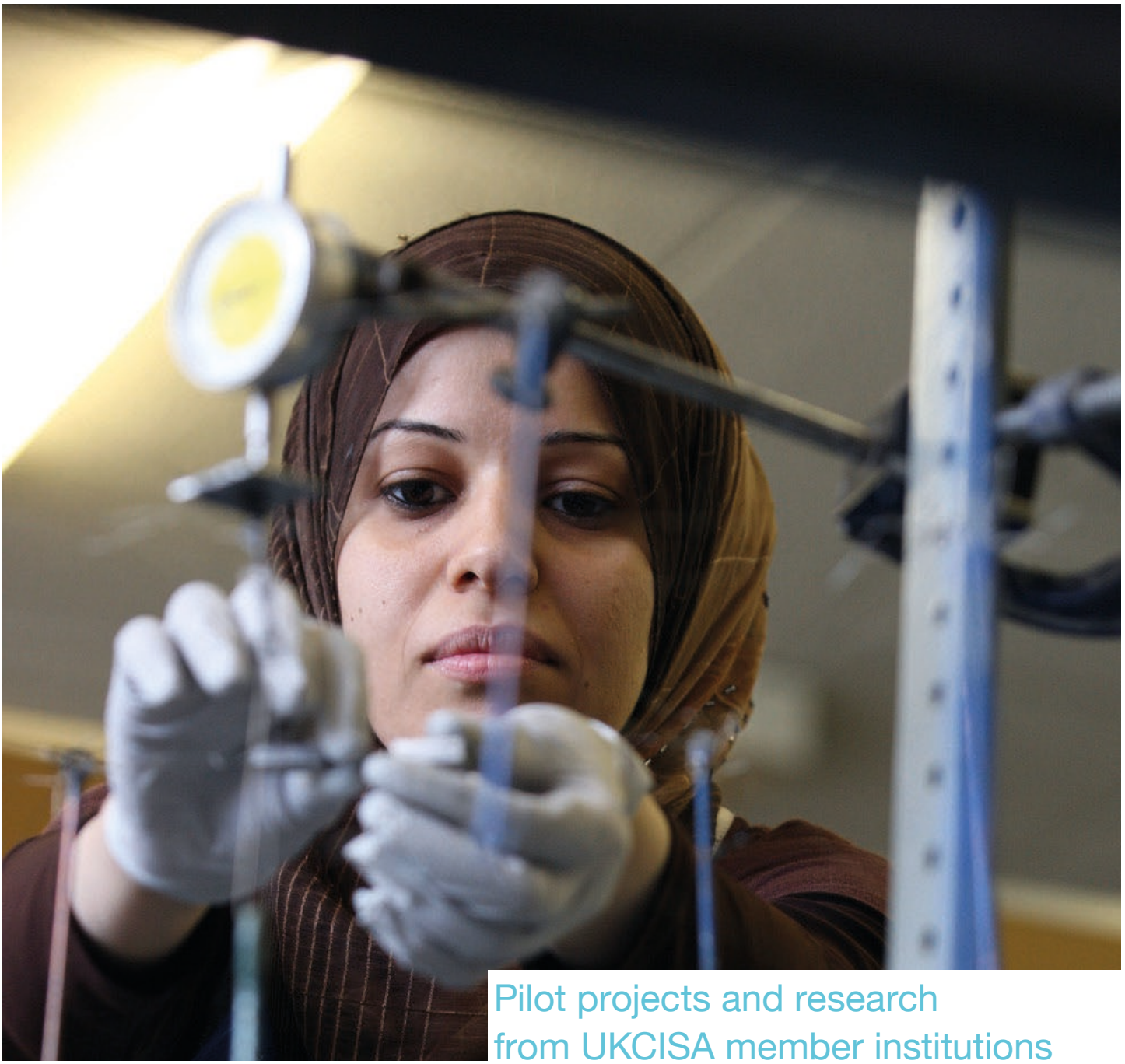
Pilot projects and research into the international student experience in the UK

2018-19



Pilot projects and research from UKCISA member institutions

UK Council for International Student Affairs

UKCISA

UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Contents overview

P= Pilot project **R**= Research

* *Winner of the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2019*
** *Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2019*

Cover image: Cardiff University, Evaluating the needs of international student-parents, page 36.

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Introduction

Welcome to the fourth publication in the series bringing together reports from UKCISA-funded research and pilot projects. The scheme was established in 2015 to support innovation in international student support in the UK and this 2018-19 publication details six research projects and two pilot projects.

Impact of previous research and projects

In our recent survey of members who carried out projects and research prior to 2018, **100%** of those who carried out research confirmed that they 'understand more about the needs of our international students'. An incredible **98%** of respondents confirmed that a grant from UKCISA has had a positive impact on international students at their institution, a positive impact on the institution and a positive impact on them individually. In addition, the examples of good practice and research findings have reached many audiences with **75%** presenting at conferences and events.

We are extremely proud of the work that members do to ensure that international students in the UK have the best possible experience.

2018-19 reports

Research reports outline motivations for research, methodology, suggestions for future research and importantly, each offers practical recommendations for the sector to learn from the findings. The two pilot projects outline how the projects were run, what went well and offer suggestions on how you can adapt for your own institutions.

Appendices with additional data, examples of surveys and materials are included in the online version of the reports which you can download individually from UKCISA at: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants.

This collection also features the winner of the **2019 Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education: the University of Sheffield, University of Glasgow and Heriot-Watt University,** who carried out extremely timely and useful research into the mental health needs of PhD students and supervisors, and **Highly Commended**: Plymouth University for their research assessing the impact of their buddying programme, and Greenwich University for their project supporting Chinese Direct Entry students.

Details on how to contact staff who carried out the research or projects are listed at the end of each report. If you have any questions about the Grants Scheme, contact Julie Allen, Director of Policy and Services at dps@ukcisa.org.uk

We strongly encourage you to take some time out of your busy schedules to read the reports – you will be inspired!

Special thanks to Board members and colleagues for their support in the assessment of the 2018-19 projects and research applications: Ruth Sweeney, Mark Collier, Sonal Minocha, Enzo Raimo and Aaron Porter.

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Research

‘Are you ok?’ Mental health and wellbeing of international doctoral students in the UK: an investigation of supervisors’ understanding and existing support provision

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Winner of the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2019

Contents

1. Introduction

This research investigates how well supervisors understand the mental health and psychological wellbeing of international doctoral students, and what support supervisors can provide given the seemingly poor levels of psychological wellbeing experienced by this group. Based on the research team's recent engagements with HE stakeholders in supporting international doctoral students, a focus on the supervisor's role was strongly endorsed. This research explores this timely but less explored area through in-depth creative interviews with experienced doctoral supervisors from UK HE institutions.

2. Research aim

This study aims to arrive at a greater understanding of what UK doctoral supervisors understand about the mental health/wellbeing of international doctoral students and what support is currently offered to both themselves and their students.

Other research has suggested that international postgraduate researchers (PGRs) newly coming to the UK for their doctoral degree were likely to be vulnerable due to a combination of reasons, including their ability to adjust to a new culture, their existing cultural mores, finance, visas, family circumstances and potentially less access to family and friend support.

To date, attention to the mental health and wellbeing of PGR students is focused on understanding the students' perspective and there is a lack of research looking at the perspectives of the PGR supervisors in supporting international PGRs. Therefore, this research aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is the level of understanding about mental health/wellbeing issues of international doctoral students amongst UK-based supervisors?
2. To what extent are UK-based supervisors equipped to respond appropriately to these mental health/wellbeing needs?
3. What additional support or resources would supervisors benefit from to be better able to support international doctoral students' needs?

3. Motivations for research

Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are significantly more at risk of having or developing common mental health conditions such as depression than the general population (Levecque et al., 2017). A large global survey of PGRs studying in 26 countries by Evans et al (2018) showed that graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to the general population. Whilst these data sets include international PGRs, they do not differentiate the international PGRs subgroup and whether their mental health varies from those who are studying within their home country. With international students (non-UK-EU nationals and non-EU nationals) making up 49% of PGRs within the UK (HESA, 2018) and bringing significant economic income to UK universities (Universities UK, 2017), it is surprising that the international PGR voice is often missing from research or underrepresented, and that international PGRs' mental health and wellbeing has only recently begun to receive attention.

In the UK, a key document published by Vitae recognised that international PGRs' circumstances can add additional burdens, making them one of the most vulnerable subgroups of all PGRs (Metcalfe et al., 2018). International PGRs newly arriving in the UK for their doctoral degree are likely to be vulnerable due to a combination of reasons, including their ability to adjust to a new culture, their existing cultural mores, finance, visas, family circumstances and potentially less access to support from family and friends (Metcalfe et al., 2018 p26).

Similarly within the UK, a large-scale annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), with over 16,000 respondents in 2018 (29% non-EU and 8% other EU) (Neves, 2018), maps a year-on-year decline in all PhD student satisfaction; currently fewer than two out of three PGRs were satisfied with research culture and six out of 10 felt they were not achieving a healthy work-life balance. Previously unpublished findings from the PRES 2018 survey (Neves, 2018) highlighted that non-EU PGRs report significantly lower satisfaction in key areas such as opportunities to become involved in the wider research community and opportunities to talk to someone about day-to-day problems. These findings could be suggestive of higher levels of social isolation, increasingly believed to be a risk factor for poor mental health and wellbeing in young to middle-aged adults (Child & Lawton, 2017).

Issues commonly identified as affecting all PGRs' mental health and wellbeing include: work family interface, managing job demands and job control, the supervisor's leadership style, team decision-making, perception of a career outside academia, understanding the PhD process; academic literacy; imposter syndrome; finding a sense of community and addressing competing factors (Holliday, 2017; Odena & Burgess, 2017). These factors all have the potential to increase PGRs' risk of poorer mental health and wellbeing (Metcalfe et al., 2018). International doctoral students face an additional set of challenges which could impact on their mental health and wellbeing, such as navigating the supervisory relationship, studying in a second or foreign language, operating in a different academic

culture, practising 'a culture of silence', experiencing a dual sense of loneliness, enormous pressure to succeed, and physical distance from their most important social connections (Lee, 2017; Elliot, Baumfield, & Reid, 2016; Elliot, Baumfield, Reid, et al., 2016; Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016; Holliday, 2017; Odena & Burgess, 2017).

To date, attention to the mental health and wellbeing of PGR students has focused on understanding the students' perspective. But the Vitae report (Metcalfe et al., 2018) makes clear recommendations of the need to explore supervisors' perceptions of their role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers, and to train, support and recognise supervisors' roles in identifying wellbeing issues among PGRs. It has been argued that not only are supervisors the international PGRs' first port of call, but they also play a crucial role throughout the doctoral journey, including supporting mental health and wellbeing (Metcalfe et al., 2018). There are also wider concerns within the academic research environment about poor mental health of academic and research staff (Guthrie et al., 2017).

Taken together, we propose that there is a strong and urgent case for further investigations into international PGRs' mental health and wellbeing and associated provision through their PGR supervisors – to seek their perspective, understand their overall readiness to provide support as well as pick up on current best evidence-based practice.

4. Summary of research outcomes

To investigate how well supervisors understand the mental health and psychological wellbeing of international doctoral students, and what support supervisors can provide given the seemingly poor levels of psychological wellbeing experienced by this group (Metcalfe et al., 2018), we recruited PhD supervisors with experience of supervising at least two international PhD students from the same geographical region. 25 participants were recruited from a range of online social networks, of which 20 met the inclusion criteria. Interviews were conducted with 15 PhD supervisors, coming from seven different UK higher education institutions. Three of these supervisors' country of origin was outside the UK, while seven had experience of working and supervising students in countries outside the UK.

4.1 Mental health and wellbeing concerns among international students

A range of understanding and experience. Our study exemplifies the existing wide range of experience and understanding around mental health and wellbeing of international students, as evidenced from the British institutions represented in our research. In turn, this leads to a lack of uniform support offered to all PGRs – home and international alike.

Increased stress. The international PGR cohort tends to be more vulnerable to increased stress. This emanates from the multifaceted stress triggers because of the dearth of strong social networks when experiencing stressful circumstances in addition to doctoral-related stressors. In this connection, disclosure was a highlighted issue as it tends to exacerbate an international PGR's situation. There are occasions where issues only become known when there is already a crisis, where international PGRs are also disengaged from other students and from learnng.

Key stress points. While recognising the high stress commonly associated with undertaking doctoral education, particularly when undertaken in a foreign context, participating supervisors have identified specific key stress points during international PGRs' academic journeys. Stress tends to be high during the initial settling stage, during fieldwork as well as during the very intense writing up stage prior to submission that leads to the viva.

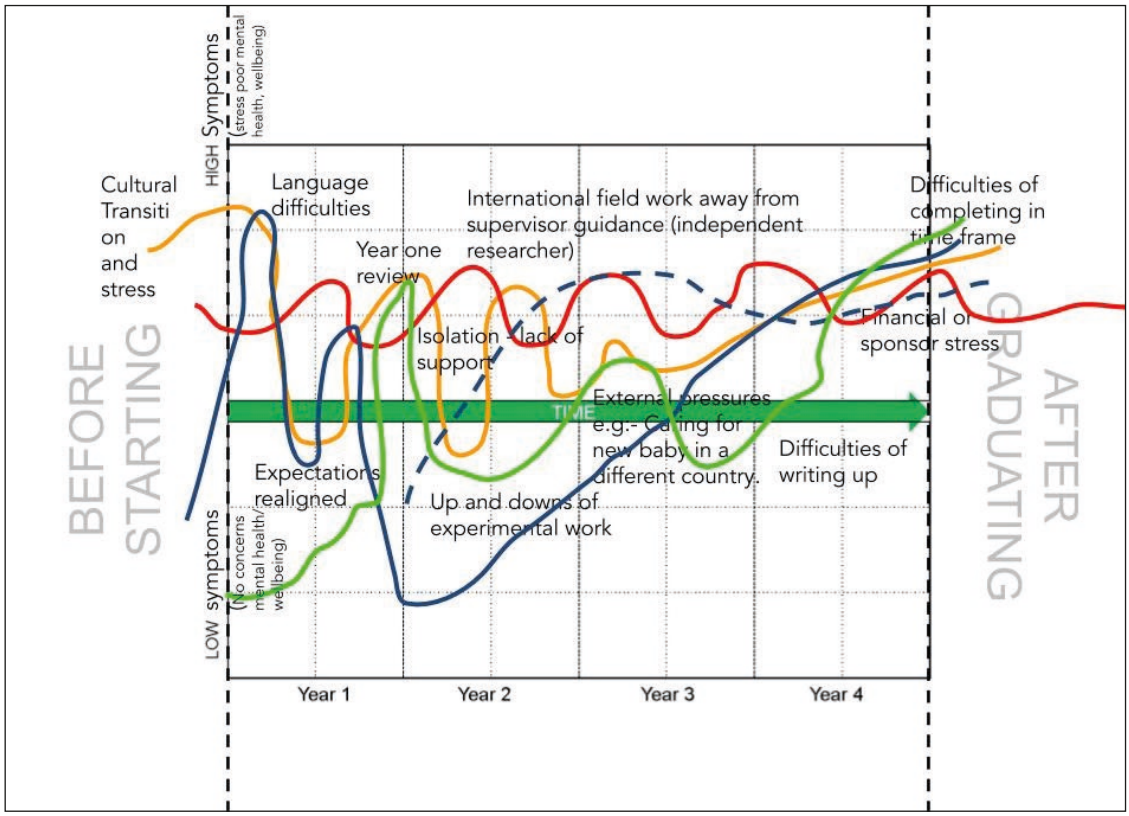
Protective factors. Equally, the inherent protective factors strongly demonstrated by a number of international students were highlighted. In particular, these protective factors, eg, strong work ethic, resilience and survival instinct or determination have been argued to help international PGRs overcome the stress of the doctoral journey.

Stress triggers. Our study findings not only confirm the presence of stress triggers that tend to affect this particular cohort e.g. isolation, loss of strong social networks, confusion due to differing academic cultures, but they also raise the crucial implications of accumulated stress triggers. This demands careful thought in order to avoid the last stress trigger that is likely to lead to a mental health issue.

4.2 Supervisors' own experience of mental health and wellbeing

Lack of training. There was a perceived lack of training and support provided to supervisors on mental health and wellbeing needs of international PhD students, and any support that was accessed came informally via peers, which they value greatly. Training is needed for supervisors in responding to psychological wellbeing needs of PGRs – home and international. This should include signposting existing university services. An important element of this is being clear on personal and professional

Figure 1 Stylised, anonymised version of an interviewee's timeline showing a typical international doctoral student's journey through the PhD



boundaries and responsibilities, and what a supervisor is and is not expected to do.

Supervisor's own mental health. It was noted that supervising PGRs (either international or home) with mental health problems has a huge impact on a supervisors' own psychological wellbeing.

5. Research methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research paradigm was employed. This study had two phases: in the first phase, key literature as well as public domain blogs were reviewed by two of the research teams to inform and sense check the research questions and interview schedule. In the second phase, we conducted in depth, semi-structured interviews with current PGR supervisors (15), conducted face-to-face (5), via telephone (1) or Skype/Zoom (9) between January and May 2019.

The second and main phase of this study entailed recruiting PhD supervisors with experience of supervising at least two international PhD students from a range of online social networks which directed potential participants to a website where they could sign up for the study (see Figure 1 for the project website). 25 were recruited and 20 met the inclusion criteria. We interviewed 15 PhD supervisors from seven different UK higher education institutions. 13 of the participants had supervised at least two PhD students from the same region to completion. Two participants had supervised two PhD researchers from the same region but one of these was yet to complete. Three of these supervisors' country of origin was outside the UK. Seven participants had experience of working and supervising students in countries outside the UK. (For further details, see Appendix 1 (page 13) Participants demographic table and Appendix 2 (page 13) Participants' supervisory experience.)

Individual interviews were selected as a method of data generation to ensure privacy and a sense of safety. These interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. During the interviews, a creative/narrative approach was used whereby interviewees were given a timeline (physically or online) to add visual representations (Reavey, 2011) of how 'home' and 'international' PGR's psychological and wellbeing may fluctuate during their PhD, from the supervisors' perspective. An example is shown in figure 1 below.

This technique aimed to not only map the PGRs, psychological journeys, but also to encourage the participants to reflect on their overall student journeys and yield richer and more meaningful data. In face-to-face interviews, this timeline was completed by supervisors themselves; in the Skype or Zoom interviews, it was completed by a member of the research team.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data was also uploaded into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) for management and transparency purposes. This dataset was analysed by following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ethics approval for this project was granted by the School of Health Related Research (SCHARR) at the University of Sheffield. In order to protect the participants' identities, we have excluded identifying information.

Figure 2: Screenshot of project website used for recruiting participants

6. Key research findings

6.1 A range of understanding and experience

Supervisors report a range of experience and understanding around mental health and wellbeing of international doctoral students, from very little to professional clinical experience:

> **'I think we are so lacking in support, knowledge and education as supervisors that we are not trained sufficiently to either deal with it, or to signpost them in the correct and right manner, and because I got involved with it and I'm happy to say this for interview, I completely felt out of my depth, cos I genuinely - from a cultural point of view - I didn't really know what to do, and then from a mental health point of view, I didn't know what to do' - P008**

6.2 Increased stress

There was an overall agreement that doctoral supervisors would benefit from regular training/ updating on this. Many participants felt more able to talk about stress than mental health or wellbeing. There was a confusion around key concepts such as 'mental health' and 'mental wellbeing'.

There was a consensus that PhDs are 'stressful' for all students and that they should 'test' the person undertaking them:

> **'I still want to put my PhD students under a challenge, I still want to put them under some stress. I think it's actually that kind of you know forged in stress that gets you through to the other side. And if it's not stress, you are not pushing hard enough. So it's not tough love but I think we should expect a degree of stress from the intellectual challenge' - P002**

But international students may be more vulnerable to increased 'stress':

> **'I think the whole journey in itself for our international students is very stressful, and I think there is a multitude of reasons, and having to study a subject which is in their case is career-changing, erm so I think international students needs to be supported a lot better, I think some of the generic stuff about stresses of studying… will be for everybody, but I think … the fact that they are international students erm needs to be acknowledged a lot better' - P008**

Some participants described the culture of academia as negative and one where many people supervising described themselves as experiencing poor mental wellbeing. Similarly many respondents discussed the normalisation of high stress and poor mental wellbeing as part of the culture for both academics and PGRs.

6.3 Disclosure

Issues around disclosure were commonly reported in association with international students, and hierarchical issues, gender perceptions and cultural differences were suggested as potential reasons for this:

> **'[In] how many cultures are people up front about mental health problems? It's getting better in ours, I know… [the student] comes from a culture in which I think that would be difficult to disclose' - P001**

> **'I'm a **-something year old white man. I may think that I'm approachable, but, that may not be how it looks from the perspective of a young, female Chinese student for instance' - P001**

> **'They see the supervisor as this person that knows it all and you have to do exactly as they say, they are less willing to be critical in whatever and then it seems to me that they find it really hard to open up because this is not what they are used to in their country, you don't go to your lecturer and tell them 'I'm stressed because' so that is a little bit of a struggle' - P004**

6.4 Key stress points

While acknowledging that 'the whole journey in itself for our international students is very stressful' (P008), supervisors also identified and highlighted the most stressful periods during international PGRs' overall doctoral journey.

