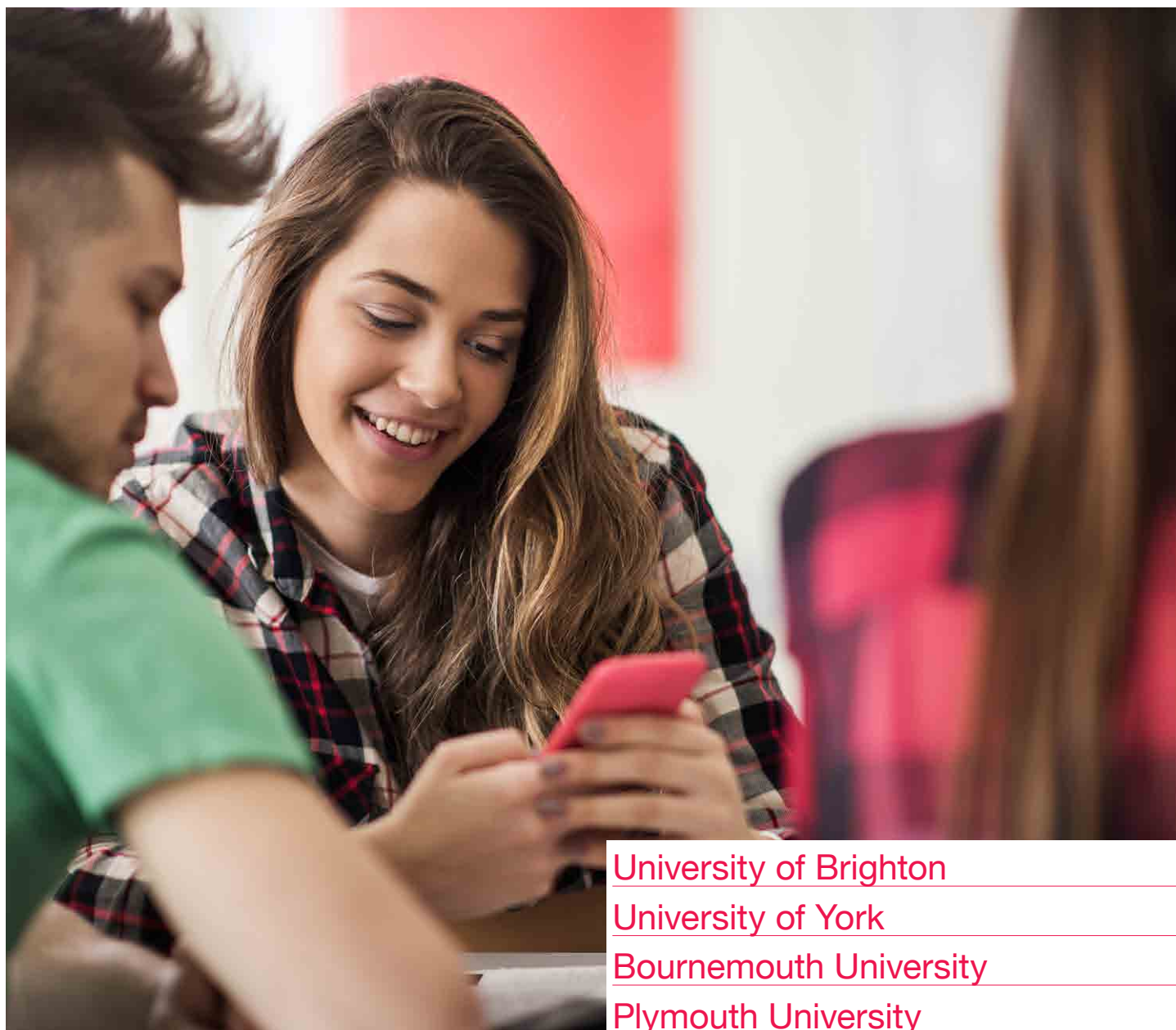


Research into the international student experience in the UK 2015-16



University of Brighton

University of York

Bournemouth University

Plymouth University

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Research and pilot projects 2016-17

A second series of projects and research is currently being funded during 2016-17. The list of projects awarded funds is available at www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-scheme2016-17, and findings from these projects will be published in the second half of 2017.

Special thanks to our colleagues and Board members for their support during the assessment of projects and research applications: Kate Dodd, James Kennedy, Nigel Healey, Ian MacLellan, Paul Rossi, Suzanne Alexander, Alan MacKay, Mostafa Rajaai and John Mountford.

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Introduction

“It’s great that the scheme is available and receiving the grant was very helpful in being able to conduct this research study.”

**Jennie Jones,
University of Brighton**

This is the second publication presenting the work of members who were funded by UKCISA in 2015-16 with small grants. This publication brings together four research projects carried out by the **University of Brighton**, the **University of York**, **Bournemouth University** and **Plymouth University**.

The research carried out by the **University of Brighton** explored the impact of attending an International Foundation Year (IFY) on international students’ experience of the transition into higher education (HE). The research presents data including quotes from students and throws up surprising results. It highlights that it takes time for students to comprehend the impact of their foundation year experience and it also finds significant differences in the experience of students depending on their academic discipline. The research report concludes with practical suggestions on how institutions can support students’ sense of belonging, engagement and success in their first year of higher education.

The **University of York**’s research was designed to assess the impact of a programme of intercultural training and events on the attitudes and experiences of ‘home’ and ‘international’ students in two colleges at the university. Although the response rate to surveys was low, the researchers draw some interesting, if tentative, conclusions and offer suggestions for future research. The Appendix to the report includes examples of the material used in the intercultural training and a resource guide as well as contact details for the research team.

Bournemouth University’s research investigated the barriers faced by international students who wanted to take up a work placement or part time work but were unable to do so. The report presents data from the results of a survey (which you can read in full in the Appendix) and focus groups and suggests ideas for further research.

Plymouth University was highly commended in the inaugural **Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education, 2016**. The Plymouth team carried out three stages of research: a questionnaire, focus groups and a project group followed by individual interviews. The aim was to explore the wellbeing of international students, their understanding and attitude towards counselling and practical steps the counselling service and the university might take to support international students in their transition to the UK. The researchers offer an insightful conclusion through interpretation of the findings and statements from students.

If you have any questions about the grants scheme please contact Julie Allen, Director of Policy and Services, at dps@ukcisa.org.uk

University of Brighton

Exploring first year international undergraduates' experiences in four disciplines: influences of university and international partner college pedagogy and support practices

Jennifer Jones, Stephanie Fleischer, Alistair McNair and Rachel Masika



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1. Executive summary

In 2015-16, we conducted a research study to identify ways in which first year international undergraduates' experiences:

1. are influenced by university and international partner-college pedagogy and support practices
2. vary when comparing students who have, and have not attended an International Foundation Year in different:
 - UK universities (pre and post-1992)
 - disciplinary contexts (Arts, Science, Business and Engineering)

Across universities and disciplines, this research shows that a combination of university and International College teaching, learning and support practices help to enhance first year international students' sense of belonging, engagement, identity development and confidence when starting their degrees, as supported by earlier research (Briggs et al., 2012). There were no notable differences when comparing pre and post-1992 universities. However, there were some significant differences when comparing broad disciplinary fields and IFY and non-IFY students. Arts interview participants expressed a greater sense of belonging and supportive working relationships with staff and students than in other disciplines. Statistical analysis of survey data suggested that Science respondents were more likely to report high stress levels and to be very worried about not passing the first year than respondents from other subject areas. Business students were more likely to feel confident in academic writing.

Our study shows that key academic challenges faced by international students relate to workload, deadlines, exams and assignments. The survey shows that a greater percentage of respondents found nearly all challenges difficult in Semester 1 in comparison to Semester 2. In this context, during Semester 1 many previous IFY participants found adjusting to studying in university difficult, and different to the International College particularly in relation to larger class sizes and lack of communication with academic staff.

Our findings show that developing a sense of belonging was beneficial for international students when starting university and settling into living in the UK. Students who had attended

an IFY had already established friendships, developed confidence in English and knew their way around campus by the time they started university, which helped them to develop a sense of belonging during Semester 1.

The survey results show that overall 76.8% of all students enjoyed their course. Interview participants often described how supportive working relationships with academic staff and peers, engaging learning and teaching and developing a professional identity helped build belonging, engagement, student identity and confidence as the year progressed. By Semester 2, many previous IFY participants had become aware of benefits of the IFY including: their increased social and academic confidence, competence in English and academic writing, practical subject skills, knowledge of curriculum content, links between International Colleges and universities and advice on non-academic matters. The survey also shows that by Semester 2 a smaller percentage of IFY students found the following key aspects of university study challenging in comparison to a greater number of non-IFY students: meeting deadlines, English language, exams, written coursework, group assignments and group work, understanding lectures, seminars and grades and feedback.

Our research indicates that partner colleges and universities share a joint responsibility to enhance existing good practice to help support UK and international student engagement and success during their first year at university. From our research, we have identified a need for universities and partner colleges to continue to work together to enhance:

- Connections between universities and pathway colleges at the transition stage such as: help with visas; pathway colleges involved with university orientation week; universities involved with pathway college results day activities
- Development of international and UK student integration within the context of internationalisation
- Preparation needed to help students to become independent learners and to manage time and workload through a gradual lessening of support throughout the IFY
- Subject-specific academic writing and skills support
- Communication and working relationships (including constructive feedback) between

academic staff and students in some disciplines/modules at university

- Online resources, such as podcast lectures, to support flexible independent study

2. Introduction

Enhancing first year student engagement, including international student engagement, continues to be a key priority for UK universities (HEA, 2008; Thomas 2012). To enable a high quality international student¹ experience many universities now work in partnership with 'pathway' colleges, which run International Foundation Year (IFY) programmes. IFYs aim to better prepare international students for the transition into HE by providing a holistic experience incorporating discipline-specific learning and teaching through a 'pathway' programme linked to the students' preferred future degrees (Kaplan, 2013). Attending an IFY can help facilitate international students' transition into UK HE and help address challenges they may face when starting degrees. Challenges may relate to students': new experiences of learning, teaching and assessment; adjustment to individualist educational customs practised in UK HE; insufficiencies in English skills; feedback; working relationships with academic and support staff; and emotional and academic support from peers/friends (Wilcox et al. 2005; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012). An IFY may help support students' first year transition in practical terms and enhance their confidence to become independent learners at university (Jones, Fleischer and McNair, 2015).

However, McNorton and Cadinot (2012, p6) suggest the need for a "joined up and harmonious approach that connects the IFY students with the wider academic world of the university" in order for the IFY to effectively prepare international students to start their degrees. In this context, the Briggs et al. model of 'organisational influence on the development of learner identity' (2012, p17) conceptualises ways in which combined academic and support practices provided by colleges and universities help to enhance student belonging, engagement, identity development, confidence, independence and success.

3. Aims and objectives

Building on a previous study into first year international students' experiences (Jones et al., 2015) and Briggs et al. (2012, p17) we conducted new research. This aimed to: identify ways in which: 1. first year international undergraduates' experiences are influenced by university and international partner-college pedagogy and support practices; and 2. experiences vary among first year international undergraduates who have, and have not, attended an IFY in different UK universities and disciplinary contexts. This research contributes to knowledge in international student transition research, helping to identify effective practices and ways to address challenges when working with first year international students.

4. Methodology

We adopted a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010) incorporating qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey at four UK universities (two pre and two post-1992 universities). In 2015-16 during Semesters 1 and 2, we conducted 24 in-depth face-to-face interviews with first year international students at three universities (two post and one pre-1992 universities). They were studying the following broad disciplines on modules where previous IFY students had enrolled: Business, Science, Engineering, and Arts. We interviewed students who did and did not attend an IFY. We qualitatively analysed interview data using cross-sectional content analysis. In Semester 2, we circulated a survey via Bristol Online Survey (BOS) to all first year international students studying Business, Science, Engineering, and Arts disciplines where previous IFY students were enrolled at the four participating UK universities. The final sample comprised 108 first year international students from three institutions, post-1992 a (100, 92.6%), pre-1992 a (6, 5.6%) and pre-1992 b (2, 1.6%). Students studied in: Arts (34, 31.5%), Business (30, 27.8%), Environment, Engineering and Mathematics and Computing (22, 20.4%) and Science including Pharmacy (22, 20.4%). 34.3% (37) were male and 65.7% (71) female. The majority of students in the sample (64.8%) were 18-20 years old, 30.5% aged 21-24 and 4.6% 25 years or older. The majority of the sample (66.7%) was from outside the EU in comparison to 33.3% of EU students.

1. Interview participants and survey respondents in this research refer to international students from inside and outside the EU. English was not the first language for the majority of these students.

Table 1: Percentage of domicile of international students

Domicile of students	Percentage	Number
EU student	33.3	36
Non-EU/Overseas student	66.7	72
Total	100	108

In the sample, 45.4% (49) of respondents completed an IFY and 54.6% (59) did not. Of those who attended an IFY 2% of respondents studied for one term, 53.1% for two terms and 44.9% for three terms at an International College.

5. Research findings

5.1 Students' early experiences of university: developing a sense of belonging

As reflected by earlier work (Wilcox et al. 2005; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012), in this research many international students experienced challenges when starting their degrees. Earlier research suggests that developing a sense of belonging in the early stages of starting a degree is important in coping with challenges and building resilience (Thomas, 2012; Wenger, 2009; Masika and Jones, 2016). In this context, most interview participants in this study across disciplines and universities described the benefits of developing a sense of belonging and being part of a Community of Practice. Examples often mentioned included:

- Feeling part of an international community
- Friendly and welcoming academic and support staff (particularly noted in Arts disciplines)
- Friends that students already knew (eg from the IFY)
- Family members staying and supporting students at first
- Making new friends through accommodation and on the course
- PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) sessions/ experienced student mentors helping new students know what to expect
- Orientation activities: a means to meet new friends and understand academic expectations

“I like all of my tutors and when I had my first talk with one of my tutors in my tutorial I felt very reassured so I feel like they are there for us and can help us.”

