

Research into the international student experience in the UK 2015-16



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**Reaching out to enhance the wellbeing of international students.
Are university counselling and wellbeing services accessible and inclusive?**

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Contents

1.	Background to the project	4
2.	Introduction and rationale	4
3.	Methodology	5
4.	Summary of key findings	6
	The questionnaire	6
	Focus group themes: an outline	6
	Project group themes: an outline	7
5.	Recommendations	7
6.	Student population in Plymouth University	8
7.	International students use of Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service: a comparison with some other UK universities.	8
8.	International student well-being survey	8
	Respondent file	9
	Results	9
	Section A: wellbeing of international students	9
	Section B: strategies for coping with stress	10
	Section C: use of university counselling services	11
9.	Focus groups results	13
10.	The project group	19
11.	The semi-structured interviews	20
12.	Conclusion	23
13.	References	24

List of tables

Table 1:	Student population at Plymouth University	8
Table 2:	International students use of Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service: a comparison with some other UK universities	8
Table 3:	Ethnic origin of respondents	8
Table 4:	Nationality of respondents	9
Table 5:	ONS wellbeing and Social Trust Responses	9
Figure 1:	Strategies for coping with stress	10
Table 6:	Who would you talk to if you got stressed?	11
Table 7:	“Whilst you have been at Plymouth University, have you used any of the following services for help?”	11
Table 8:	Comparison of mean ranking of sources of support by level of study	12
Table 9:	“What might stop you going to see a university counsellor when you were feeling unhappy, worried or distressed?”	13

1. Background to the project

In 2014-15, the proportion of international students seeking counselling at Plymouth University had dropped from 7.7% in 2013-14 (of the total number of students using the counselling service) to 2.8% in 2014-15. Given that international students (EU and non-EU) form approximately 10% of the student population, this figure was concerning.

This research sought to inquire:

- Why international students are not using counselling services?
- What affects international students' wellbeing?
- What would help international students to feel happier at university?

Definition of wellbeing

The project defined wellbeing as having both individual and social components and sought to inquire about how international students addressed both their:

- **individual wellbeing** which was defined as, 'satisfaction, vitality, resilience and self-esteem and sense of positive functioning in the world' (NEF, 2009) and their
- **social wellbeing** which addressed their 'experiences of supportive relationships and sense of trust and belonging with others' (nef, 2009).

The research will help the sector to:

- engage in rethinking of the traditional delivery of university counselling and wellbeing services
- create modes of service development that engage staff, home and international students as partners and co-creators of services and innovation, and
- develop inclusive practices

The research team ethos

We are:

- Committed to 'reaching out' to international students, rather than expecting international students to 'come in' to pre-existing services
- Dedicated to working in partnership with students
- Prepared to challenge traditional views and models of counselling and wellbeing services

2. Introduction and rationale

Underutilisation of university counselling services by international students

There is currently no central collection of data about use of counselling by international students in British universities and, until 2016, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Universities and Colleges Annual Survey did not collect this data. There are no readily available means of benchmarking international students' take up of UK university counselling services. However, widespread international research cites underutilisation of university counselling services by international students (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Russell et al., 2008; Pedersen, 1991).

The stress of adjusting to living in a new culture

The transition to a new culture can be stressful and may cause international students to experience more problems adjusting than home students (Leong and Sedlacek, 1986). Research findings consistently report that international students have greater counselling needs than home students (Nicolas et al., 2013; Raunic & Xenos, 2008), and it is hoped that international students utilise university counselling services to help them cope with issues raised in adjusting to living and studying in a new country. Levels of social support are closely linked with psychological wellbeing (Segrin, 2001) and the move to another country could disrupt international students' usual social support systems. Maluccio (1979) suggests that counselling may have a role in 'triggering' clients to establish new friendships, re-establish old ones and enhance their family relationships. Counselling could therefore support international students to develop their systems of social support within a new country, and enhance their levels of wellbeing.

Do counselling services support the ongoing process of adaptation to a new culture?

Several researchers have suggested that formal models of counselling may not fully accommodate the needs of international students (Arthur, 1997; Crockett and Hays, 2011, Smith, 2014). Russell et al (2008) regret the lack of 'clear empirical evidence on which universities can base the structuring and improvement of their health and counselling

services for international students.’ Smith (2014) concludes that a ‘noticeable gap is the absence of interventions directly targeting psychological adaptation’.

The aim of the research: finding ways to support and enhance international students’ wellbeing

This research proposed to meet this gap by engaging international students from Plymouth University via focus groups and a survey to ascertain their understanding of the counselling services, and perceived barriers to accessing these. The focus groups sought to understand the wellbeing needs of international students at Plymouth University, and use this data to inform the development of services to enhance wellbeing.

This project extended pre-existing research done at the university by international students in partnership with the Student Counselling and Personal Development Service in 2014-15 (The Plymouth University Counselling Service, 2014).

Following the focus groups, the research team employed international and home students to work together in a four week project group, to reflect upon the focus group findings and discuss the type of wellbeing interventions that could engage both international and home students. This aimed to break down cultural barriers, increase communication between home and international students and create a space for social relating.

The research featured a partnership approach between students and the researchers.

3. Methodology

An online questionnaire was sent out via the International Student Advisory Service to all international students to identify their understanding of counselling, barriers to accessing university counselling services, and their wellbeing needs. The questionnaire was analysed using SPSS and the themes informed the focus groups’ discussion.

Four focus groups were held with international students. Each group consisted of between 4-10 participants in order to fall within the numbers of participants described as acceptable in focus group literature (Kitzinger, 1995).

The questionnaire and focus group data were analysed and key themes identified.

Those themes informed a joint project between six international students and three home students.

These project group students were recruited from the university student jobs department. In partnership with Anne Bentley, Student Counselling and Personal Development Service Manager and Dawn Hastings, a Student Counsellor, students sought to develop proposals about how services could enhance the wellbeing of international students.

A focus group method was selected as it was felt that a group setting may engage people who may feel that they do not have much to offer in a one-to-one interview situation (Kitzinger, 1995) and given that international students do not present for one-to-one counselling, it was felt that a group setting may be preferable and encourage participation. Also it offered the opportunity for the sharing of thoughts and experiences and could enable a ‘group process’ to develop which offered synergies between participants’ contributions and ideas.

An all-Chinese focus group was facilitated by Anne Bentley. Students were invited to speak in Chinese but they chose to speak in English. This may have been out of respect for Anne.

The remaining three focus group sessions were facilitated by the Research Assistant, Michelle Virgo and involved international students from a variety of different countries. The four focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Following initial thematic analysis of the focus group data, four three-hour project groups were held involving home and international students, facilitated by Anne Bentley and Dawn Hastings.

These sessions offered space for home and international students to reflect upon the themes that emerged from the focus groups with the aim of arriving at tentative suggestions about how the institutional climate could enhance the wellbeing of international students.

Following the project groups, the participants were offered the opportunity to have a semi-structured interview with the Research Assistant, Michelle Virgo. These interviews focused upon participants’ experience of working in a

multicultural project group. The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that it enables both a focus on the aims of the research and gives space for new associated material to emerge through dialogue with the researcher.

Transcripts of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Rance, 2015). This qualitative data analysis technique is widely used in counselling and psychology research as it enables the discovery of 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p15) across the data.

The transcribed data was coded and sorted into themes. The process involved a rigorous process of moving back and forth across the entire data set ensuring consistency of coding and accuracy of themes.

