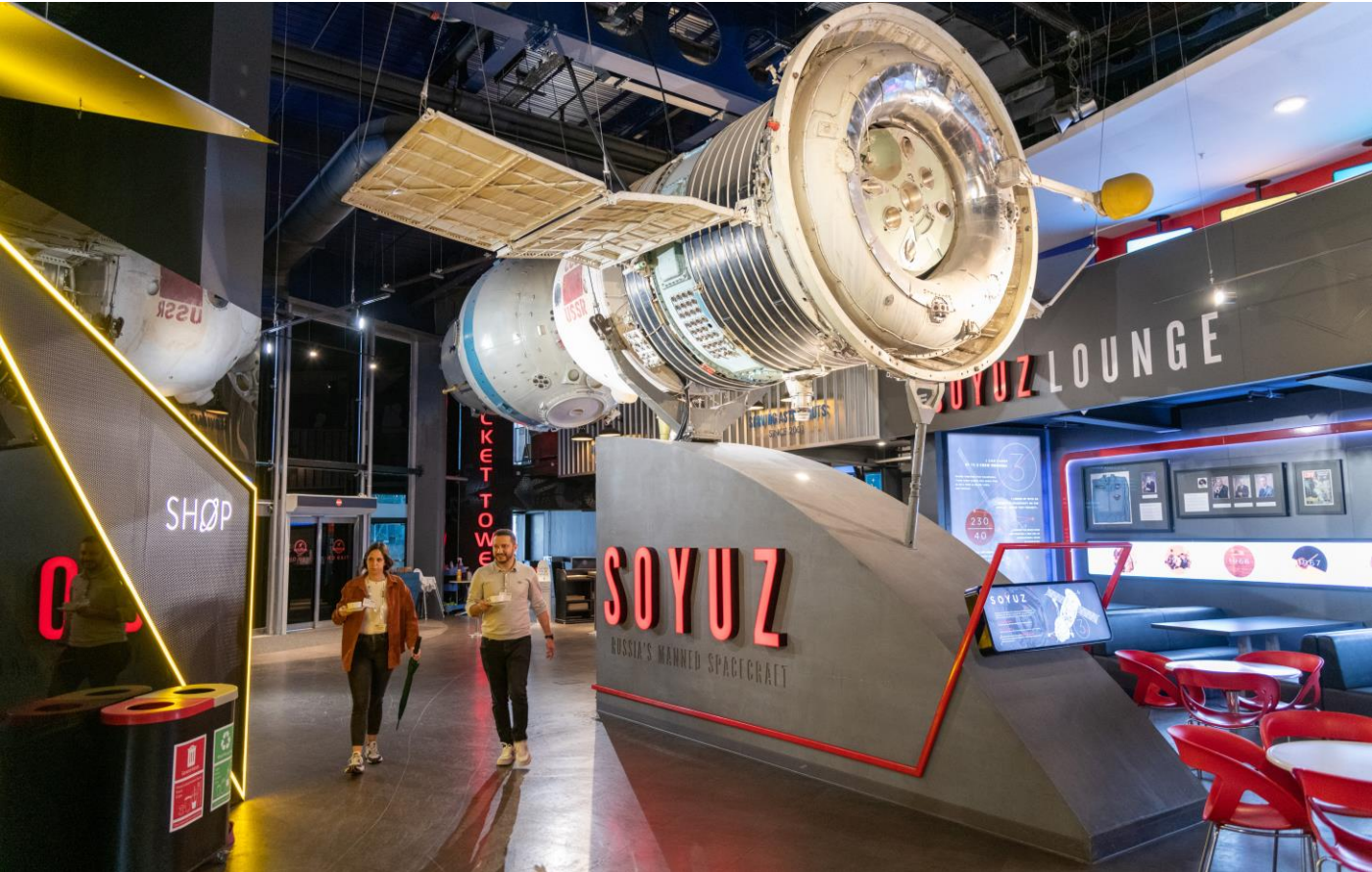
The 'Universities Partnership' combines the collective strengths of our universities and civic institutions to make a greater impact through collaboration for, with and among our communities. This Civic Agreement marks the beginning of a journey, signalling a commitment by the partners to bring together our collective skills, expertise and social capital and collaborate in the long-term interests of our communities.