(Arts participant)

In this context, several participants in Arts disciplines described academic staff as particularly friendly and caring. Most participants described different sets of friends they had made from their accommodation, course and during the IFY. The survey results suggest that a majority of students made friends on their course (91.7%) and that there was no statistical difference for IFY and non-IFY students or by subject groups. Overall 68.3% said that friends supported their studies, 52.0% of IFY students and 80.0% of non-IFY. This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.284$, $df = 1$, $p = .022$) and may suggest that non-IFY international students needed to rely more on support from friends in comparison to IFY students.

5.1.1 Friends and social transition when starting university

Students who had attended an IFY had already established friendships by the time they started university, which helped them settle in to living in the UK.

“My accommodation helped. I lived in shared accommodation at the time and that helped in the sense that I got to meet more people and that obviously opens you up, but also being at the International College helped. There was always information available at the reception. So if you need to know stuff or how to get around you could ask people... so that helped, and making different friends in the International College also.”

(IFY participant)

In addition, some previous IFY participants said they had overcome cultural and linguistic challenges when they started university, whereas some non-Foundation participants mentioned greater challenges in this context. However, a few participants said they found some British people less approachable than in their own country; and described some UK students on their course as cliquey.

“In the university English people have their groups and they're not really that open to talk to other people and maybe I prefer to be with my other friends... international friends.”

(IFY participant)

In this context, a small minority of participants described their lack of confidence in

communicating in English, and because of this found it more difficult to make British friends. In addition, some participants described how they did not want to take part in the clubbing and restaurant culture that many UK students enjoyed and were less likely to make friends with UK students for this reason. However, most participants described how confidence in English and communication with British students became easier over time.

“Most of our classmates are understanding, even though we don’t drink they are friendly to us ... and we are in the same stage together...if we are frustrated they are pretty much in the same state so we can talk about that among each other. It’s pretty fun to work especially in Architecture.”

(Non-IFY participant)

5.1.2 IFY students’ academic transition in Semester 1

In the first semester, many previous IFY participants found adjusting to studying in university difficult, and different to the International College. This often related to students’ need to work more independently at university and manage their own time, and receiving less academic and pastoral support in comparison to greater support at the International College. In this context, participants across universities and disciplines frequently described how students learn in small groups at International Colleges, but generally attend much larger lectures at university. At International Colleges, participants described how it was easier to ask lecturers questions and interact, whereas at university it was more difficult. The only exception was Arts, where more participants described receiving attention and academic advice from lecturers than in other subjects. A previous IFY participant was critical of the International College’s approach of providing lots of support, which then made it more difficult for international students to adjust to the level of independence required when starting a degree. However, several participants realised they needed to become more independent learners at university and that this was what being at university was about.

“I would say I don’t really like the aspect of the college giving too much support because the student will now feel that when they get to the university they will

get that kind of support and then when they get there they figure out they don’t get that support, so it will now be difficult for them to adjust. “

(IFY participant)

5.2 Students’ experiences as the first year of their degree progressed

Most international interview participants and survey respondents faced challenges throughout their first year, which will be discussed in Section 4.3. However, the survey results show that overall 76.8% of all students enjoyed their course, 22.2% strongly agreed, 54.6% agreed, 19.4% neutral, 1.9% disagreed and 1.9% strongly disagreed. Interview participants often mentioned the following engaging aspects.

5.2.1 Working relationships with academic staff and peers

Participants often mentioned that developing good working relationships with academic staff and peers (particularly mentioned in Arts disciplines) was engaging and helped develop their sense of belonging and confidence. Aspects included:

- staff encouragement and friendliness
- flexible communication with academic staff including time to ask/answer questions and prompt email communication
- constructive feedback
- staff posting lecture material including slides and podcasts online
- collaborative peer support in and outside formal teaching

“In Hong Kong we care about the different level of student and teacher but here they are like friends so when you talk to your lecturers they are friendly to you, so you don’t feel nervous and you can ask them anything and they will answer you.”

(Arts participant)

5.2.2 Engaging learning and teaching

Aspects of engaging learning and teaching frequently described included:

- an entertaining teaching style in lectures/seminars
- subject matter that students were passionately interested in
- interesting and varied learning and teaching resources (including e-learning)
- interactive and collaborative seminars and class discussions

- group work (although this was also challenging)
- practical, professional and real-life experiences

“I really like practical jobs, doing pitches and organising presentations together, but I still have some problems organising them because some of the other students are less engaged by doing these things. Sometimes it’s very difficult to chase them, but it’s a shame because I really like to do this; so I need to find a group that has the same goal.”

(Business participant)

5.2.3 Developing a professional discipline related identity

In most disciplines, participants described how teamwork was part of the disciplinary and professional culture within their field. Hence, group work helped participants develop learner and professional identities. Many participants said that they found practical learning that related to real-life and professional experiences engaging.

“The good thing is that teachers make you feel Architecture is teamwork. You can’t work as an architect without people to support you and share ideas. That’s the good thing, I think, about my course. You always find people to help you and you learn from them and they learn from you.”

(Arts participant)

5.3 Students’ challenges

As mentioned earlier in this report, most interview participants including IFY and non-IFY students described varied ways in which they found starting a university degree challenging. Frequently described challenges in Semesters 1 and 2 included both academic and practical issues.

Supported by the survey results (see Table 2) academic challenges included:

- Managing time, coping with workload and meeting deadlines
- Adjusting to independent study
- More challenging level of work
- Stress caused by starting unfamiliar subjects
- Fast-paced lectures
- Less support from academic staff
- Lack of clarity about academic expectations
- Exams and written assignments
- Academic writing (particularly discipline-specific reports)

- Group work and group assignments when other members do not contribute equally
- Understanding discipline-specific terminology and language
- Presentations

Practical and social issues often described included:

- Managing finances
- Visa issues
- Difficulties in making friends
- Missing orientation and induction activities
- Inconvenient timetabling
- Adjusting to the university VLE/intranet
- Working part-time
- Feeling out of place/not feeling a sense of belonging to the university or course

5.3.1 Variation of students’ challenges by semester

According to survey results and interview data challenges that international students faced varied from Semester 1 to Semester 2. In this context, the findings are supported by findings from earlier research, and when merging datasets from 2014 and 2016 (Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Jones et al., 2015). In general, the survey results show that a greater percentage of respondents found nearly all challenges difficult in Semester 1 in comparison to Semester 2. A higher percentage of non-IFY compared to IFY participants found English Language difficult in Semesters 1 and 2; and a higher percentage of non-IFY participants in comparison to IFY participants found exams and written coursework difficult in Semester 2. A greater percentage of non-IFY respondents compared to IFY also found group assignments and group work difficult in Semester 2. (Please see Table 2 on page 9). This suggests that IFY students may feel better prepared and more confident in these aspects than non-IFY students by Semester 2, which is also reflected by qualitative data.

5.3.2 Key challenges: workload, deadlines, exams, group work and written assignments

As reflected by the survey results, many interview participants (IFY and non-IFY) found varied aspects of assessment and feedback challenging (see Table 2). Exam related issues often mentioned included: writing under pressure, nerves and taking exams or tests online when students are not used to this.

Table 2: Aspects students found difficult in semester 1 and 2 (in percentage) by attending an IFY

Found difficult	IFY		Non-IFY		All	
	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 1	Semester 2
Workload	38.8	44.9	40.7	44.1	39.8	44.4
Meeting deadlines	55.1	34.7	40.7	42.4	47.2	38.9
English language	28.6	16.3	33.9	25.4	31.5	21.3
Exams	38.8	24.4	23.7	35.6	30.6	30.6
Written coursework	38.8	34.7	40.7	42.4	39.8	38.9
Giving presentations	38.8	28.6	39.0	27.1	38.9	27.8
Group assignments	38.8	22.4	25.4	32.2	31.5	27.8
Group work	38.8	18.4	25.4	30.5	31.5	25.0
Understanding lectures	34.7	14.3	28.8	20.3	31.5	17.6
Seminars	30.6	10.2	22.0	20.3	25.9	15.7
Grades and feedback	30.6	20.4	28.8	22.0	29.6	21.3
Making friends	32.7	20.4	32.2	23.7	32.4	22.2
Family	26.5	16.3	22.0	23.7	24.1	20.4
Money	26.5	24.5	37.3	35.6	32.4	30.6
Accommodation	24.5	24.5	25.4	25.4	25.0	25.0
Travel	14.3	14.3	13.6	16.9	13.9	15.7
Understanding feedback	14.3	16.3	15.3	22.0	14.8	19.4
Understanding university rules	18.4	14.3	13.6	16.9	15.7	15.7
Communication with lecturers	28.6	28.6	20.3	25.4	24.1	26.9
Reading	26.5	20.4	23.7	25.4	25.0	23.1
n	49	49	59	59	108	108

“You cannot test student knowledge in one go, for example two hours or 120 minutes. I have in one semester learnt a lot of different things. How can I put everything I have been learning down in only one hour? It’s frustrating because most of us when we do exams we get pressure on ourselves which is complicated, so I disagree with exams. We should find out different ways to assess us for example doing seminar or coursework, but exams as exams I disagree.”

(IFY Engineering participant)

Interview participants often mentioned challenges in group-assignments relating to group members not contributing equally. Participants also often described issues relating to workload and deadlines for written assignments all coinciding. Several participants found discipline-specific reports that they had not experienced before challenging. Some non-IFY participants described challenges in written assignments relating to academic skills, grammar and competence in English.

“I find the literature reviews are probably the hardest. You have to get all your sources and referencing; it takes so much

time because you have to do the year, author, the book and all that.”

(Non-IFY Business participant)

Participants’ experiences of feedback were inconsistent across modules and disciplines. While some lecturers provided very detailed and constructive written and/or spoken feedback, some only provided a mark and short comment, which was not constructive in directing students on how to progress further.

“We’ve had tasks to submit which were drawings. We had feedback but it’s just a paper that is written good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory or fail. They only put a circle on the thing but they don’t really tell us enough comments. They can say for example ‘edit it’, but they don’t really tell us what really we have to do.”

(IFY Arts participant)

5.4 Influences of the IFY on students’ experiences in Semester 2

By Semester 2, many previous IFY participants had become aware of benefits of the IFY including: their increased social and academic confidence, competence in English and academic writing, practical subject skills,

knowledge of curriculum content, links between International Colleges and universities and advice on non-academic matters. The survey also shows that by Semester 2 (see Table 2) a smaller percentage of IFY students found the following aspects of university study challenging in comparison to a greater number of non-IFY students: meeting deadlines, English language, exams, written coursework, group assignments and group work, understanding lectures, seminars and grades and feedback.

5.4.1 Confidence

In relation to developing social confidence, IFY participants had established friendships that helped them feel a sense of belonging when starting degrees in Semester 1. Academically, by Semester 2 students described how the IFY provided solid building blocks of learning in relation to English language, subject knowledge and academic skills such as referencing and academic writing.

“I think maybe what I have gone through before, I think going to the International College that has helped me build up my confidence coming to the university”

(IFY participant)

5.4.2 Competence in English language and academic writing

The survey results show that on average IFY students felt more confident than non-IFY students in: writing an essay and preparing for exams (see Table 3). In addition, English is a key area, which a greater percentage of non-IFY students found challenging in comparison to IFY students in Semesters 1 and 2, and in Semester 2 in particular. This finding is also the same when merging data from the 2014 survey with the 2016 survey; and is reflected by IFY interview participants, who often described how developing and practising their skills in academic writing during the IFY was helpful during the first year of their degrees. Examples included how to structure an essay or report and academic skills including knowing how to use references and understanding plagiarism.

“I think because of being in the International College, they teach us how to write essays and reports; and I think that was really helpful for my course because I have to write a lot of reports; and now I know how to write the structure and everything; so I find that’s been really helpful.”

(IFY Business participant)

Table 3: Confidence ratings (mean and standard deviation (SD)) by attending an IFY (1 being very confident, 2 confident, 3 neutral, 4 not confident, 5 not confident at all)

Confidence means		IFY	Non-IFY	All
Participating in group work	Mean	2.59	2.36	2.46
	SD	0.956	1.126	1.054
Arranging tutorials with a tutor	Mean	2.57	2.49	2.53
	SD	1.080	0.972	1.018
Taking notes	Mean	2.18	1.98	2.07
	SD	0.782	0.900	0.851
Asking questions for explanation	Mean	2.78	2.53	2.64
	SD	0.963	1.165	1.080
Writing an essay	Mean	2.57	2.80	2.69
	SD	1.041	1.186	1.123
Oral presentations	Mean	2.86	2.80	2.82
	SD	1.099	1.079	1.084
Dealing with stress	Mean	2.82	2.66	2.73
	SD	1.167	0.921	1.038
Preparing for exams	Mean	2.59	2.81	2.71
	SD	0.998	0.973	0.986
Reading academic texts	Mean	2.59	2.56	2.57
	SD	0.911	0.970	0.939
Organising your time	Mean	2.73	2.78	2.76
	SD	1.186	1.001	1.084
n		49	59	108

5.4.3 Practical subject skills

Several interview participants described gaining subject-specific practical skills during the IFY as helpful, such as giving presentations, technical drawing or lab work.

“There’s some really basic skills that I learnt from the Foundation course...how to do technical drawing and how to use the tools because there’s so many machines in different aspects like drilling machines that others don’t know about but because I took the Foundation course I know about them.”

(IFY Arts participant)

5.4.4 Curriculum content

Most previous IFY participants described how they had benefited from having learnt the same basic curriculum content during the IFY that they were currently studying during their degrees.

They perceived this to contribute to their confidence and success.

“It opened me up to the international way of business that is in the subject and it has been a good pathway for me going into the university. It was very helpful because having gone to the International College I knew some of what to expect. Even now I’m still not comfortable, but I’m happy because having gone through the International College, I know a lot compared to other people who never went to the International College.”

(IFY Business participant)

5.4.5 Links between the International College and the university

A few participants described how the International College and the university processes appeared to be linked; and that the degree seemed like a continuation of the IFY.

“Coming from the college has made the transition much smoother because the International College and the university are linked together, we use the same facilities, the lecturers even if they’re into the same they know quite a lot about the university and I felt like it was just a continuation.”