The quality and rigour of the analysis was maintained by involvement of all the researchers in the process of analysis. First the Research Assistant, Michelle Virgo, explored and identified themes. These were reviewed by Anne Bentley and refined to develop a deeper understanding. Anne used this to develop the analysis and ensure that it reflected the meanings and experiences of the participants (both tacit and overt).

The qualitative results were then reviewed a third time by the co-researcher, Dawn Hastings to ensure consistency and to see if any other meanings or analytic interpretations could be surfaced.

4. Summary of key findings

The research was carried out in the form of a questionnaire, focus groups and a project group. Below we list the key findings from each stage of the research.

The questionnaire

- Students living overseas for the first time have lower levels of wellbeing
- Students with higher wellbeing scores are likely to say that they cope with stress by finding someone to talk to more of the time or by keeping busy
- Students with lower wellbeing scores are more likely to avoid talking to other people and avoid academic work

- Respondents were much more likely to talk to family and friends about stress than to university staff or other professional helpers
- Students who feel better are more likely to be willing to go to their academic tutor, and those who feel worse are more likely to look online for support
- The most agreed-with reason for not using the counselling service was the belief that "I should be able to sort out my problems by myself". This belief was stronger amongst undergraduates than postgraduate students
- Students for whom it was their first time living overseas were more likely to cite difficulties with language, worries about the counsellor thinking badly of them and not maintaining confidentiality as barriers to seeing a university counsellor than those who had lived overseas before

Focus group themes: an outline

Transition

Transition was experienced as 'away from' (first language, family and social networks, physical environment and cultural context) rather than 'towards' (exciting new opportunities).

Adjusting

To academic life

- Differences in expectation and uncertainty about what was expected

To other support services

- Concern that staff without knowledge of culture/language may not be able to understand individual concerns/experience

To different culture

- Not having the same cultural references as 'home' students contributing to feelings of homesickness
- Lack of cultural reference construed as a 'lacking' on their part
- Feeling that difficulties should be managed independently

To language

- Language barrier inhibits social connections
- Difficulties expressing themselves 'across cultures' leading to a fear of being misunderstood

Social networks

- Loss of support from family or friends
- Easier to reach out to other international

students than to 'home' students

- Social networks happen through participation in activities either through joining clubs/societies or via academic connections (classes/language sessions)

Support

- A sense of inappropriateness or failure attached to seeking support
- Low belief that talking about difficulties could be helpful
- Difficult feelings were largely abated by experience of social activities
- A focus on self-reliance
- A wish for more satisfying social connections and activities

Counselling service

- A lack of awareness about what counselling is
- Concerns about expressing themselves in another language
- Concern that counsellors may give culturally inappropriate advice
- Accessing counselling means you are a 'psycho', 'weird', 'not normal' or mentally unwell

Project group themes: an outline

"Touched by the group" experience

- Experience of warm relationships in a safe and empathic space
- Hearing others' stories led to feelings of sadness, shock and disbelief but forged feelings of support and solidarity
- Focus group themes resonated with students' own experience

'Crossing the emotional divide'

- Students put themselves in the shoes of others
- Students owned their part in needing to reach out to home and other international students to make friendships

'Hope for the future'

- Students opened themselves up to the possibility of friendships with students from other cultures

'It's OK not to be OK.' Awareness of counselling

- The project group raised awareness of counselling
- Students were inspired to challenge stigma around counselling and promote the message 'it's OK not to be OK'

- Shift in perception: counselling seen as "a good thing" and a service they would promote

New ideas

- Many varied and innovative ideas to promote engagement/inclusion of international students were shared in the group; seeking community underpinned all

5. Recommendations

Social wellbeing

1. Wellbeing and other professional services could devise and deliver community-oriented social projects involving home and international students
2. Social activities could be facilitated rather than open events where students are expected to independently 'mingle'
3. Consultancy groups involving international students could respect their expertise and engender new ideas for supporting international students' acclimatisation.
4. Peer support programmes could be deployed
Peer supporters could engage with new international students through social events and/or could offer a buddying service. The buddying relationship could begin via email pre-arrival

Individual wellbeing (counselling services)

1. Promotional materials should be translated into a number of international languages
2. Efforts should be made to have multilingual counsellors
3. Plymouth University's SHINE website (www.plymouth.ac.uk/shine) could create specific pages for international students and for Chinese students in Chinese. This could include sections on adjusting to a new culture; a guide to Plymouth University, and a description of what counselling is. The creation of these pages could be in itself a project for international students

6. Student population in Plymouth University

Table 1: Student population at Plymouth University

2014-15 Enrolments	Postgraduate		Undergraduate		Total	
	Headcount	Percentage	Headcount	Percentage	Headcount	Percentage
EU	345	11.99	671	2.90	1016	3.91
Home	2088	72.55	21076	91.17	23164	89.11
Islands	6	0.21	55	0.24	61	0.23
Overseas	439	15.25	1315	5.69	1754	6.75
Grand Total	2878	100.00	23117	100.00	25995	100.00

7. International students' use of Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service: a comparison with some other UK universities

Table 2: International students use of Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service: a comparison with some other UK universities

Academic year	Percentage of total number of international students accessing counselling			
	Plymouth University	University of Nottingham*	Brunel University	University of Bristol
2014-15	2.8%	18%	26%	14%

*Includes data from Malaysia and China campuses

8. International student wellbeing survey

Respondent profile

A link to a Survey Monkey online survey was emailed to international students. 138 students clicked on the link between 8 January and 29 January 2016. Of these, 35 abandoned the survey, leaving 103 complete or partially complete cases for analysis. Where results are given in tables, missing cases have been omitted and percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Respondents ranged from age 17 to 44 with a mean age of 24. 64 respondents were female, 37 were male and 1 preferred not to say. Ethnic origin of respondents is given in Table 3.

Table 3 Ethnic origin of respondents

Ethnic origin	Number	Percent
Asian – Chinese	23	23
Asian – Indian	8	8
Asian – Pakistani	1	1
Asian – other	9	9
White	47	47
Black – African	8	8
Caribbean	1	1
Mixed - Black African and White	1	1
Mixed - Asian and White	2	2
Total	100*	100

* Three missing cases were omitted from the 103 completed or partially completed cases.

Respondents came from 28 different countries (Table 3), with the largest single nationalities represented being mainland China and Hong Kong. For 61 students, it was their first time living overseas, and 41 stated that they had lived overseas before coming to Plymouth. Of the respondents, 75 were undergraduate and 27 postgraduate students. For 37 respondents, it was their first or only year of study, 42 were in their final year and 20 were in their second or other year (e.g. third year of a four year programme).

Table 4 Nationality of respondents

Country/region	No	Countries included
China, Hong Kong	9	Hong Kong
China, mainland	12	China
Asia except China	18	India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia, Indonesia
Eastern Mediterranean	4	Lebanon, Turkey, Cyprus
Africa	9	Angola, Nigeria, Morocco, Libya
North America	6	Canada, USA
South America	4	Brazil
Western Europe	23	Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, Greece, Ireland
Eastern Europe	15	Poland, Russia, Czech Republic, Slovakia
Total	100	

Results

Section A:

Wellbeing of international students

Respondents' overall wellbeing was investigated using two different indicators: the short version of the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Taggart et al. 2015) and four questions from the UK Office of National Statistics (Office for National Statistics 2015). A standard survey research question relating to social trust was also included.

SWEMWBS responses were coded such that 1 = None of the time, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = All of the time. A new raw variable was created from the sum of these variables and converted to a metric score (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009).