> **'The beginning can also be very stressful, [yes] because of course they are coming to a new country' - P004**

> **'The point at which they realise the reality, is the point at which the stress becomes much greater… and I think sometimes it can be really quite close to their viva; I mean it could be like that (yeah, going down), going really bad' - P003**

6.5 Protective factors

Protective factors that were seen as 'unique' to international students include 'strong work ethic' and a tendency for students to be 'more mature', 'more resilient' and 'survivors':

> **'We are looking at the survivors. We are looking at the ones who have been really selected, both selected themselves and being selected by the institutional pathways to demonstrate... I think they are the ones that are quite purposeful and ambitious' - P002**

6.6 Stress triggers

There is evidence to suggest that there are stress triggers which are unique to the international doctoral students' circumstances of being away from their main source of social support, and being immersed in a different academic culture. Stress triggers tend to accumulate, until they lead to a crisis or the appearance of a mental health issue.

> **[International students] don't tend to come and say 'I'm stressed, I have a problem or whatever' … that is a problem in itself … then you see that there is no progress and … then they think they are failing and that just adds to the whole issue' - P004**

6.7 Supervisors' own mental wellbeing

Many participants indicated that their own mental health and wellbeing was negatively impacted upon by their experiences of supervising PhD students who were experiencing poor mental health:

> **'I still don't know; this is ten years ago and I still don't [know] what the right decision, and it haunts me a little bit' - P001**

> **'Being out of my depth, I should have passed it on, and been left alone erm for the experts to deal with it' - P008**

> **'Your own level of resilience kind of struggling and not being supported by the university, it gets eaten away. I don't think the university particularly acknowledges that' - P009**

> **'I'm feeling that, I'm feeling a bit of a failure that I haven't been able to help her more and erm so that's, that's my personality I guess, so erm or me it feels more self-imposed pressure I supposed to external erm yes' - P015**

This was linked to pressure from organisations and departments on 'completion rates going on academics' records' and 'getting students to complete in the funded timeframe'.

> **'I've gone through my own crises and learnt how to manage myself, but and I think she [a student] caught me at a time when I was struggling a lot, and I didn't know where to turn to really, for support… can't think of an equivalent job where you'd have this intensity of connection with another human being, you know about which you are being judged and where there are you know, considerable pressures to perform at high level and so on, it's like you are locked into, it feels like a 5 year relationship with another person' - P012**

Some supervisors reported mis-matched expectations from students:

> **'I've had some from very poor backgrounds. One was getting really worried about going home because, they've not finished, but basically it was my responsibility to save their family from poverty because he was sending some of his PhD stipend home, they didn't have electricity where he lived, somewhere I don't know, yeah, it was my sort of my thing to try and find him a job somewhere' - P009**

Supervisors experienced pressure to take on larger numbers of students, particularly international students (with funding) due to departmental financial gains.

7. Conclusions and ideas for further research

7.1 Conclusions

PhD supervisors need better training to be able to understand mental health and wellbeing issues as they arise in their work with international PGRs. This training should be co-designed by international PGRs themselves so that it is relevant to their needs. Whilst there may be internal or structural issues impacting on staff wellbeing, which should be addressed separately, the training should also recognise and address the impact of international PGR mental health and wellbeing on the mental health and wellbeing of supervisors.

Further research is needed to evaluate the impact of the supervisor training on both international PGR and supervisor mental health and wellbeing. Research is also needed to recognise, understand and evaluate the role of both international student support professionals and supervisor development professionals in supporting international PGR mental health and wellbeing.

7.2 Limitations

Limitations to the study include the relatively low number of participants. Despite best attempts, the number of participants recruited was lower than anticipated with only 15 interviews completed, although it did appear that data saturation was reached as observed from the richness of the data analysed. Amongst those who did participate, there was over-representation from one of the research team's institution, perhaps because people were more likely to respond to invitations from a Research Associate from their own university. There was a limited number of participants from new universities.

A more fundamental bias may come from the type of supervisors who were likely to respond to the invitation to participate – many of those those who signed up were wellbeing leads or had previously worked in similar roles where there was an inherent focus on the mental wellbeing of PhD students. Although this hypothesis was not tested, it is possible that people who were already more attuned to the PGR wellbeing were more likely to participate, so the sample should not be considered representative of all supervisors.

7.3 Dissemination

A variety of methods have been used to disseminate the findings of this research project, including the following conference presentations:

Blackmore, C., Elliot, D.L. , Ohlsen, S., Daley, R. and Guccione, K., 2019. *'Are you OK?' Mental Health and Wellbeing of International Doctoral Students in the UK: an Investigation of Supervisors' Understanding and Existing Support Provision.* UKCISA Annual Conference, Keele, UK, 03-05 Jul 2019. (Unpublished)

Elliot, D.L.,2019. *'International doctoral students and psychological wellbeing' Understanding and Existing Support Provision*. Norwegian Research Education Conference, Tonsberg, Norway, 05-06 Jun 2019. (Unpublished)

Blackmore, C., Ohlsen, S., Guccione, K., Elliot, D.L. and Daley, R., 2019. *'Are you OK?' Mental Health and Wellbeing of International Doctoral Students in the UK: an Investigation of Supervisors' Understanding and Existing Support Provision*. 1st International Conference on the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers, Brighton, UK, 16-17 May 2019. (Unpublished)

Daley, R. and Elliot, D.L., 2019. *Untangling the Evidence! How Well do we Understand the International PGR Student Experience in the UK?* Advance HE Surveys and Insights Conference 2019, Bristol, UK, 08 May 2019. (Unpublished)

The research team intends to publish at least three peer-reviewed journal articles from this research study.

The research team has had a preliminary conversation with the UKCGE concerning wider dissemination of this project's findings, through their specialist PGR education networks. There is potential for the published findings to be added to the Supervision Reading List, and for a workshop for supervisors to be hosted by UKCGE with participants drawing from UKCGE subscribers across the UK.

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

We present this section in two parts: firstly, the rich suggestions for supervisor development which were generated in the research study by supervisors themselves. We then present recommendations drawn from our interpretative data analysis, combined with the team's experience of design and delivery of supervisor development programmes.

8.1 Recommendations for delivered learning and practice support for supervisors, requested by supervisors

Their focus is on building skills and awareness to reduce or prevent stressful situations related to the supervisory relationship with (international) PGRs.

- Participants requested delivered workshop-based learning that focused on how they can helpfully understand, anticipate and respond to the psychological wellbeing needs of PGRs (both home and international) in the context of the systems and support available at institutional level.
- PGR groups should be consulted in the design of development activities, and/or enabled to co-design supervisor development, to ensure relevance with their lived experiences of transitioning to PhD study in the UK.
- Workshop content to include: the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, monitoring and managing their own mental health, and setting role, behavioural and relationship boundaries with PGRs.

- Greater supervisor peer support and participation in peer networks needed, to provide opportunities to learn from colleagues with additional or complementary experiences to their own. It was also felt that reaching out at the point of need when a problem arises would be beneficial.
- Appointing a department level Mental Health Lead or Champion to raise awareness of the situational causes of poor mental health, and to drive and audit good practice.

8.2 Recommendations for the supervisor role, delivered learning and practice support for supervisors, derived through interpretation of the data

This set of recommendations focuses on international PGR supervision and also acknowledges the greater challenges to supervisors' own wellbeing within their wider academic practice. We note that although many of the stressors acting upon supervisors were not directly caused by their relationships with international PGRs, they did impact on those relationships. We feel this is important because operating within a background of stress depletes the emotional resources otherwise available to use to support struggling PGRs, and because we wanted to situate our recommendations for supervisors within their professional context.

- Academic staff are reporting chronic work-overload and several recent studies have demonstrated the impact of workload on academic staff mental health. The research team noted that a general drive to reduce academic staff workload, and a system of workload modelling that recognises the demands of the supervisor role, would afford supervisors more time to think, prepare and reflect.
- As an alternative to asking supervisors to attend optional supervisor development on top of core development in academic practice, it would add value to integrate supervisor development within the broader academic practice development provision (for example the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education/Academic Practice) or associated Recognition of Prior Learning routes to professional recognition aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework. In this way, supervision is positioned as a facet of teaching and learning from the outset and academics can be familiarised with the key challenges, with distinct and robust pedagogical underpinnings for good practice, and the work is contextualised as part of a core student engagement skillset that is developed early in the career.
- Within such frameworks described above, we should give supervisors choice over what development they each need and enable them to find the relevant experts, literatures and specialist development activities, or create development activities for and with them, based on need. This will involve working across key learning functions of the institution to locate and utilise expertise, for example with Libraries, Student Advice and Counselling Services, Disability Services, Internationalisation teams, and Equality Diversity and Inclusion colleagues.
- As well as learning and development activities which operate on a deficit model, universities should strive to recognise positive supervisor impact and exemplary practice. There are a range of award-bearing opportunities in most universities or Students' Unions (eg, Student Awards, Learning & Teaching Awards) that can be broadened to include supervisory recognition. Additionally, non-competitive and non-award-bearing initiatives could be devised that encourage clearly recognisable examples of impactful supervisor practice. This culture of recognition should be extended to recruitment, probation and promotion criteria for academic staff.
- The role of the PGR Tutor/Convenor/Director of Doctoral Studies can be broad, and in many institutions the duties attributed to the role are unclear, or only loosely defined, varying greatly between departments. Yet the support of the PGR tutor is a powerful way of resolving issues for both students and supervisors. Departments/schools should develop role descriptions that make the expectations and support provided by the PGR tutor explicit, and raise awareness of the proactive side of the role and how the tutor can influence cultures of supervision, setting the tone for good practice (Guccione, 2018).
- Design and promote peer support networks among supervisors that cultivate collaborative rather than competitive cultures. Enable supervisors to meet (face-to-face or digitally) to discuss the challenges they face in their supervision with other differently experienced supervisors. Supervisory peer-support can have significant impact as it is both accessible, and discipline-specific.
- Institutions should clearly identify an individual with the expertise to act as a tutor, advisor, coach, or mentor to supervisors. Supervisors experiencing challenges can approach a designated advisor in confidence, to explore how they might best react to their challenges, or to get information on other sources of support for them or for their PhD students. This work currently happens informally in most institutions, and usually falls under the expectations of a

Researcher Development or Academic Development professional.

- Institutions should stress the importance of maintaining frequent communication pathways between supervisors and PGRs as a way to prioritise mental health and wellbeing through a 'preventative' approach rather than a reactive, urgent, or deficit-based approach.
- The research team note the vast amounts of experience and expertise that student-facing professional staff in universities have, that complements and supplements supervisor knowledge. These staff members often provide impromptu, informal and flexible support with PRG wellbeing issues, particularly where an international PGR does not feel able to talk to their supervisor or use formal support services, but this vital contribution can be undervalued. This professional group should receive formal recognition for the support they provide, as well as appropriate support and training. Such groups (eg, International Student Support Professionals, Researcher Developers and Doctoral School Managers, PGR Administrators, Students Union Advice Teams, Disability and Counselling Services, and Library Staff etc) should also be consulted in the design of supervisor and PGR development activities, and/or enabled to co-design doctoral processes and policies. These staff groups are ideally placed to provide rich contextualised examples or case studies, to support supervisor development and to strengthen university processes.

9. Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions and links

To be successful, support for both supervisors and students needs to be at three levels: 'Individual' (increase in mentoring, peer support), 'Department' (training packages and workshops) and 'Organisation' (underpinning policy and pathways).

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Appendix 1

Table 1 Participants' demographics

	How many international doctoral students have you supervised?	How many of these international doctoral students have you supervised to completion?
Mean	9.1	6.2
Median	7	5.5
Range (min)	3	2
Range (max)	21	18

Appendix 2

Table 2 Participants' supervisory experience

ID	University	Academic discipline	Country of origin	Experience supervising abroad	International PhD students supervised	International supervised to completion
P001	1	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Middle East	10+	7
P002	1	Applied sciences (Engineering and technology, Medicine and health)	UK	Not worked abroad	3	2
P003	2	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	Oceania	Oceania & UK	7	3
P004	3	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	Europe (outside UK)	Europe & UK	6	2
P005	1	Natural sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Earth sciences, Space sciences, Physics)	UK	Unassigned	3	2
P006	1	Applied sciences (Engineering and technology, Medicine and health)	UK	Unassigned	10+	10+
P007	4	Formal sciences (Computer science, Mathematics, Statistics)	UK	Europe & UK	8	6
P008	5	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Unassigned	10+	10+
P009	1	Applied sciences (Engineering and technology, Medicine and health)	UK	Not worked abroad	7	5
P010	1	Applied sciences (Engineering and technology, Medicine and health)	UK	Europe & UK	10+	10+
P011	2	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Not worked abroad	10+	6
P012	6	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Not worked abroad	10+	6
P013	7	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Europe & UK	5	2
P014	5	Applied sciences (Engineering and technology, Medicine and health)	Europe (outside UK)	Europe & UK	6	2
P015	1	Social sciences (Anthropology, Archaeology, Economics, Human geography, Law, Political science, Psychology, Sociology, Education)	UK	Not worked abroad	4	3

Pilot project

Navigating life in the UK without losing yourself in the process: developing psychological and social capital for Chinese direct entry students

University of Greenwich

Dr Crystal Tsay, Senior Lecturer in Human Resources and Organisational Behaviour
Dr Yang Yang, Lecturer in Pedagogy and Educational Practices, Greenwich Learning and Teaching
Dr Jing Luo, Lecturer in Human Resources and Organisational Behaviour

Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2019

Contents

"January and February was a very difficult time for me and I could not get through without the teaching team."

1. Motivation for the project

Recruitment of international students has become a strategic priority for many UK higher education institutions (UKHEIs). More international students enter UKHEIs through particular entry requirements than direct entrants. The direct entry mode has been a popular choice for Chinese international students. The fast growth in Chinese Direct Entry (CDE) students in UKHEIs has been an exciting yet sometimes difficult story, which poses many challenges to the whole sector. Apart from acculturative stress and depression experienced by some due to cultural differences (Wei et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2008), many CDEs experience 'learning shock' (Griffith et al., 2005), characterised by acute frustration, confusion, and anxiety as a result of differences between the UK and Chinese educational systems (Bradshaw, 2004), especially different beliefs about knowledge and the process of teaching and learning (Kember, 2001; Biggs, 1996).

In fact, many CDEs are under-supported. They are usually launched into programmes with other students already familiar with the UKHE environment and available support (Christie et al., 2013). Being expected to settle in the host country cultural and learning environment and be ready to perform under time pressure, CDEs usually face a steeper learning curve (Quan et al., 2013). Without sufficient understanding of differences between UK and Chinese national cultures and education systems, it is common that in their academic lives, CDEs employ inadequate learning strategies, have lower academic achievement, and poor integration into UKHEIs (Wang et al., 2012; Phakiti et al., 2013). In their non-academic lives, they are also more likely to experience loneliness, isolation, and sometimes discrimination, which hinder their wellbeing (Zhang et al., 2012).

2. Aims

The aim of the pilot project was to develop CDEs psychological (eg hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience) and social capital (eg, support networks) through five bespoke workshops, to provide them with resources to cope with the challenges in a foreign cultural environment. Considering time as a factor for capital development and the process of cross-cultural adjustment (Oberg, 1960), each workshop theme reflected the developmental needs of students at a certain time. In addition, the workshop design was based on a scaffolding approach to learning (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010) and therefore training content shifted from teacher-centred activities to student-centred ones.

3. Outcomes

50 CDEs were recruited, with 31 attending one workshop and 11 attending two workshops. Eight received certificates of workshop completion because they participated in at least four workshops. The project was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Results indicate that the programme of workshops effectively enhanced student psychological capital of hope, resilience, and confidence, and cross-cultural adjustment. Qualitative feedback suggested students became more confident in developing social networks. This pilot project was also effective because it raised the institutional awareness of the needs of CDEs, generated training resources, and disseminated its impact internally and externally.

4. About University of Greenwich

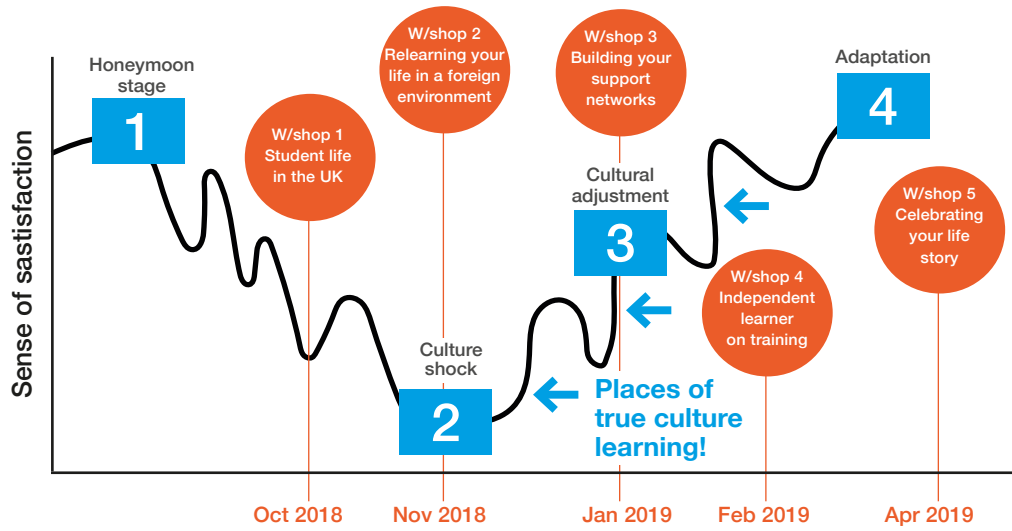
The University of Greenwich (UoG) is located on the banks of the River Thames in London and the historic Chatham Maritime in Kent. It is also one of the few London universities that has a central campus with all facilities in one place. The university has a diverse community of UK based and overseas students totaling just over 39,000 students, representing over 140 countries. In China, the University has 12 TNE partners who send their students to complete their studies in the UK.

In 2018-19, there were over 400 CDE students recruited to the UoG and 95% of them studied at the Business Faculty. Many CDEs encounter academic challenges. They apply inadequate learning strategies leading to lower academic achievement and poor integration into UKHEIs (Wang et al., 2012; Phakiti et al., 2013). Belief about knowledge and the process of teaching and learning brings particular challenges. (Kember, 2001; Biggs, 1996).

5. Delivery

A scaffolding approach (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010) was employed to offer dynamic training workshops across two academic terms. The scaffolding approach, shifting from instructor responsibility, joint responsibility, to student

Figure 1. Cultural shock and cross-cultural adjustment (adapted from Oberg, 1960)



responsibility, is thought to provide a practical way to help students acquire necessary skills to develop psychological and social capital for effective cross-cultural and academic adaptation.

The workshops were timed in accordance with the four key stages of cross-cultural adjustment (See Figure 1), ie, honeymoon, culture shock, cultural adjustment and adaptation (Oberg, 1960). Each workshop took place on a Saturday for three hours learning and one-hour lunch, between October 2018 and April 2019. Table 1 shows the workshops details, including the time each workshop was run, learning outcomes and main activities for each workshop.

6. Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project aim, ie, developing CDEs' psychological and social capital, both quantitative and qualitative measures were used. For the quantitative data, students' psychological capital was measured by scales of

Table 1. Dynamic developmental workshops

Workshop 1: Student life in the UK (October 2018)		
Activities	**Activity mode**	**Learning outcome**
Common challenges faced by Chinese learners	Lecture	Understanding acculturative stress and stress-management techniques
Stress and time management practices	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment (November 2018)		
Activities	**Activity mode**	**Learning outcome**
Communication skills	Lecture	Developing behavioural strategies for successful adaptation to UK and UKHE
Awkward moments in life	Group discussion	
Do you understand me? (The Johari window scenario discussion)	Student-centred group activity	
Overcoming communication barriers experience sharing using a Lego game	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 3: Building your support networks (January 2019)		
Activities	**Activity mode**	**Learning outcome**
Catchball game	Student-centred group activity	Developing social networks through experiential learning exercises; self-awareness through reflection
Speed networking	Student-centred group activity	
Time exercise and reflection	Individual exercise, followed by group discussion	
Workshop 4: Independent learner on training (February 2019)		
Activities	**Activity mode**	**Learning outcome**
How to make great presentations the Pecha Kucha way	Lecture	Developing competencies for effective communications; building up professionalism
Say STOP Activity (scenario)	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story (April 2019)		
Activities	**Activity mode**	**Learning outcome**
Postgraduate study experience sharing	Lecture	Presentation skills; developing academic self-efficacy

Table 2 Students' psychological capital and cross-cultural adjustment

Variable	Workshop 1 (Oct 2018) No of responses: 32	Workshop 5 (Apr 2019) No of responses: 10
V1. Academic self-efficacy	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 1.04]	Mean = 5.59 [s.d.= 0.75]
– Course efficacy	Mean = 4.58 [s.d.= 0.81]	Mean = 5.34 [s.d.= 0.99]
– Roommate efficacy	Mean = 4.97 [s.d.= 0.98]	Mean = 5.69 [s.d.= 1.10]
– Social efficacy	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 1.04]	Mean = 5.75 [s.d.= 0.52]
V2. Hope	Mean = 5.69 [s.d.= 0.81]	Mean = 6.13 [s.d.= 0.31]
V1. Cross-cultural adjustment	Mean = 4.75 [s.d.= 0.75]	Mean = 5.39 [s.d.= 0.76]
– General adjustment	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 0.80]	Mean = 5.33 [s.d.= 0.87]
– Interaction adjustment	Mean = 4.48 [s.d.= 0.99]	Mean = 5.30 [s.d.= 0.79]
– Work adjustment	Mean = 5.08 [s.d.= 0.60]	Mean = 5.67 [s.d.= 1.04]

The scale of all measures is 7-pt Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

academic self-efficacy (Solberg et al., 1993), hope (Snyder et al., 1996), and three dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Stephens, 1988). Short surveys were distributed to students in the first and the last workshops. For the qualitative data, students were asked to give feedback after the workshop three speed networking exercise, and after workshop five.