## Context of the Event

Under the Universities Partnership (UP), partner universities and local authorities jointly delivered a campaign to promote international education and inward investment in our region through a project named 'Universities Partnership International'.

The project was centred on an international showcase week being held 9 - 13 October 2023 which also included further opportunities to promote stories and celebrate the benefits of international education in our region.

By working together as a partnership, we aim to make our region more appealing to international markets and attract international candidates to choose Leicestershire as their study destination.



## Aims

The project aimed to increase international student recruitment and partnership opportunities for Leicestershire, thereby:

- Boosting the regional economy
- Supporting our communities through the benefits international education and partnerships brings to education, the economy, culture and wider society
- demonstrate to international partners that Leicestershire is among the most diverse and welcoming places in the UK

## The Event

The civic reception involved over 45 international educational partners with a global reach for student recruitment who were invited to visit the area for a week-long celebration of everything the region and our universities have to offer to international students. At the event they heard from the universities, met regional leaders, heard about local businesses programmes for developing and recruiting graduates, local tourist destinations and the faith offer across the area.

The event was attended by circa 90 people

- the audience included local government leaders and senior officers
- senior civic stakeholders e.g. sports clubs and local enterprise partnership
- senior staff from the three universities
- VIPs include the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Mayor of Leicester, Chairman of Leicestershire County Council and Mayor of Charnwood
- 45+ international educational recruitment agents from across the world working in Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific, China, Hong Kong, India, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia (excl India), the Americas and some with a global reach.
- International students and alumni of the three Leicestershire universities

## The Big Question: How do we attract international students to Leicestershire?

During this interactive workshop session, we explored the international student and alumni experience of studying in Leicestershire, heard what makes an area attractive

for international applicants, and discussed what's working well and how the area could be made even more attractive in this international market sector. The session was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the experience of international students and alumni of Leicestershire as a study destination?
2. What are international students looking for when choosing a place to study in the UK?
3. How do we attract more international students to Leicestershire's universities? What is working well? What could be improved?

The discussions were led and noted at each table by a senior representative of either the universities or a local council and the tables included a mix of international students/alumni, civic stakeholders and dignitaries, university representatives and international education recruitment partners.



## **Feedback**

### **“Leicestershire’s location is key!”**

The conversations that followed in response to the questions centred around a number of themes highlighting the positive experiences that students and alumni wanted to share alongside some areas where improvements could be made. The international recruitment partners offered up invaluable insight from their experience of supporting prospective students and remaining in touch with candidates and alumni. Some recruitment agents were international alumni of other UK higher education institutions themselves.

#### **Place**

Throughout the conversation Leicestershire’s location was seen as one of its main advantages and a unique selling point. Delegates referred to the area’s proximity to London and Birmingham with great connectivity both nationally and internationally as being very attractive.

An agent commented that students often pick universities based on their parents’ budget so many are looking at smaller towns and have a preference to live outside big cities with the option of visiting easily. The size of the Leicester and Loughborough were seen by many as a very positive attribute; students said that the area quickly becomes familiar, was easy to walk and it was nice to start to recognise faces and people in their local area after a short period of time. This also reinforced the feeling that the area was a safe place to live with a good reputation nationally as a place to live and work. The smaller regional cities and towns are becoming increasingly attractive as the cost of living in larger cities continues to rise. The local environment with a mix of towns and countryside and green spaces within easy reach was also highlighted as a positive strength of the region. It was highlighted that the UK offers a way to achieve a degree in less time than other countries such as Canada, this was seen as positive as it provided a streamlined pathway into work.

#### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Many referenced a ‘sense of belonging’ and a ‘home from home’ with food, language and the ability to mix within their own cultural community and with others as great attributes of Leicester in particular. This encouraged many students to return as alumni as they had a strong feeling of being part of the community. Students were looking for social and cultural societies to enhance their academic experience and appreciated the rich history of the area.