The ONS wellbeing questions and the social trust question are scored on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is extremely dissatisfied/unhappy or not at all anxious or worthwhile and 10 is extremely satisfied/happy /anxious /worthwhile.

The standard social trust question was reworded slightly to avoid confusion for respondents whose first language is not English, so the question used in this survey read: "Generally

speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that most people cannot? Please give a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means that most people cannot be trusted and 10 means that most people can be trusted."

The SWEMWBS questions were answered by 102 respondents with a metric (adjusted) score that ranged from 9.51 to 30.70, with a mean of 21.86. The mean national score for all adults as recorded in the 2011 Health Survey for England was 23.6 (Taggart et al. 2015).

Responses to the ONS well-being and social trust questions are set out in Table 5.

Students living overseas for the first time have lower levels of wellbeing. Their mean scores on the SWEMWBS are 21.02 compared to 23.06 for those who have lived overseas before. [M (first time overseas) = 21.02, SE= 0.51. M (lived overseas before) = 23.06 SE= 0.57. $t(100) = -2.62$, $p = 0.01$.]*

The direction of the relationship between "first time overseas" students and the four ONS wellbeing questions is consistent with their SWEMWBS scores, for example that first time overseas students are less satisfied and happy, more anxious and feel their activities are less worthwhile than those who have been abroad before. However, the differences observed in the responses to the ONS wellbeing questions are not large enough for us to be certain that they are more than just chance.

Older students are happier and feel that the things they do are more worthwhile. [(rs (happy) =.234 $p=0.021$ $n=97$) (rs (worthwhile) =.216 $p=.033$ $n=97$)].

Relationships between nationality or ethnic origin and wellbeing are difficult to discern from this data. Students who identified their ethnic origin as white scored more highly on the ONS questions about being satisfied with life, being

Table 5: ONS wellbeing and Social Trust Responses

Question	Number	Mean	Median	Mode
Overall, how satisfied with your life are you nowadays?	100	6.08	7	7
Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?	100	5.62	6	7
Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?	100	4.66	5	5
Overall, to what extent do you think the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	100	6.65	7	8
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that most people cannot?	98	5.14	5.5	8

* For definitions of basic statistical terms see:
<http://tinyurl.com/hr2fa9n>
<http://tinyurl.com/h7l2ds3>

happy and on social trust but there was no significant difference between these two groups on the SWEMWBS scale.

There were no significant relationships between gender, level of study or year of study and wellbeing.

Section B: strategies for coping with stress

Respondents were asked “What do you do when you feel stressed?” and offered possible strategies, to which they could respond on a scale ranging from “none of the time” to “all of the time” (Figure 1). They were also asked to indicate other coping strategies. Responses to this narrative question included prayer, meditation, smoking and distractions such as reading or TV.

Figure 1: Strategies for coping with stress

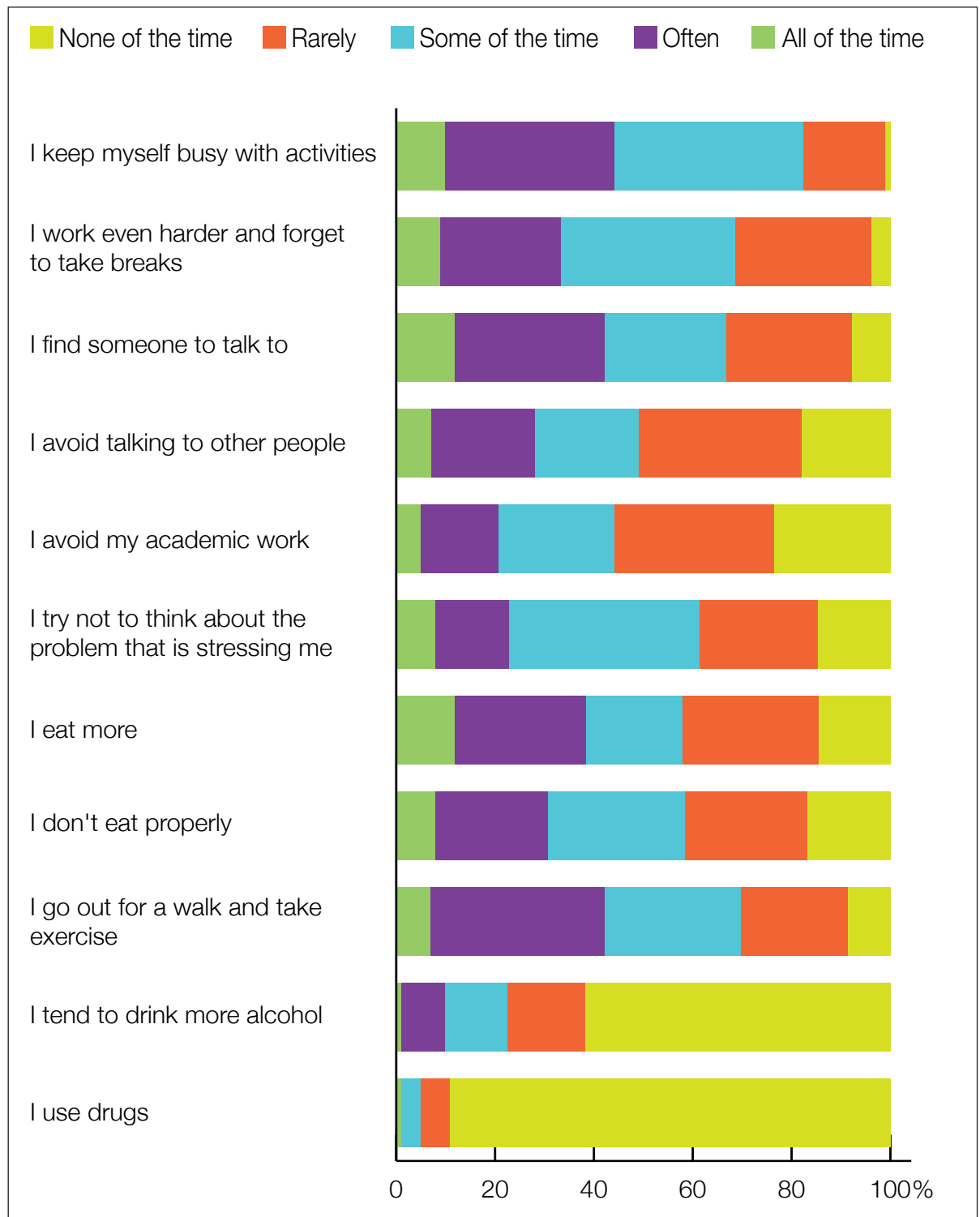


Table 6: Who would you talk to if you got stressed?

Person	Number	"Would talk to"	"Would think about talking to"	"Would not talk to"
Family member	101	63	24	14
My friends	102	54	40	8
My tutor or another member of the academic staff	101	12	52	37
A Plymouth University counsellor	99	10	42	47
My doctor / GP	101	9	31	60
Someone from the International Student Advisory Service	101	5	40	56
Staff from the chaplaincy	100	4	23	73
People on internet forums	100	3	19	78

Students with higher SWEMWBS wellbeing scores are likely to say that they cope with stress by finding someone to talk to more of the time or keeping busy. Students with lower SWEMWBS scores are more likely to avoid talking to other people and avoid academic work. [$r_s(\text{talk}) = .474, p < 0.01$ $r_s(\text{keep busy}) = .372, p < 0.01$ $r_s(\text{avoid talking to other people}) = -.347, p < 0.01$ $r_s(\text{avoid academic work}) = -.348, p < 0.01$]

The data suggests that there might be a relationship between lower wellbeing on the SWEMWBS scale and using drugs as a coping strategy. However, we do not have enough data to be very confident of this. [$r_s(\text{use drugs}) = -.204, p = 0.04$]

Respondents were much more likely to talk to family and friends about stress than to university staff or other professional helpers (Table 6). Men were more likely to talk to academic staff than women.