Table 2 shows the mean scores in students' academic self-efficacy, hope, and cross-cultural adjustment before and after the workshops. Although the score of each variable increased, it was unsuitable to test the statistical significance due to unequal sample sizes. In addition, it was not feasible to compare these scores between students who attended and students who did not attend the workshops due to the low response rate.

After Workshop 3, 13 participants were invited to complete a feedback survey with the question "How would you describe your experience today to others who did not attend?" Seven responses were received. The following two quotes, to some extent, capture the development of social capital.

> **"The best part of this activity is to reduce the tension and pressure of students in inter-cultural communication. After trying, I can understand that socialising with students in other countries is not as difficult as I imagined. The difference in language does not affect communication. The event was very good and built my confidence in the socialisation."**

> **"Through this activity, I found it was really good for me, because I had more chances to touch more local people and know many things like free museums, how to find a part-time job and other things from them. What's more, because of this activity, I have a new friend. If you have time, please don't miss this activity!"**

At the end of Workshop 5, students were asked to share with us what they liked about the workshops and what we should improve. The following quotes from them, to some extent, capture the development of psychological capital.

> **"I am really grateful for the teaching team. January and February was a very difficult time for me and I could not get through without the teaching team. I enjoyed each workshop. For example, in the second workshop, I liked the game Dr Yang Yang did with us. In the third workshop, Crystal shared many ways to release stress. In the fourth workshop, Jing taught us a life philosophy of 'Making efforts constantly, taking the results lightly,' was very helpful. It changed me a lot and I don't feel upset easily."**

> **"These workshops have helped freshman like me to integrate into English learning and life more quickly. The most useful help is to enhance my confidence in cross-cultural communication."**

> **"Workshops are a great way of learning. They helped me not only on learning, but also on emotional intelligence."**

> **"Hope the workshops will go on in the next few years because they are useful and helpful. I was upset and frustrated before I attended the first workshop."**

7. Timescale

The project ran between September 2018 and July 2019. The project progressed on time and to budget but with two minor changes to the original timescale, due to student and staff availability. First, several workshop participants were not available due to end-of-term one coursework submissions and beginning-of-term two exams, therefore, workshop three was shifted from December 2018 to January in 2019. Accordingly, workshop four was shifted from January to February 2019. Secondly, due to institutional policy changes and budget constraints, we were not able to use the proposed web platform (i.e. Articulate) to share materials with students. Instead, a closed group on Facebook was created and workshop materials were regularly

Figure 2. Project timescale

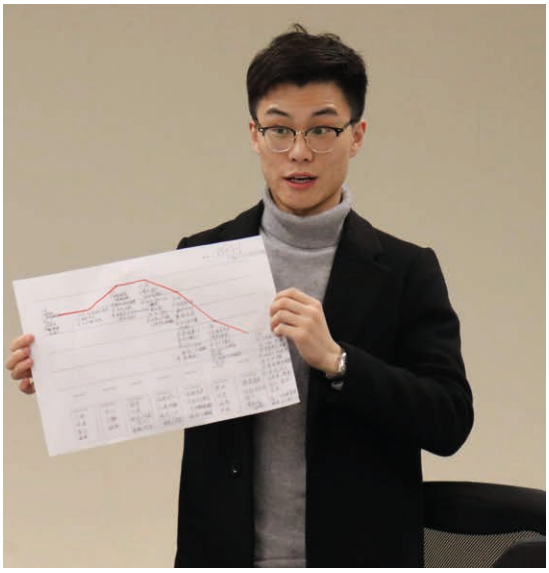
	Task	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019	Apr 2019	May 2019	Jun 2019	Jul 2019
1	Student recruitment											
2	Workshop 1: Student life in the UK											
3	Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment											
4	Workshop 3: Building your support networks											
5	Workshop 4: Independent learner on training											
6	Progress report											
7	Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story											
8	Data analysis and development of highlighted workshop activities											
9	Evaluate report and write final report for UKCISA											

updated to participants. In addition, the teaching team posted videos and blog posts from the public domain that would enhance cross-cultural communication, networking, and language learning. Occasionally, event opportunities or part-time job vacancies were also shared on the Facebook group page. The actual project timescale is shown in Figure 2.

8. Reflections

There were a few challenges in the process of project delivery. Some issues were related to resources and logistics, other issues were related to student motivation and commitment, and there were also some unexpected findings.

Regarding resources and logistics, the considerable work involved in this project was not calculated within the project team's teaching workload. To ease the burden of staff travel, the project team chose the workshop venue to be in the Maritime campus. In addition, the timing of workshops (ie Saturdays), which was initially chosen to avoid student timetabling clashes, eventually became difficult for students who needed to travel from other campuses to the Maritime campus without the university shuttle bus services on the weekends. As a result, it lowered the interests of CDEs in other campuses to participate in the programme.



Due to the programme design, it was believed that students would gain the maximum benefit by attending all five workshops. However, motivating students who expressed an initial interest in the programme but declined to commit over the long-term due to various reasons (eg academic pressures) can be disheartening and required a degree of staff resilience. A significant drop-out occurred in January 2019 and this might be due to students feeling adapted after months of stay in the UK and requiring no further support. Some students tended to arrive late and the waiting time caused delays in material delivery.

Regarding unexpected findings, it was discovered that CDEs tended to have high expectations for their study-abroad experience, with goals of graduating with at least a 2:1 degree , a postgraduate study offer, and maybe some work experience in forms of volunteering, internships, or through the University student job shop. However, most encountered the reality-expectation gap, which lowered their satisfaction with UoG and impacted on their intentions to continue postgraduate studies.

"What the project team offered to CDEs was actually support for learners who attend the UKHE for the first time without sufficient skills and confidence to develop resources to become independent and resilient learners."

Another discovery was that CDEs would like to participate in mainstream student activities (eg student societies, Student Union events) within the University and communicate effectively with other learners. However, they felt distressed when unable to express themselves clearly and some expressed a feeling of being discriminated against. A further discovery was that most CDEs rarely socialised with other non-Chinese students and for many of them, the workshops were the only extracurricular activities they had participated in.

9. Impact

The team strongly believes in the sustainability of this project because of the high level of staff engagement and the institution-wide impact. The participant recruitment effort was supported by multiple programme leaders from five departments in the Business Faculty and the School of Engineering and Science. The workshops information was circulated regularly in the Business Faculty newsletters. The programme was promoted effectively through internal presentations to other professional services units such as the Student Union, Greenwich Language Connect, Information and Library Service, and the International Office. In addition, a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshop on supporting Chinese Direct Entry students, available for all staff, was delivered three times by Dr Yang Yang in the project team. Hence, the university staff and other student communities are more aware of the culture of and the unique needs of Chinese students. A mutual trust and willingness to share between different communities was nurtured. Also, the team presented this project in the UoG Business Faculty's Teaching and Learning Festival and at the 2019 UKCISA annual conference. Our presentations were well-received. One UKCISA participant commented that it was the best support resources offered to Chinese international students.

10. Sustainability

In retrospect, what the project team offered to CDEs was actually support for learners who attend the UKHE for the first time without sufficient skills and confidence to develop resources to become independent and resilient learners. Therefore the support recipients could also include other DEs, undergraduate and postgraduate international students, and even some first year undergraduates. Therefore, a proposal was submitted to Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and was approved for internal funding. The project will be scaled up and delivered to wider student communities in the academic year 2019-20, in a slightly modified form. That is, five workshops, each with a different theme, will still be run, but each workshop will be delivered twice in different campuses. Students do not need to commit to all five workshops, although a certificate from Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) will be issued to recognise students who participate in the full programme.

Our new programme provision is in line with the University of Greenwich Academic and Student Experience Strategy 2018-22. The new project's aim is to create a learning environment where learners from different backgrounds can learn about UK Higher Education, understand what is expected from them (for example in their attitudes and behaviours) at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and how to develop cultural intelligence (CQ) to navigate in a culturally diverse environment like UoG. In addition, in this welcome, inclusive, and engaging learning community, students can 1) share their study and life experiences, 2) vocalise their worries and concerns, 3) network with learners from different countries and provide peer support, 4) learn how home students develop their employability skills, and 5) obtain information about postgraduate studies.

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13. Links to documents used in the project

University of Greenwich Academic and Student Experience Strategy 2018-22: https://docs.gre.ac.uk/rep/vco/academic-and-student-experience-strategy

1. Workshop 1: Student life in the UK highlighted activities: http://tiny.cc/dwvgaz
2. Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment highlighted activities http://tiny.cc/50kfaz
3. Workshop 3: Building your support networks highlighted activities http://tiny.cc/69wgaz

4. Workshop 4: Independent learner on training highlighted activities http://tiny.cc/yzmfaz
5. Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story highlighted activities http://tiny.cc/irzgaz

14. Recommendations for other UK institutions

1 Critically review how you work with CDEs, before implementing any workshop interventions with them

It is always worth the effort and time to find out more about your CDE students, although there are numerous empirical studies about them. We conducted an interview with our targeted students a year before the UKCISA project was implemented.

2 Provide role models to whom CDEs can relate and trust, before offering any practical strategies and guidance.

For CDE students, the first year is a very intensive learning and life experience. Provide them with a vision for success by connecting then with genuine role models. This role model could help CDEs to identify the meaning and relevance of the advice and strategies delivered in the workshops.

3 Make the extra-curricular workshops not only fun and playful, but also intellectually stimulating.

To keep the CDEs engaged with all five workshops, we tried different pedagogical approaches, eg, gameful learning, dialogical learning and lectures. When we interviewed our students afterwards, most critical incidents they recalled were the ones that challenged their self-perception and assumptions.

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https://www.gre.ac.uk/people/rep/faculty-of-business/han-huei-crystal-tsay

Research

Examining the efficacy of a buddy programme for international students' integration, language ability and academic performance

University of Plymouth

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Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2019

Contents

The photographs in this report are some of the participants in the Hello Project.

"I really enjoyed the Hello Project, and it really gives people a sense of accomplishment. Just make us feel like a part of this society, part of the Plymouth family"

1. Introduction

This project examines the efficacy of the Hello Project, which supports international undergraduate students at the University of Plymouth (UoP). The initiative matches more experienced buddies (usually, but not always, home students) with new international students, to support their transition to living and studying in the UK. Each buddy works with a small group of three to four international students and the programme runs for six weeks at the start of each academic year. The Hello Project targets 'direct entry' international students who have typically started degree studies at a partner institution in their home country and are transferring to UoP for the final year or two years of the programme. Since 2014, over 500 international students have participated, with informal feedback from international students and their buddies indicating a high degree of satisfaction. This positive feedback does not, however, provide detailed insight to the transition processes that international students experience, or the specific impacts of the Hello Project on participants' integration, English language skills, and academic performance. The current research project takes an indepth look at these issues.

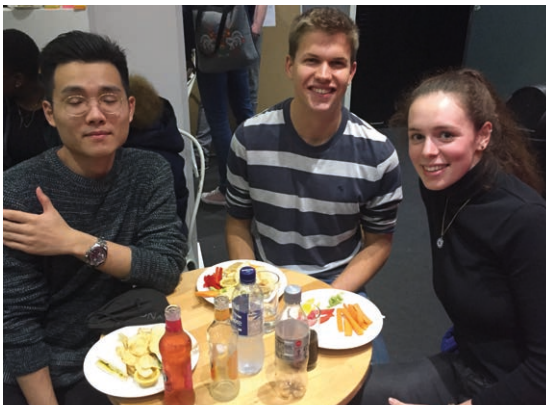
2. Research aim

The current project sought to:

- Explore the impact of buddying on international students' integration with home students and the host society.
- Examine the influence of buddying on international students' perceptions of their own language ability.
- Assess the association between buddying and international students' academic performance.
- Capture the experiences of those serving as buddies to identify benefits.
- Identify methods for optimising international student buddy programmes, and associated research/evaluation work.

3. Motivations for research

The number of students from outside the EU coming to study in UK universities has continued to rise in recent years, reaching 319,340 in 2017-18. This represents an increase of 70% over the last decade (Universities UK 2017, HESA 2019). These figures have sparked interest in the study and transition experiences of such students, which have both been described as challenging. According to Ryan (2005), international students can experience three types of shock (culture shock, language shock, and academic shock), all of which may negatively impact self-esteem. Hyland et al. (2008) and Brown (2009) described difficulties that international and home students experience in forming meaningful relationships, whilst Crawford &



Wang (2015) and Ianelli & Huang (2014) confirmed an attainment gap between home and international students. In parallel, there is growing interest amongst UK Higher Education (HE) providers regarding peer-assisted learning schemes (Ody & Carey, 2012), and how such initiatives might support international students in adjusting to their new university environment (Chilvers, 2016). See the UKCISA report on peer-assisted learning by Ulster, Brighton and Edinburgh Universities.

Despite this interest, previous research into buddy schemes has mostly examined participants' general satisfaction. This may stem from insufficient opportunities or funding to conduct more in-depth research. The current project seeks to provide deeper understanding of the Hello Project's impact on both international students and those acting as buddies. From this, specific recommendations are made for UK institutions looking to enhance their support for international students.

4. Summary of research outcomes

The main finding was that both international students and their buddies cited opportunities for friendship, socialising and meeting other students as the leading benefits of the Hello Project. This finding highlights the importance and rewards of fostering intercultural relationships in a UK university. In addition, international students did not expect, or report, benefits to their academic performance stemming from participation. Nonetheless, statistical analysis showed a significant association between participation in the Hello Project and higher marks.

5. Research methodology

Ethical approval was granted by the host institution for a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Two online surveys were conducted at the end of semester one, shortly after the Hello Project finished. The first elicited responses from direct entry international students who had recently joined the second or third year of a degree programme

(N=123). Amongst these respondents, 46% had participated in the Hello Project, 46% were male, and 73% were from China or Hong Kong. Respondents were asked a range of numerical and free text questions regarding (non-)participation in the Hello Project, self-assessed English language ability (using statements adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), and adjustment to university (using the College Adjust Questionnaire [CAQ], O'Donnell et al 2018). Numerical data were analysed using appropriate tests (eg, t-tests, logistical regression). The second survey collected similar data from student buddies (N=36, 34% male, 83% British) to capture their experiences of supporting international students.

See the Appendix online to read the full surveys.

Focus groups, lasting 45 minutes to an hour, were organised with small groups of volunteers to reveal experiences of participation and ways to improve the Hello Project. Three focus groups were held for international students, each consisting of two to four students (total N=9, 22% male) and two focus groups were conducted with students who had acted as buddies (total N=7, 29% male). Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed, before the data was analysed to draw out the core themes.

Finally, a subgroup of international students from one degree programme (BA International Finance) was identified for a retrospective analysis of academic performance. This compared the final degree mark as a percentage between participants (N=169) and non-participants (N=140) of the Hello Project. During analyses, steps were taken to control for additional influential factors, including students' gender and pre-entry profile.

6. Key research findings

The summary below groups key findings according to the project's research aims.

6.1 The influence of buddying on international students' perceptions of their own language ability

Qualitative data, collected from international students and their buddies, indicated that both groups are keenly aware of the pivotal role that English language ability plays in the lives of international students. Good grasp of English is seen as enabling friendships with home students, and international students viewed the Hello Project as beneficial for both improving everyday language skills and enhancing opportunities for friendship with home students. Nearly half of the international students who participated in focus groups spontaneously referred to 'enhancing language skills' as their initial motivation for participating in the Hello Project:

> **"… most of my friends are Chinese … this activity is a good opportunity to improve language"**

> **"... one of my goals ... was to improve my English and speak English with local people, so I thought participating in this project would allow me to speak with … local people"**

Some students identified the language barrier as an acute challenge:

> **"the language barrier is the main element that comes between me and my buddies …"**

Focus group responses from the students acting as buddies indicated that they too considered English language skills to represent the main need for the international students they were partnered with, especially in everyday life settings. For example, buddies mentioned challenges that arose for international students when ordering in restaurants and using colloquial language to build friendships. Buddies often identified a link between international students' English language ability and confidence:

> **"They were quite shy because their English wasn't the best…."**

When asked about the impact of the Hello Project on their English language ability, several international students cited the opportunity it provided to practice English more frequently than otherwise:

> **"it's a good way for Hello Project because it can encourage for speaking more...."**

> **"if I hadn't have joined I would only have spoken with my other Erasmus friends."**

The positive impacts that participants noted on their language skills related to the use of English in everyday contexts, rather than in academic studies:

> **"I think it had an impact more on my personal confidence on the speaking [than my studies]."**

During the online survey, international students were also asked to identify the best aspects of the Hello Project using open responses. 'The opportunity to communicate with others' and 'enhancing language skills' emerged as the second and third most frequent themes, only behind 'making friends/ socialising with others'. Clearly, enhancing English ability through increased communication is a priority for international students.

The online survey also featured closed, multiple-choice questions relating to English language. These were suitable for statistical analysis. Analyses found no significant differences between Hello Project participants and non-participants in terms of the amount of English they used daily outside university, or their self-assessed ability in any of the five skills addressed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (ie, reading, writing, spoken communication, spoken production, listening). The task of interpreting the impact of the Hello Project on language ability was complicated by the collection of data at a single time point after the Hello project had been completed. This meant that we did not have a baseline measure of English ability (eg, taken at entry to university), which could be used to accurately identify any differences in English skills before and after participation in the buddying scheme. Whilst the data we collected showed no difference between Hello Project participants and non-participants, these groups may have had different levels of English skills on entry to university, such that the null-effect actually conceals different levels of progress amongst the two cohorts.

Statistical analysis of the online survey did reveal an important role for another variable – international students' pre-entry profile. Those who attended a pre-sessional academic English course at UoP were less likely to report moderate or high English use outside of university (41%), relative to counterparts who did not take a pre-sessional (61%), with the difference approaching statistical significance ($p = .051$). This pattern emerged even though all students technically met the same IELTS (International English Language Testing System) benchmark for gaining entry to university.

6.2 The impact of buddying on international students' integration with home students and the host society.

In the online survey a series of closed numerical questions probed international students about the perceived helpfulness of the Hello Project in four domains. 'Improving my English' and 'getting used to university life' jointly received the most positive appraisals; in both cases, 40% of Hello Project participants chose unequivocally positive responses (ie, "helpful" or "very helpful") from a 5-point scale.

These two domains were closely followed by 'getting used to life in the UK' (37% unequivocally positive responses), whilst the perceived helpfulness of the Hello Project for the final domain – 'doing well in my programme' – appeared much lower (27%). These findings suggest that international students' motivations for engaging in the Hello Project are largely non-academic. This is consistent with the findings for English mentioned earlier, where the emphasis was on enhancing everyday communication skills, as opposed to academic language. These results make sense, given that the stated focus of the Hello Project is not academic.

In overall terms, however, researchers were surprised by the volume of neutral appraisals that international students gave to all four domains. This appeared inconsistent with the largely positive open comments left by the very same survey respondents, as well as the focus group results. From this incongruence, it appears that the main benefits of the Hello Project are not accurately or exhaustively represented by the concepts of 'improving English', 'getting used to university life', 'getting used to life in the UK', and 'doing well in the programme'. For example, these domains make no reference to 'making friends/socialising with others' which, as noted, was the most frequently mentioned theme when international students were invited to freely identify the best aspect of the Hello Project.

The focus group discussions unearthed additional, nuanced examples of how engagement in the Hello Project impacted international students' lives and integration to the UK. Alongside growing confidence to use English in everyday settings, the benefits mentioned by international students related to emotional well-being, the development of cultural and local knowledge, and gaining insights to the general structure/processes of UK higher education:

> **"When the term started it's a bit difficult, the language and the skills, expertise and I felt a bit depressed…both in my life and study. I think talking to my buddy really helps me a lot ... so I feel quite good now ..."**

> **"I think for the Hello Project … lots of students are so pressured or they're homesick … it's a good way to release the pressure. Even though they just say they care about us we feel so touched … I just think it's so good, I just feel not so lonely."**
>
> **"I really enjoyed the Hello project, and it really gives people a sense of accomplishment. Just make us feel like a part of this society, part of the Plymouth family."**
>
> **"... they [the buddies] can take us to know more about Plymouth. It can help lots of activities."**
>
> **"I think the first valuable information is about culture differences. They can discuss and talk about everything and sometimes they have different opinion…They cook something...then they would like to try our Chinese food … we shared lots of stories ...."**
>
> **"It does help me to be more confident about my life study because I can talk to with [name] the one on our course, about our study, which really helps me a lot."**
>
> **"It's hard to be familiar with the surroundings and environment and the buddies can help to deal with these problems, for example how to find my personal tutor ...."**

Focus group responses from those acting as buddies confirmed the sense that participation in the Hello Project benefitted international students' social confidence and wellbeing, and imbued in them a 'can-do' attitude:

> **"I think we managed to give them more self-confidence...we went to a karaoke party, as it was their first time when they actually experienced some nightlife. And in the end some sense of belonging."**
>
> **"I think [the buddy scheme] relieved a lot of their anxiety ...."**
>
> **"... even small things like they went to a shop and they were able to communicate and they were proud of themselves ... so I think they've become more confident generally.'**

Student buddies responded to the perceived needs of the international students by identifying a range of suitable activities (eg, introducing international students to their own friendship groups). These strategies showed a desire amongst buddies to create interesting and meaningful experiences for the international students they were partnered with.

Turning to quantitative data, results for the CAQ element of the online survey showed no significant differences between Hello Project participants and non-participants, in terms of educational, relational or psychological functioning. Again, the collection of data at a single time point is problematic in terms of sensitively detecting effects. Moreover, it may be significant that instruments such as the CAQ have been designed for general student cohorts and, as such, do not necessarily address the primary concerns of international students. Interestingly, analyses of CAQ data again revealed significant associations with pre-entry profile; respondents who attended a pre-sessional programme showed significantly lower psychological functioning ($p<.05$), compared with those who did not.