(IFY Business participant)

5.5 Participants’ suggestions for enhancement of pedagogic and support practices during the IFY and at university

Interview participants’ suggestions for enhancement included:

– At the University:

- A calendar including key dates for the whole year provided at induction
- Available support and how to access this explained at induction
- Subject-specific training in writing and practical skills
- Slowing down the pace of teaching
- Podcasting and lecture slides available online
- More interactive seminars that clearly follow on from lectures
- Greater support in encouraging students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to integrate

– At the International College/prior to university:

- A clearer explanation regarding degree workload, curriculum and academic expectations before starting university
- Additional specific subject training related to the degree, eg in practical skills and reports
- Increased preparation for becoming an independent learner
- More strongly communicated advice on applying for a visa

5.6 An overview of variations according to different groups

It was not possible to identify any statistically significant differences between pre and post-92 university survey respondents’ experiences. However, interview participants across three different (pre and post-1992) universities, described similar experiences including helpful factors and challenges, and therefore we may conclude that international students’ experiences and challenges are similar in different types of UK universities. However, there were significant differences in survey responses, and variations in interview participants’ experiences, when comparing broad disciplinary fields. Qualitative data analysis revealed that Arts interview participants expressed a greater sense of belonging and supportive working relationships with staff and students than in other disciplines. Statistical analysis of survey data found that Science respondents were more likely to report high stress levels than respondents from other subject areas and this result was statistically

Table 4: Stress level by subject area (percentages)

Stress level	Arts and Design		Business		Engineering, etc.		Science		All	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
High	35.3	12	20.0	6	13.6	3	50.0	11	29.6	32
Medium	47.1	16	70.0	21	77.3	17	50.0	11	60.2	65
Low	17.6	6	10.0	3	9.1	2	0	0	10.2	11
n	100	34	100	30	100	22	100	22	100	108

Table 5: Percentage of how worried students were of not passing their first year of the degree course by subject area

Worry level	Arts and Design		Business		Engineering, etc.		Science	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Very worried	8.8	3	20.0	6	4.5	1	45.5	10
Fairly worried	44.1	15	40.0	12	63.9	14	27.3	6
Not at all worried	47.1	16	40.0	12	31.8	7	27.3	6
Total	100	34	100	30	100	22	100	22

significant ($\chi^2=13.314$, $df=6$, $p=.038$) (see Table 4). Moreover, Science respondents were statistically more likely to be very worried about not passing the first year than students from other subject areas ($\chi^2=17.824$, $df=6$, $p=.007$) (see Table 5). In addition, Business students were statistically more likely to feel confident in academic writing and that their written English was good enough to pass their degree than in other subjects.

Data analysis revealed differences between previous IFY and non-IFY students' experiences. Academically, most IFY interview participants found that the IFY was very helpful as the first year of the degree progressed, and this finding is supported by the survey results, particularly in relation to English skills and confidence in academic writing. Except for English language, previous IFY participants experienced similar academic challenges to other international students when starting their degrees, but struggled particularly in relation to adjusting to independent study, larger class sizes and decreased communication with academic staff, as described earlier in this report. However, the research shows that attending the IFY is very helpful for students in relation to developing a sense of belonging and making friends in Semester 1. According to earlier studies, developing belonging is a very important factor in contributing to student engagement, confidence and success (Wenger, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Masika and Jones, 2016).

6 Conclusion

This research shows that a combination of university and International College teaching, learning and support practices positively influence international students' sense of belonging, identity development, independence, confidence and engagement (Briggs et al., 2012). As supported by earlier research (Jones et al., 2015), this study also demonstrates that students' attendance of an IFY at International Colleges helps to prepare them for university in varied ways during the first and second semesters. When starting degrees and in early transition, the IFY is most helpful in preparing international students in relation to: English skills, a sense of social confidence and belonging. However, this is not always the case and varies across disciplines and according to individual student experiences.

As the first year progresses, the IFY provides international students with enhanced confidence related to: English language and academic writing, curriculum knowledge, subject specific practical skills, and similar processes linking the College and university.

Challenges faced by all students including UK and international students when starting HE include the need to successfully integrate with one another. For some, but not all, international students, there is also a need to adjust to new experiences of UK HE learning, to become independent learners, and to reach the required HE level in discipline-specific academic writing.

Additional academic challenges faced by international students, relate to workload, deadlines, exams and assignments. Again, international students are not alone in these challenges, as UK students also face them (HEA, 2008; Jones et al., 2015)

For all students developing a sense of belonging when they start university may be considered crucially important in order to counteract the loss of 'cultural capital' and 'institutional habitus' that they have experienced in moving from college to a new UK HE environment. For international students this challenging experience of feeling like a "fish out of water" may be exacerbated (Thomas, 2002, p431: Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Our research indicates that partner colleges and universities share a joint responsibility to develop existing good practice to help support international student belonging, engagement and success during their first year at university by enhancing:

- Connections between universities and pathway colleges at the transition stage, such as: help with visas; pathway colleges involved with university orientation week; universities involved with pathway college results day activities
- Development of international and UK student integration
- Preparation to help students to become independent learners and to manage time and workload, eg through a gradual lessening of support throughout the IFY
- Subject-specific academic writing and skills support
- Communication and working relationships (including constructive feedback) between academic staff and students in some disciplines/modules at university
- Online resources, such as podcast lectures, to support flexible independent study

The need to prioritise internationalisation and enhance the quality of international students' experiences in UK universities is now timely and crucial (Thorne, 2015). The findings of this study can help to inform the future development of HE and international college policies and practices in working with international students. Within this context, the integration of international and British students in UK HE may be a new focus for future research.

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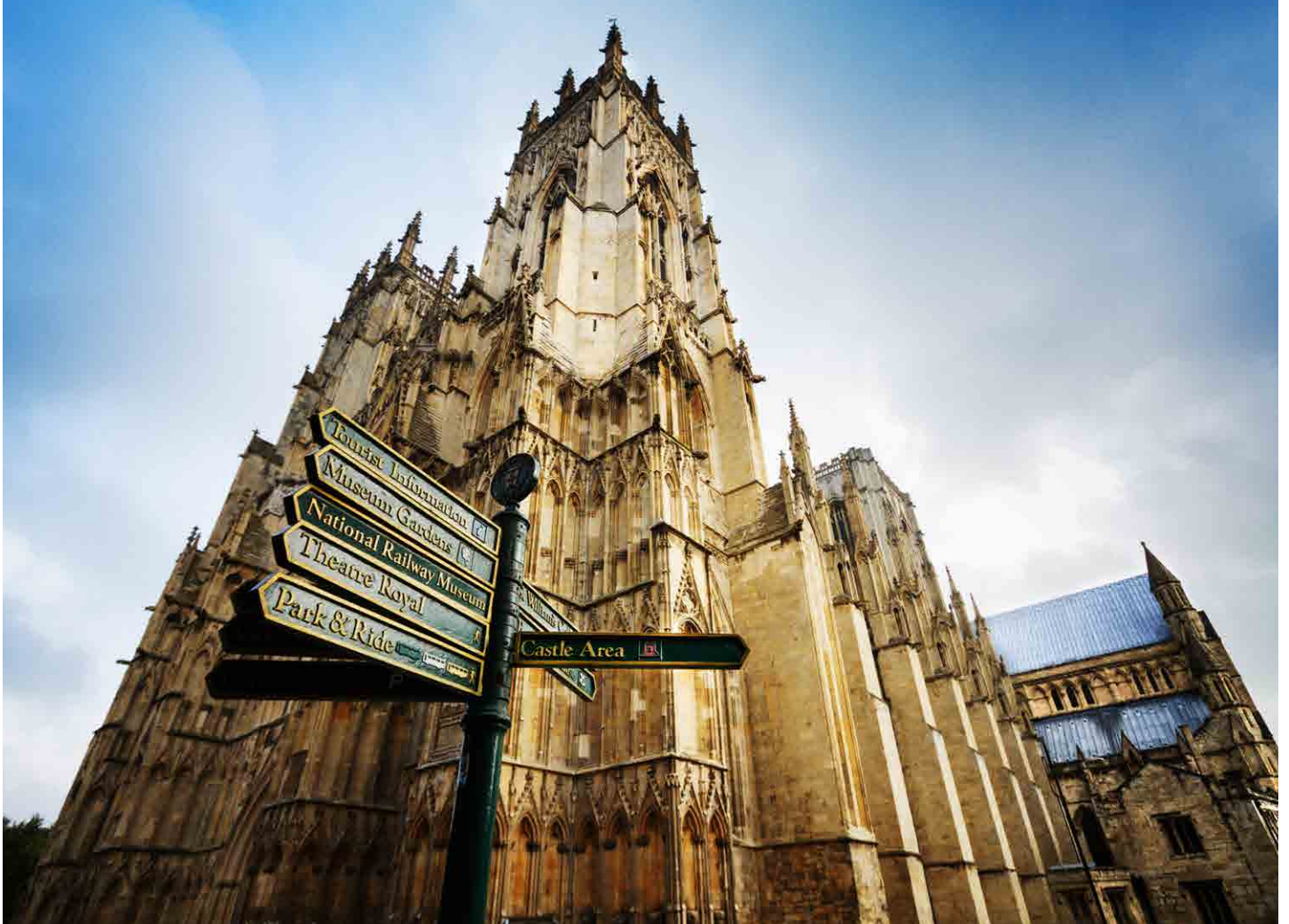


The Checkland Building at Falmer campus, University of Brighton

University of York

Evaluating intercultural competency strategies within college communities

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1. Introduction

This project aimed to explore the integration of international students and the attitudes of 'home' students in terms of intercultural competencies. In 2015-16, Goodricke College at the University of York began to pilot a series of workshops, events, and campaigns as part of an Intercultural Competency Certificate Programme (ICCP) designed to create an ethos of intercultural understanding. This research aims to determine the impact of these activities by conducting attitude surveys in Goodricke and a control college at the University of York, and qualitative interviews with Goodricke students. Strategies used have included an online survey administered to all students in the target college and a control college with a study body of similar demographics as well as evaluation forms collected from participants in the various workshops and events. In addition, one-to-one interviews were conducted with volunteer students from the target college to address their intercultural development in greater depth as well as their reflections on the ICCP.

The research aimed to look at two dimensions of intercultural competencies, the first was of those students directly accessing the workshops and taking the certificate in intercultural competencies, to see the impact the course had on their attitudes and behaviours towards others. The second was to see if, even at this early stage in the project, whether the ethos of the college was impacted by this work and felt by the wider student body in the college.

2. Motivations for research

Successful integration of international students depends not only on those students, but also on the attitudes of 'home' students and the overall ethos of the institution. The massive growth in the number of international students in the UK has brought with it particular challenges for those students, for 'home' students, and for universities as institutions. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that a large number of international students come from a single country and research suggests that large numbers of single nationality students inhibits integration across nationality and thus impacts of the intercultural experiences of all students (i-graduate, 2014, p. 9).

There is a growing interest in the experiences of international students and the relationships and interactions they have with 'home' students (Montgomery, 2010). Surveys have found that one of the main concerns of student satisfaction concerns multicultural learning on campus (i-graduate, 2014, p. 14). Yet, research on, and understanding of, the experience of international students in the UK is relatively scarce (Gunawarden and Wilson, 2012; Morrison et al., 2005). What there is suggests that some international students find it difficult to integrate, and experience barriers (both internal and external) in engaging fully with university life (Andersson et al., 2012; Marginson, 2013). As such, this research endeavoured to determine whether this ICCP may be a suitable resource to support increased engagement and, specifically, which aspects of the programme are most useful and to which aspects of student life it is most beneficial.

3. Intercultural Competency Certificate Programme (ICCP)

The intercultural competency certificate programme (ICCP) is a series of courses, trainings and workshops on issues of diversity. Piloted in York in the autumn of 2015 in Goodricke College, the aim of the programme is to build inclusive spaces at the University of York for all students.

The main objectives for student participants are as follows:

- Define the concept of intercultural competency and how it relates to the University of York
- Discuss and analyse their own social identity and explore their cultural background stories
- Become familiar with Milton Bennet's spectrum of Intercultural Sensitivity and how it is relative to their own life experience and several other theoretical frames
- Recognise emotional triggers when discussing intercultural issues
- Recognise stereotypes and assumptions
- Identify intercultural issues that may impact how they interact with difference
- Begin to discuss issues of power, privilege and oppression
- Create a personal action plan with attainable goals

Students who sign up for the programme must attend eight sessions to earn a certificate of completion. This certificate shows that the

student is dedicated to learning about intercultural competency. The programme is designed to start the conversation and students are advised to seek out further development, as one is never fully interculturally competent due to the ever-changing nature of our world.

The content of the course is highly interactive and are usually 90 minutes in length. The material in the sessions relies on multimedia such as Ted talks, poetry, music and several activities. Participants explore their own cultural background stories and how this relates to the cycle of socialisation, the intercultural sensitivity spectrum and other theories. Sessions on social identity and power, privilege and oppression also help facilitate an idea of how the participants interact with difference. Finally there are several activities on uncovering bias and how to be an active bystander. Several examples of the content can be found in the Appendix.

While the facilitators teach six of the eight sessions, two sessions can come from other lectures, programmes and arts-based events around the university and city of York. We had a US-based theatre artist come to the university for a performance of her solo work. This event was extremely popular and acted as an alternative to the usual workshops. Sessions from LGBTQ Week, Trans Awareness Week and Refugee Week were also promoted. Next year another US-based speaker, Jay Smooth, hip hop and political correspondent will be coming to talk at the university through the ICCP scheme. He will discuss creating dialogues around inclusivity using hip hop as a framework. Jay Smooth is widely known and highly regarded in the US and many students have commented on how excited and grateful they are for the ICCP to encourage these dialogues at York.

In the pilot year, 100 students registered for the programme, 60 students attended one or more workshops and 20 students completed the full programme. The celebration dinner was held in late May with The Academic Registrar in attendance. Based on feedback from the participants of the pilot, improvements for the coming year should mean a more streamlined approach for registration and new communication strategies that should enable more students to complete the ICCP. The need to equip our students with necessary tools for interacting with difference is more pressing than ever. The ICCP begins the conversation, gives

students vital and demonstrable employability and dialogue skills for our ever shrinking ever more diverse world.

4. Research methodology

In October we developed research instruments. It was decided that we would use a Qualtrics hosted online survey format with short answer and matrix questions, collecting demographics as well as feelings and perceptions of living in college. For example, we asked students how welcome they felt in college, what they did to make others feel welcome and how informed they felt about intercultural issues. In parallel the survey asked students to consider the quality of their interactions and desired interactions with British, European and international students.