Some of the agents explained how they arrange local tours that include where banks, supermarkets and food outlets are for those later in the application process.

The cultural offer of the area was noted as a magnet for international students. The diversity of faiths, festivals and language contributed to the region's attraction to prospective applicants.

A current student at De Montfort University highlighted a Narborough Road local family business offering Indian food packages to students.

Another aspect of life in the region that was much appreciated was inclusivity; going beyond diversity to celebrate and enable all people to be themselves.

When considering what could be improved, there were calls from many of the delegates for increased diversity and representation in the workforce of the universities.

### **Accommodation**

The area was praised for offering a range of good quality accommodation to meet all requirements. Although affordability was a key factor which was well catered for, it was also mentioned that the area offered some 'high-end' accommodation for those that wanted more luxury.

It was noted that post graduate students and researchers may wish to bring their families with them so having good and safe accommodation is important.

Accommodation close to campus was another benefit which reduced travel time and costs and would support high attendance, as per UKVI attendance requirements.

### **Courses, rankings and opportunities**

International students are conscious of the rankings of universities and they know this is important to both them as students and prospective employers. Career prospects and employability are an important factor when looking to invest in studying abroad as are teaching and research quality. They are interested in global, country and subject rankings and class sizes. It was felt that all three universities were well established in the rankings.

It was noted that the three universities offer a good variety of courses across the region with a range of different specialisms. An agent commented "each university has its own strengths". The research and development opportunities of the area were also seen as a strong selling point for the local institutions. The quality of the campus environment and facilities within schools was also a key deciding factor when selecting a place to study.

Across the conversation delegates highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for work experience and 'hands on' activities as part of teaching. Placements and internship options came up on several occasions as a key factor in choosing a course or institution.

When considering areas for improvement it was suggested that job opportunities and work experience could be increased with closer links to local business and industry.



There were a number of challenges raised relating to the availability of placements for nursing for example and some barriers to work placements due to visa restrictions that needed to be overcome. It was felt that the area lacked large corporate employers and that the routes to employment may be “less obvious” than in larger cities. To support this, it was felt that success stories could be celebrated and promoted in collaboration with business and industry. There was a suggestion that more combined programmes for example, Business with Sport and enhanced Finance and Technical options could be developed to create more unique propositions for study. There was a call for more scholarships and placements to support employability including a request to consider a regional scholarship and reduced fee discount offer. For those that were interested in starting their own enterprise it was felt that more support could be available for business start ups.

## **Support**

International students and alumni considered that generally support from the three universities was good helping with wellbeing and belonging. Those that were affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns felt they received good support in their accommodation.

When considering areas that could be improved, one delegate suggested considering peer to peer recruitment such as Unibuddy. Some students and alumni said that ‘international student specific’ support could be increased and language support was particularly highlighted. Post-graduation was raised as a particularly challenging time for international students with a feeling that they were “on their own” when navigating visas and Right to Work with employers and they would welcome more support immigration policies including guidance and instructions on how to complete processes. They felt the universities could also work more closely with businesses to inform them about graduate visas.

There was a lot of support for increased opportunities to take part in summer schools which offer a ‘soft landing’ into the UK and the local community. Some of the delegates raised affordability and deposits as a barrier to study and called for a faster turnaround of offers.

## **Conclusion**

The conversation highlighted the very many positive selling points for the area as a destination for international students. There was an overwhelming call to celebrate the area and to promote the good work and successes that have been achieved. One delegate said “Don’t be humble use your unique selling points as a way to open the conversation with international markets”. There was strong support and thanks for the Universities Partnership International showcase as a way to demonstrate that the area is open to international students and welcomes them to the area. Many of

the visitors highlighted that they had learned new things about the three universities which would help them when supporting prospective students to choose where to study.



“This is an historic event – it is the first time in the UK that universities have come together with civic and business partners and with international higher education partners in order to promote a region”

**Prof Henrietta O'Connor, Provost and Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Leicester**



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