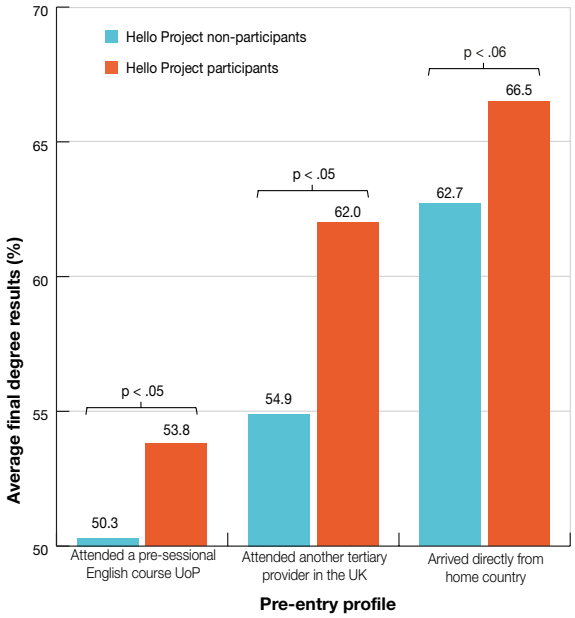
6.3 The association between buddying and international students' academic performance

It is important to note that the Hello Project does not aim to improve academic performance and does not offer direct academic support. Indeed, during initial training buddies are specifically advised not to offer such support but, instead, to signpost international students towards the centralised academic and language support services provided by the University. In this context, it is unsurprising that students did not refer to benefits for their academic performance during focus group discussions or the online survey.

Nonetheless, statistical analysis of final degree results revealed a positive association with participation in the Hello Project. Further insight can be gained by separating results according to international students' pre-entry profile, that is: those entering following a summer pre-sessional academic English course at UoP; those arriving having completed a year at another tertiary provider in the UK; and, those arriving directly from their country of origin. As Figure 1 shows, academic performance was, overall, stronger amongst the last group, followed by students who had previously attended another tertiary provider in the UK and, lastly, alumni of a summer pre-sessional course. For all three profiles, academic performance appeared heightened where students had participated in the Hello Project. This trend was statistically significant for students who had attended a pre-sessional or another tertiary provider and approached significance for those arriving directly from their home country ($p=.06$). See Figure 1.

These findings for academic performance should be treated cautiously. The association may simply reflect that the Hello Project attracts participants with high levels of motivation to succeed in their studies (a construct we did not measure). Alternatively, increased performance may be a genuine dividend of participation, which could stem

Figure 1 Academic performance in Hello Project participants and non-participants, stratified by pre-entry level profile



from the nuanced benefits unearthed in our qualitative data (eg, gaining insights to the general structure/processes of UK HE).

6.4 The experiences of students serving as buddies

Focus group sessions revealed that participation in the Hello Project had a considerable impact upon buddies, providing unique cultural insights and experiences.

> **"I found it really nice to learn about their cultures. One of my buddies brought in a load of food ... from Mongolia … so it was like a cultural experience, which I don't think I would have got from my normal university experience. I think it's really beneficial."**

> **"I think it opened up a lot of friendships to me that I wouldn't have necessarily had before."**

> **"... and then I think it was also one of the reasons why I got so excited about going to China later, so it encouraged me."**

Some buddies reported that they signed up to the programme to enhance skills that would be relevant for their own studies and future careers.

> **"I do cultural studies as part of my degree … so I just want to know how people feel, how they interact, what they're looking for."**

6.5 International students' and buddies' recommendations for enhancements to the Hello Project

During focus group discussions both groups of students discussed the value of the relationships they made and also offered suggestions about how to improve the project. These suggestions included:

- Helping both international students and their buddies to understand the nature of the student-buddy relationship better so that they were clear and realistic of what they could expect from each other.
- Giving students more choice of who they were matched up with to improve their chances of finding common ground.
- Providing buddies with a range of potential activities to do with their international students.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The assorted data indicate benefits of buddying for the experiences of international students and buddies, centred on the development of intercultural relationships, as well as unanticipated positive associations with international students' academic performance.

7.1 Recommendations for other education institutions

- Provide 'everyday' English language lessons to give international students the tools they need to build the important relationships they need.
- Track the welfare of international students, paying particular attention to students who have attended pre-sessional English language programmes who may need more support during their transition.
- Continue to promote and explore ways of bringing international and home students together so both groups of students benefit from meaningful interaction with a new culture and international students can build the relationships with home students that they are looking for.
- Promote the benefits of serving as a buddy more widely across the institution, especially to students on programmes with a focus on intercultural awareness. Buddying might be an accessible and cost-effective alternative to foreign travel, in terms of unlocking opportunities for home students to enhance their intercultural skill set.

7.2 Recommendations for buddy programme administrators.

- Offer improved clarity for international students and buddies around their relationship. This should address issues such as etiquette for communications, appropriate and safe meeting

spaces, and expectations regarding the depth and volume of engagement. A form of student-buddy contract might assist towards this end.

- Employ more sophisticated methods for matching international students and buddies, according to factors such as shared academic discipline and interests.
- Provide buddies with more guidance in regard to activities that they can do with their international student(s), to cater for different needs, preferences, and cultures.
- Explore ways of incentivising service as a buddy in non-financial ways (eg, allowing it to contribute to course assessments), in a bid to increase overall buddy numbers and so narrow the ratio of international students assigned to each buddy.

7.3 Recommendations for research:

We also make the following recommendations in regard to further research:

- The influence of international students' pre-entry profile on their behaviours and outcomes should be researched in-depth, and this factor should be accounted for, especially in future quantitative studies.
- The impact of participating in buddying schemes on international students' academic performance should be thoroughly investigated, to identify any causal association.
- For students who serve as buddies, further research might consider their initial motivations for participation, and the specific benefits they derive.

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11. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

Pilot project

What's on your phone? Illuminating international students' lives and experiences

University of Plymouth

Helen Bowstead, EFL lecturer and TESOL coordinator

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1. Project aims

The incredible developments in smartphone technology have enabled millions of people worldwide to take and share high quality photographs via social media. By tapping into the cultural shift towards storying our lives using visual images, this project aimed to provide a forum for international students to communicate their identities and experiences to the University and wider community through a familiar and accessible visual medium. Students across the University were invited to submit images that they would like to be included in a public exhibition to be held on the main campus in May 2019.

2. Project outcomes

1. The opportunity for a group of students to curate and organise a public exhibition.

   The exhibition was organised in close collaboration with a self-selecting group of international students from a diverse range of cultural and educational backgrounds. These five students were involved in every stage of the planning and selection process leading up to the opening event and exhibition.

2. The opportunity for international students to showcase their lives and experiences through digital images.

   Almost 100 images were submitted by approximately 30 students. Submissions were received from students from countries as diverse as Taiwan, Nigeria, Iran, Greece, India, Romania, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Kenya, Singapore and Bulgaria. In total, over 50 images were selected and at least one image from every student who had expressed their interest in participating in the project was included. All exhibitors were invited to attend the opening event.

3. The opportunity for participants to engage in dialogues generated by the exhibition with staff and students at the university and members of the local community.

   Staff and students from across the University were invited to attend the opening event and exhibition. The event was included in the staff and student bulletins and posters and flyers were distributed across the campus. The exhibition was also advertised more widely using social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.).

4. Attendance at an international conference.

   A student member of the steering group will accompany the project lead to the RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) Conference at Newcastle University in September 2019 in order to present an academic poster based on the project.

3. Background

Like many similar higher education institutions (HE), the University of Plymouth is committed to its internationalisation agenda. However, recent research into the experiences of international students at the University of Plymouth has found that many of the students interviewed still express strong feelings of being an outsider (McMahon, 2018). While some students do tend to retreat into co-national groupings, other students said they had tried hard to reach out to ‘home’ students and the local community. However, these students reported that their attempts to integrate were generally rebuffed, causing them to feel excluded and as if

their skills, knowledge and culture were not valued by their UK-educated peers. Despite some successful attempts to encourage integration at the University of Plymouth, for example through 'buddy' and peer mentoring schemes, it seems that language and cultural differences still pose a huge barrier for many students hoping to develop meaningful relationships with UK-educated students.

4. Project set up

Key to the success of this project was recruiting a group of students who would be willing to act as an organising committee for the exhibition. It seemed important to ensure that all the decisions made were student-led and that the students involved had a strong sense of 'ownership' of the project. The steering group were a diverse group of highly motivated students studying a wide variety of disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The success of the project lies almost entirely with their hard work and enthusiasm. In addition, the help and support of the University Events Team was also a crucial factor, as their professionalism and cross-university reach meant that the exhibition set up and opening event were extremely well-organised.

The exhibition opened on 23 May 2019 and ran for 10 days. The opening event was well attended with over 60 visitors and generated a lot of interest and discussion among visitors and participants. Feedback from visitors was collected via informal conversations and through comments in the Visitor's Book. Members of the steering group and participants in the exhibition were also invited to feedback electronically post-exhibition.

5. Project activities and timeline

October 2018
Application for ethical approval submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Education Research Ethics Sub-committee.

January 2019
Minor changes to the application for ethical approval are requested by the Research Ethics Sub-committee. Amendments are subject to the Chair's action.

Ethics application is resubmitted.

February 2019
Ethical approval is confirmed by the Chair.

An invitation to take part in the project is sent out to international students via various distribution lists (International Student Advice Service, Student Union, English Language Centre, Global Buddies, etc.). Five students respond and express an interest in helping to organise the exhibition.

March 2018
First meeting of the project steering group. Informed consent forms are completed and students are briefed on the aims of the project. Potential venues, dates and the format of the exhibition are also discussed.

Further invitations to submit images for inclusion in the exhibition are sent out to international students across the University.

April 2019
Steering group meeting to finalise venue, dates and the format of the exhibition. A possible space is identified and this is booked along with the display boards.

Meeting with the Events Team to discuss arrangements for the exhibition set up, opening night and promotion of the event.

May 2019
Final steering group meeting (and cream tea) to select the images to be included.

23 May 2019
Opening event and exhibition.

May 2019
Abstract submitted to present a poster at the RAISE Conference, Newcastle University,
September 2019
Student-led poster presentation at the RAISE conference, Newcastle University.

6. Challenges

The main obstacle was gaining ethical approval for the project as Faculty of Arts and Humanities Education Research Ethics Sub-committee only meet a handful of times a year. As a result, the application was not approved until February 2019. However, once this was in place, the project was fairly quick and easy to set up.

A number of students responded positively to the invitation to participate, but others stated that they were too busy and/or unwilling to commit time to the project. This may have been partly due to the timing of the exhibition, which coincided with end-of-year examinations and assessments, but it was also clear that some students found the amount of information supplied (project description, informed consent form, etc.) rather daunting and/or confusing. However, the five students who eventually volunteered to be members of the steering group were extremely committed and the meetings were always constructive and productive. A simplified version of the invitation to participate in the exhibition was sent out. Initially, there were only a handful of responses, but as the deadline approached, a large number of images were submitted. This put pressure on the project lead

and steering group as the images had to be selected and printed within a very tight deadline. It was decided to print the images on foam board to create a more professional finish. Having the printing done in-house was not possible as the print team in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities were extremely busy preparing students' work for the final degree shows. This meant the printing had to be outsourced, which resulted in a longer turnaround time.

Finding an appropriate space was also a challenge as May is a very busy month due to the number of examinations and degree shows taking place across the campus. The Peninsula Gallery, which hosts the wide-ranging public arts programme of the University of Plymouth, was not a viable option as it is only available for professional artists and exhibitions. Eventually a large atrium space in one of the university's key buildings (Portland Square) was eventually identified as being available and was booked for a 10-day period at the end of May.

7. Sustainability

One of the key aims of the HE sector is to develop graduates who will be able to contribute to a more sustainable future as informed, responsible, and active global citizens. It is essential therefore that staff, students and the local community are provided with opportunities to acknowledge and reflect on the assumptions that impact on their interactions with those from different backgrounds and cultures.

This project provides a simple, inexpensive model of innovative practice that could be adopted by HE institutions across the sector. Based on this, an annual budget of £1,000 to cover printing and catering costs is currently being sought from various stakeholders to ensure that similar exhibitions can be held in the future at the University of Plymouth.

8. Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Ensure students are involved at every stage of the project.
- Budget for catering for student meetings and opening events.
- Make it as easy as possible for students to understand how they can participate – talk to students face to face where possible, and follow up with simply worded emails and/or short posts on social media.
- Be mindful of University 'pinch points', avoid examination/assessment periods, holidays, etc.
- Enlist the help of University services – events, catering, external relations, room bookings, print and copy services, etc. early on in the planning process – at least six months before the exhibition date.
- Aim to hold the exhibition in a venue which can easily be accessed by staff, students and members of the public

9. Reference

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10. Further information

Image archive: https://liveplymouthac-my.sharepoint.com/personal/helen_bowstead_plymouth_ac_uk/_layouts/15/onedrive.

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Research

Evaluating the needs of international student-parents
Cardiff University

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1. Research motivations and aims

It is not uncommon for international students to bring their families (spouses/partners and children) to the UK while they study. However, exact figures for such family members are unknown. National Statistics (Home Office, 2019) did not separate the number of Tier 4 dependant visas issued from the number of Tier 4 (general) student visas granted. Even if separated, it should be noted that not all family members would hold a dependant Tier 4 visa.

There has arguably been limited inquiry into the experiences and needs of such international student-parents in the UK. The researchers from the International Student Support Team at Cardiff University therefore hoped to redress this gap and broaden this area of research.

At present, international student-parents tend to seek and receive support from the University's International Student Support team, primarily in relation to their dependants' immigration and visa issues (based on staff testimony). This research aimed to explore students' experiences of the support already offered at Cardiff University as a whole, and whether more could be done to better support international student-parents and if so, in what way.

The researchers were also interested in comparisons based on gender, particularly regarding the level of support received from students' partners. The study also attempted to examine the relationship between home country and parental challenges.

This research additionally considered the possibility that such students are a disadvantaged and vulnerable group within the University and have a need for representation.

2. Research methodology

2.1 Online survey

Full ethical approval was gained from Cardiff University in advance of data being collected. The first phase of the research project involved an online survey which was sent to all students whose records were marked with: enrolment status registered or pending, the 2018 academic year, and as international. As such, it reached 8,431 students, and 3,589 students opened the email. The survey was live for approximately two weeks and received 56 responses. This seems a very small amount, however the number of international student parents at Cardiff University is also unknown (as such data is not collected), thus the response rate is hard to ascertain.

2.2 Focus group

The second phase of the research project invited the informants from the online survey to attend a focus group. This aimed to elicit more detailed answers than the online survey. Comparatively, this phase of the research project was not as successful as the online survey, with only three students attending the group session.

3. Key research findings

3.1 Online survey

3.1.1 Demographics

Although this research targeted (non-EU) international students, the online survey for (reason/s unknown), attracted some European respondents. However, (non-EU) international student-parents remained the focus.

Most respondents were typically postgraduate research students, aged 31-40 years old and married, with one child, most likely an infant (aged between 0-4 years).

Figures 1-3 below illustrate the demographics of the survey respondents.

Figure 1a Online survey: respondents' levels of study

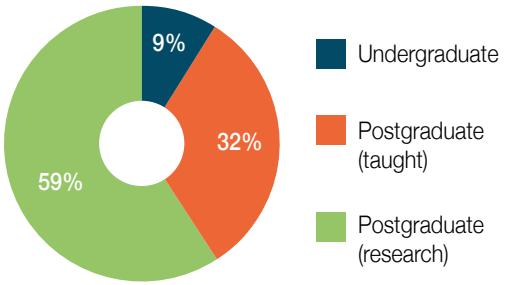


Figure 1b Online survey: respondents' gender

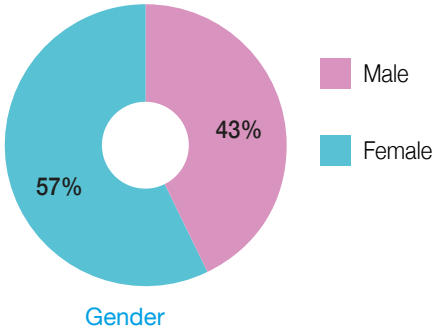


Figure 1c Online survey: respondents' age range

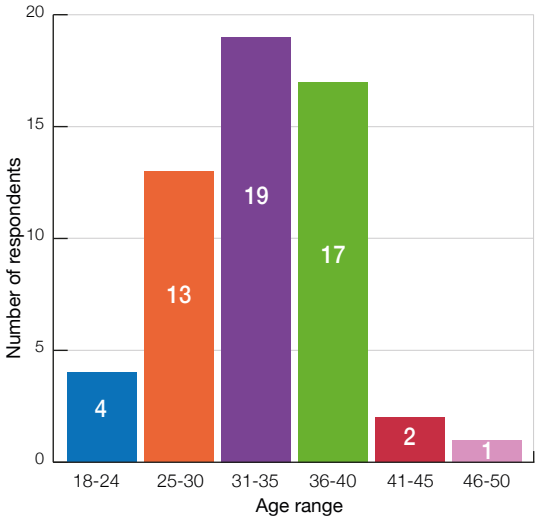


Figure 2 Online survey: respondents' nationalities

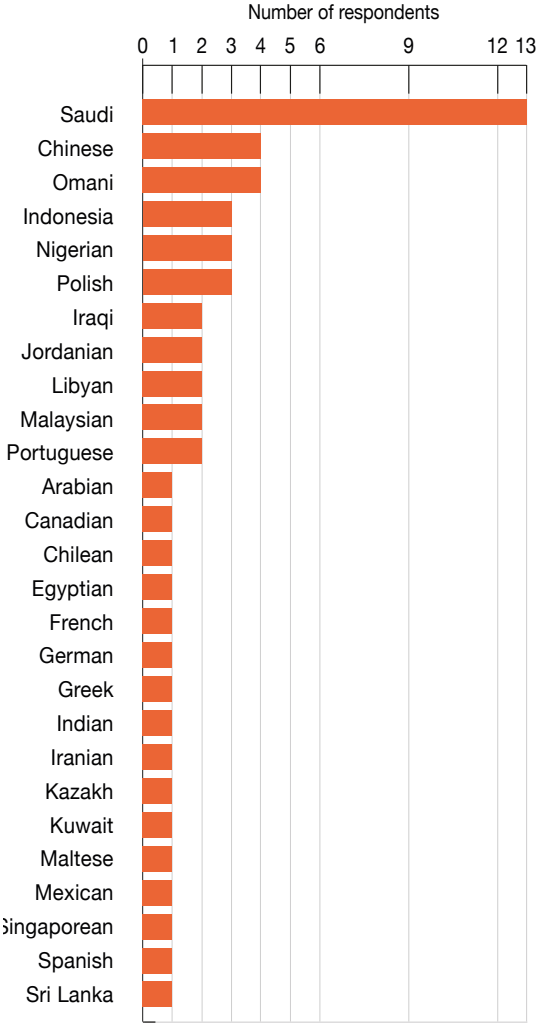
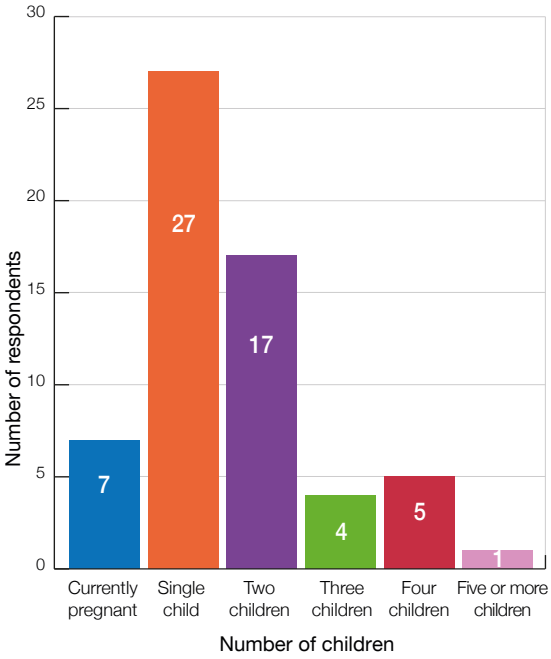


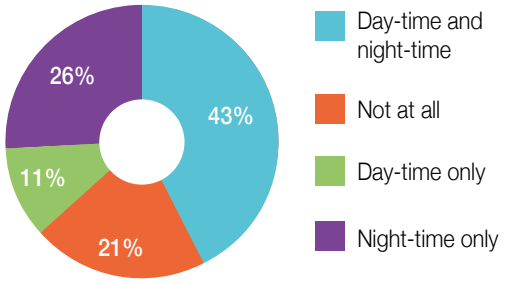
Figure 3 Online survey: respondents' number of children



3.1.2 Experiences of parenting as an international student

The online survey also looked to determine the support international student-parents received from their spouses/partners in the UK.