Section C:

Use of university counselling services

Students were asked which university services they had used for help. This question followed

the questions about stress and talking to people, but did not specifically refer to support with emotional stress or wellbeing. Therefore, responses were likely to include services used for practical help and support such as accommodation or academic matters. Tutors and academic staff were the most used source of help, followed by the International Student Advisory Service (ISAS) and the University Medical Centre (Table 7).

An additional question which asked respondents to rank sources of support showed that postgraduate respondents ranked online self-help significantly lower than undergraduates. They ranked family and friends significantly higher (Table 8). Older students are less likely to make use of online self-help. [$r_p = -2.83, p = .010, n = 83$]

Meanwhile, older students were more likely to rank their academic tutor higher as a source of support $r_p = .289, p = .006, n = 90$.

Table 7: "Whilst you have been at Plymouth University, have you used any of the following services for help?"

Service	Number	"Yes"	"No, but I would consider using it"	"No, and I am not likely to use it"	"I did not know about it"
Student Counselling Service	100	12	44	19	25
The Listening Post	101	8	25	46	22
ISAS	102	40	23	29	8
Learning Development	99	14	42	25	18
Tutors/Academic staff	102	61	20	17	3
The Chaplaincy	101	6	27	36	32
University Medical Centre	101	36	38	20	7
UPSU	102	26	27	37	9
24hr Anytime Advice line	101	1	28	25	47
Peer Support Programme	101	5	27	29	40

Table 8: Comparison of mean ranking of sources of support by level of study

		Mean	SE	t*	df	Sig
Online help	Undergraduate	6.08	0.373			
	Postgraduate	3.03	0.551	4.00	83	<0.001
Family	Undergraduate	8.14	0.327			
	Postgraduate	9.12	0.310	-2.17	75	0.033
Friends	Undergraduate	8.01	0.279			
	Postgraduate	9.07	0.150	-3.34	94	0.001

*equal variances not assumed

Additional significant relationships between SWEMWBS and ranking of sources of support are:

- Academic Tutor $r_{p=}.400$ $p<0.001$ $n=92$ (positive correlation)
- Counselling Service $r_{p=-}.228$ $p=.034$ $n=86$ (negative correlation)
- Students' Union $r_{p=}.291$ $p=.006$ $n=87$ (positive correlation)
- ISAS $r_{p=-}.225$ $p=.031$ $n=92$ (negative correlation)
- Online self-help $r_{p=-}.428$ $p<.001$ $n=85$ (negative correlation)

These tell us that students who feel better are more likely to be willing to go to their academic tutor, and those who feel worse are more likely to look online for support. Age is a factor here, as we have already observed that older students have higher wellbeing and are less likely to look for support online. We also have evidence that men and older students are more likely to talk to an academic tutor and could theorise that this is because they are more confident to do so. They also tell us that it is the students with lower levels of wellbeing (but not the lowest, who look online) are more likely to seek support from the student counselling service.

When asked the direct question "Before doing this survey, did you know that Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service offers services to support students who are feeling stressed?" 50% answered yes. 27% of respondents knew where the counselling service was located on campus and 30% knew what services were offered. Older students are slightly more likely to be aware of the counselling service ($r = -.022$ $p = 0.29$ $n = 98$). Male respondents are slightly more likely than female ones to know where the counselling service is located ($\chi^2 = 10.52$ $p = 0.005$) and slightly more likely to know what services are offered ($\chi^2 = 5.997$ $p = 0.05$).

The most agreed-with reason for not using the counselling service was the belief that "I should be able to sort out my problems by myself" (Table 9). This belief was stronger amongst undergraduates than postgraduate students $t(100) = 2.07$, $p = 0.042$. Postgraduates were more likely to think that their problems are not important enough $t(100) = 3.96$, $p < 0.001$.

Students for whom it was their first time living overseas were more likely to cite difficulties with language, worries about the counsellor thinking badly of them and not maintaining confidentiality as barriers to seeing a university counsellor than those who had lived overseas before. A similar effect was noted for students in their first year of study.

Respondents whose ethnic origin is White are less likely than other international students to cite differences in culture $t(97) = 4.37$, $p < 0.001$ or perceived lack of confidentiality $t(97) = 2.40$, $p = 0.018$ as a barrier to seeing a university counsellor. Gender did not appear to significantly influence barriers to seeing a counsellor.

Students with lower SWEMWBS wellbeing scores were more likely to give the following reasons for not going to see a university counsellor

- "I don't think that a university counsellor could help me" ($r = -.239$, $p = .016$ $n = 102$)
- "I would find it difficult to explain my problems in English" ($r = -.207$, $p = .036$ $n = 102$)
- "I don't think the counsellor would understand about the differences in my culture" ($r = -.290$, $p = .003$ $n = 102$)
- "I would worry that the counsellor would think badly of me" ($r = .205$, $p = .039$ $n = 102$)

Respondents who were low in social trust were more concerned that the counsellor would not understand about their culture. ($r = -.298$, $p = 0.003$ $n = 98$).

"Students who feel better are more likely to be willing to go to their academic tutor, and those who feel worse are more likely to look online for support."

Table 9: “What might stop you going to see a university counsellor when you were feeling unhappy, worried or distressed?”

Question	Number	Strongly agree/agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree/strongly disagree %
I think I should be able to sort my problems out by myself	102	71	22	8
I didn't know there was a counselling service at Plymouth	101	32	21	48
I don't think a university counsellor could help me	102	26	42	51
I would find it hard to explain my problems in English	102	17	21	63
I don't think the counsellor would understand about the differences in my culture	102	26	20	54
I would worry that the counsellor would think badly of me	102	18	22	60
I do not think my problems are important enough	102	35	33	31
The counselling service is not confidential and may tell others about my problems	102	10	27	63

“71% of students surveyed think they should be able to sort their problems out by themselves.”

9. Focus groups results

As described in the methodology, the qualitative data considered in the following sections was reviewed by all three researchers using thematic analysis to surface, explore, deepen and cross check themes and meanings. The discussion below represents the outcomes (so far) of this process.

1. Transition

Students' experiences at Plymouth University coalesced around the central theme of transition with four major sub-categories. Adapting to the Plymouth environment was experienced as a continuous, complex process.

Sub categories:

- Transition from (loss)
- Arrival (shock)
- Settling in (experiences of support)
- Feelings about transition

Underlying these categories were strongly felt emotional narratives that centred around loneliness and isolation. This emotional content permeated the categories.

Transition from

Students talked about what they had left behind in terms of social network, family and pets, suggesting a sense of mourning for a defined social sense of self that could not be publically seen or implied within this new social world of Plymouth.

‘Back in China I’ve got a family, I’ve got friends from primary school to high school ... I can find different people. I can have dinner for 60 days in a row with different people, but I can’t get it here’

Arrival

Students' experience of arrival was expressed in their descriptions of the first 24 hours in a new country and featured a sense of isolation:

‘Where do I go?... Where to get taxi? When I get to my accommodation there was no people in my flat. So I don’t really talk to anybody.’

‘It’s really very lonely because all my block is only me, like four blocks, it’s only me.’