At the same time we developed an evaluation form to be distributed after the workshop sessions conducted in Goodricke College. These include questions on learning and knowledge gained, whether the session would make a difference to their behaviour in interactions with people from other countries, and whether they felt it would be applicable in their course, their accommodation and their everyday life. The workshops began in October and in November there were three further workshops and events in Goodricke College from which evaluation feedback was collected.

At the end of November the first wave questionnaire (Table 1) was distributed to all students in Goodricke and Langwith colleges. The total number of residents in Goodricke is 636; 146 international (including European) students and 490 'home' students and in Langwith there are a total of 681 students; 502 'home' students and 179 international. The initial response rate was:

Table 1 Response rate to first wave questionnaires

	Home	International (including European)	Total	Participating in ICCP
Target College	33 (52% of total response)	31 (48% of total response)	64	15
	6% of population	21% of population		
Control College	61 (70% of total response)	26 (30% of total response)	87	--
	12% of population	15% of population		

In December we analysed the first wave questionnaire data and in the Spring of 2016 the second wave of questionnaires (Table 2) was administered to both the target and control colleges. The response rate for this phase of data collection was:

Table 2 Response rate to second wave questionnaires

	Home	International (including European)	Total	Participating in ICCP
Target College	28 (74% of total response)	10 (26% of total response)	38	3
	6% of population	7% of population		
Control College	40 (62% of total response)	25 (38% of total response)	65	--
	8% of population	14% of population		

Clearly the response rates were low from all students. There was a noticeable reduction in the number of international students from the target college that responded to the survey. While these figures make it difficult for us to draw generalisable conclusions regarding comparing the two colleges across the two waves of survey, we are able to make some tentative comments about the difference between home and international students perceptions of college life.

From both waves of the questionnaire students were asked to identify whether they were willing and able to participate in a one-to-one interview. In total, seven interviews were conducted with students from Goodricke College; six home first year undergraduates and one international taught postgraduate student.

5. Key research findings

The findings from the quantitative data are difficult to draw very strong conclusions from. It must be noted that the response rate from both colleges was very low, and the rates differed across colleges, making it impossible to generalise from the data. The size of the sample was also too small to give any significant differences, and since the data was anonymous at the point of collection, we do not know if the participants from wave one and two were the same. However, we provide here some of the observable differences in the responses across colleges and across the pre and post-surveys, but we do not make more than tentative suggestions regarding the interpretations.

One of the initial questions asked students how welcome they feel in college, out of three with three being very welcome. Combining answers from both colleges and across both waves of the survey, we found that international students are slightly less likely to feel welcome (2.39) than British students (2.74). On the other hand when asked about how informed they feel about intercultural issues international students were likely to feel slightly better informed (2.17), on average, than British students (1.94).

In the first wave questionnaire, when all students were asked how welcome British students make international students feel in college we found that the average rate of response (out of three, with three being very welcome) for Langwith was 1.75 and for Goodricke was 1.97, however in the second wave questionnaire these averages were 1.86 for Langwith and 1.64 in Goodricke. When looking at the data in student nationality categories, Goodricke international students had a 0.4 decrease in how welcome they felt British students made international students, while British students had a 0.1 decrease.

When international students in each college were asked about the quality of their interactions with British students, we found that in both college the average response was 1.9 (out of four with one being high quality and four being superficial). In the second wave, both colleges showed decreases in the quality of interaction, Goodricke to 2.2 and Langwith to 2.5. This may suggest that in both colleges the early welcoming environment was not maintained or it was difficult for students to foster relationships, possibly an effect of their increased academic load throughout the year.

British students in Goodricke showed a decrease in the quality of their interactions with international students, from 2.3 to 2.6 (with one high quality and four superficial interactions) while international students also showed a decrease in the quality their interactions with British students, from 1.9 to 2.2. In Langwith, British students' quality of interactions with international students improved slightly, from 2.8 to 2.7, but the superficiality of interactions reported by international students with British students went up from 1.9 to 2.5 (with one high quality and four superficial interactions).

Students were also asked about the extent to which they desired more interactions with British

students, and international students in both waves. Both colleges showed that British students are keen to have more interactions with international students, averaging around 3.4 (with one being no desire for more interactions and four meaning high desire for more interactions). This compared to British students' desiring more interactions with other British students, 3.1. This implies that generally British students wanted more interactions than they currently have with international students. Similarly, international students expressed a desire to interact more with British students, averaging 3.3 and 3.2 in Goodricke and Langwith respectively (compared to international students desiring more interactions with other international students, which was 3.5 on average in Goodricke).

The questionnaires also contained some open questions, which allowed us to group the responses into themes. When commenting on interactions with others participants were quite split in terms of how integrated they thought their colleges were. 38% of international Goodricke students said they thought there was an international divide, compared to only 28% of British students. In Langwith only 14% of international students thought there was an international divide, compared to 33% of British students. On the other hand 31% of international and 52% of British Goodricke students said that they felt well integrated with people from other countries, this was lower in Langwith with only 29% and 28% of international and British students respectively feeling well integrated.

Other findings from the analysis of open questions in the first wave questionnaire was that British students in both colleges tended to emphasize the importance of being welcoming and they talked more about being comfortable and safe in college. International students talked more about stress, and college as a place to help you cope with that stress. This may begin to give us some clues about why international students do not always feel confident to engage in college life and that perhaps need more support to do so. Students in Goodricke talked more than their Langwith counterparts about wanting to avoid isolation, build community and the idea of college as home. Comments from international students in Goodricke suggested that Chinese students felt they were most likely to interact only with other Chinese students. International students were more likely to talk about wanting more interactions with people

from other countries than British students, with 42% of Goodricke and 38% of Langwith international students saying that they wanted more interactions with people from other countries. While only 14% of Goodricke and 26% of Langwith British students saying the same. However, more home students commented on wanting to make an extra effort with international students (13% of Goodricke and 11% of Langwith, compared to 0% of international students).

Perhaps the most striking finding from the questionnaires was that far more international students worried about cultural differences, and therefore said that they were less likely to interact with people of different nationalities to themselves in order to avoid this. This was the case for 18% of Goodricke international students and 24% of Langwith international students, while only 2% of Langwith British students and no Goodricke British students made similar comments.

Further qualitative findings come from the workshop evaluations and interviews with Goodricke students. While these do not allow for a comparative dimension, they provide a deeper understanding of the way the students experienced the activities and life in college. The evaluations of the ICCP workshops revealed generally positive feelings about the course. Those that attended reported high satisfaction rates with an average of 3.6 out of 4. Participants were more likely to think the course would be useful in their everyday life (3.6 out of 4) than in their course (3.3), and many also thought that the course would be useful in their accommodation (3.5). Each of the workshops had specific learning objectives, with overarching themes running throughout. One key dimension of the programme was to encourage students to be more open-minded in their approach to others; many commented that they took away from the course the importance of thinking twice before making stereotypes about others. Wider learning outcomes were not mentioned explicitly.

The final aspect of data collection was the interviews with Goodricke students. Again, the sample size was small with six home and one international student, and the participants were recruited through the survey, with the aim to get a random sample of participants from the college, rather than students who were participating in the ICCP. Of the seven

interviewees just one was participating in the ICCP and two others reported knowing about the programme from sources other than the research instruments for this project.

In order to more fully understand what students actually expect from their college they were asked to explain the purpose of the college system and how they fit into their college. Almost every respondent described colleges as being a place to create community, often highlighting the importance and value of doing so at a smaller scale versus on a university wide basis. This was also noted in questionnaire data where variations of the statement *“college is a home away from home”* were received. A British questionnaire respondent from Goodricke stated: *“it is the foundation on which your whole university experience is built upon. If I didn’t feel welcomed by my college I wouldn’t have felt welcome at university”*. This highlights the importance of the college role. Specifically referring to international students, Interview Respondent 7 said: *“all they want is to feel included”*, though he went on to caution, *“highlighting differences too much can have the opposite effect.”*

With college community in mind, interviewees were then asked who they believe is responsible for making students feel welcome within college. Each interview respondent identified the students themselves as being primarily responsible, with some supplemental assistance from college tutors. A few students felt the Head and Assistant Head of College could also contribute to the process but felt interaction from students was more effective. Many more mentioned college welfare tutors as playing an integral role in the process, *“they’re on the ground level and are easy to talk to, so they can observe who seems uncomfortable and help whoever needs it”* (Interview Respondent 5).

Students were often hesitant to identify and discuss their friends or flatmates as being of a different culture or nationality, similar to questionnaire responses where a significant number of responses included remarks such as *“I don’t treat international students differently at all because everyone should be treated equally.”* When they did, most said a majority of their intercultural interactions were related to typical flatmate living issues. Intentional events offered by the college were perceived as having low attendance rates, but students mentioned events involving food, such as a Bake Off and College

Barbeque, as the most engaging. Another questionnaire respondent stated he would not behave differently to make home or international students feel welcome, *“to behave differently would make the international students feel separated, the idea is to make them feel included.”* A similar idea to this was stated by a majority of Goodricke questionnaire respondents, showing a possible conscious effort to treating people equally, despite varying backgrounds and interests.

In discussions of the college ethos interviewees were generally pleased. It was seen as a welcoming and accessible college, *“anyone can talk to anyone”* (Interview Respondent 5), though there were no comments on it being a particularly intercultural environment. A few students made the point that they felt any changes should be organic, *“it has to be natural, the college can try but they shouldn’t push too hard”* (Interview Respondent 6). Despite the general feeling of welcoming and openness, many Goodricke questionnaire respondents still noted what they felt to be international students moving in home culture peer groups without much interaction with British students, and many felt this was a missed opportunity for interaction.

The respondent who was participating in the ICCP reported increased skills in tolerance as the main benefit of the programme, as well as occasional discussions on topics arising from the workshops and events with other friends also participating in the programme. She reported a greater awareness of issues such as holding prejudices and making assumptions but did not feel that had changed her outward behaviour, stating she made efforts to avoid making such generalisations prior to participation in the ICCP.

6. Conclusions and ideas for further research

Overall, international students are slightly less likely to feel welcome in college and are likely to feel more nervous about initiating interaction with people of different nationalities to themselves than British students. However, British students are more likely to feel that their interactions with international students were slightly more superficial than vice versa. All students reported wanting more interactions with people of different nationalities in the quantitative survey data, but from the qualitative survey data we found that

twice as many international students than British students commented on wanting more interactions with people from other countries. As is often the case with extra-curricular activities organised in college, communication and publicity of events and their benefits could have been extended in order to raise awareness of the activities. However, for the students that were involved there were positive attitudes about the workshops, and evidence that at least one of the key outcomes, challenging stereotypes, was met by the programme.

In terms of the broader college ethos there is still some way to go to embed intercultural competencies into the college community. The results did not show any conclusive evidence that students in the target college were more interculturally competent overall, although at this early stage that was to be expected. It appeared that students felt uncomfortable about being asked to differentiate overtly between students from different countries, and believed that students should all be treated equally. This did not mean necessarily that all students were satisfied with their interactions with people from other countries, but those who had not done the ICCP workshops were perhaps not aware of the stereotypes and taken-for-granted assumptions on which they may have based their interactions. So aiming for higher levels of participation is desirable, although reaching the students who may have most to benefit is always a challenge. The same is true of the response rate. Students often complain about feeling saturated by opportunities and emails, and low participation in both activities and surveys is a common problem.

With this in mind, future research should focus more qualitatively on the participants on the course, and perhaps their flatmates to focus the data more explicitly on the outcomes for students participating in the programme, and those they directly interact with. Following individual participants would allow us to gain a deeper insight into the ways in which the programme components actually influence their everyday interactions and how, if at all, it influences their flatmates and friends who are not ICCP participants. It is from these initial impacts that the college ethos will gradually be affected by this type of input.

7. Recommendations for practice

Students in this study suggested the college focus on how it publicises its events, those in the ICCP as well as other offerings. The most effective strategy seemed to be welfare tutors coming into each individual flat to tell everyone about upcoming events in person. This was a way for students, with minimum effort, to find out more about potentially interesting events. Emails as a main source of publicising offerings has limitations and often results in non-participation. In terms of the content of the programme, the evaluations were positive and students recognised the benefits and utility of what they had learned in everyday life. There was less focus on how the learning could be translated to their living environment and accommodation, so to benefit the ethos of the college, perhaps there could be more explicit focus on how students could feed the ideas into their flats and how they relate to those they live with.

8. Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions

The content of the workshops received consistently positive feedback and could easily be rolled out to other colleges or residences in UK institutions. A guide to the practice and the content of the workshop is in development and is available by contacting sarah.napoli-rangel@york.ac.uk

Sarah Napoli has been providing consultation and offering workshops to UK institutions. This work is difficult to facilitate without training and consistent practice. Although a dissemination guide is in progress, training on how to implement the programme is necessary. In the Appendix to this report you will find a resource guide that Sarah has developed for student affairs professionals that was used at the 2016 AMOSSHE conference.

University of York

Appendix

Encouraging intercultural dialogue with students

Community Learning Guidelines, *The Social Justice Training Institute*

- Be open and honest
- Participate at your own comfort level
- Speak from personal experience: use “I” statements to share thoughts and feelings
- Listen respectfully
- Share air time; encourage others to participate
- Be fully present
- Be open to new and different ideas/thoughts
- Take risks
- Respect and maintain confidentiality
- Space to ask questions
- Participants lead discussion
- Have fun and laugh!

Ice breakers

Come inside the circle

All participants stand in a huge circle. The facilitator gives a couple of statements like, “I have traveled abroad” etc... and those that it is true for step into the circle. After a couple done by the facilitator, ask the participants to step in the circle and say a true statement about themselves, all other people who it is also true for should step into the circle...and this continues etc., another getting to know you on a large scale! (If there are mobility disabilities in the space, this can easily be done as a hand raise or stand up/sit down.)

Communication Game

Work in pairs, one person is person A, one is person B.

Person A needs to communicate a story to person B without speaking, they can use gestures and they can draw but they cannot write numbers or words. (It helps if they do not

know each other)

Person B tries to figure out what they communicating, they can ask questions and person A can nod or shake their head.

Afterwards, debrief and ask how that felt? Did you get the story right? How does this relate to cultural misunderstandings? Have you ever had to communicate something in a culture that does not speak your language? Have you ever tried to understand someone who did not speak your native language?