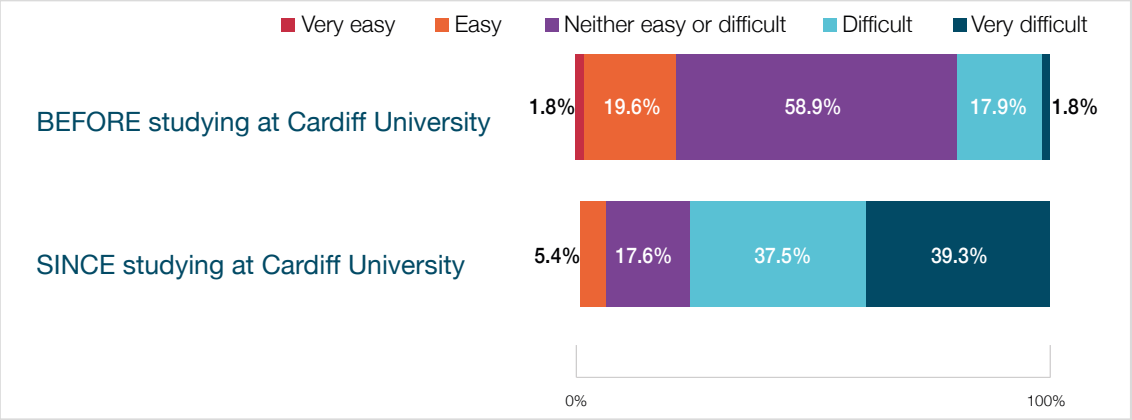
Figure 4 Online survey: when respondents' partners look after the children



The 26% of respondents whose spouses/partners did not look after their children were prompted to explain their childcare arrangements. These included school and day-care, no spousal/partner help with childcare due to maternity leave, and help from their mother-in-law.

Respondents were also asked to rate their experience of parenting based on ease/difficulty, both before and since arriving at Cardiff University to study. The results indicated a stark trend, when viewed comparatively (see Figure 5). Students who had previously had neutral feelings toward parenthood now felt it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' upon studying at Cardiff.

Figure 5 Online survey: level of ease, difficulties, parenting before and since studying



In line with the researchers' expectations, the most-cited reason for parenting becoming more difficult was time management and balancing 'everything', such as work, university, childcare, schooling or leisure. The lack of family support as a result of studying overseas was frequently mentioned, particularly in relation to childcare. Furthermore, nursery and day-care were said to be expensive when it featured in respondents' answers. Other specific difficulties included: social isolation and not having friends like themselves; pregnancy and, later, breastfeeding during their studies; adapting to life in the UK.

Interestingly, several respondents also intimated their dissatisfaction with the University itself, especially tutors and supervisors, who were said to be unsupportive or lacking sympathy for their parental demands. The following answer from one respondent is indicative:

> **"…my supervisor and the school would be constantly changing meetings without any support given to the fact that childcare had been arranged and paid beforehand [sic]. There would also be very little understanding of sickness and things that happen to children. These would be blamed on me as little commitment …when the truth was that kids change things."**

Indeed, a few respondents cited what they felt to be the lack of a clear University policy towards pregnant international students, as a stressor. (It should be noted however, these results, are not proportionate since not all respondents specified why their circumstances had become harder. Indeed, some did not give answers at all, whereas others were unclear.)

The international student-parents who indicated neutral or at-ease feelings toward their parenting role also explained their answers in a variety of ways. One respondent noted that being a postgraduate is "no walk in the park, but [they] knew what [they were] getting into. [sic]".

"One answer alluded to the psychological or emotional challenges of being a student-parent, specifically the feeling of being 'torn between getting a good grade or being a good parent."

Respondents were also asked if being a parent and/or a prospective parent affected their studies. The majority answered 'yes – the results are illustrated in Table 1 below. There were some 'greyer' responses where students 'sometimes' felt it impacted on their studies.

Table 1 Does being a parent and/or prospective parent affect your studies?

Response categories	Frequency
Yes	38
Sometimes	8
No	9

In relation to the consequences of parenting while studying, having little time and/or energy featured prominently, which is consistent with the majority-experienced problem of time management.

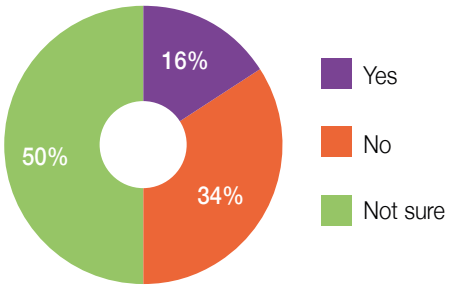
Moreover, sleep deprivation was thematic; and struggling to focus, which follows logically. Other repercussions include: the child(ren)'s lack of family time; missing morning sessions at university; and having to take an interruption of study. One answer alluded to the psychological or emotional challenges of being a student-parent, specifically the feeling of being "torn between getting a good grade or being a good parent."

It would be incorrect to omit the more positively themed answers. Indeed, a small minority of students did not feel that their parenting role negatively impacted their studies. Those respondents that gave reasons cited their parenting demands as a motivating factor to better organise their time. Additional explanations include having adapted to the combined responsibilities of parenting and their studies; having their partner take care of the child(ren); and not having their child in the UK with them.

This latter response indicated a respondent for whom the online survey was not especially targeting, that is, they were not an international student-parent raising their child in the UK while they studied. Indeed, another respondent took the opportunity to ask: "I wonder why distance students with children are not included in this." It is only in hindsight that the researchers realised they should have both explicitly defined what an international student-parent is, to themselves and to participants.

The online survey also asked respondents whether they felt represented at Cardiff University. It is important to highlight the answers illustrated in Figure 6, with only 16% confirming they did feel represented.

Figure 6 Online survey: do you think student-parents (including prospective parents) are represented at Cardiff University?



The lack of recognition of international student-parents also resounded clearly in a few answers in the online survey. One respondent wrote:

> **"Little sleep, tiredness, no time to study at home, very busy, yet marked and graded same as other non-parent students."**

Another respondent stated:

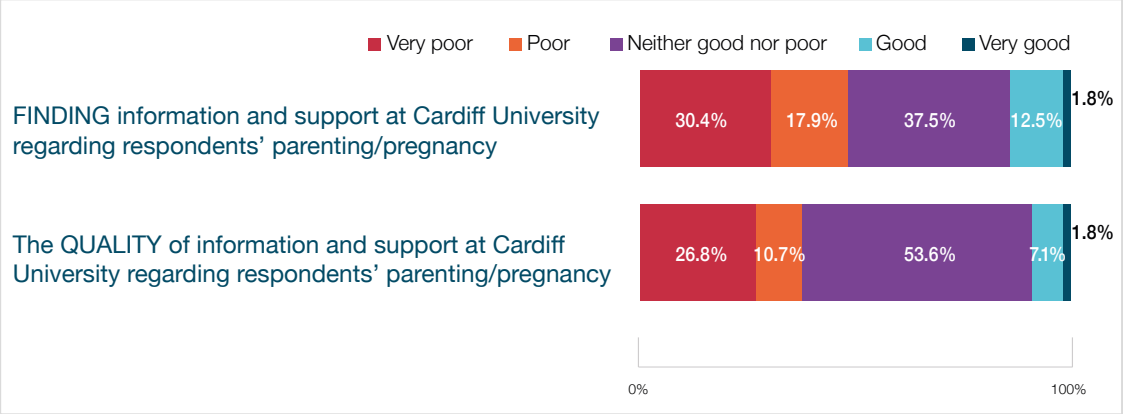
> **"[…]I really do not understand how a parent can have an equal opportunity at succeeding at university and why universities don't understand the difference between mature student with responsibilities and a 19-year-old with only their studies to worry about."**

When asked about the support already accessed at Cardiff University, the most striking result was 'no support received' which accounted for over half of the total respondents. Figure 7 illustrates all responses which shows the range of services and support on offer at the University which were accessed (this was a multiple-choice question).

Figure 7 Online survey: services already accessed by informants

Respondents were asked to rate the ease of finding information and support at Cardiff University as well as the quality of information and support accessed. Figure 8 shows the results in both cases are broadly similar, with respondents feeling neutral towards both finding and the quality of services at the university.

Figure 8 Online survey: experiences accessing the university services



Finally, the researchers asked respondents what further help Cardiff University should provide for international student-parents, including those who were pregnant. The themes with their specific suggestions are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2 What further help, if any, do you think Cardiff University should be providing international students who are parenting and/or are pregnant in the UK?

Category	No.	Specific suggestions
Better childcare	18	▪ more affordable, vouchers/discounts for childcare ▪ accessible in the evening ▪ inclusion of older children ▪ day-care in specific university schools/departments ▪ day-care during the holidays, and activities especially for international student-parents and their children
Clearer information	13	▪ more university transparency about their policies and procedures (especially pertaining to pregnancy and maternity leave) ▪ clearer website and online information ▪ improved online correspondence ▪ more pre-arrival information ▪ better-informed staff ▪ better representation ▪ more assistance with forms and paperwork
More material support	5	▪ family-friendly university accommodation ▪ financial support available to international student-parents ▪ more employment opportunities with better wages
More social/ psychological support	4	▪ improved counselling and wellbeing services ▪ events with other student-parents ▪ more understanding from university tutors and lecturers
More flexibility	4	▪ to attend conferences/training ▪ lectures available to download ▪ later or amendable assessment dates

3.2 Focus group

This was a very small sample of international student-parents but included a range of genders, nationalities and courses. Students were from Malaysia, Libya and Algeria, studying at PhD, undergraduate and Masters level. Their family situations ranged from parents who arrived with children in the UK, parents whose children had lived in the UK and had returned to their home country, and parents whose children were born in the UK. Much of the discussion was consistent with the results from the online survey. The cost of university as an international student combined with the demands of parenting, and no financial support from the University, featured heavily in discussion. A large part of this related to the costs and inaccessibility of flexible childcare in Cardiff.

Participants also expressed concerns over the lack of advertising of support and services on the University's part, and how, for example, they did not consult International Student Support on many occasions simply because they did not think to do so. One participant in the study did not make use of the Students' Union services as she was told by friends that no-one goes there. Students suggested that more information supplied in advance, would have benefited them.

Students felt that university tutors and lecturers ought to be more understanding of the issues faced by international student-parents, which is consistent with the survey findings.

Interestingly, instead of seeking help from the University, some students reported that they relied mostly on people within their own communities. For example, when faced with a schooling issue, one participant sought advice from their peers in their home country who had experience of similar situations. Peer networking appeared to be an important strategy for some in order to seek support and advice.

The focus group also discussed whether Cardiff University Students' Union should set up a peer network to consolidate existing international student-parent communities. This would facilitate new peer relationships through regular group meetings or social events. The participants supported this idea, although with some reservations regarding sharing problems with people who may not care or fully understand their situation, eg, as a single-parent. Interestingly, the facilitators had proposed a 'support group' but students in the focus group felt deterred by this term because, as one student stated, they did not like the idea of a group "where you have to tell your problem and to explain yourself". 'Peer network' could therefore be a better descriptor. The notion of the term 'support group' having the opposite desired effect was a useful insight from the focus group discussion that had not emerged from the student survey data.

It is also important to mention the positive findings from the session. It was encouraging to hear one student emphasising the importance of spousal support during the focus group:

> **"When you don't have family in the country, it's important that you and your husband or wife stay really close together and support each other. That's really important."**

In addition, the participants' children experienced no known issues adapting to life in the UK, such as schooling and learning the language, whereas the researchers had predicted otherwise.

4. Conclusions

The researchers acknowledge the one month gap between phase one (survey) and two (focus group) for the small turn-out of the focus group session. It was also the period where assessments were taking place and the academic term was ending. The online survey itself was delayed due to circumstances beyond the researchers' control, in turn delaying the focus groups. Although participants were welcome to bring their children to the focus groups, the researchers recognised that they were asking some of the most 'time-poor' students to attend.

Despite the limitations of the study, it also had its strengths. It was able to identify several phenomena during both phases of the research, including the majority experience of parenting becoming harder since coming to Cardiff, and the general sentiment that not enough support is offered in relation to childcare. Additionally, the profile of international student-parents was indicated as low in the online survey and during the focus group session. Worryingly, over half of the respondents had not accessed any support from the University and a significant minority had not received any spousal support in terms of childcare. This could suggest that international student parents are a vulnerable group. Certainly, they appear to experience little representation and seem to rely on their own community or peers, with the sense that the University does not attempt to understand their needs or clearly articulate the services and information available to them.

While the researchers recognise it is not likely that universities will be able to assist with childcare expenses, there are several key meaningful adaptions that could take place easily and cost-effectively.

5. Application of research: key recommendations

1. The establishment of a peer network for international student-parents

This could act to highlight the psycho-social problems students may face while parenting in a host country and empower them to form communities, plan social events, and organise their own interests. This could help them feel more represented at university. Following the focus group the researchers became aware of the Parents and Carers Association (for all students) which was already established within the Students' Union at Cardiff University.

2. Connecting staff

Peer networks and/or International Student Support teams can regularly reach out to tutors and supervisors within schools to provide them with a point of contact for understanding the needs of international student-parents.

3. Information

Improved information from the university, including advertising of services and information offered in advance of international student-parents' arrival in the UK. For instance, clearer links and information relating to university policies and procedures (ie, to pregnancy during studies) and an estimation of the high childcare costs in the UK. This could allow students to better prepare for their move to the UK.

6. Ideas for further research

One striking issue for the study was the definition and lack of clarity of who counted as an 'international student-parent'. Future efforts should be careful not to exclude student-parents unnecessarily.

Another glaring issue for the study was the unknown number of international student-parents at Cardiff University, reflecting broader issues of a lack of data, recognition and representation. The remedy for this problem is further sampling, perhaps creating the necessary research parameters for a full investigation into differentiations based on nationality and gender. This was beyond the scope of this research.

In addition, the researchers recommend that there is an investigation into the attainment of international student-parents, and whether there is a gap between them and international students without parenting responsibilities. A comparative analysis with international non-parent students and native student-parents, taken as baseline measures, would be beneficial.

The presence of an attainment gap could lead to determining if international student-parents are indeed a disadvantaged and vulnerable group. The indications from phase one and the discussions arising in phase two of the study, support the possibility that international student-parents are disadvantaged and vulnerable. A group without recognition and/or formal representation is already susceptible to marginalisation.

This research has attempted to redress the research gap on international student-parents. It represents a preliminary step towards

understanding the needs of international student-parents. Further research would benefit international student-parents and their experience of studying in the UK.

7. Reference

Home Office, March 2019. *Why do People come to the UK To Study?* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2019/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-3-to-study

8. Acknowledgements

The researchers at Cardiff University's International Student Support team would like to express their gratitude to UKCISA for their financial backing in the completion of this research, and to Professor Trevor Jones (Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences) for his unfaltering support and guidance throughout this project.

Our deepest thanks are reserved for the international students at Cardiff University who took the time to contribute to this study. We hope our combined efforts will serve to help you and students alike in the future, both at Cardiff and beyond.

9. Research team

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11. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

Research

Creating a community of practice for international students: the role of academic peer learning in supporting their transition and integration into higher education

Ulster University, University of Brighton, University of Edinburgh

Research team:
Professor Melanie Giles, Ulster University
Katie Scott, Edinburgh University Students' Association in partnership with University of Edinburgh
Catherine McConnell, University of Brighton

Contents

1. Executive summary

The enthusiasm for internationalisation is continuing to grow across UK institutions, with international student recruitment remaining a significant priority. However, research suggests that international students face a number of challenges when integrating into Higher Education (HE) which can lead to some students feeling disillusioned and others dropping out. With this in mind, the aim of this project was to explore the impact of the PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme on the integration of international students into HE. In doing so, the project also sought to acquire a better understanding of the broader issues associated with the successful transition of international students into university life.

A mixed method approach of surveys, one-to-one interviews and focus groups was employed. Data was collected from three UK HE institutions: Ulster University, the University of Brighton and the University of Edinburgh.

Findings showed that international students continue to face many challenges when transitioning into HE, including feelings of isolation. A lack of proficiency in English and a perceived lack of warmth and friendliness from members of the host country, which can exacerbate these feelings.

The PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme has the potential to alleviate these difficulties and enhance students' sense of engagement. However, peer mentors have a significant role to play in the transition process; poor leaders can result in international students feeling disillusioned and disengaged. Standardised cultural awareness training for all new PASS leaders is therefore required to ensure 'blanket consistency' and guarantee that every student in any group receives the same experience. Recommendations include raising the profile of international students on campus, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and providing greater opportunities for international students to become involved in the university and local community.

2. Motivation for research

A considerable body of knowledge has been built up about international students' perceptions of their academic challenges and experiences (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2008; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). As a consequence, it is widely acknowledged that students attending universities in a culture different from their own have to contend with novel social and educational organisations, behaviours and expectations – as well as dealing with the problems of adjustment common to students in general (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). Additional academic challenges have been found to include language difficulties (Sawir, 2005) and stress or confusion relating to alternative teaching and grading styles (Durkin, 2008; Kingston & Forland, 2008). Alongside academic adjustments, international students have also been shown to encounter social and personal problems including loneliness and isolation (Edwards & Ran, 2006) and culture shock (Bamford, Marr, Pheiffer and Weber-Newth, 2002; Ward et al, 2001; see also Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen and Van Horn, 2002).

Abbreviations	
PASS	Peer-Assisted Study Sessions
PALS	Peer-Assisted Learning Session
IAPL	International Academic Peer Learning Network
CoP	Community of Practice
HE	Higher Education
EU	European Union
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
SI	Supplemental Instruction
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
PM	Peer mentoring
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences used by researchers to perform statistical analysis
t-test	Allows comparison of the average values of two data sets and determines if they came from the same population

In a review of adjustment factors for international students attending English-speaking universities, Andrade (2006) found that English-related skills, such as listening ability, lecture comprehension, note-taking, oral communication and writing were particularly problematic. In order to improve the university experience and ameliorate the quality of academic learning for international students, many universities have adopted learning support systems based on collaborative study and peer support.

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and other such approaches are focused on creating a "safe and friendly place to help students adjust to university life" (Capstick, Fleming and Hurne, 2004, p.2). These small, often informal, student-led teaching groups have been shown to be a place where students are able to ask questions and make mistakes without fear of reprisal (Longfellow, May, Burke & Marks-Maran, 2008); this is thought to be of particular importance for international students who may not be proficient in English (Rust and Wallace,1994).

2.1 How the PASS/PAL scheme works

In practice, the PASS/PAL peer mentoring scheme involves higher year students (PASS Leaders) working in pairs to facilitate weekly study sessions with students in the year below. It is argued that higher level students (those in the second and third year of their degree) should have direct and relevant

experience of the circumstances in which new first year students may be having difficulty and thus are well placed to aid their transition into HE. PASS sessions are timetabled, typically involve 10-15 first-year students, and are generally targeted at difficult modules. The sessions themselves are student-led in that the participants are encouraged to set the agenda and identify topics for discussion. The focus on group facilitation techniques and associated activities during the two-day training provided for PASS Leaders and the emphasis placed on planning sessions during the weekly debriefs (half hour sessions held weekly with the Academic Coordinator to review the process), provide leaders/mentors with the skills necessary to empower students to identify topics for discussion.

Since its inception, within the UK, there has been a proliferation of PASS/PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) activity within many degree programmes. Research suggests that the scheme has the potential to enhance academic performance (Ashwin, 2003; Bidgood, 1994; Coe, McDougall. and McKeown, 1999; McCarthy, Smuts and Cosser, 1997; see also Rodger and Tremblay, 2003), aid the transition process (Giles, Zacharopoulou and Condell, 2012; see also Collings, Swanson and Watkins, 2015; Glaser, Hall and Halperin 2006) and reduce student drop-out (see eg, Bolton, Pugliese and Singleton-Jackson, 2009; Collings, Swanson and Watkins, 2014; Higgins, 2004; Pugliese, Bolton, Jones, Roma, Cipkar.and Rabie, 2015; see also Dawson et al, 2014). There is also some evidence to suggest that the scheme engenders enthusiasm for the discipline, increases group cohesiveness, creates opportunities for communication and feedback between staff and students. It enhances not just employability, but also the quality of the student learning experience (see eg, Capstick, 2004).

As such, it would seem that the PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme has the potential to address many of the challenges experienced by international students when transitioning into HE. In other words, research suggests that PASS/PAL has the potential to create 'a safe, friendly place to help students adjust to university life' (Capstick, Fleming and Hurne, 2004, p.2), thereby addressing the widely documented difficulties experienced by international students such as homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, language barriers, loneliness, depression, anxiety and academic adjustments (see eg, Jones and Fleisher, 2012).

3. Research aim

In light of the above, the aims of this research project were to:

- Evaluate the impact of the PASS/PAL peer-led learning programme on the integration of international students into HE. In doing so, the research project also sought to acquire a better understanding of the broader issues associated with the successful transition of international students into university life, including non-academic factors among primarily postgraduate international students.
- Create a Community of Practice (CoP) at a national level to help others in the sector share good practice and in so doing, provide the highest quality of support possible for international students. In the present context, the aim of the CoP was to review the findings from this study and make recommendations.

4. Summary of research outcomes

In terms of the transition process, findings from this research project suggest the following:

- There are a number of motivations for international students deciding to come to the UK to study which include the quality of education provided and the need to acquire other cultural experiences (see also Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). Indeed, there was a strong sense that international students are keen to embrace the UK culture, although not at the expense of relinquishing their own cultural heritage. Whilst the desire for personal growth was also a motivating factor, the fear of failure was for some a significant driver.
- International students continue to face many challenges when transitioning into HE, including feelings of isolation often due to a perceived lack of warmth and friendliness from members of the host country. Where warm and positive relationships are apparent, student belonging is enhanced.
- There is a perception that UK students are reluctant to embrace other cultures. Sometimes this exists as blatant rejection; more often it results from intracultural exchanges amongst host students which are unintentionally exclusive; this is serving to limit the social integration of international students.
- International societies and other intercultural events are welcomed but they may inadvertently promote intracultural exchanges which may discourage students from integrating with members of the host culture.
- A lack of proficiency in English is discouraging both academic and social integration. The former is compounded by a limited understanding of the UK's educational process and systems, academic terminology and differences in teaching styles. The student-centred ethos now a feature of most HE institutions is alien to many international students who lack the confidence required to participate actively in learning and teaching initiatives. Regional dialects and

accents are also perceived as particularly problematic.