Some students reported practical difficulties:

‘I didn’t know that there is no duvet on the bed so I just cover my body with all the clothes I take, so it’s actually quite unforgettable memory...’

‘I can still remember about that first night here there’s no pillow for my bed so I just used my backpack as my pillow.’

These are troubling images of students alone in an unfamiliar country, without bed linen, sleeping under their own clothes with a backpack for a pillow.

Many of the students reported their first impressions of Plymouth in terms that appeared distressed, using images of wind and rain and adjectives such as ‘terrible’ and ‘horrible’:

‘A terrible rainy day.’

‘It was completely dark and it was raining pretty hard outside and wind is blowing hard, and I was still wearing my t-shirt and so when I got off from the bus I just literally freeze’.

‘Really horrible the weather, it was kind of different from the weather in Africa’

The Plymouth weather featured throughout the focus groups with the rain and wind experienced negatively. Possibly these comments served as a way of referencing the emotional shock of arrival? Was the weather a socially acceptable metaphor to express feelings about an unwelcoming environment?

Settling in

The students described a process of familiarisation.

Some described supportive contact with staff:

‘The university staff, that’s where we came, where we ask questions, and who explain everything that’s here,’

‘Since I came to Plymouth I’ve had one or two issues... so what I did was I went to staff, they would help me.’

Feelings about these initial experiences of transition

Students reported a variety of feelings including helplessness, abandonment, loneliness and anxiety:

‘I don’t have telephone, I only have four hours free Wi-Fi, I’m just kind of worry about what will happen if I just run out of time, so it’s quite helpless....’

‘It feels like abandoned, cos no-one has a duty to babysit me, but no-one is actually there to help me as well, and I still feel a bit *not treated quite fair*.’

‘At the first few weeks I’m pretty lonely because I don’t have any flatmates,’

‘It was very, very lonely.’

One student reported feelings of excitement and interest in the new situation:

‘So yeah it was exciting, interesting, so everything’s interesting, every day go for a walk, I learn something new, yes all the time.’

2. Adjusting and making sense of a new environment

This theme reflected the students’ responses to aspects of their new environment and contained the following sub themes:

- adjusting to the academic environment
- the language barrier
- a different culture
- forming social networks

The students described a sense of transitioning as a continuing process of interaction with the environment at Plymouth.

Students talked about adapting to Plymouth,

‘...No pollution in Plymouth, but too much air pollution in China, so it makes me happy.’ (1, 8)

‘Yeah I liked the city at first. It’s a bit far away from everything but it is a good city.’

Adjusting to academic life

Some students described ways in which their academic experience at Plymouth University differed from their previous experience of higher education:

‘...I think if we had some academic problem and we turned to the tutor, but actually the Chinese academic system is different from the one in England, and actually we don’t know that, because our tutor have specific research area and if we have other questions, he don’t know anything about it. He would tell me, you should go to ask another tutor, but actually about some general point such as how to write a research or something, and in China we don’t do in that way, even I think I’m doing well but the teacher said you’re not doing the right way.’

There seemed to be differences in expectation about how to negotiate academic tasks. The student seemed confused about who and how to ask for help and perceived a difference in their experience of the role of tutor in China and Plymouth. The student discovered that he was not doing as well as they thought, and felt unsure about their performance.

Many students described their academic experience in positive terms:

‘There is much resources for studying our coursework, it’s very good.’

‘Every time you go to class it’s happy time.’

However several students described finding their personal tutors unhelpful or unsupportive.

‘Not very useful I think.’

The students described feeling that their tutors did not reach out to them sufficiently, and that when they did have tutorials, they felt that their tutor was meeting with them out of duty rather than desire.

‘When you’ve really got problem they will care for you, but they will not ask you, what problem do you have? Sometimes you just really need to, you need to push the problem, you need to ask and just hope you can get the answer you want.’

This student seemed to be asking for a more assertive, parental-type of contact from their tutor, incorporating a welfare focus.

‘I only have one meeting with my personal tutor, it’s like he’s finishing his task, it’s like there’s some kind of requirement from the uni that the personal tutor needs to meet with the student, but most I think he’s not really concerning about this.’

This student felt that their tutor was ‘going through the motions’ rather than investing care in the tutorial task.

Other students talked more positively about their personal tutor seeing them as a first port of call:

‘Yeah, at least if I feel particularly stressed with coursework and things like that, that he would be the first person to talk to.’

The language barrier

All the students described language being a significant, difficult factor. This was rarely noted in connection with classes or academic studies, but often mentioned in terms of impeding social connection with home students:

‘I tried to communicate with a few of the local British, the first problem I get is sometimes they just talk really, really fast and it’s really hard to try to catch up with them.’

‘They love to make jokes and sometimes you will not really get what they’re meaning, it’s kind of absurd when you are trying to ask them what this means.’

‘Yeah, at first I just want to stay alone because I’m not used to speak English

with people, I just want to stay alone and talk with Chinese students.’

Students worried about making mistakes with English leading to feelings of embarrassment and fear of being judged by ‘home’ students and an increased tendency to socialise with other international students:

‘Sometimes they [home students] may think you are stupid’.

‘Yeah, make me feel embarrassed I think, so I tend to get along with other international students.’

‘They’re [international students] at the same level language, for me.’

‘Maybe it’s difficult to improve my English but we can understand each other and they don’t mind if I make a mistake, that’s my thing.’

‘Understand’ here seems to refer to an empathy with the situation of using a second language rather than just the use of language to convey meaning. It is as if relationships with other international students are emotionally safer, less exposing to judgment and embarrassment and evoke less anxiety.

‘Yeah I actually got very, very lucky because I can find somebody to talk to, especially that makes me to practise my English well, and makes me to blend into the local environment, and I cannot imagine if I don’t have these friends with me what my life is going to be here because most of the time I was really being really quiet and just staying in my room for all day.’

The student discussed how prior to making friends with other international students, his anxiety about language prevented him from seeking social connection and describes how practicing English helped him to ‘blend in’ to the environment.

A different culture

Students saw cultural differences as offering the opportunity for new learning and social engagement:

‘I think what makes me feel happy is that the different brand new experience which I can’t get in China. Like, say skateboard, I don’t have a good command of it, but with my parents I will never try that.’

‘One of the stuff I enjoy the most is the Viking Society, I really like these people and basically we’re doing a historical re-enactment training and that is a completely new stuff to me and is so much fun.’

Students discussed not having the same cultural references as ‘home’ students which they constructed as a lacking on their part. Some spoke of the steps they took to try and make up this knowledge. These attempts often seemed to be experienced as difficult and unsuccessful:

‘I played a card game with my flatmate we came here, but I just can’t play it because they give like the particular name of probably the political figures or some stars but I have no clue about who they are. I just remember I keep looking up the different names in the dictionary but it didn’t actually help. I just realise even apart from the language barrier, we still have the culture.’

‘We don’t actually watch the same cartoon with you as you grow up, we don’t watch the same TV programmes so actually we still have too much difference.’

Forming social networks

Students reported meeting fellow Chinese students at gatherings organised by academic staff whilst some described forming social connections through language sessions:

‘Because I had to take the language sessions, I made some friends here... They are international students.’

Several described meeting people via societies:

‘I go out to play football it’s a club so we just go there to keep fit. Yeah, we meet loads of people from different tribes and culture.’

‘Join some society or sport or other... I find two students from my home country and they explain me things.’

Difficulties in forming social groups

Students also discussed difficulties in forming new social groups. One student spoke of joining a club and feeling:

‘Let’s say a little bit ignored, it’s hard to actually find someone to talk to.’