(The idea here is to help students see how difficult it can be for international students living in the UK, even if their English is fluent. Also, I think that we tend to forget that, if we don't understand someone, it's because we don't speak the same language, and it's not because they are not intelligent.)

What is culture?

- Think of two cultures you belong to, think of culture broadly, share this definition with your partner
- Cultural Iceberg (see Figure 1)
- What are the things that we observe and interact with a culture (above surface) and what is it that we do not see (below surface), work with your partner

Search for ‘cultural iceberg’ on Google and you will find thousands of other examples!

Cultural Background Stories

It's important to share stories yourself. Give a good example to get them thinking of who they are and where they come from.

Figure 1: The Iceberg concept of culture



Figure 1 source:
The Indiana
Department of
Education
Office of English
Language Learning &
Migrant Education.
Accessed on 1
November 2016 with
minor edits by
UKCISA

Who are you as a Cultural Being?

- Where I was born and raised
- Family background
- Identity markers (race, class, sexual orientation, religion, gender, age)
- When I went to school
- Significant experiences up to this point that have impacted me
- Current relationships
- Basically how I got from point A to point B

Have them share in pairs, it's better if they do not know each other. If time allows, give each person five minutes to share and then switch, then allow

them to ask questions. It's a practice of active listening as well.

Intercultural spectrum: Milton Bennet

(See Figure 2). Side note: I am not a massive fan of this theory but I do find it to be useful when working with students to help them understand that if someone is in 'defense' mode, you cannot expect them to move up to 'acceptance' right away. You need to first interact with them in 'minimisation', etc. Also, we all tend to think we are higher in the spectrum than we actually are.

Figure 3: The cycle of socialisation

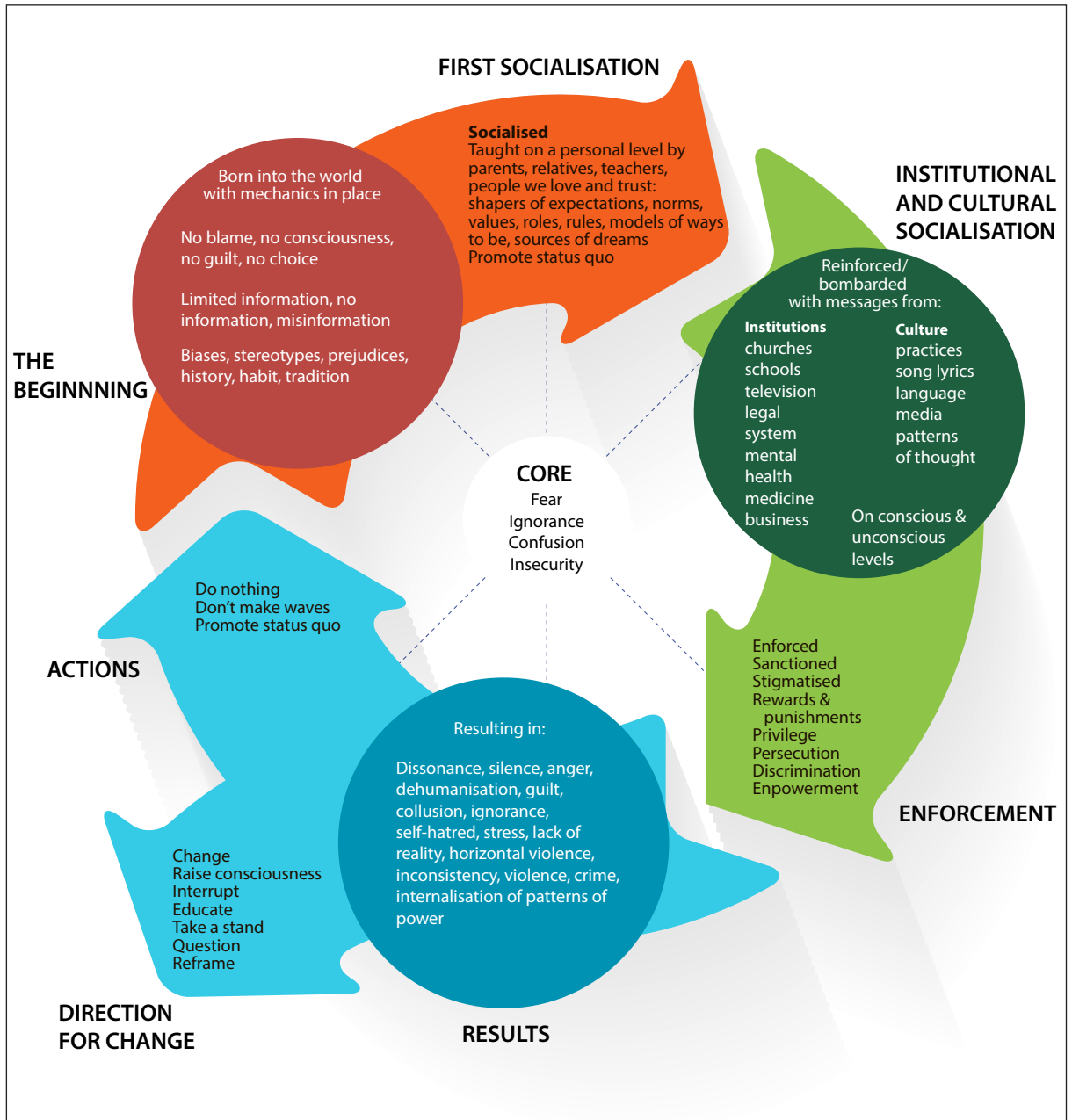


Figure 3
Source: Cycle of Socialization developed by Bobbie Harro
© Readings for Diversity and Social Justice, Routledge 2000

Figure 2: The development of intercultural sensitivity

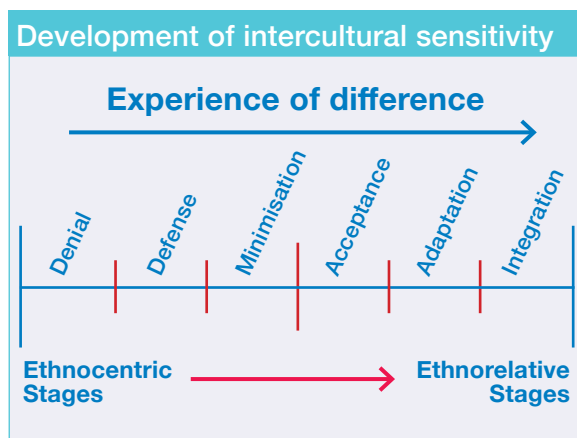


Figure 2
© Milton Bennet

There is an inventory where you can actually find out where you are. I do not think integration exists – I think it's more an aspiration than anything. (These are my own personal feelings.) See <http://idrinstitute.org/page.asp?menu1=15> for more information on the model of development of intercultural sensitivity.

Cycle of socialisation: Bobbie Harro

(See Figure 3).

- When did you experience your first socialisations?
- When did you experience institutional and cultural socialisations?
- What were enforcements?
- What were some of the results of your

socialisation?

- Have you encountered anything that caused a direction for change/change in your perception?

The article is available at <https://www.scribd.com/doc/12817387/Haro-B-The-Cycle-of-Socialization> or email me at: sarah.napoli-rangel@york.ac.uk for a pdf copy.

Identity corners

The goal of this activity is that during the exploration of social identities, participants will gain knowledge of privilege and power dynamics within the group.

Different identity groups will be scattered around the room: (define these with the group)

- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Ability/disability
- Nationality
- Socio-economic class
- Size/appearance
- Age

A series of statements will be read and participants move to the identity that best sums up that statement for them:

- I think most about this aspect of my identity (small group)
- I think least about this aspect of my identity (large group)
- This was the most emphasised in my family (1:1)
- This was the least emphasised in my family (large group)
- This part of my identity has the most effect on how people treat me (small groups)
- Experienced the most prejudice (large group)
- Most rewarding experience (large group)

Participants will discuss why they have moved there within the large group if they wish and with the other participants standing within their own identities. The facilitator can decide how long we can discuss each statement, depends on time.

Identity activity debrief (I am usually working with student leaders but you can replace this with anything)

- What experiences have you had in these identities that may define your approach to leadership and group work?

- What identities don't? How might this impact your approach to leadership and how you work with others?
- How can you be more efficient and transparent with your identities to decrease the impact it may have on leadership and group work?
- Where does power and privilege play a role in these identities and how does that impact your approach to leadership?

Power/privilege and oppression

(See Table 3). This is the hardest conversation you will have with students. Firstly, it is good practice to define your terms (see the video links below):

Institutional power:

The ability or official authority to decide what is best for others. The ability to decide who will have access to resources. The capacity to exercise control over others.

Privilege:

Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels and gives advantages, favours, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of target groups. In the United States, privilege is granted to people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups:

- White people
- Able-bodied people
- Heterosexuals
- Males
- Christians
- Middle or owning class people
- Middle-aged people
- English-speaking people

Privilege is characteristically invisible to people

Table 3: Power/privilege and oppression

	PRIVILEGED	TARGETED
Class	Upper/middle	Lower/working
Race	White/european descent	People of colour
Gender	Male	Female/any other gender identity
Ability	Able-bodied	People with disabilities
Age	Middle	Older/younger
Religion	Christian	Any other religion
Size/appearance	Fit/average/Hollywood	Too thin/too big
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	Any other sexual orientation
Nationality/language	USA, UK, "western", English	Everywhere else, not english speaking

who have it. People in dominant groups often believe that they have earned the privileges that they enjoy or that everyone could have access to these privileges if only they worked to earn them. In fact, privileges are unearned and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent.

Oppression:

The combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called “target groups”) and benefits other groups (often called “dominant groups”). Examples of these systems are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism. These systems enable dominant groups to exert control over target groups by limiting their rights, freedom, and access to basic resources such as healthcare, education, employment, and housing.

This is in a western context but some of the privilege/targeted identities will ring true for societies across the globe.

The impact:

- Take an inventory of your privileged and targeted identities
- How may your identities affect how you interact with difference?
- Why is it important to recognise this? In terms of your work? As a student? As a professional?

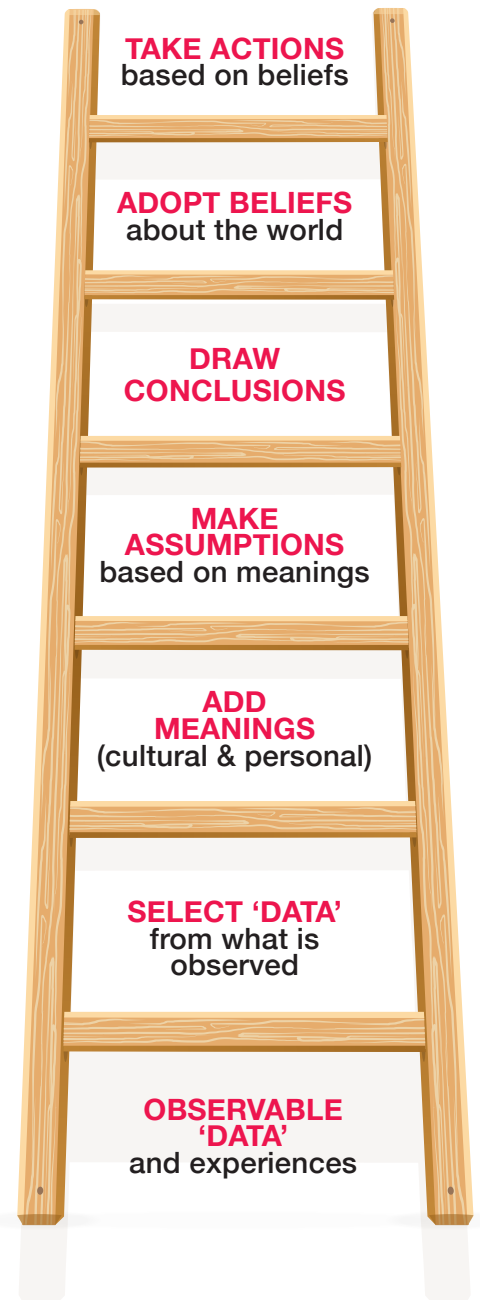
Figure 4 Source:
The Fifth Discipline
Fieldbook, Senge et
al., 1994

Ladder of inference

Helpful when discussing unconscious bias (see Figure 4):

- Have you ever made an incorrect/bad assumption towards someone else? How did you find out it was wrong? What did you do after you made the mistake?
- Has anyone ever made an incorrect/wrong assumption towards you? How did you react? What did you say to the person?
- Where did the assumption you made or the one that someone made of you come from? (Think about the cycle of socialisation/ladder of inference)

Figure 4: The ladder of inference



Cultural stress points

- Identify three to five intercultural stress points that you find challenging in effectively responding to cultural differences.
- These intercultural stress points should describe situations you face that you believe interfere with your interactions with others from different cultural backgrounds
- How do you normally respond to a situation when you are emotionally triggered?

What do I do?

- Take a break, walk away, breathe, ask someone else to step in
- Stop to think where they may be on the intercultural spectrum. Did they climb the ladder; how have they been socialised?
- What is your motive: do you want to educate them? Correct them? Do you want them to apologise? Do you need to apologise?
- Determine a strategy, goal: what is your role, do you have a power relationship, do they?, how can you educate, correct, apologise, etc.
- If you are offended, remember to use 'I' statements, focusing on feelings, if they are offended, validate their feelings, don't get defensive
- Dialogue not debate

Contact sarah.napoli-rangel@york.ac.uk for a copy of active bystander workshop.

Videos

Danger of the single story

<http://bit.ly/2jTZFx8>

- What stuck out for you in the video?
- How does it relate to intercultural competency? Social justice?
- What will you take away from the video?

What kind of Asian are you?

<http://bit.ly/2ix4Xmf>

This is a useful video to use when discussing the intercultural spectrum.

- Where do you think the man is on the spectrum?
- Why?
- How could he move forward on the spectrum?
- Where do you think *you are* on the spectrum?

Guante – spoken word and hip hop artist

<http://bit.ly/2iwWq2J>

This is good when discussing the cycle of socialisation:

- What does this poem tell us about the cycle of socialisation?
- How does he interrupt the cycle?