- The PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme has the potential to alleviate the difficulties experienced by international students and aid their transition into HE. Not only is it enhancing their awareness of course expectations, providing help with assignments and developing key study skills, but it is also serving to enhance student engagement and belonging.
- Peer mentors have a significant role to play in the transition process; poor leaders can result in international students feeling disillusioned and disengaged.

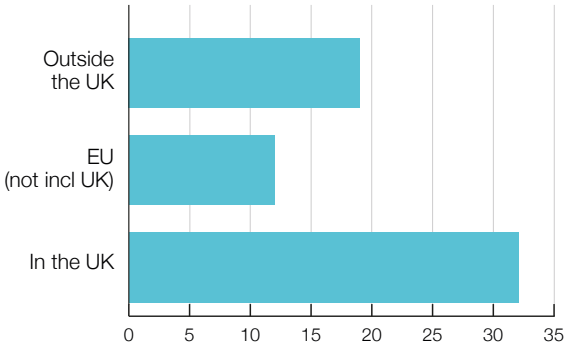
5. Research methodology

In order to explore the impact of the PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme and identify issues associated with the transition of international students into HE, a mixed methods approach of surveys, one-to-one interviews and focus groups was employed. Data were collected from three UK HE institutions: Ulster University; the University of Brighton and the University of Edinburgh. Each of the host universities vary significantly in student population. For the academic year 2017-18, Brighton University had a total student population of 21,555 – 1,645 were international[1], University of Edinburgh had a total student population of 41,312 – 13,353 were international[2] and Ulster University had a total student population of 34,117 – 1,473 were international[3].

5.1 Pre-evaluation survey

To evaluate the impact of PASS/PAL from a quantitative perspective, a questionnaire survey was administered to 64 international students from the University of Edinburgh across three different faculties[4] at two points in time (at the beginning of the first semester and again towards the end of semester two). The mean age of participants was 18 years old. The majority of participants' origin of birth was listed within the EU (n=37), followed by Asia, Africa and the Americas[5]. However, 32% of participants reported living in the UK before they attended university. Figure 1 displays a breakdown of domicile location. The survey included measures on: satisfaction, academic performance, student belonging, student engagement, psychological capital, interpersonal skills, and academic commitment (see Appendix 1, in the online version of this report).

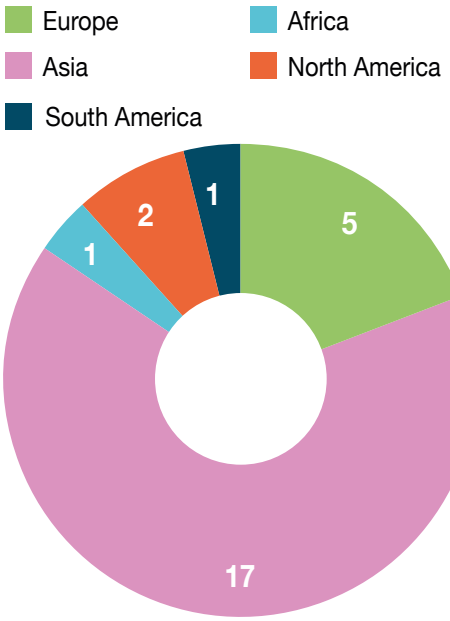
Figure 1. Pre-evaluation survey participant domicile before HE attendance in the UK



5.2 Interviews and focus groups

Alongside the surveys, semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus groups were conducted to complement the quantitative data and to provide richer understanding of international students' transition into UK HE life, both from an academic and a social perspective. Focus group and interview topics covered students' early transitional experiences of first being in the UK, PASS/PALS exposure, cultural differences and relationships (see Appendix 2, available in the online version of this report). Participants were also asked for their recommendations of how PASS/PALS and universities as a whole could improve the experiences of international students during their transition period. 26 participants from the host universities responded to an email invitation to participate which resulted in eight one-to-one interviews and four focus groups. Of these, six were studying for an undergraduate degree, 19 were enrolled on Masters Programmes and one student was completing a PhD. Figure 2 displays a breakdown of the origin of birth for the qualitative participants.

Figure 2. Origin of birth for qualitative participant sample



5.3 Data analysis

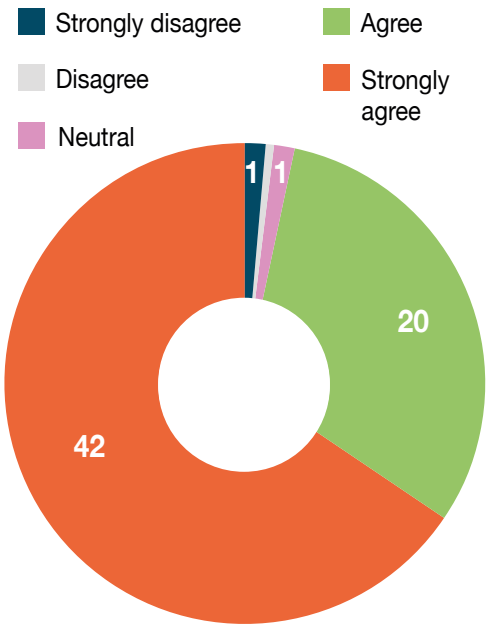
Data collected from interviews and focus groups were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA), described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data'. The TA used in this research adopted a realist method, reporting the experiences, meanings and reality of participants. Transcripts were read and re-read; following this, initial codes were generated. Once codes were developed, they were sorted into potential themes creating an initial thematic map. Further refinement of themes then took place to ensure greater external heterogeneity between themes. Potentially identifying information has been removed from quotes to maintain participant anonymity. Qualitative research focuses on the individual's experience, meaning and reality and as such, objective measurement is not the goal. The data collected from the questionnaire survey were entered into SPSS (version 24); descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to explore the data. See below for selected student quotes.

6. Key research findings

6.1 Impact of the PASS peer mentoring programme

Participants reported a high degree of satisfaction with the PASS/PAL process as illustrated by the frequencies displayed in Figure 3. Indeed, when asked how satisfied they were with the PASS sessions (see Appendix 1, in the online version of this report), the vast majority strongly agreed that the sessions were 'useful', enjoyable', 'interesting' and relevant to their area of study, helping to build their confidence, increase knowledge and were sufficient to their needs.

Figure 3. Satisfaction with PASS/PAL sessions



Moreover, whilst the mean scores on key performance indicators did not differ significantly between times 1 and 2 (see Table 1), most moved in a positive direction suggesting that participants not only felt more engaged with their programmes from having participated in the process, but also perceived that their listening, writing and speaking skills had improved as a result. Slight improvements were also observed in their levels of confidence, optimism and resilience.

Table 1. Mean scores on key outcome measures

Measures	Time 1	Time 2
Satisfaction	3.61	3.67
Academic performance	3.49	3.51
Student engagement	2.74	2.99
Student belonging	3.55	3.44
Working with others	3.82	4.05
Listening skills	4.02	4.30
Writing skills	3.32	3.67
Speaking skills	3.74	4.12
Academic commitment	4.54	4.59
Confidence	3.74	3.82
Problem solving	3.91	3.73
Goal setting	3.73	3.71
Resilience	2.91	3.27
Optimism	3.45	3.73

These findings were endorsed by the qualitative findings which further highlighted the role of the PASS/PAL scheme in developing key study skills and confirmed that it is serving to aid the transition process by helping international students to settle in to university life, enhance their awareness of course expectations, clarify expectations and provide help with assignments (see section 5.3 data analysis). For example:

Approachability of PASS/PALS

> **"I feel like a PASS environment is safer because it's your peer because they want to help you and not make you look like a fool. Sometimes you ask the actual lecturers questions and they look at you like you're a dumbass and then that makes you not want to ask a question next time."**

Settling into university life

> **"Forming a community where we can rely on each other and I mean if I were to reflect on my first semester and how I have settled in I think I've been very fortunate to have been able to click with many of my friends. That has helped me settle in as an international student."**

> **"So I think I made really good friends out of it [PALS]. In terms of settling into university life, it has helped me a lot. In terms of academic work/transition, [it's been] more of**

a relationship transition and building new friendships."

Awareness of course expectations

"For the most part, they just try to help us with the course like telling us what we should expect and what we should expect from lectures and how the tests and classes will be. It's helpful."

Assignment help

"It was helpful because they're [students in second and third year] above you and they know where you're coming from. So sometimes you were there and you wondered why, it wasn't a great session and other sessions you could take a lot from. When it was helpful we would know more about the structure of what we could put in essays."

"The fact you can know what to focus on in terms of coursework. I'm not sure you define that as a skill, but knowing how to effectively study."

Study skills

"I felt like it was a good practice session because they gave us tips – we practiced we may not realise that we're speaking too fast or we are doing weird hand movements. So they really pointed that out and it helps with our presentations."

Co-learning skills

"I suppose I talk to the people in my course and I get along with them in class but I don't see them other than that. In the first few weeks I didn't really talk to anyone. At least in PASS we are in a group and we usually talk to each other and it made it easier for me to be confident enough to relate to them [other students] more."

'Insider' knowledge

"I just think it's important to reiterate how important it is to have a community of students who aren't in your year so you can ask them – my friends are in the year above who are PALS leaders are applying for jobs now so I can get advice about that and just having access to people who are in older years that you might not necessarily know otherwise.

"I would say you will know the 'inside' knowledge in how you should go about tackling problems. Different professors want different kinds of things and that insider knowledge is really important in order to perform well."

However, despite participants endorsing the PASS/PALS scheme, there seemed to be a lack of consistency in experience across the participant sample, with some students highlighting a few areas where the sessions did not quite meet their expectations. The peer mentors appeared to play a significant role here. For example:

Dissatisfaction with PALS leaders

"We just didn't bond with the PASS leaders, which is sad because I heard other groups the leaders would bring sweets and they loved it."

"Other leaders were really sociable and when they saw each other in the library they'd try to see your work. Mine would say hi but wouldn't do more than that. It does change things, which leader it is."

Dissatisfaction with content of sessions

"They are seen as leaders, so we go to them, we do count on them a lot. We respect them in that sense, they come and want to teach us something, so we try to listen but if there's nothing to do, and we want to leave."

Lack of structure

"There were some sessions for me where I could take information and others where I didn't take anything from it. You just wanted to leave at times because it wasn't productive enough."

"Our PASS sessions would last half an hour, it could last ten minutes and it was sad and that is how it happened."

Over-reliance

"If someone is now aware of PASS in the timetable, they may stop going to lectures and completely rely on PASS and that's really not good. It's better to go to lectures because PASS can only do so much."

Some of the participants in the study were PASS/PALS leaders and they too mentioned some benefits of being involved in the scheme, including enhancing their own academic knowledge, helping others and being able to include PASS/PALS experience in CVs:

"I really liked the community of people and I wanted to do something connected to Economics and for my CV…. It's a great opportunity to learn how to educate and be on the opposite side of education."

"I learned about it [PALS] because international student's office talked about in semester 2 you're invited to apply to be a leader. I thought that would be a nice thing

to do to meet new people and help incoming exchange students to settle in."

"Having the community of people over here has been really good for my academic development. And then repeating the material that we learned in the first year, I feel like it solidifies those concepts that I might have forgotten otherwise."

"It looks good on the resume and we're not supposed to teach, just lead them to the answer, it teaches me too – I'm also studying whilst helping them. You can study better when you're teaching it to someone else so that helps me with my studies too."

Shortcomings for PASS/PALS leaders included noting that preparing for sessions was time-consuming, that sessions were poorly advertised resulting in low numbers of students attending, and there was a lack of formal recognition from the host university for leaders' work:

"I probably spent three hours a week on PALS things which is a fair bit for something that is voluntary. I think it's worth it but I think we don't get enough recognition for that - like the impact awards, they don't really have a way to make us feel like our work is being recognised."

"PALS on my CV looks good but it doesn't look anything like the actual time commitment that it is. I've got other things on my CV that are much less hours and effort that are just as good as PALS but it's just one thing."

"I did lead one PASS session last term and nobody came. I think one person came but I was packing up to go and I think it wasn't because they didn't want to come, they don't know that it exists for the most part. It's not advertised – when I was at UBIC [international college] they had PASS and I didn't even know about it. I only found out that they had it when they asked me to be a PASS person so no one really knows that it's there."

6.2 International student experiences

A second aim of this study was to acquire a better understanding of the broader issues affecting the transition and integration of international students into HE. Three main themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the interviews and focus groups (see Figure 4):

- The first theme **Intercultural Experiences** captured information about the cultural differences experienced by international students and the impact this had on their sense of self and their personal sense of identity.
- The second theme **Transitional Experiences** explored international students' [early] academic and social experiences and adaptations into UK HE life.
- The final theme **Sources of Support** discusses both external and internal support mechanisms that international students found useful for buffering potential stressful transitional situations.

6.2.1 Intercultural experiences

Almost all participants described the challenge of living in an entirely new cultural setting. Despite reporting feelings of "homesickness" and "stress" in relation to leaving their home country for study abroad, there was a strong sense among some participants, of the importance of and willingness to embrace UK culture:

"I come here [to the UK] with all my knowledge and all my cultural background to give a little part of me to everyone I meet and I expect the same in return from everyone. I expect to come back and be a better person because of all the people that I've met and I hope I get to change minds and stigmas."

"There's a saying in India – wherever you go you pick up things from there. So coming here, I would say it's more about enjoying their festivals like St Patrick's Day, so being part of that culture makes it more of an enjoyable experience. I've always tried that and it has only made me happy."

"We have to respect each other and be open, you know. When we are open we embrace all the cultures and we make it easy for us – that's what it's about, being open and making it easy for yourself."

In doing so, this was seen as a way to both potentially combat feelings of isolation and to feel more fully immersed in the international student 'experience'. However, as much as participants discussed the importance of embracing their new cultural setting, most ensured that they did not relinquish their own cultural heritage as a result. The mutual respect and exchange of knowledge meant that cross-cultural reciprocity was not only within the intercultural, it was within themselves as international students representing their country in the UK.

Identity

Jung, Hecht and Wadsworth (2007) wrote that it was possible for international students' expression of selves to be restricted when they communicate with members of the host culture, due to cultural differences and communication barriers. In this study, when asked what it meant [to the participants] to be an international student in the

UK, it was found that participants' cultural identity was established at the earliest available opportunity, often upon first introductions:

> **"As soon as I introduce myself, I keep my identity. That's the first thing I explain."**

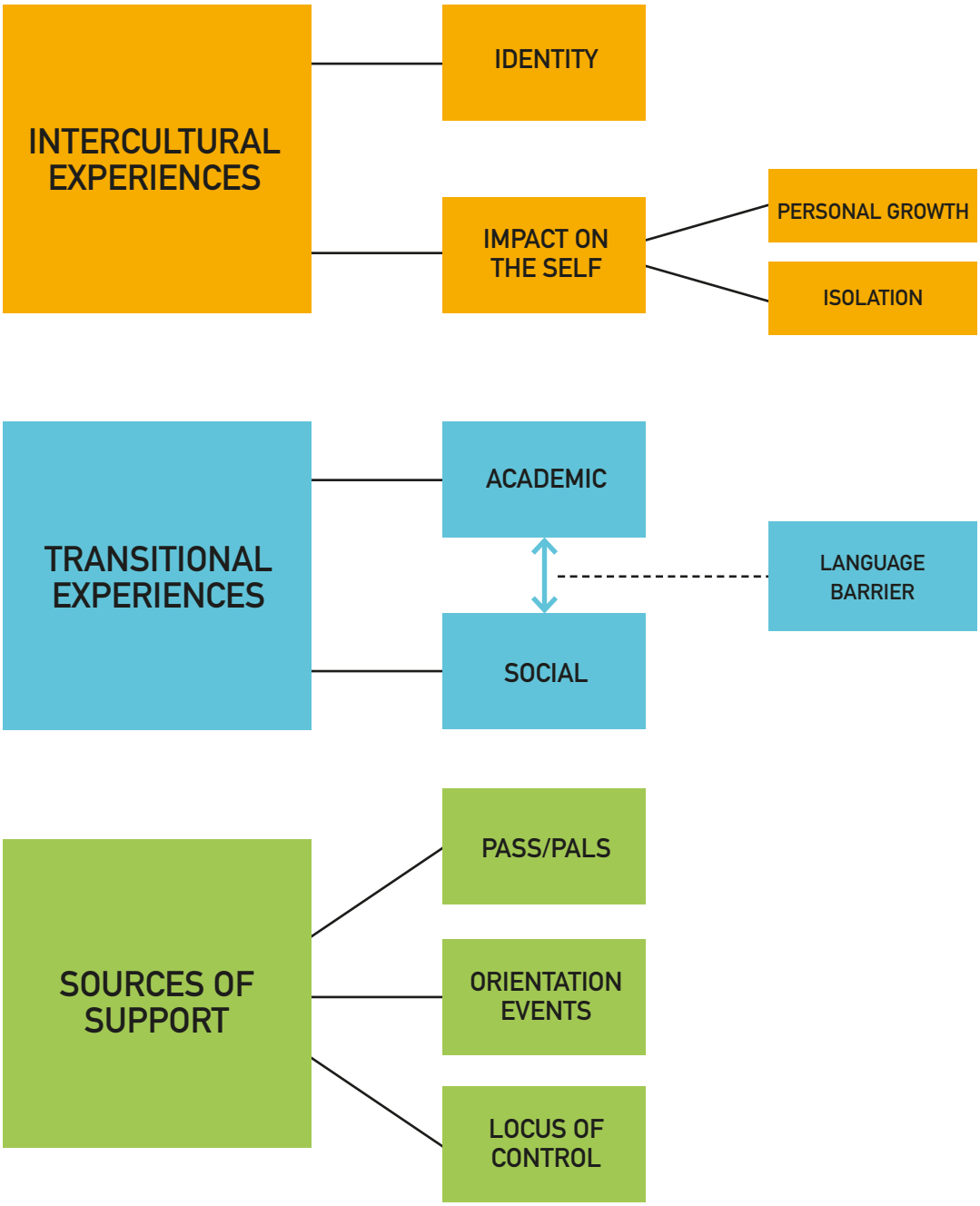
> **"When I make new friends and introduce myself, I talk about where I'm from. Originally, I'm Egyptian so that's what I say and if people seem interested about where I come from I can talk more about it. And that's what happened with people I'm trying to be friends with – I talk to them about my culture and where I'm from."**

> **"I come here, and I want to let people know what Hong Kong is and sometimes people will feel it is equal to China but they don't know we have our own system and the culture is different. It is important to let people know and also it's my passion."**

The participant below found that her personality and culture clashed with UK culture:

> **"Sometimes I feel my personality is too much for English people, they're just not used to the abrasiveness that comes with being American […] no one here wants to offend or stand up, so I find myself having to reel back my Americaness so that I don't offend anyone."**

Figure 4. Thematic map from qualitative data



Klak and Martin (2003) reported that university-sponsored international cultural events increased students' acceptance of cultural differences and the same was found in this study with participants across Brighton and Edinburgh praising the value of such events for promoting cultural sensitivity and greater inclusivity:

> **"I think in the pre-Masters course they'll do something every month with cultures and we can share our culture to other people and that's a good way to show your culture to other people. It is enjoyable and you can meet different people."**

> **"I think it's interesting to be here and be surrounded by people from other countries and not just UK people. Within our School there are a lot of societies that help us retain our culture. So there are a lot of food festivals and we have different things and it's interesting because you can taste food from home and other countries as well."**

Participants from Ulster University[6] felt that the university could do more to promote greater links between international students and local students. Creating a more social cross-cultural student community outside of academic life may be a challenge because much of the student population at Ulster University are from Northern Ireland and so, on weekends and public holidays, often those students leave the campus to return 'home':

> **"Very hard to hang out with people and in the weekend I'm free but other students because most of them are from here they go home, so just feels like a lonely place here and sometimes it's very hard for me to have any connection or mixture with the people here."**

> **"So my friends from NI are from Belfast, so every weekend they go back to Belfast and I'm like arghh – I want to hang out with you guys."**

> **"We have 'coffee and chat' but we don't have any connect with the locals. There are not much activities happening, which combines cultures. Maybe in the first week but it stops after that. I met friends and they tell me about different words that are used and how NI is different – those things I get to know and that's exposure one should have in order to have universal acceptance and experience."**

Acceptance is an additional pressure for the international student to contend with, as described above. Furnham (2004, p.17) notes, 'foreign students face several difficulties, some exclusive to them (as opposed to native students)'. In our research, these particular difficulties were shown to be caused partly by feelings of being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture and the new environment.