Other students’ comments included:

‘My support’s not good here now.’

‘It’s hard to find friends here.’

In the focus groups the students seemed to express an implied sense of identity as ‘an international student’, which was defined in terms of its ‘difference’ to home students.

This was frequently associated with a perception of themselves as lacking in language skills and cultural familiarity. These discussions of difference were associated with feelings of loneliness and embarrassment.

The students felt responsible for cultural difficulties. Perhaps this assumption of responsibility is another element of the identity of ‘an international student’?

3. Home students

There was much discussion of home students in the focus groups.

Many of the students wished to make links with ‘home’ students and British culture:

‘That’s the main reason why I joined some of these societies and I’ve tried to do my best on this.’

‘Yeah I’m trying to find some British friends.’

Other students reflected on the difficulty in making friends with home students:

‘It’s not hard to find friends; it’s hard to find British friends.’

Students discussed the difficulties in language and culture:

‘I just realise even apart from the language barrier, we still have the culture [barrier].’

‘We still have too much difference.’

‘Sometimes you will not really get what they’re meaning.’

The international students talked of mitigating uncomfortable feelings arising from communicating with home students by more social contact with other international students:

‘I just think other international students, they have the same problem as me, English is also their second language so they can understand me.’

“It’s not hard to find friends; it’s hard to find British friends.”

“I just realise even apart from the language barrier, we still have the culture [barrier].”

4. Support

The focus groups inquired as to how students supported themselves:

Wellbeing

When asked directly, many students reported feeling happy.

‘I’m happy, I’m just unhappy with the weather and the food.’

However feelings of homesickness and loneliness featured prominently and seemed to contradict statements about feeling fine.

‘I think I’ve gone less happy here.’

‘Sometimes I’ll get homesick...’

‘I find it more difficult than I thought I would.’

It was hard to tell how fine things actually were in the wider context of frequent mention of loneliness, homesickness, uncertainty and dislocation and the researchers wondered whether it may have felt culturally difficult to openly admit to not feeling fine?

Loneliness was the most cited emotional descriptor throughout the transcripts, which seemed to contradict the sense that things are fine.

Self reliance

One student described,

‘A tendency to wait until it’s too late, so only when it gets really bad then I do something...’

Another student in the same conversation commented:

‘I think I can always help myself’.

Students believed they were responsible for resolving difficulties and referred to a feeling that it was inappropriate or a failing to seek support. There was no sense that talking about dilemmas, problems or difficulties to a counsellor could be helpful.

‘For me I think when you get hurt mentally, you need yourself to recover it, it’s like the mental wounds will never be healed from the others, you need to fix it by your own.’

‘I would try to solve it myself and if that doesn’t work I think I’d feel a bit bad for not being able to do it myself, if that makes sense’.

‘Yeah, first when I talk about myself I want to resolve my problems alone, and when I talk about reaching out I feel sort of bad, sort of inappropriate’.

Students’ self-help strategies

Shopping

‘Just go out with my flatmates, shopping’.

Friends

‘Socialising with others make me feel happy’

‘I’ve got some friends on the course and just send them a text saying do you want to do something, or call home, that usually helps.’

Sport

‘Sometimes I go out to play football. It’s a club or something, so we just go there to keep fit, sometimes we go to the gym’.

Cooking

‘Cooking with my friends, cook some Chinese food and international students just makes me happy.’

‘Because Chinese food is our pride I can say, it is our pride, and we always like to try and cook some, and we want to share it with others’.

Contact with home

‘Well actually I talk to my mum. Because she knows everything about me...it is often more efficient to talk to directly to the people who know you, it’s like you don’t need to introduce yourself with your background, you just talk with a problem and they will probably think in your ways, in your shoes.’

Alcohol as a social coping strategy

‘And when I’m getting maybe slightly unhappy I may join my friends to the pub or have some Pimms, get seriously drunk and everything is good’.

‘We watch movies, go walking, listening relaxing, music, and lots to drink.’

‘When I’m unhappy I just watch TV series, to get out of the emotion you were and get into the TV series, I find that very good. I smoke and drink.’

The best attested category was using friends for support via social activities rather than through talking with others.

The difficulty of achieving social engagement was a common theme. Therefore, in thinking about supporting international students it appears that work may most usefully be focused around enabling the formation of social networks.

When considering how best to support these students, an assumption that counselling would be the first priority seems mistaken. The challenges they face in many ways derive from the social and environmental dislocation of coming to study in Plymouth, and possibly are best met with a social and environmental response?

5. Counselling service

We found low Awareness of Plymouth University Student Counselling and Personal Development Service.

Most students said that they did not know about the counselling service and were unaware of what it offered:

‘What’s it all about?’

‘What exactly is supporting, what exactly?’

When the focus group facilitator explained about counselling, one student said:

‘It’s like a counselling service is our last choice, it’s our worst choice, sorry.’

When asked if they would see a counsellor many students simply said no, with one adding,

‘Yeah if I really feel that I can’t handle it, when even a phone call home won’t help, then yes.’

Counselling is not part of home culture

‘The Chinese don’t know what [counselling] is, we only go to help if we get hurt physically, but not mentally.’

‘It varies, shy probably, to say oh I have a depression, to show your emotions like that, but in our country it’s unreal.’

This last quote alludes to a difficulty in talking about emotions and the use of the word ‘unreal’ suggests how alien talking about emotions feels to this student.

Language

‘I believe for most of the Chinese students they are more likely to talk to others with their problems in their mother tongue, it is actually easier to reflect what they want to say, and easier to reflect the problems they have, and when talking to somebody in English sometimes you need to think about it, and you need to plan your words or something, it can get a little bit tiring and also maybe the shyness when you are dealing with this complete stranger.’

‘I think if I go there I can’t explain exactly in English, so I maybe won’t go there’.

It is clear that the students’ concerns about expressing themselves in another language are a major barrier to their accessing counselling.

Counselling is an oral process that is largely dependent upon making meaning through dialogue. This suggests the importance of wellbeing services finding other ways of facilitating healing forms of communication.

Fear that staff will not understand meaning due to cultural difference

‘The person will never get what I’m really going through’.

‘To be more helpful to Chinese students they need to maybe provide some of the Chinese speaking person then they can discuss the problems more deeply.’

‘Western culture is totally different from Asian culture, if they give me some advice maybe I can’t use it because my culture is totally different’.

Students were concerned that counselling staff would not understand their culture and may give them culturally inappropriate advice.

Fear of judgement

‘They will think you’re weird or you are strange, or you are a psycho or something.’

‘You are not normal, it’s always concerning about what others will think about you’.

Counselling was equated with a fear that ‘others’ will think that you are a ‘psycho’, ‘weird’, ‘not normal’. Possibly holding this hostile

“Western culture is totally different from Asian culture, if they give me some advice maybe I can’t use it because my culture is totally different.”

“The Chinese don’t know what [counselling] is, we only go to help if we get hurt physically, but not mentally.”

interpretation of others opinions would make attending counselling to resolve, mild to moderate anxiety, almost impossible and implies a sense of having to be very mentally unwell to access counselling.

Students seemed largely unaware of what counselling was. When the focus group facilitator explained, the response from the mainly Chinese students was to suggest that not only was it not culturally relevant but that it would be a last resort.

Possibly these issues point to a need to focus more on providing means to enhance students' wellbeing through building up social connections within the community rather than focusing on models of one-to-one therapeutic support. The international students seemed to feel that they should be responsible for addressing their difficulties by themselves and perceived approaching a counsellor as countercultural and undesirable.