Guante's website in general is excellent for any social justice conversation:

<http://bit.ly/2k0ogVn>

<http://bit.ly/2iCtgKG>

Rethinking thinking

Ladder of inference video

<http://bit.ly/2jU8Pd2>

Jay Smooth

- How to tell someone they sounded racist (great for tips on how to start that conversation)
 - <http://bit.ly/2jrQW8R>
- His TED talk on a similar theme
 - <http://bit.ly/2js2ysl>
- Systemic Racism series (US stats but applicable here)
 - <http://bit.ly/2k0qXpC>

Akala

The UK systemic race issue is scrutinised at:

<http://bit.ly/2ilb05z>

Contact me

Sarah.napoli-rangel@york.ac.uk

Bournemouth University

Identification of the key barriers to securing employment in the UK for international students at Bournemouth University

Jane Pimblett, Georgia Van Raalte, Thuy Dinh, Linda Ladle
Careers and Employability Service



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1. Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that international students at Bournemouth University (BU) face a high level of difficulty in securing work experience whilst studying. This research seeks to investigate and gather evidence to either support or disprove this claim.

We collected primary data from small focus group sessions with international students. These helped to formulate an online questionnaire which was sent out to all the BU international student population. With nearly a 10% response rate we were able to use the data to gain greater insights into the expectations of our international students and perceived barriers. It also highlighted some differences between the experiences of both the undergraduate and postgraduate population at BU.

We concluded that managing the expectations of incoming students and building resilience in seeking work in the UK during their studies is paramount. We will continue to develop our services following the results of this research and hope our findings will be of use to other universities.

2. Research aim

To carry out primary research to understand Bournemouth University (BU) international¹ students' perspective on the issues facing them when trying to gain work experience in the UK during their studies, either as part of their course, personal development or a source of income. This research was carried out with the aim of adapting practices and services for international students.

3. Motivations for research

At BU we have more students on work placements than any other university in Great Britain² and we believe that taking a work placement as part of your degree can help you stand out from the crowd. Some courses include mandatory placements, while on others they are optional. Mandatory placements can be anywhere from two weeks to 40 weeks (a full academic year) long. The shorter work placements are typically designed to fit in around modules of study.

With international student recruitment growing in countries such as America, Canada and Australia, and with the increase in the quality and accessibility of domestic education in Asian countries, it is essential that BU increases its competitive advantage. Increasing Global Mobility of all students is a key strategic drive for BU. Experience of work in the UK is perceived to be a huge advantage to international students to enable them to enter the global workplace. Previous focus groups organised by the International Market Research team at BU identified that BU international students face additional barriers to finding employment and work placements in the UK, over and above UK national students. This supports anecdotal evidence from individual students who approach the BU Careers and Employability staff for help finding work opportunities. Our research set out to explore these barriers in greater detail.

4. Summary of research outcomes

Our research identified the following key barriers for international students in gaining work experience in the UK:

- Lack of understanding of the UK job market, recruitment processes and practices
- English language difficulties
- Unrealistic expectations of the university placement process
- Lack of understanding of the amount of effort required to be successful in gaining work experience in the UK
- Lack of understanding of the value of transferrable employability skills gained from non-course specific work experiences

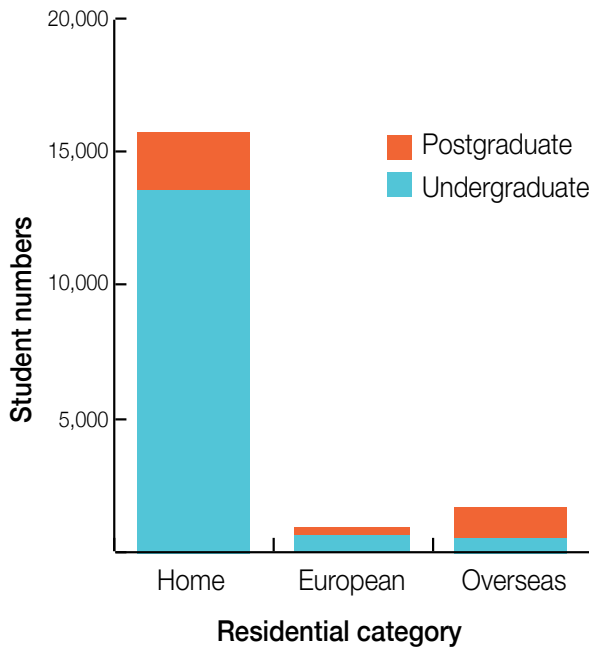
5. Background information and scope

Many students are attracted to BU because it offers all students the opportunity to complete a work placement during their studies. The university has a total student body of approximately 18,000, 11% of whom are international. (Figure 1 on page 33)

¹ Defined as Non-UK student

² According to HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013

Figure 1 Overview of all BU Students 2015-2016



responses to the questionnaire which was above our target of 10% and statistically reliable. The responses reflected a range of ages, nationalities and levels of study.

6. Research methodology

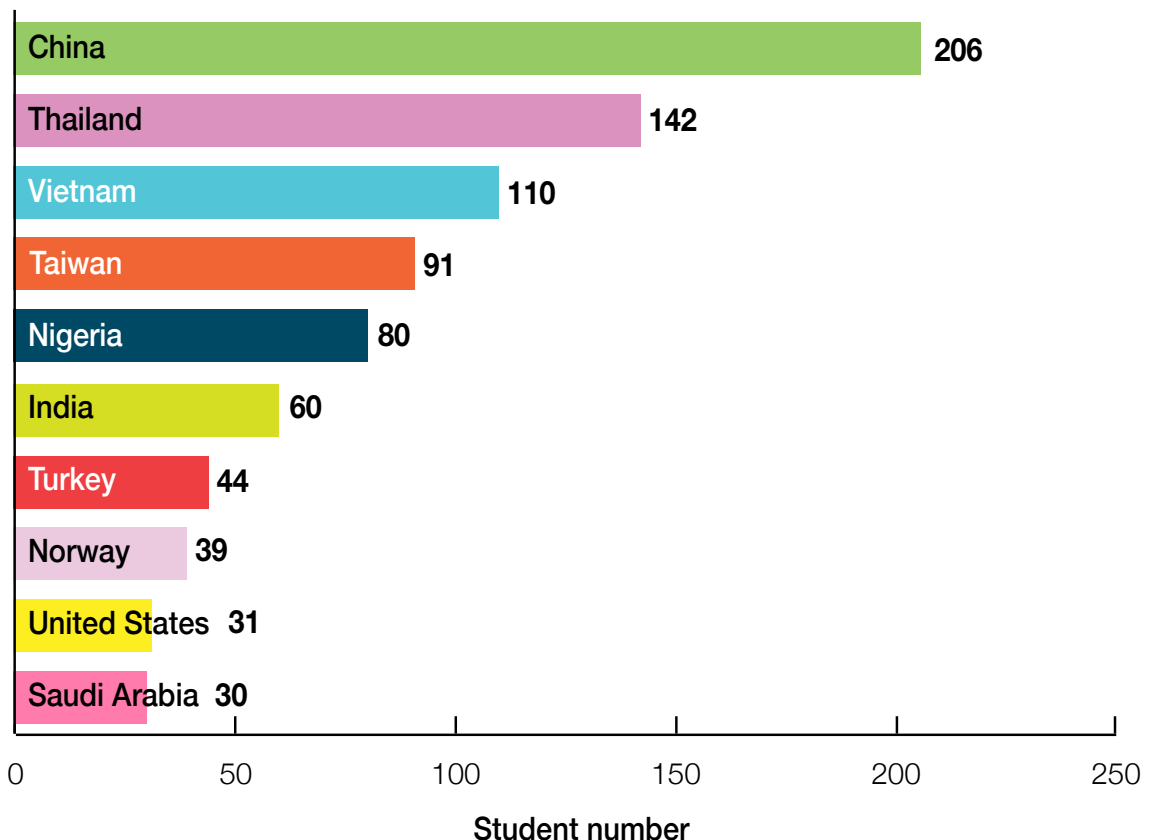
Employing the approach of grounded theory, we sought to gather as much data as possible before any attempts to theorise. (See summary of secondary research in Appendix 1). Focus groups and an online questionnaire were used to gather primary data.

All research was completed according to the guidelines set by our internal ethics policies. We employed a Project Research Assistant, who was a recent graduate and who had herself been an international student, and a current international student to help analyse and collate the data.

Our questionnaire was sent to the entire international student body (approximately 1,850 students). Figure 2 below illustrates the top 10 countries of all overseas students at BU for 2015-16 academic year. We received 292

Initial data was collected via three focus groups with international students from a number of different subject areas and course levels. Based on the findings of these focus groups we devised an online questionnaire entitled "Opportunities for

Figure 2 Top 10 Country of origin of both undergraduate and postgraduate international students at BU





From left to right: Thuy, Project Data Assistant, Alexandra, Prize draw winner and Georgia, Project Research Assistant

and Challenges to Finding Work in the UK from the Perspective of International Students” (Appendix 2). The questionnaire ran from 14 April to 3 May 2016. Students who completed the questionnaire were entered into a prize draw for £100 of Amazon vouchers.

7. Key research findings

The following findings are arranged into key areas of interest, reflecting themes that recurred across the focus groups and questionnaire data.

7.1 About the respondents

The largest volumes of respondents were between 21 and 24 years of age (see Table 1).

By running a linear regression, we found a slight negative correlation between student ages and their intention to search for work during their studies. That is to say, younger students were more interested in finding paid work to either support their living costs or gain more experience/skills as compared to older students.

We looked at the correlation between the countries of origin of the international population at BU (Figure 2) and the nationalities of the respondents to the questionnaire (Figure 3). Our findings revealed that whilst the largest population of international students at BU are from China, the largest group of respondents to the questionnaire were from Vietnam.

It can be seen from the graph in Figure 4 that undergraduate students were mostly looking for jobs in the Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications and Hospitality & Tourism, for 31% and 25% respectively. Regarding postgraduate students, most of them showed interest in Hospitality & Tourism and Marketing, Sales & Services, making up 25% and 18% correspondingly.

As can be seen from the graph in Figure 5, most EU students showed great interest in the area of the Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications (33%) as well as Hospitality & Tourism (25%). Meanwhile, we found that a considerable number of non-EU students were

Table 1. Age range (Question 2)

20 years and under	21 – 24 years	25 – 29 years	30 years and over	N/A	Total
67	111	69	37	3	287
Minimum age		Maximum age		Average age	
17		50		23	

Figure 3: Nationalities of top 10 respondents in percentage (Question 3)

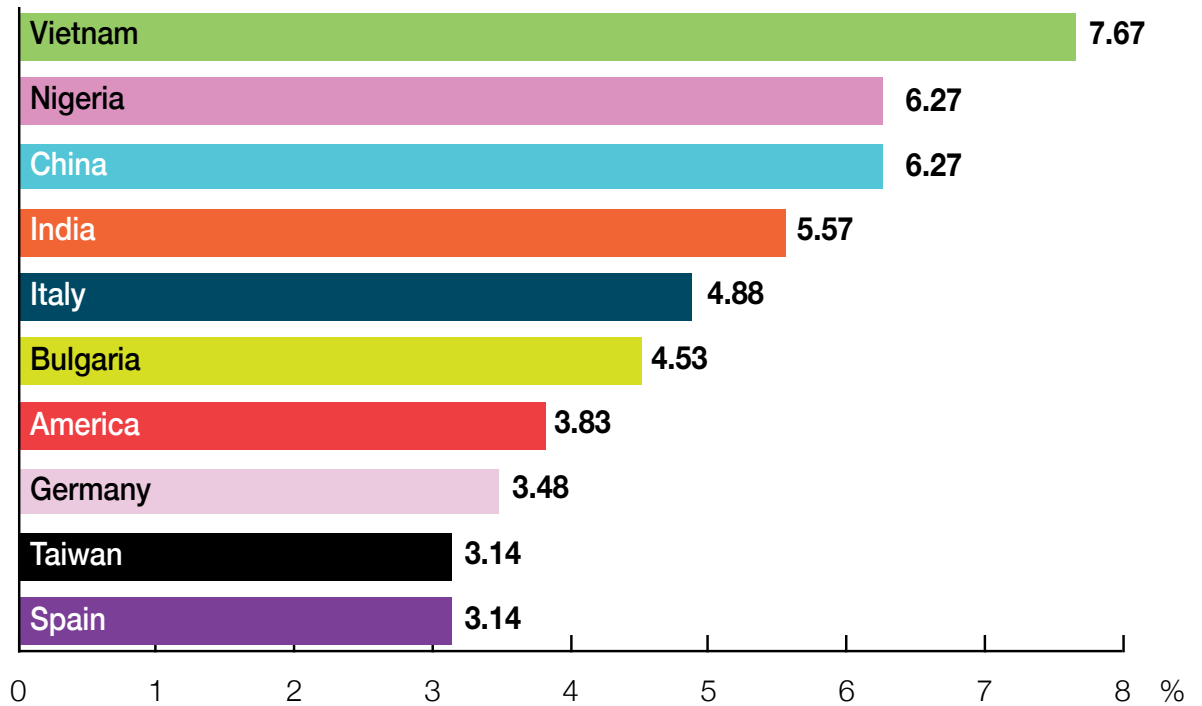


Figure 4. Career areas and study levels (in %) comparison (Questions 5 and 10)