Impact on the self

Isolation: As discussed above, international students are confronted with a new culture to acclimatise to. This is not only a process of finding one's way in the host country's culture, but also navigating the differences between academic cultures and ways of thinking and seeing the world (Okorocha, 1996). This study found that participants experienced feelings of isolation due to perceived lack of warmth and friendliness from members of the host country:

> **"This is my first time attending school in the UK and being at [X university] I don't feel like the English are very welcoming towards people who aren't English. They're not warm, they're not open so because of that we're the rejects. It may not be reality but that's what it feels like."**

> **"English people are different from Asian, when I was in pre-course I made some Asian friends, they were welcoming but when I finished course and went into university – I don't know why, I found the English speaking people are more cooled and distant."**

Such perceptions among international students may be exacerbated by the inadvertent behaviour of home students:

> **"Some people because they're from England, they can talk about TV shows and bond around that, little things like that make a difference. You feel more isolated because you can't follow the chat or try to get in there and it makes you sad. It's not on purpose, but it's small things like this that makes it a bit harder to go forward with people and try to bond."**

> **"I'd say the same, so I was feeling that most of the UK guys stick together and they know how the culture works and they don't engage with us."**

> **"On my course I wouldn't say everyone is closed to being friends with an international student but did notice some prefer to just be with English people, it's tricky."**

Although perhaps, largely unintentional, such behaviour from people from the UK could lead to negative implications for cross-cultural relationships. Here, it was found that as a result, international students felt more compelled to 'stick with' people from their home country. However, rather than

having a positive effect, this only compounded feelings of isolation:

> **"I joined a society in the first semester and it was pretty international. People from different countries and I'm from Singapore and there is a Singapore Society and I try my best not to stick with my people because I'm conscious of how easy it is to cling on to and you just shut everyone out."**

> **"It's hard for me to learn English [in this flat] because sometimes I ask them [other international flat mates] something about English and they don't know because English isn't their mother language either and I feel that I'm isolated and we are all isolated."**

Previous research in the English-language countries found that many international students are disappointed by the underdevelopment of relationships with local students (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). Several participants felt that there was a different dynamic between international and English students, where international students did not feel a sense of belonging and community-spirit from UK people. However, this was not the case for all participants in the study, the comment below from a mature international student at Ulster University describes the impact of positive engagement with local people in helping to (successfully) adapt to a new culture:

> **"I think the most important thing in a place is its people – that's why I'm comfortable here because people here are friendly and helpful and they didn't let you feel like you're strange. When they know you have come from so far they're keen to help you."**

This finding is consistent with Wong and Kwok's (1997) research on mature-aged students, which found that those who perceived more support overall correspondingly perceived fewer difficulties. Murphy-Lejeune (2003, p. 113) describes the experience of adaptation and learning abroad as a 'maturing process' and as a sense of belonging and alienation appear to co-exist for the participants, international students can be the agents of their own success and create trajectories out of these fragments and contradictions (Gu et al. 2010). In this study, many participants described feelings of personal growth and development because of their experience of living and studying abroad.

Personal growth: When successful, intercultural experience(s) can be a transformative learning process, leading to a journey of great personal growth and development (Gu and Maley, 2008). Many participants described coming to the UK not only to progress their academic careers but also to broaden life horizons, gain a better grasp of the English language and to seek adventure. This meant that a lot of participants, despite facing challenges in coming to the UK, were motivated to make the most of their stay:

> **"I wanted that new experience and new weather and new people. So studying abroad and coming here to the UK gave me that opportunity."**

> **"I wanted to have that new experience and new weather and meet new people. Since I tried so hard to have friends out of school, so that studying abroad and coming here to the UK gave me that opportunity to have friends outside university."**

Mental resources, particularly having hope for the future and motivation was shown to have an impact on mental wellbeing and feelings of satisfaction at being in the UK. Indeed, many international students felt that they were more engaged than their British counterparts when it came to succeeding academically and experiencing all that UK academic life had to offer:

> **"You need to think about what you want to get from it [studying in the UK] and what you really want to achieve in the future – that makes for a positive attitude to study."**

> **"I think I'm more involved with the university than most home students […] I don't want to generalise but British students are more relaxed here. It's their environment and they're not that motivated."**

> **"I also have the experience in that most of the extra-curricular activities that I do are run by international students, they are not UK. So I feel that they [international students] are more motivated and have the privilege to be here."**

It is important to highlight that despite many participants describing feeling motivated to succeed for positive reasons, a significant minority indicated that underlying their motivations were the potential consequences of failure, including wasted tuition fees and potentially losing study visas, therefore there were "a lot higher stakes" to do well academically. Overall, as many studies (eg, McLachlan & Justice, 2009) have shown international students do survive transition and thrive. In this study, when asked what advice current participants would give other international students about to embark on a journey to the UK, the quote below sums up the general consensus among respondents:

> **"You're getting an experience for life because you are coming on your own and you are making everything by yourself and no parents or family to help you. It makes**

you stronger and more independent. When you go abroad you experience new things, meet new people, new culture, learn more."

6.2.2 Transitional experiences

A major theme to emerge from this study was international students' experiences of transitioning and integrating into UK life, both from an academic and a social perspective. Proficiency in English was an overarching barrier to successful transitions across both academic and social spheres. From the data, it was clear that adapting to different academic cultures and pedagogies was just as acute as adapting to a new social environment. Some participants felt that there could be more effective ways to respond to the language needs of international students. For example, better use of visual learning techniques in the classroom. It is well known that international students may face language barriers – but an interesting finding to emerge from this study is that participants emphasised spoken language barriers (especially dealing with regional dialect and accents) far more than written language problems.

Academic

One of the first clear transitional difficulties to emerge from an academic perspective among participants was the perceived difference in the UK grading systems and teaching styles in comparison to international students' home countries:

"I struggled with the grading system because it wasn't properly explained. I had to do a lot of essays and wondered why they never marked up until 100. I know the scale is 1-100 but they never explained what quality would reach 100. No work can reach 100 so that's one thing that they should clear up with international students."

"I've been here about 18 months and is still an adjustment even now. It's just the way the school structure is completely different from the US, the grading scheme is different, teaching – everything, it's like night and day so adjusting to that was probably the hardest part I would say."

"It's [UK teaching style] very different from the Asian system because in Taiwan we are encouraged to find the answers by more practical ways. It's very different from here, here you have to step back and discover possibilities. Right now I'm enjoying it but at the beginning you have no idea how to do it."

As already noted, UK universities deliver courses that are valued and recognised worldwide and this reputation and exposure to high quality teaching was noted amongst some participants:

"I was surprised and it's different from my home country because here the lecturer has privilege and status and students are close with each other and so they were helpful and they could understand your concerns and listen, which is important to have someone to listen to you."

"When I had first assessment it was 'open book', I didn't know what that was. I was scared so I went to him [lecturer] and he explained it to me. In our system the questions that you have you are giving back to the teacher the information he gave you. Here – no – you have to go above and beyond, that's proper learning."

A significant challenge for international students concerns English language ability, and consideration of those international students who are non-native speakers of English. Bamford (2008) found that little time may be spent in addressing the more specialist support required by [these] students in class. As a consequence, some international students can become frustrated, as lecturers mistake specific lack of knowledge in technical (or political or cultural) terminology for generic language difficulties. Below are some examples expressing this frustration:

"We did have a module that did talk a lot about politics and that was tricky […] even with my tutor, I told him I didn't understand the issues. If you don't encourage me, and explain it to me, it doesn't make me feel more welcoming to learn."

"After I start my course I found because all of the students are from mainland UK only a few are international and I found that you can't understand very well from a tutor and it's hard to openly chat with your classmates."

"Communicating with your peers – it's challenging, obviously the tutors engage you but sometimes there is a language barrier and you cannot do everything as much as you would like to."

"It's hard to communicate with abstract ideas and because we are not competent in English and you're affected by facial expressions and you think they're thinking 'ah they don't understand' – how do I fix that."

In many UK HE degree programmes, active oral participation in seminars and tutorials (for example) is a skill that is strongly encouraged. However, in this study, some participants who came from teacher-centred cultures where students do not

speak without first being called upon to do so find the 'rules' of classroom participation in the UK to be challenging with one participant admitting to not speaking up for fear of "making a fool out of himself." Some participants did suggest practical ways to facilitate their learning:

> **"I think it's a different experience than home because if you're in a discussion group, people can just question the material and that's an experience I've never had before. Usually it's just a test of how much you can remember."**

> **"Our mother language is not English and if the tutor only speaks English – it's hard for us but if they use a picture or image, I think it's easier for us to pick up on the point. Sometimes I can't concentrate on the tutor and not everybody's accent is very good."**

> **"You have a lot of ideas but because of language you experience no confidence, people just don't understand but I think that maybe if we have a class that encourages international people to communicate with confidence for any away even if you are not good at English, you still have a lot of ways to express yourself – I think that maybe can help us build confidence."**

Tatar (2005) studied classroom participation by international students and suggested that instructors might also consider the students' need for organised discussions for which they can prepare. Strategies such as emailing study questions beforehand, giving clear directions and summarizing important points of the discussions were found to encourage both prior preparation and active participation.

Social

The concept of social satisfaction was intriguing in this study because participants being 'sociable' was closely related to both early days adjustment and getting the full experience of being in the UK. The number of friends did not seem as important. One participant went as far to say that they did not come to the UK to make friends, their purpose here was for study only. It is also possible that this finding could be because some of the international students interviewed may be more independent, self-sufficient, as well as comfortable in social interactions (as reflected by their willingness to live far from home and the advice they would offer other international students considering moving to the UK). Below are some such comments:

> **"Try your hardest to be sociable with people that you live with. Even in your house, try your hardest to chat to everyone, even if you don't know where it's going. Try to make the effort, even if it's scary and you don't want to."**

> **"Get out and know people, talk to people, live your life, go for trips, go outside and discover. I can see some changes in people and they change you and you will learn from them. Not only from them but the experience of being here because you've been in home country for years, so it's pointless to come here and be on the phone with your family all the time."**

As Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010) note, social connectedness is very important for ensuring that international students succeed in their new environment. As already noted, both in this study and previously in the literature (eg, Yeh & Inose, 2003) lack of proficiency in English is a significant barrier for international students as it can affect their academic ability but based on the comments below, it can also impact ability to engage socially:

> **"The first week to do activities where you would talk to each other but it's awkward. You listen to the person but you don't know them and if you should care or be friends with them and it's stressful and try to be sociable with people you don't know – it is worth it."**

> **"When I first got here I was afraid to communicate with strangers because I feel my pronunciation is not very good […] it's really hard to catch each other and I'm busy trying to settle down and I have no idea where I can ask for the help, it's also hard to openly chat with your classmate."**

> **"I try my best to find a social life here but it seems very hard because even though I have a well prepared English, here the accent is different with standard accent and so sometimes I just feel like I can't catch their words and my 'chit-chat' skills are not very good."**

From the comments above, participants perceive that any experiences in social isolation are as a result of their own deficiencies in English. On the other hand, some students indicated that the problem was located in the broader university environment, including how home students receive international students:

> **"It is a different dynamic between international college and coming here with the rest of the English students. It felt like a family at international college, everybody wanted the best for each other, helped each other. I just don't get that same sense of belonging from non-international students."**

6.2.3 Sources of support

The current study suggests the sources from where an international student gets support vary, from external sources such as active participation in PASS/PALS schemes and attending university-led events (eg, 'Freshers' Week') to more internal support systems, such as adopting a personal locus of control.

Orientation events

In a study conducted by Clark and Hall (2010), the predominant view among their respondents was that Freshers' Week, is or should be, concerned with the social aspects of university life with students getting out and about in order to make friends. As has already been noted, student transition to university collectively emphasise the interplay between the social and academic circumstances of students, and the institutional systems, which should support them. In this study, participants positively appraised traditional university events such as Freshers' Week and the more formal Induction Week as a time for making vital early social connections to gaining more practical knowledge about university facilities (eg, printing, borrowing books from the library):

> **"On the first night when I reached the common room, everyone had their own groups and they didn't really welcome me [..] so I felt like I didn't have any friends.. during Freshers' Week I saw people from my own country and I wasn't alone in a sense."**

> **"I think Freshers' Weeks was good because there was a lot of staff around, it helped. Even students were located in different parts of the school – they're in the library to help with wifi or even our personal tutor met with us to discuss what we wanted to do in the future."**

> **"Yes it [Freshers'] was pretty great, I didn't have that in my home university, so I found it very helpful. I learned everything that I needed to know, like how to print, how to ask for a book, I found it really helpful."**

> **"I was keen to be present for Induction Week, it was very organised and welcoming – they were friendly and she [staff from international office] gave me addresses of agencies where I can look for accommodation. We had information about the university and they were keen to integrate with us so it was excellent."**

University-led events alongside existing peer-learning programmes have been shown to be effective external systems that help to make international students' transition into UK academic life as successful as possible. When attempting to make a successful transition, some participants commented that they did not rely solely on these external things but described how they were agents of their own success and happiness too. This came in the form of a personalised locus of control over events and the value of prior preparation before coming to the UK. The final section below discusses examples of participants' personal mastery over their own (successful) transition to a new culture and academic setting.

Locus of control

Students' perceptions of their preparedness for higher education have been identified as significant in influencing their successful transition to the new learning environment (Byrne et al. 2012). In this study, several participants highlighted the importance of being 'open' to new experiences and gaining a sense of control over their (successful) adaption to UK academic life. It was also noted among some participants that international students should be seen as equal to their home student counterparts:

> **"The thing about being an international student, everyone is moving here to come to university, I'm moving as well, just from farther away – that's what I don't like if people treat me differently because I'm international. At the end of the day, we're all coming from our home to here."**

As Paige (1990) asserted, international students assume many roles in the host country, which impacts the manner in which they are perceived. If international students are viewed as "outsiders" this may hinder their acceptance [by their host culture and home students] and ultimately affect the success of their transition. Several students felt that they had to take personal responsibility for their own journeys:

> **"I needed to focus on the independence and be responsible for myself because I needed to take charge of it [being in UK] and that's what I learned from the beginning."**

> **"You can't teach someone how to be human, you just be a human and engage and if that person doesn't want to engage, you find the next. You can't teach being a human to someone. I feel that's each individual person's responsibility."**

This belief and ownership in the transition process can filter down into how much effort is expended by international students into making their transition 'work'. As a conclusion to the data collection process, participants were asked what advice they would give to future international students considering moving abroad for study. Below are a selection of responses, all of which encourage students to be resilient and proactive in making their transition to the UK a success:

"You have to be mind-strong, expect to be on your own but welcome the possibility of making friends but be secure in yourself that you will be by yourself most of the time."

"I think it's about starting small. I know the first few weeks I couldn't do everything at once. It's about taking time, figure things out, settle in first and not get too paranoid about everything because you can't do it all at once."

"I remember doing it and it wasn't as I expected – everything will be new and stressful, just bear with it and try again if you don't succeed. You'll question why you're here, just try your best to stay and try again and again."

7. Conclusions

International students continue to face many challenges when transitioning into HE including feelings of isolation. A lack of proficiency in English and a perceived lack of warmth and friendliness from members of the host country can exacerbate these feelings. However, consistent with much previous research (eg, Capstick, 2004), the results of this study suggest that The PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme has the potential to alleviate these feelings and enhance students' sense of engagement. Indeed, the benefits of PASS/PALS are wide-ranging. When it works well, it creates an open, safe environment allowing students to voice concerns and ask questions which is of value in making the adjustment to university, building confidence and enhancing students' ability to succeed academically. Conversely, participants also felt that at times, PASS/PALS was inadequate; dissatisfaction with leaders has the potential to affect the student experience negatively. This in turn can result in the sessions being perceived as slow-paced, lacking in structure and not a productive use of time. It is therefore imperative that universities reinforce the standardised systems of quality control surrounding the PASS process (which include comprehensive training and regular debriefs to monitor sessions) and conduct evaluation checks to ensure that their peer-learning programmes are adding value to both students' and leaders' academic learning and personal enrichment.

8. Recommendations

A Community of Practice has been established at a national level which now exists as a special interest group affiliated to the International Academic Peer Learning Network (IAPL) network. This group is comprised of 10 individuals from the universities of Ulster, Brighton, Edinburgh, Loughborough, Manchester, Hull, Bournemouth and Carleton College in Canada. To date, three one-day workshops have been facilitated (involving student representatives) at the universities of Manchester, Loughborough and Brighton to explore the findings from this project and share good practice. A number of recommendations have resulted from a review of the findings including the following:

- Continued promotion of the PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme given its potential for aiding the transition of international students into HE. However, specialised training of peer mentors (similar to that provided by Loughborough Students' Union – see Appendix 3, available in the online version of this report) is required to increase mentors' cultural awareness. Careful monitoring of their performance is also essential.
- Effective partnerships must be established with the academic and student support services within an institution and all other stakeholders who engage with international students.
- Universities should initiate cultural and social interactions that enable local and international students to share their experiences. These might include language cafés or cookery classes which encourage more informal dialogue.
- Careful matching of mentors/mentees is needed taking cognisance of the language and cultural needs of international students.
- Effective spaces to promote informal interactions between home and international students should be provided.
- Extended, planned induction programmes involving key stakeholders which serve to strengthen communications with incoming international students are essential so they are fully aware of the services available to aid social and academic integration.
- Careful monitoring of international students during the university lifecycle will help to ensure their academic and social needs are met. Regular surveys of their experiences will help to improve service delivery. Indeed, the student voice must be heard.
- Effective student record systems which can flag international students to tutors are required thereby allowing academics to raise awareness of the learning support services that underpin and sustain academic programmes.
- Training of mentors is required to increase their cultural awareness. Careful monitoring of their performance is also required.
- Careful monitoring of attendance at PASS sessions and the use of strategies to encourage attendance. This could entail highlighting the benefits of attending through advertising and promotional materials (see eg, White et al, 2008) or the use of social media to engage students outside of study sessions (see also, Blakelock, 2014).

9. Reflections

Like any applied piece of research, this project has not been without its problems. The uncertainties surrounding the future of HE within the UK and ongoing restructuring exercises within participating institutions did impact the data collection process. This process was also compounded by the number and length of surveys that students are currently being requested to complete. Indeed, there was sometimes a reluctance to complete the questionnaire such that some incentives were required. Nevertheless, the qualitative data obtained was rich, providing a valuable insight into the PASS/PAL peer mentoring programme and the broader issues associated with the transition and integration of international students into HE. Moreover, the CoP created as a result of this project has proved to be invaluable, particularly in terms of identifying enhancements to professional practice. This has served to highlight the importance of multidisciplinary research groups with appropriate student representation.

10. Notes

[1] https://www.brighton.ac.uk/about-us/statistics-and-legal/facts-and-figures/student-population.aspx

[2] https://www.ed.ac.uk/about/annual-review/student-numbers

[3] Cognos report Ulster University Admission Department.

[4] Business (n=6), Economics (n=46), Engineering (n=12)

[5] n=17, n=5, n=5 respectively.

[6] The participating institution with the lowest international student population (n=1,473)

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15. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

Research

Understanding and developing implementable best practice in the design of academic integrity policies for international students studying in the UK

University of Warwick *with support from*
University of East Anglia, University of Leicester, Loughborough University

Dr Tim Burnett, Senior Teaching Fellow in Liberal Arts, Warwick University

Contents

1. Introduction

The issue of academic malpractice is understood by many names (eg, unfair practice, academic misconduct, academic dishonesty), and encompasses a range of behaviours in which students might engage, such as plagiarism, collusion or disallowed cooperation, and commissioning or 'contract cheating'. Some reports in recent years have drawn attention to the idea that the incidence of such academic malpractice is growing or evolving (eg, Marsh, 2018) and, moreover, that this may be driven by an increasing number of students turning to essay writing companies – particularly amongst international students. Despite several progressive industry recommendations (eg, QAA, 2017), the over-arching response to this perceived threat to academic integrity has been to enhance penalties; notably, as far as criminalisation (in Australia).

Increasing penalties to dissuade deliberate misconduct is intuitively accompanied by the increased risk of damage to individuals who engage in malpractice unintentionally. This highlights the importance of ensuring that students understand the parameters of what is acceptable, and what is not.

In the context of academic integrity, much of the mainstream reporting talks about international students, but rarely engages with international students. To redress this imbalance focus groups and surveys were carried out at a number of UK universities, focussing on Business and Economics owing to the incidence of overseas students studying these topics.[1] The findings of this research have provided a clearer picture of students' understanding (or lack of) around academic malpractice and support they have received in this area, with a number of implications for the design of future policy and training.

2. Motivation for research

There is a developing ideological link between the nationality of a student, and their propensity to engage in academic malpractice. Whilst in many cases this link is anecdotal based upon the suppositions of teaching professionals (McKie, 2019), in other cases universities have reported higher instances of misconduct amongst their overseas cohort relative to 'home' students (ibid). Whether this claim is true is somewhat peripheral to the more fundamental question of how universities engage with their overseas cohort and prepare them for the particular requirements of the UK educational system, except, in part, to motivate policy reform.

The publication of such statistics around contract cheating and the link with international students does, however, promote a particular moral-centric discourse, which is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, it implies a narrative that students who engage in cheating simply suffer some degree of moral shortcoming, or suffer some sort of deficiency in moral development. This approach is evident in policy and research which promotes the idea that students cheat when provided with the opportunity (leading to notions around 'cheat-proofing' assessments (eg, Olt, 2002)), or that cheating simply represents some sort of cost-benefit analysis undertaken by students. This is heavily linked to the expectation that undergraduates possess a uniform and pre-developed moral code and understanding of malpractice in line with some stated (idealised) standard of behaviour (Newton, 2017) – an approach which loads responsibility onto the individual and absolves institutions of their responsibility to provide support and leadership in this issue, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Second, very often the notion of 'cultural difference' is applied as some sort of well-meaning blanket explanation. This is problematic for two reasons:

i) It supports tropes around the idea of fundamental differences in education and presents a misguided view of what is expected under some educational regimes (the most infamous concept being that East Asian education rewards students for copying) (Mostrous, 2016; Sowden, 2005 and its response in Ha, 2005).

ii) It promotes and supports the emergence of simplistic and potentially discriminatory stereotypes around students and/or people from particular countries (Ha, 2006).

Third, and linked to the idea of nuanced differences in individuals' academic background, the promotion of unforgiving penalties denies students the experiential learning opportunity associated with experimentation around the boundaries of the expectations in the UK education system (Introna and Hayes, 2007).

Finally, there is the issue of resources. The dominance of policies focussed on detection and punishment of malpractice bears the hallmarks of an 'arms race'. As universities introduce increasingly complex policies and mechanisms for detection of malpractice, so those who deliberately engage in such behaviours turn to more sophisticated methods of deception. Recent calls for the criminalisation of malpractice (Rahim, 2019) represent not only idealised thinking on the matter (one can only imagine the necessary burden of proof), but also simply the next step in an ongoing escalation.