10. The project group

The aim of the project group was to facilitate students to develop proposals about how services could support the wellbeing of international students, taking into account the themes and ideas that had emerged in the focus groups.

An implicit aim of the group was to create a mini community with international students forming the majority group and be positioned as an expert resource.

As discussed in the methodology section (see page 49), this was a different sort of group, trying to bring together international and UK students to explore a common task, hence group members were recruited differently to the focus groups. Six international students and three home students were recruited, via Student Jobs, to take part in four three-hour-long group sessions. Places in the group were offered on a first come, first served basis. Students were paid to attend.

The group was facilitated by Anne Bentley, and Dawn Hastings.

The group met over four weeks in the university Wellbeing Centre.

Week one was a 'get to know you' session. In weeks two and three, the themes from the focus groups were introduced and students began reflecting and working on developing ideas. In week four the group summarised their ideas and reflected upon their experiences of being in the group.

The sessions were 'loosely' facilitated by the counsellors to enable the students to speak freely and lead the flow of discussion. The facilitators' summarised and reflected back to the group what was being said to check meaning and promote discussion.

After the group, students were offered a semi-structured interview with the Research Assistant, to reflect upon their experience of being in the group.

The project group supplied many new ideas to promote wellbeing. The main suggestion was to use social events as:

1. a wellbeing intervention to promote interaction and belonging
2. a means of promotion of the services available
3. a means of social transformation through providing activities which engender conversation and relationships

It was felt that these activities needed to be structured, entertaining events in themselves with a focus on activity rather than talking. Participants reflected that many social events on campus were hard to access as they required students to enter a room and initiate networking or conversing with others. If the events were structured around facilitated fun activities, this would make them feel more inviting.

The overriding theme was of how to develop an active, assertive social outreach that was inclusive and above all, fun.

Ideas from the project group

- Societies to encourage international student participation
- All events to be promoted within the home student population too to encourage cross cultural engagement
- Arrange events which don't involve alcohol
- Events that run by the Counselling Service should not be specifically focused on counselling
- Challenge stigma:
 - Run a play around mental health issues and

how counselling can help – free food/drink and then a discussion/debate afterwards

- Run a debate, eg “Is it OK to access counselling?” and have a Q&A live panel for questions
- Film event – choice has to be relevant and mainstream. Follow with panel/Q&A?
- Food night – bring food from cultures
- Make contact with the local Chinese community leader as s/he posts on WeChat and Weibo and can translate.

Student Counselling and Personal Development Service to hold a party in Orientation week:

- During the day so no alcohol
 - Free food
 - Games and/or quiz: where students work in teams with other students.
 - Introduce our service beforehand to raise awareness. Easier to get full attention at the start before students start to move off to do other things
 - Plant ‘bugs’ in the group to break up culture groups
 - Explain how mental health links to physical health and resilience
- Put adverts in library – use Facebook more – use SU website more – have a page in Freshers pack.
 - Volunteering – use this as many students check regularly on opportunities. Use volunteers to help run events
 - Peer supporters – to be present at key events. Wear name badges/T-shirts.
 - Pizza night – freebies such as pens, stress balls, t-shirts to attract students to events and keep them engaged

11. The semi-structured interviews

Seven of the nine students from the project group were interviewed, five were international Students.

A semi-structured interview was chosen as a means of facilitating a structured conversation whilst allowing for the possibility to explore issues and themes as they arose organically from within the conversations.

The interviews were analysed thematically, comparing data both within and across the interviews to ensure consistency in themes. This was an immersive process that enabled

researchers to get close to the data and ascertain underlying themes.

Themes

Composition of the group

The group was self-selecting and apart from one home student all the students had lived in a country other than their home country.

‘Of the three British students two of us had been international previously, so we’d been abroad and therefore, we have a really good international perspective of being that type of student...that’s somewhat isolated.’

This student equated being an international student with being isolated:

‘I think everyone there was quite similar in the respect that they either were internationals or had international experience of some kind.’

The students’ felt that they shared a common understanding of the meaning of being an international student which they perceived as helping them to empathise with each other.

Feelings about being in this group

There were a lot of positive feelings expressed, including feeling ‘close’ and ‘comfortable’ with other members, reflecting on, how they, ‘loved the dynamic’ calling it ‘enlightening’; ‘organic’; ‘eye-opening’; ‘relaxed’ and talking about:

‘How well everyone got on, how good those relationships were especially in that room.’

One student talked about being ‘touched by the group’ and explained:

‘People trusted each other immediately, and I’ll tell you what’s a great signifier of that is the fact a girl told us about the islamophobia within an hour of us all meeting, she understood the room was open to that discussion, and I think everyone immediately responded in such a respectful and understanding and totally helpful way.’

Students constructed the space as safe and empathic. The group was facilitated in a small room. The chairs were arranged in a circle and possibly this physical arrangement may have helped the sense of sharing and intimacy. Over the weeks, several students referred to the group as either a ‘therapy session’ or as ‘this counselling’ even though the facilitators were

explicit that this was not counselling, suggesting that participants experienced the group as a therapeutic space.

Facilitating disclosure

By the end all students had 'held the floor' on at least two occasions. This was noted by a student:

'Even one of the girls, once she started speaking she had so much, and it was fascinating for us, she was totally open to it so it showed how quickly people can be open to that idea of what the group is about'

The group was perceived as a shared endeavour:

'Everyone was working, building on each other's previous discussions and that sort of thing.'

Possibly the positioning of participants as consultants in the research, drafted in to share their expertise, to help the Student Counselling and Personal Development Service meant that they came prepared to work on and contribute to a task. The fact they were being paid may have assisted this orientation towards the task.

Facilitation: a semi-structured space

Students seemed to understand the method of facilitation:

'Everybody contributed ideas and the facilitators let us come up with the ideas.'

Some students expressed a wish for a more structured process, with facilitators offering guidance:

'I feel like maybe a bit more guidance with maybe two more questions per session ... so maybe ask us a few more questions.'

For some students the 'open' nature of the process felt unfamiliar and evoked insecurity about what was expected of them.

Impact on the participants

Increased awareness

Students shared experiences and explored the focus group data. The quote below reflected an input at the start of the group about an islamophobic incident experienced by one of the group members:

'She told us this in the first session so it set the tone, and she'd left the library and someone had been like 'oy you' and she

was on the phone, she said I think there's a fight going on.

She turns around and she thought, 'I'm the fight, they're yelling at me', and they said, 'It's because of people like you innocent people have to die', and this poor girl had to run to her house, she was scared, and she's new to this country, so scary for us to hear, we couldn't believe that could happen on this campus, and it was shocking.'

Students expressed sadness and shame, support and solidarity with the student.

Students' emotional responses to the themes of the focus groups

'The second one, we got a booklet full of things that international students have said about their experiences. I read the whole thing, I was really, really shocked.'

'They didn't have like a pillow to sleep on, and I was so shocked, just like a lot of loneliness as well. The majority of it was quite sad.'

The students felt distressed by the focus group themes. One student identified with the themes, commenting:

'I am the typical international student, that means I don't have any friends here, that means I didn't really reach my expectation.'

The group heard about experiences that felt almost unbearable and they were vocal in their distress with what they had heard and expressed high levels of support and compassion towards each other and towards focus group members they had never met.

Empathy

Students' comments indicated a sense of trying to put themselves in the shoes of others, mentioning feelings of pity, sadness and guilt. Students thought about how they may have felt had they been in the same position as their fellow focus group peers. They engaged with the texts of their fellow students' experiences, identifying and being alongside them.