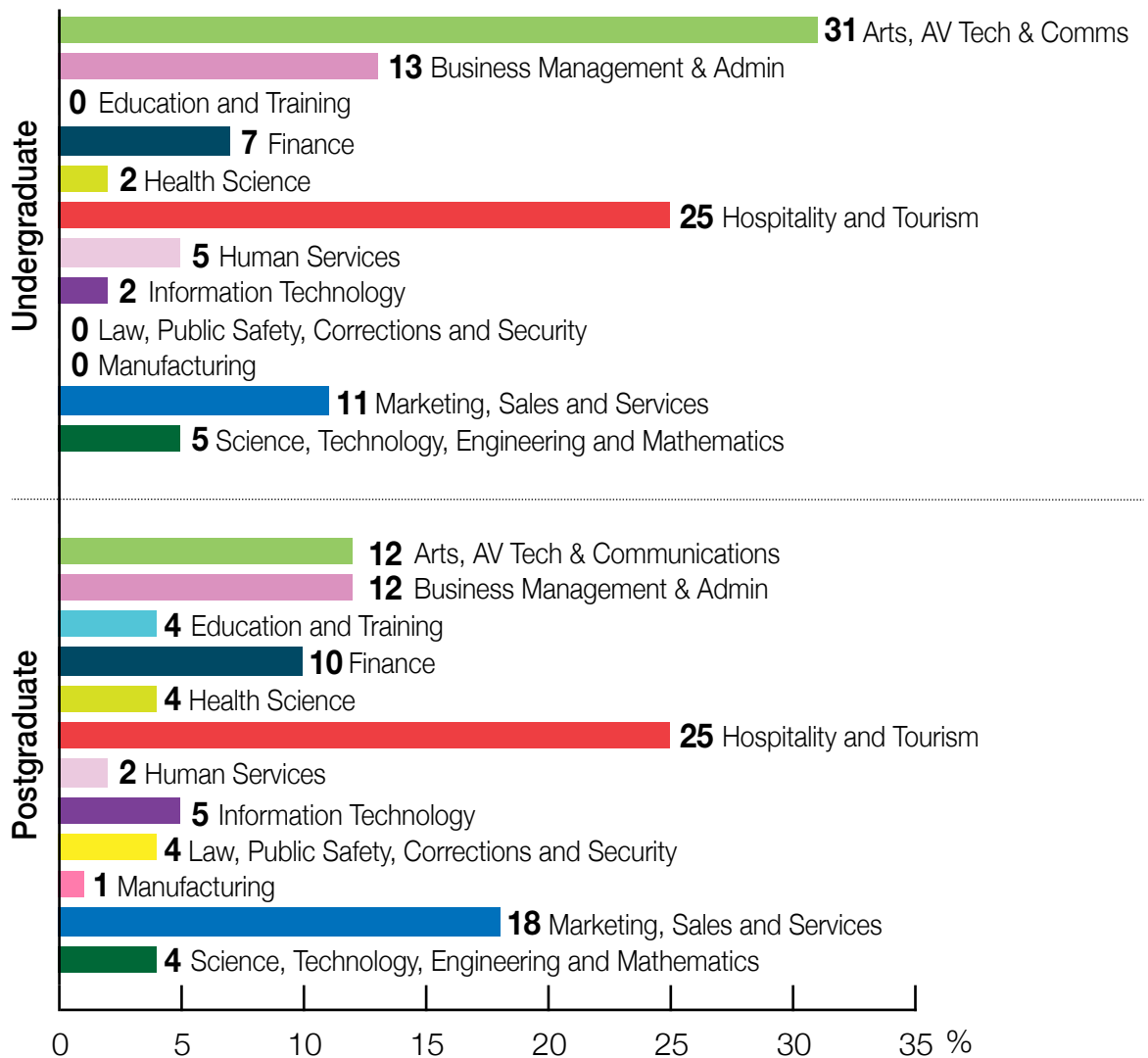
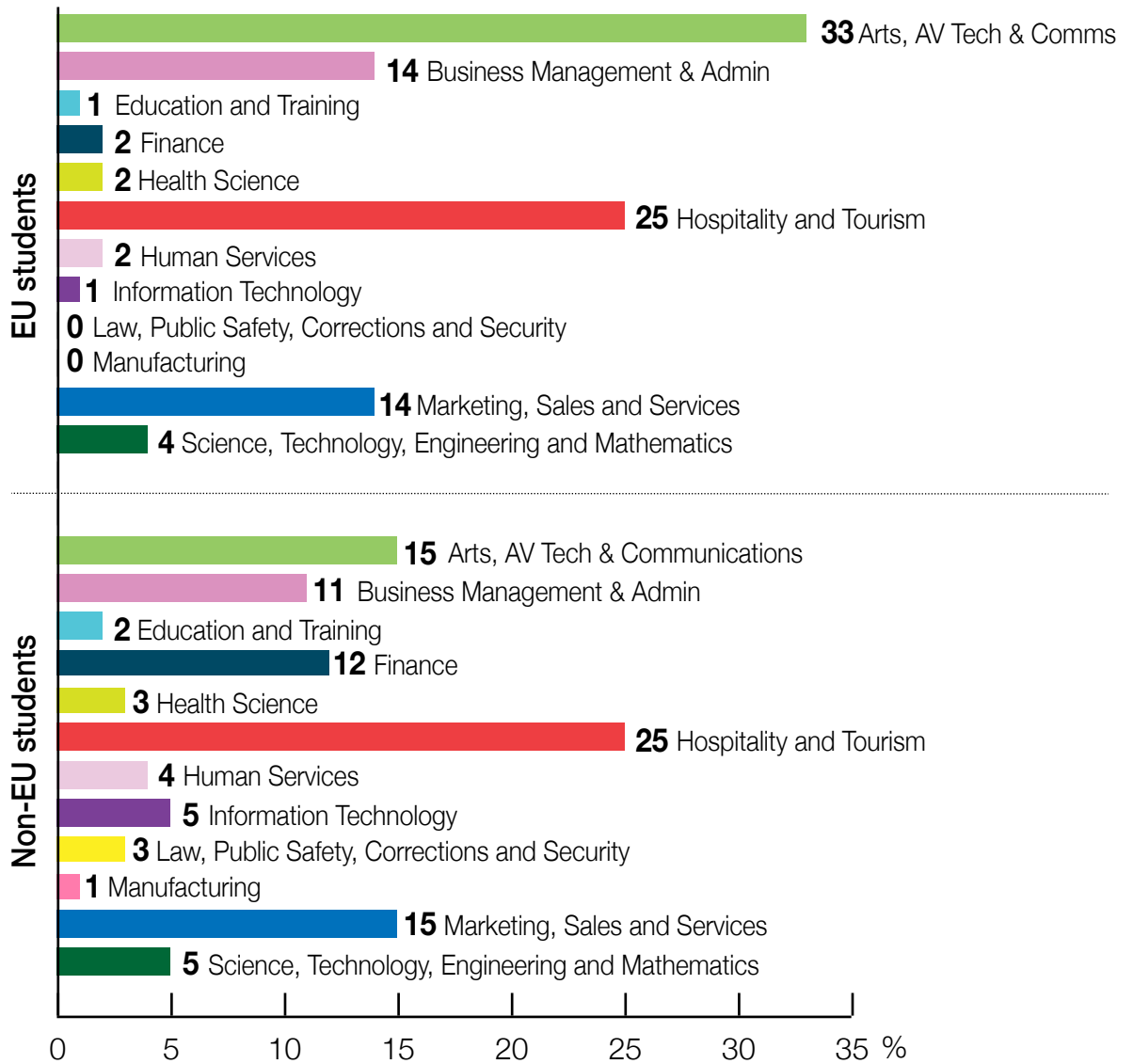


Figure 5: Career areas and study levels (in %) comparison (Questions 5 and 10)



interested in Hospitality & Tourism (25%), Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications (15%) and Marketing, Sales & Services (15%).

7.2 Expectations

The graph in Figure 6 relate to the responses to question 16 (Appendix 2) about the difficulties faced by the students. There is a discrepancy between expectations and reality regarding work in the UK for international students. From our research it appears that many international students assume that a work experience opportunity will be provided for them by the university.

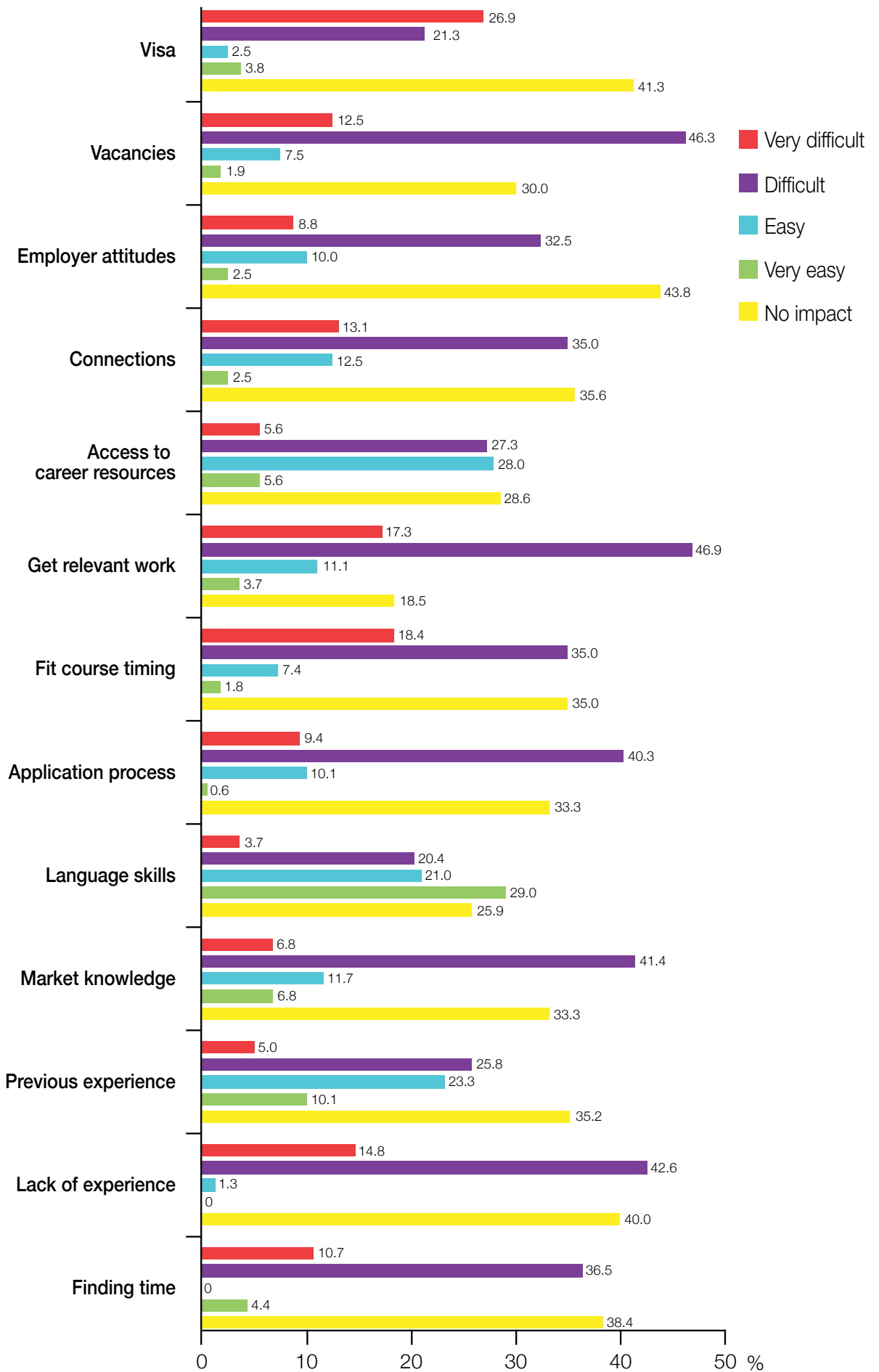
Hearsay among students may lead to international students not bothering to look for work, or to give up too easily, believing the process to be unfair to international students.

32% of respondents claimed that the attitudes of employers made finding work difficult, and 9% claimed this made it very difficult. International students, who were aware that finding work experience is difficult for all students, and who thus put extra effort into the search were reported to be more successful.

When asked “what advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?” (Q.20) 15% recommended perseverance, suggesting an awareness of the difficulties of the process, but optimism that it is a worthwhile process.

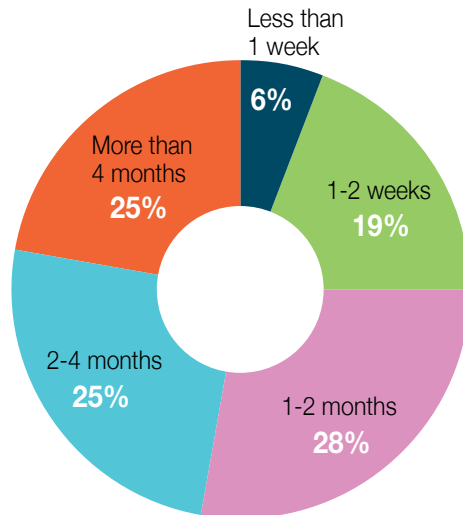
When asked “is there anything else you would want to tell us about your experience of looking for work and/or working in the UK?” (Q.21) 12% gave positive feedback about their experience. In the focus groups students did not seem to be aware of how early they must begin their job

Figure 6: Difficulties expressed by students (Question 16)



search. Question 17 asked them about the amount of time they spent looking for work experience (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Time spent looking for work (question 17)



Using binary logistic regression run through SPSS Statistics, a software package used for statistical analysis, we looked at the data effects of age, time spent looking for jobs, EU/Non-EU students and whether the students were attending undergraduate or postgraduate courses. We found that postgraduate students spent less time on searching for work than undergraduate students. Comparisons against nationality, career clusters, access to information and attitudes of employers were found to be insignificant to the level of study.

7.3 Level of work

International students often want a very specific type/level of work experience, and will reject offers that they feel do not meet these requirements. They are less willing to take a placement which they do not perceive to be directly relevant to their career path. Although these students recognised the value of a placement in the UK, they did not feel this value outweighed the expense if the job is seen to be low paid or low status.

- *“If there was a good placement I would definitely take it, but if there was one I wasn’t sure about – I still have to pay fees and everything – so I wouldn’t take one that isn’t worth my time, even if it is experience.”* (Quote from focus group).
- 64% of respondents struggled to find work or a placement that was relevant to their course. (Q16)

Postgraduate international students often have industry experience in their home country, and may not be willing to take a placement that they believe will not further develop their skills.

- One student interviewed said; *“I’m a Masters student with eight years’ experience in the industry, why would I take a waitress job? It isn’t worth my time.”*

Some students felt that work experience opportunities were out of sync with academic workloads in postgraduate courses.

- One MA student interviewed said; *“The placements being offered aren’t in sync with the timing of my course – employers want a one year placement when you only want one for 10 months.”*
- 53% of respondents said that finding work or a placement that fit with the timing of their course was difficult or very difficult (Q16.8). Of these, 57% were postgraduate students.

7.4 Language skills

Language problems can confront even those students with a high level of English. A student may have an excellent level of English within their subject area, but may have a low level of social English and so may struggle with interviews.

- *“You use technical English every day, but trying to communicate to higher-ups, there’s no experience of that for me.”* (Quote from focus group).
- 20% of respondents claimed that their language skills made finding work difficult, although only 4% claimed that it made it very difficult. (Q16.1)

7.5 Working in the UK

When asked to list any other problems they faced (Q.16.a) 16% stated lack of knowledge about the UK job market was a major problem.

Students reported a lack of clear, easy to find and well-publicised information about National Insurance numbers, visa-related working restrictions, the employment process and UK work culture.

- 48% of respondents claimed that their lack of knowledge of the UK job market made finding work difficult or very difficult.
- 48% of respondents said that not understanding the application process for work in the UK made finding a job difficult or very difficult.

Many students felt that employers did not know that international students who are doing a work placement as a component of their course, are able to work full time without the need for sponsorship from the employer.

- 47% claimed that visa restrictions made their search for work difficult or very difficult.

7.6 Previous work experience

When asked “what advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?” (Q.20) 12% replied that having prior work experience was helpful.

International students often do not have experience of work in the UK, and feel that experience in their home country is often rejected by potential UK employers.

- 54% of respondents stated that lack of experience made finding work difficult or very difficult. Of those who were able to secure a job or work placement in the UK during their studies, 23.3% said that they needed work experience outside of their home country in order to get this job.

8. Conclusions and ideas for further research

In summary the main issues confronting international students appear to be:

- Unrealistic expectations of the job-searching process in UK
- Students do not start their job search early enough, do not consider enough different options and lack resilience when faced with rejection

Ideas for further research:

- The questionnaire could be used by other institutions in order to gauge a national view on the issues addressed
- Carrying out a similar survey targeting UK students at BU would highlight if these issues are pertinent to international students alone
- Conducting a survey with key graduate employers to gather views on providing work experience for international students

9. How might the research inform enhancements to professional practice? How might it be applied?

Managing the expectations of incoming international students is crucial. Students need to be aware that finding work can be an extremely difficult process. More information on the difficulties of the job-hunting process, advice and a proposed timeline for job-searching could be provided for international students before they begin their studies, so that they arrive in the UK with more realistic expectations.

Information on working in the UK needs to be clear and easily available in a range of formats. Several students said they would rather receive it in an online format.

BU has good links with a wide variety of employers who provide placements for students. These could be targeted to improve their awareness of the issues which face international students and how to mitigate these. Aspects such as timescales and specific work experience could be discussed – particularly for postgraduate students.

10. Reflections on learning points and links to further information

Conducting this research as a professional service has been a very useful process. The internal research ethics process has had minor amendments as a result of our project to reflect that we were not part of an academic faculty. Having guidance from an experienced research staff mentor has been invaluable. Time and effort was devoted to finding suitable candidates for the Research and Project Data Assistant positions.

Conducting focus groups and the questionnaire has provided a lot of rich data to influence the practices to support international students within BU beyond this research project. Further information on secondary data referred to is summarised in Appendix 1.

Bournemouth University

Appendix 1

Secondary data sources

1

Balta, Coughlan and Hobson's 2012 study "Motivations And Barriers in Undergraduate Students' Decisions to Enrol in Placement Courses in the UK"¹ noted that while previous studies have extensively discussed the benefits associated with work placement experience for students' future employability, limited work has been undertaken on the problems students face in the process of attempting to secure a placement. Their study sought to identify the motivations and barriers for undergraduate students in the UK choosing between placement and non-placement courses. They identified a number of issues, including:

- Unrealistic expectations on the part of the students, who often expect to be placed in big multinational firms, where there is high competition and limited opportunities
- Many students are reluctant to undertake a placement in an area that is not related to their studies
- Financial restriction is an important barrier, as students continue to pay fees and accommodation though their placement year.
- Many students stated that the time and energy necessary for the pursuit of a placement was problematic (12% of respondents), and many feared that their academic work would suffer (27% of respondents)
- Fear of rejection also proved to be an important factor

Our research at BU sought to continue this work, focusing specifically on international students (both Undergraduate and Postgraduate), in order to discover whether they felt that they faced additional barriers over and above those faced by UK students, and if so what these were.

2

The Department for Business Innovation & Skills October 2013 research paper, "Working while Studying: a Follow-up to the Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2011-12"² noted a number of problems that UK national students claim they face when searching for employment in the UK during their studies. In particular, the survey noted that: *"Generally students appreciate the opportunity to undertake a work placement but not all students take up placements because they are not interested and feel placements would unnecessarily extend their course and delay graduation, they may feel that placements are not appropriate for their career goals, or they feel they already have sufficient work experience"* (p. 9)

This research focused on the question of why students decided not to pursue a placement, classifying this as a matter of free choice. In our research we sought to understand why students who wanted to undertake a placement or part time work were unable to do so.

3

Marcellus Mbah and Kelly Goodwin's CEL (Centre for Excellence in Learning) funded project on "The Placement Experience of International Students at BU"³ in 2015, explored the experience of international students during their time on placement.

- With regards to the process of finding a placement they reported that while there was excellent support for CV and cover letter writing, students did not seem to understand what a placement entailed, and how it related to visa work restrictions.
- Further, they found that there were a number of cultural differences which proved

problematic for international students looking for a placement in the UK, particularly the need for proactive self-confidence and self-promotion during the interview stage.

4

Crawford, Wang and Andrews' 2016 paper "Exploring the influence of individual and academic differences on the placement participation rate among international students"⁴

- The purpose of this paper is to investigate the low placement participation rate among international students compared with UK students, by examining the impact of individual factors such as gender and domicile and academic achievement such as prior academic qualification, prior academic results and subsequent academic results on students' choices of degree programmes as well as their graduation status.
- They found that UK students on entry are 35% more likely than international students to choose a degree programme with a placement module after controlling for individual and academic differences. Among females, international students who switch to a degree without placement following entry significantly and statistically underperformed their UK counterparts who complete a degree with placement from the first year onwards. This trend is not observable among male students. Instead, male students who select and graduate with a degree without placement are the worst performers, regardless of their nationalities.
- They suggest that international students need to know more about the benefits of undertaking placements on their academic performance and the development of generic skills before entry. Moreover, UK universities need to provide more assistance to international students, especially females about how to secure placements and how to widen their search for potential placements.

In contrast with this research, our project sought to explore what other issues might be causing the low participation rates of international students in work experience in the UK. We wanted to understand why a student who was aware of the value of a placement for example, and who did wish to undertake one, might nevertheless be unable to do so.

End notes

1. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2jv3HPG>
2. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2il4hc6>
3. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2k0AWvZ>
4. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2j4iAFn>

Bournemouth University

Appendix 2

Opportunities for and challenges to finding work in the UK from the perspective of international students



1 Participant consent

- I understand that participation in this questionnaire is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time.
- I understand that the information I provide may be used in future academic research.
- I understand that any information that I give will be used anonymously.
- I agree to take part in this questionnaire.

2 Age

3 Nationality

4 Name of your course

5 Level of study

6 Is a work placement compulsory for your course?

7 How important do you feel work experience or a work placement is to your future career?

8 Have you so far tried to find a job or work placement in the UK during your studies?

- Yes No

8a If yes, was it:

- Part-time job Work experience
 Work placement Other

8b If not, why?

8b1 If you selected Other, please specify:

9 When did you begin to look for work?

- October-December January-March
 April-June July-September

10 Which industry did you want to get a job within? (tick all that apply)

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy | <input type="checkbox"/> Administration | <input type="checkbox"/> Animation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Design |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finance | <input type="checkbox"/> Forensics | <input type="checkbox"/> Health care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> IT | <input type="checkbox"/> Journalism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Law | <input type="checkbox"/> Leisure Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Marketing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Media | <input type="checkbox"/> Medical | <input type="checkbox"/> Nursing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nutrition | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics | <input type="checkbox"/> Psychology |

- Retail

 Science

 Social Care
 Sport

 Tourism

 Other

10.a If you selected Other, please specify:

11 Did you find a job or placement in the UK during your studies?

- Yes

 No

12 Which of the following statements describe the job role (tick all that apply)

- Casual (related to my course)
 Casual (not related to my course)
 Professional (related to my course)
 Professional (not related to my course)

13 Was the job relevant to your course or career plans?

- Yes

 No

14 Did you need to have any work experience to get the job? (tick all that apply)

- Experience in the UK
 Experience in the EU
 Experience in home country
 No experience was needed

15 Did you face any difficulties when you were trying to find work in the UK?

- Yes

 No

16 If you answered yes, please indicate what impact the following factors had on your search for work.

16.1 My language skills

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.2 Knowledge of the UK employment market

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.3 Previous experience

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.4 Lack of previous experience

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.5 Finding time for applying

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.6 Access to careers resources

- It made it very easy

 It made it easy

 It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult

 It did not have any impact

16.7 Getting work relevant to my course

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.8 Getting work that fits with the timing of my course

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.9 Application process

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.10 Visa restrictions

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.11 Number of job vacancies

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.12 Employer's attitudes

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.13 Making connections with employers

- It made it very easy It made it easy It made it difficult
 It made it very difficult It did not have any impact

16.a Please list any other problems you faced**17 How much time did you spend looking for work?**

- Less than 1 week 1-2 weeks 2-4 weeks
 1-2 months 2-4 months

18 Which of the following did you do in order to get a job or work placement?

- Considered a range of job roles
 Sent a targeted application or CV to employer
 Sent targeted covering letter
 Sent follow-up email/made follow-up phone call to employer
 Visited employers in person
 Used social media to connect with employers
 Used the University Careers Service
 Used department connections
 Attended conferences
 Attended career fairs
 Talked to my Tutor
 Talked to my Academic Advisor
 Used the University Placement service
 Other

19 Did you receive any further support from the University?

Yes No

19.a If yes, what was the further support you received?

20 What advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?

21 Is there anything else you would want to tell us about your experiences of looking for work and/or working in the UK?

22 Thank you for completing our questionnaire! If you would like to be entered into a prize draw to win £100 of Amazon vouchers, please enter your email address below.

Plymouth University

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

Project Lead

Research Assistant

Researcher

Anne Bentley

Michelle Virgo

Dawn Hastings



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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

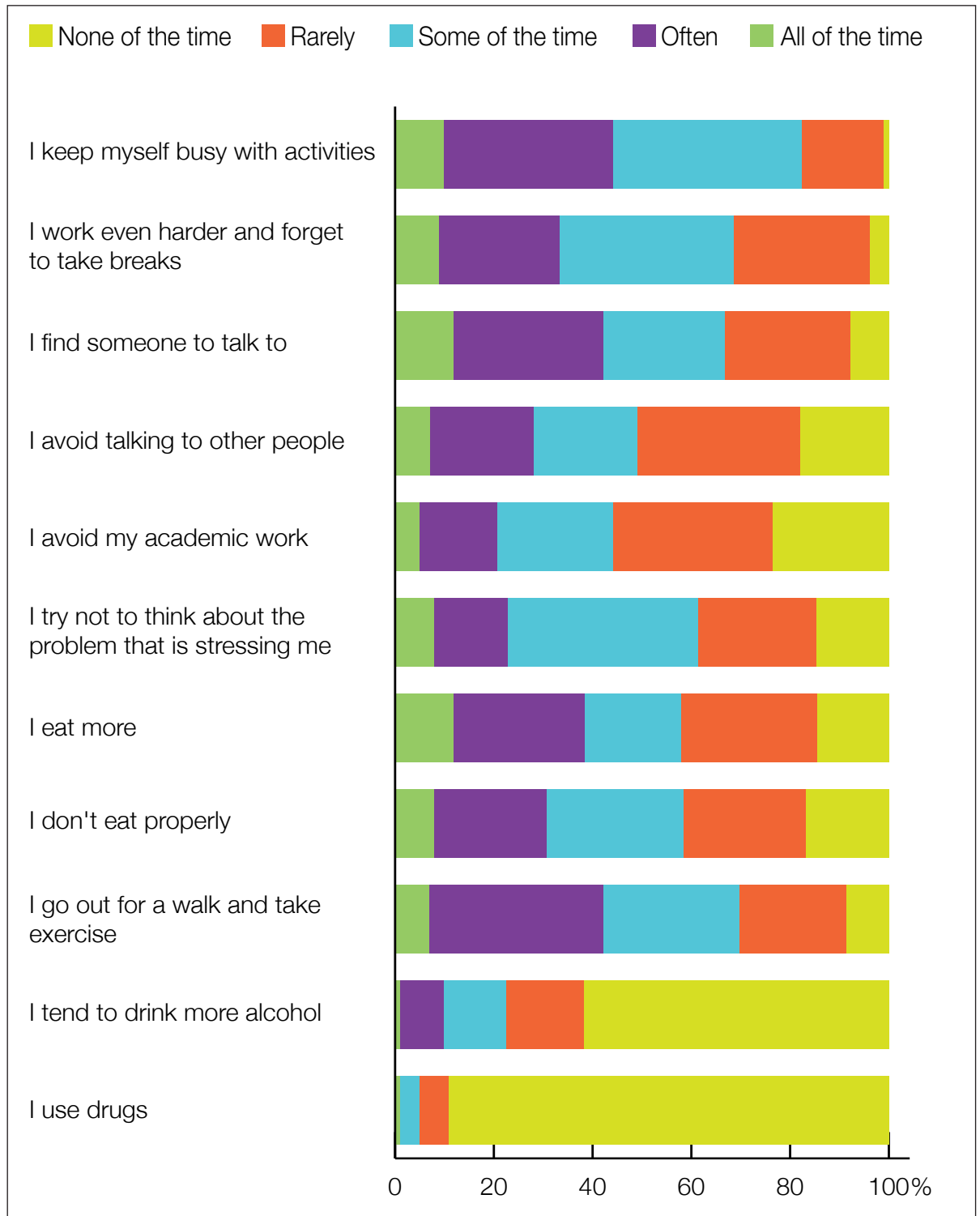


Table 6: Who would you talk to if you got stressed?

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 (talk) = .474, $p < 0.01$ r_s (keep busy) = .372, $p < 0.01$ r_s (avoid talking to other people) = -.347, $p < 0.01$ (r_s (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 (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 $r_p = -.428$ $p < 0.001$ $n = 85$ (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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