'The poor lady ...she sounded like she had so much anxiety and so much to say... it was all of these worries that she amassed that she didn't have anyone to talk to about with.'

‘She was saying that she an international student and she didn’t even know about orientation week ... I felt bad for her and I felt we should be doing a lot more ... I felt guilty.’

Reaching out to others

The students expressed a wish to make friends with international students:

‘I want some international friends. I have international friends but not a lot.’

‘I think maybe just have events and get internationals involved, but I think home students would definitely be keen to get involved as well. Like for me I would like definitely get involved with international events.’

However one of the group felt that there needed to be some awareness-raising with home students as he felt that home students were not interested in relating to international students.

‘Sometimes I even feel the local students don’t really care about the foreign international students ... and I think it’s really hard. I want is to reach the awareness of the local students, the home students I think, that should be better.’

Hope for the future

The project group gave students a sense of hope and belief that it may be possible for them to make friends with students from other cultures:

‘[When] I joined that group I think maybe home student don’t care about what the internationals are thinking and maybe don’t want to make friends with us, but during discussions I changed my mind, ok we come and it’s good that you care about us and they want to make friends with us.’

‘I should just move on and not stay in the same environment and socialise with the Chinese community, I should go out and say making some new friends, cos really before that I thought the home students really don’t care about us ...I’m narrow in the concept about making friends, the home student, the international student ... I’m just thinking maybe I got it wrong and I can say maybe OK I can make friends with other new local students.’

Other students felt hopeful because the group had given them a sense that there were people

who cared about them and that there was support available.

‘I learned that there are a lot of people here in the university that are willing to help, that a lot of people actually care.’

Awareness of counselling

The project group functioned as an educative process about counselling and highlighted the issues associated with attending counselling, particularly for Chinese students:

‘You have a stigma attached to you, there’s something wrong with you and it cannot be fixed’

‘For Chinese culture we just think ok it’s our own problems, we don’t speak to another person.’

Another student reflected that prior to the group he felt that that he would only attend counselling for very serious issues:

‘I feel bad if I had something quite minor and then I took the place of somebody who had something drastic.’

Another student was inspired to think about raising awareness of the counselling service, challenging the stigma and promoting the message, ‘it’s OK not to be OK’:

‘I hope I raise awareness even for everyone, sometimes people are just struggling in the relationship, not just for international students, and I think it’s OK to be not OK.’

Another reflected that through the group discussion he had learned that:

‘You have that discussion and you realise how beneficial it is to you, it’s like going to the gym and exercising, it’s like exercising your wellbeing’.

Another commented that they had learned:

‘That counselling is a good thing, support is really good, I would use their service.’

The project group provided an emotional and learning experience for the students. All were saddened by the feelings of loneliness expressed in the focus groups.

The group appeared to facilitate all participants to engage, and provided important learning about the nature and opportunity of counselling.

Perhaps most importantly, the group manifested high levels of empathy and compassion for each other and all seemed to want to engage in friendships with students from other cultures. It is interesting that with exception of one home student, the remaining eight students had experienced being an international student. This poses the question of how projects such as this can reach out to those home students who may have had little experience or contact with those from other cultures.

12. Conclusion

Counselling research has indicated that transition to a new culture can be stressful, and may cause international students more problems in adjusting than home students (Leong and Sedlacek, 1986). It has been suggested that levels of social support are closely associated with psychological wellbeing (Segrin, 2001), and that a move to another country could disrupt existing systems for social support. These findings are consistent with additional research suggesting that international students have greater counselling needs than home students (Nicolas et al., 2013; Raunic & Xenos, 2008).

Our data does not allow comparison between levels of need for counselling between the international students that took part in our study and the population of 'home' students at Plymouth. However, it does seem clear from the qualitative and quantitative data that in coming to study at Plymouth international students are faced with a very significant process of transition away from their prior social, cultural, linguistic and academic resources.

The international students who participated in our study often mentioned feelings of loneliness and homesickness. However, there are two important points to bear in mind here.

Firstly, it was rare that the international students directly referred to feelings, other than loneliness. The researchers were able to infer feelings of loss, anxiety, displacement, embarrassment and distress based on international students' descriptions of activities they undertook and the reasons they gave for doing so. The researchers suggested that students' descriptions of experiences of weather and food had a partly metaphorical function, offering a way to relate

distress or discomfort obliquely rather than directly.

It was noted that participants tended to describe themselves as 'fine', despite describing experiences that seemed not to be 'fine'. Given this it may be unlikely that international students would identify or construct themselves as being distressed and in need of counselling.

This is compounded by the fact that for some international students the notion of counselling seemed very unfamiliar, even 'unreal' and to be associated with stigmatizing ideas of mental health and social condemnation. This was quite apart from the difficulties of accessing counselling that many described, including concerns that language difficulties and lack of common cultural references would render any attempt redundant.

Hence, while counselling may have a role in 'triggering' the formation of new social relationships and support (Maluccion, 1975), it seems unlikely that the offer of one to one therapeutic support would in itself seem like a useful, relevant or desirable activity for many international students at Plymouth University, however much counsellors publicised the service or explained its activity.

Secondly, the students who took part in the focus groups described over and over again a wish to be socially engaged with a wide range of other students, not least 'home' students. Alongside this, they clearly described that their preferred form of support for difficult emotions was taking part in a range of social activities. It seemed to the researchers that the project group embodied the possibilities of a socially based intervention to support international and home students to engage with each other.

Here, students from international and home backgrounds co-operated on a shared venture, the effects of which seemed to be transformative for all of them. They consistently spoke of a sense of valuing each other and the group, of making new social links, and of personal development and learning, leading to changed understandings, greater hope for the future and ongoing planning to take the experience forwards. It appeared that this experience had elements of healing for the students, even though the groups had not been formally conceived as therapeutic.

It was also striking that all the students in the group spoke of a greater willingness to consider using counselling support at the end of the group than had been the case in the focus groups. The project group participants took this further by engaging in thinking about how to make counselling appear more useful and accessible for other international students.

It seemed that although the project group was not formally therapeutic, the students appeared to have taken away from it an experience of dialogue that was transformative, and helped make the notion of a one-to-one dialogic counselling relationship seem useful where this had not previously been the case.

For both these reasons, this research is consistent with other work which suggests formal models of counselling may not fully accommodate the needs of international students (Arthur, 1997; Crockett and Hays, 2011; Smith, 2014). This research indicated the benefits of socially-based interventions, which seek to support international students to develop networks of social support and belonging, and in particular aim to foster social links between international and 'home' students.

The focus group participants described responding to distressing feelings with social activities and interactions rather than seeking support through reflective dialogue. Community interventions, as represented by the project group, could improve the wellbeing of international students, as they help students to make relationships and increase their capacity to deal with difficult feelings through social activities. Paradoxically interventions like the project group had a further effect of helping the notion of counselling appear relevant and useful rather than confusing and stigmatising.

In respect of further work, project group students made many practical suggestions to take this work forward. The researchers plan to continue working with international and home students to implement these and evaluate their effectiveness.

There is still considerable scope for further analysis and theory building with this existing data. In particular, it seems that the data contains interesting information about how the identity of 'an international' student is constructed and what it means. It appeared that the project group offered all the students a

chance to break down this construct, position themselves as 'expert' rather than as lacking (language, cultural knowledge, academic culture), and renegotiate aspects of their sense of self.

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