Developing a better understanding of international students' views and experiences of their UK education, and particularly academic integrity, will provide evidence to support the introduction by universities of more nuanced policies which, while maintaining an appropriate capacity for penalisation (where appropriate), support the ongoing needs of overseas students who are adapting to a new education system.

3. Summary of research outcomes

This study used both focus groups and surveys to try to gain an understanding of student understanding and attitudes toward both academic misconduct and associated support; detail on these approaches is outlined in the following section.

Whilst the two approaches were designed to elicit slightly different information, they yielded similar results in that students (both home and overseas), overall, are hungry for more support in terms of their understanding of the specifics of malpractice, and also in terms of developing the necessary academic skills to avoid inadvertent misconduct.

The survey results suggested that relatively few students consider that the engagement with unfair practices, particularly collusion and plagiarism, to be the product of a desire to cheat, or dishonesty – notably amongst international students. Only in terms of commissioning and exam-based misconduct was the finding of dishonesty more crystallised, especially amongst home students where over 50% considered that these practices were the product of an overt desire to cheat.

These findings around plagiarism and collusion were also reflected when talking face-to-face with students in focus groups. In the context of these types of malpractice, most participants exhibited a degree of anxiety around what constituted misconduct, the boundaries of such behaviour, and the risks of being incorrectly accused. Many pinpointed what they perceived to be a shortfall in training, or that the training they had received had been ineffective.

Overall, contrary to many narratives around academic malpractice and those students who engage in it, participants in this study did not view cheating students as inherently dishonest. On the contrary, students expressed concerns about their own knowledge around misconduct, and saw their own anxieties in others who might engage in misconduct.

Section six of this report proposes several relatively easily implementable policies which universities can pursue, based around some of the key outcomes from the survey and focus groups, and also presents several avenues for further research.

4. Research methodology

Working with three other UK universities[2], this research project took two main approaches to its research: an anonymous survey administered during one or more lectures at each partner institution, and focus groups which were carried out on site. Given the nature of the subject matter, anonymity was prioritised throughout avenues of study. This section outlines the objectives and methods of each approach, details of measures which were put in place to protect participants, and an explanation of how the approaches complement each other.

In total, seven focus groups were carried out at the various participating institutions, with between one and three taking place at any given location (based around the ease of recruitment of students). At each university, an email advertising the research was circulated, prompting students to contact the organiser (Dr Tim Burnett) directly, which resulted in the recruitment of around eight students per group with each student compensated for their time with a £20 Amazon voucher.

Throughout the entire process, multiple measures were put in place to safeguard the anonymity of participants. These included the protection of students' identities from their own institution, the use of pseudonyms in the focus group itself, and the absence of direct references to particular universities in the results in the following section. The original experimental design aimed to recruit groups consisting solely of either overseas students or home students. The rationale for this approach was twofold:

- Segregating students according to their status provided the opportunity to elicit potentially nuanced differences in tone or content of responses.
- Several questions within the focus group asked students to comment on their interactions with home students (for international students), and vice versa for home students. It was considered that mixing the profiles of the groups may have impacted on the candour with which students were willing to answer, especially if responses were negative.

Ultimately, there were three groups, each of which consisted solely of international or home students, with one mixed group.

Within each group students were engaged in a conversation regarding a number of issues including their general university experience, their interactions with students of different nationalities, their

confidence in a range of academic skills, and, crucially, their knowledge and understanding of academic misconduct.

In order to develop an environment of trust, students were repeatedly encouraged to confer with each other, and sessions were designed such that confidence was built up by discussing quite general topics around university experience, which progressively became more specific and focussed on the core topic of malpractice. Crucially, to avoid jeopardising accumulated trust, participants were not asked directly whether they had engaged in any sort of misconduct. Instead, students were encouraged to be honest in their responses, and inferences from their experiences would be drawn more generally from their responses to the range of questions posed for discussion.

Throughout the focus groups, after asking initial broad questions, the interviewer was conscientious about not introducing bias or guiding the conversation beyond asking questions such as "thank you, that was an interesting point; does anyone else have a similar experience or a different one", or "did anyone want to say something about this …?".

The complete focus group script can be found in Appendix 1 in the online version of this report.

The second strand to the research concerned the completion of a short anonymous survey by students at each participating university; a task designed to take no more than five to 10 minutes. In order to maximise the response rate this was implemented during lecture time, under supervision[3]. Like the previous approach, anonymity and trust were paramount, and no information was collected which could positively identify respondents.

Each participating institution was asked to nominate one or more large lectures at which the regular lecturer was willing to give up lecture time to allow the completion of the questionnaire. In the specified class the project was introduced by the researcher and students were asked to log onto an online survey (optimised for either computer, tablet, or phone access) and fill out the questionnaire either before, in the middle, or at the end of the lecture (according to the preferences of the lecturer).

Unlike the focus group, which aimed to tease out potentially fairly nuanced information, this exercise was premised on being completely anonymous and did ask students directly about engagement in academic misconduct. One key issue with this approach is that, common with survey methodologies, self-reported measures of misconduct might underestimate true levels. To remedy this (as can be observed in Appendix 2), the survey asked respondents whether they or *anyone they knew* had engaged in behaviours; this was designed to elicit the idea that students may be reticent to admit malpractice themselves, but more willing to report on others.

Other questions in the survey asked respondents why they felt students engaged in particular types of misconduct, about academic support they had received (either compulsorily or voluntarily), and what academic support they feel would help them improve their understanding of academic malpractice and policies around the topic.

The full survey can be found in Appendix 2 in the online version of this report.

5. Key research findings

This section first introduces the empirical results of the survey, before reporting on the highlights of the focus group discussions.

5.1 Survey results

The various surveys resulted in a dataset of 192 individuals, of whom 119 declared they were from the UK, with 73 declaring themselves non-UK. The survey resulted in a very rich dataset which offers insight into a range of issues around conduct, attitudes, and provision of, and engagement with, academic support.

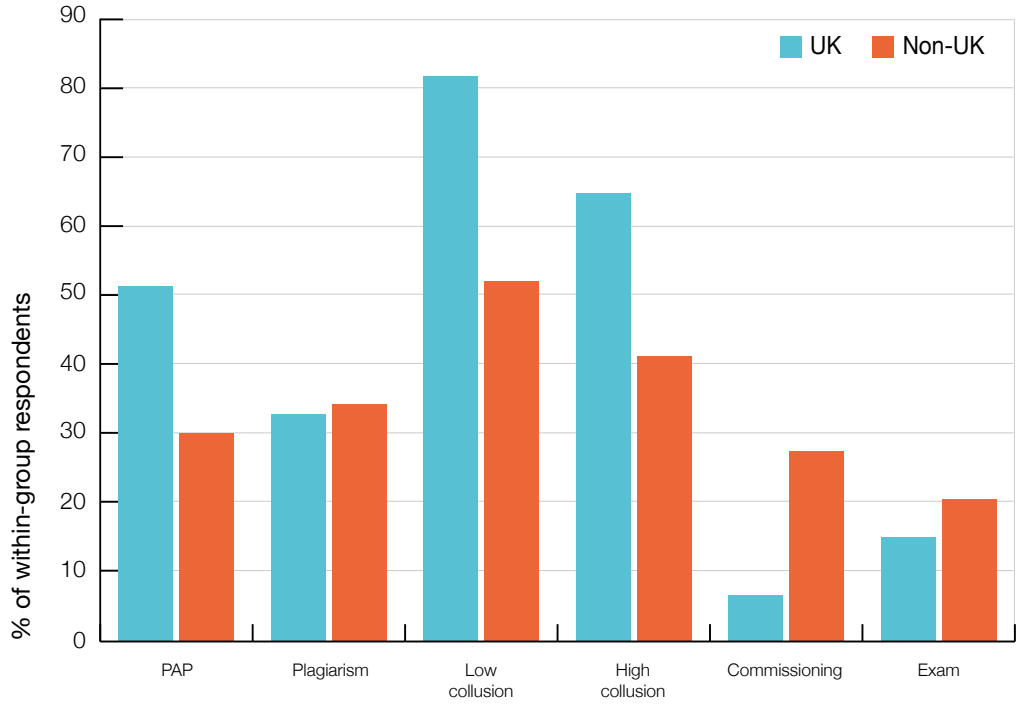
This section reports on a selection of salient headline results from the dataset. The reported findings steer clear of attempting to draw causal inference from any of the results, but instead focus on broader patterns in the data, specifically any distinctions which emerge between home and overseas students.

5.1.1 Engagement with academic malpractice

One pervasive idea with respect to academic misconduct concerns the likelihood of overseas students engaging in malpractice, relative to their domestic counterparts. Figure 1, below, reports the proportion of home and overseas students who reported *either* engaging in malpractice, *or* knew someone who had, whether detected or undetected. Results are reported in terms of the proportion of students within each group (home and international) providing a positive response to each question.

The results on self-reported conduct must clearly be taken with a pinch of salt for reasons associated with self-reporting, introduced in the previous section. Regardless of any study coordinator's pleas for honesty, students have little personal incentive to self-confess to engagement in malpractice, nor is it possible to verify results in an

Figure 1 Engagement in misconduct *either* by students *or* someone they know (or both).



anonymous setting. The inclusion of questions around the conduct of 'someone you know' were designed to try and correct for this. While this might still result in unreliable estimates, the continued study of partial observability in misconduct indicates a lack of consensus on the superiority of any alternative approach.

Notwithstanding, the results do suggest that, contrary to apparent dominant stereotypes, the overall incidence of self-declared misconduct was higher amongst home students than overseas. This was especially true for issues around collusion, and low-level poor academic practice (PAP)[4]. Only for commissioning of academic work and exam-based misconduct was the incidence higher for overseas students.

5.1.2 Why do students engage in academic malpractice?

A second tranche of questions asked respondents why they thought students engaged in the various stated forms of malpractice, providing a list of six possible reasons. Figures 2a and 2b, below, illustrate the distribution of responses, again divided by home and international students. Students were asked to mark all explanations they thought were appropriate to each type of misconduct.

The results demonstrate that, in almost all cases, the perception of students is that 'laziness' is associated with almost all forms of misconduct, similarly (to a lesser extent) time management. Interpreting 'laziness' is challenging, since the relatively open phrasing of the option means that different students may have interpreted it in their own way (eg, laziness associated with acquiring knowledge around referencing, or laziness in assessment completion?). Laziness may also represent a manifestation of lack of positive motivation amongst students (Dowson and McInerney, 2003), in which case (much like the present case of academic malpractice), there may be implications for the way universities design teaching and learning activities. The concept of 'laziness' is considered in relation to future research.

For low-level offences, all students (home and overseas) ranked a lack of referencing knowledge as a relatively important association; this was similarly extensively reflected in discussions in focus groups, later in this section.

An interesting result from home students (Figure 2a) was the generally low response around 'desire to cheat' amongst practices such as plagiarism and low-level collusion, whereas the same students considered that desire to cheat was much higher amongst students who bought essays (commissioning). This suggests a qualitative difference in the way home students view these offences. For overseas students, the association between 'desire to cheat' remained low across all type of conduct, notably also for commissioning and exam-based misconduct.

As alluded to earlier, the link between desire to cheat, skills, and misconduct was discussed extensively in the focus groups.

Figure 2a Why do students engage in malpractice? (UK responses)

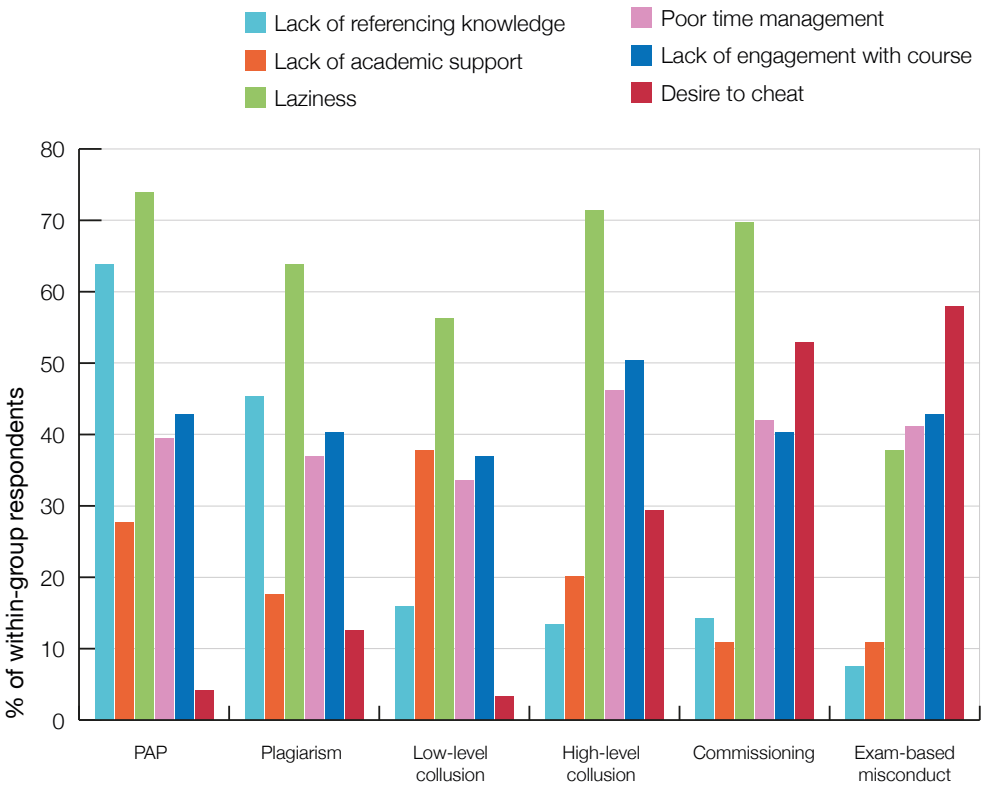
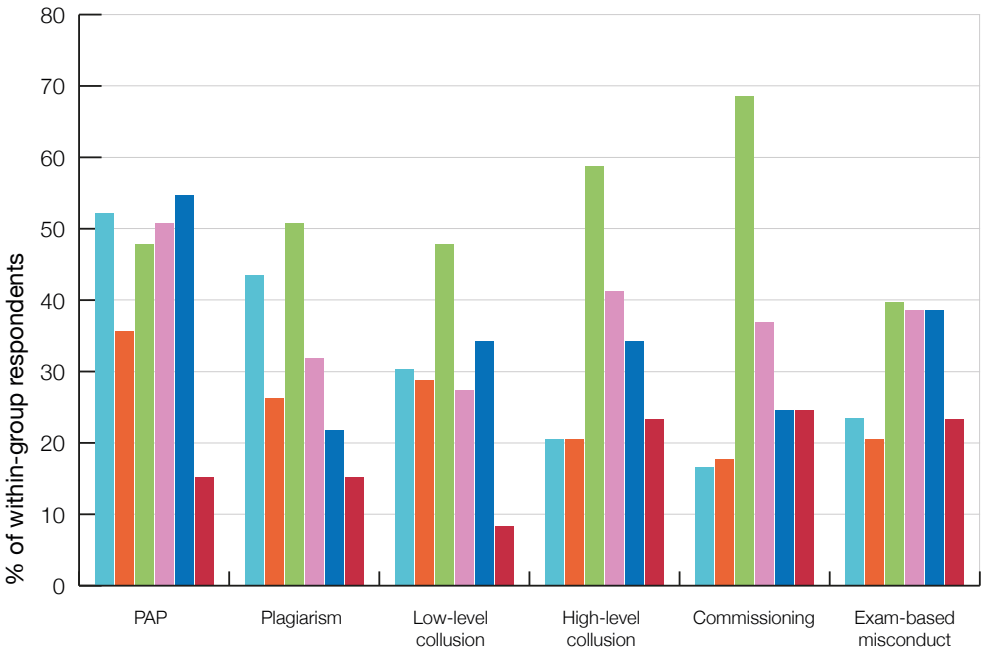


Figure 2b: Why do students engage in malpractice? (Non-UK responses)



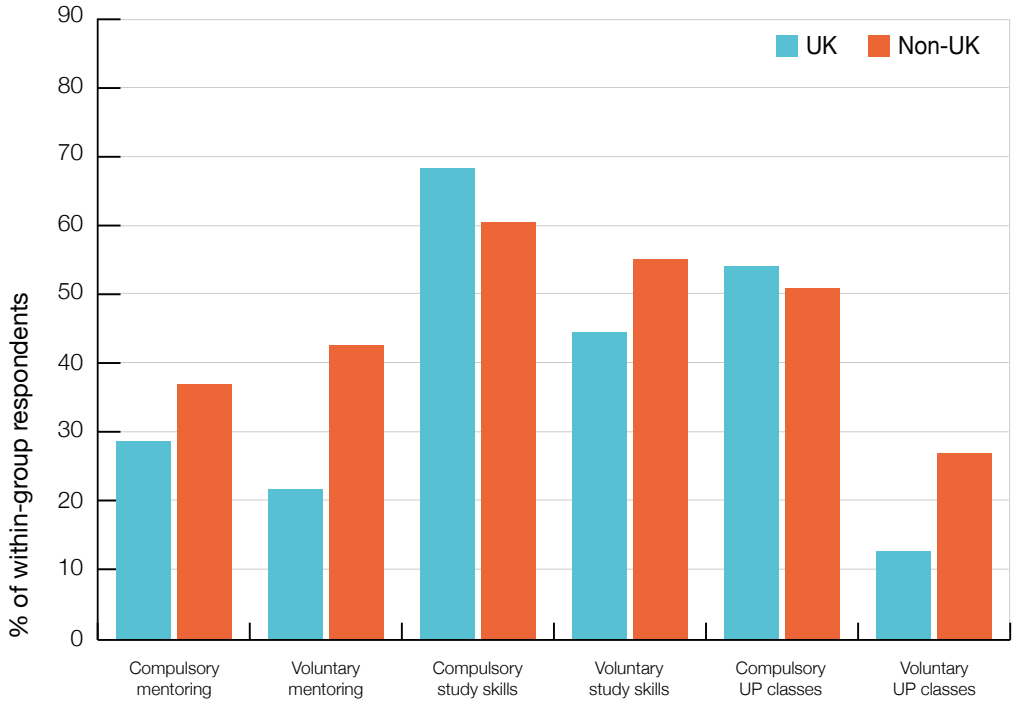
5.1.3 Engagement with support

The results concerning students' engagement, or desired engagement, with academic support suggested that, at a general level, overseas students share a similar propensity to home students to engage with academic support (in terms of those activities in which they have engaged). Rates of engagement with mentoring (or buddying) was higher for international students, likely as a result of specific targeting programmes.

Similarly overseas students were more likely to engage in voluntary skills classes (both generally and specifically around academic misconduct). Engagement with compulsory training around study skills and malpractice was marginally higher for home students. See Figure 3.

Students were then asked the question "thinking about how universities can encourage good academic practice, which of these do you think

Figure 3 What support have students received?

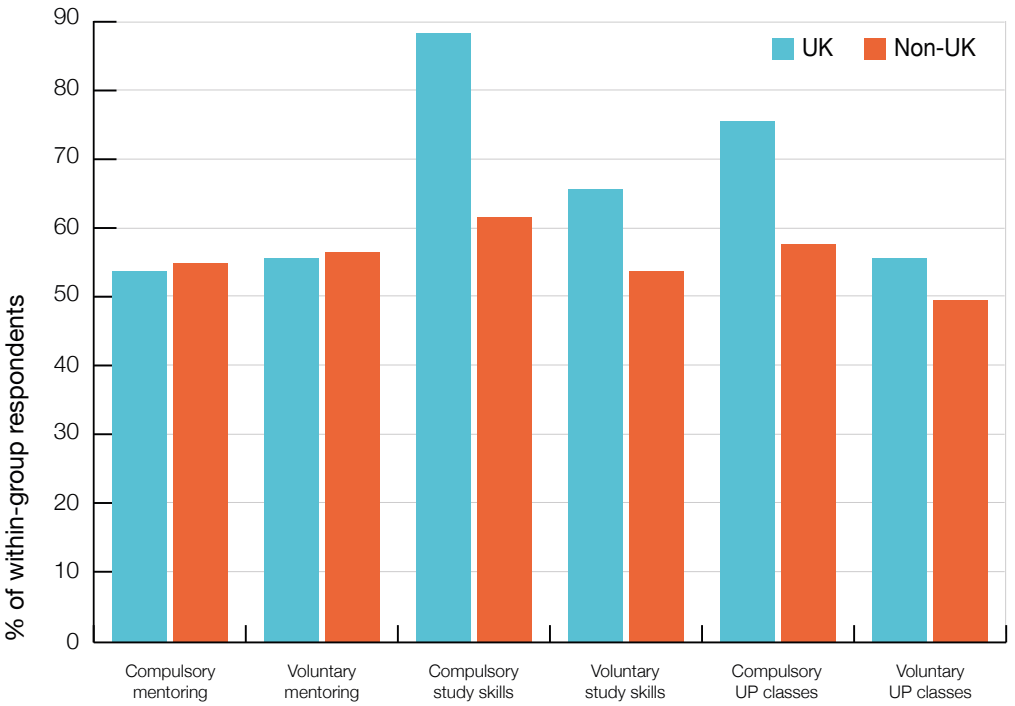


would be effective?", and offered the same set of academic support opportunities. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 4.

In general, home students were more responsive to the possibilities of the different types of support, though there remained a (very) slight preference for buddying amongst overseas students. The response rates around compulsory classes in study skills and academic misconduct reflected the discussions held in focus groups where, in the smaller setting, students were very forthcoming about their desire to feel more confident in their ability to avoid inadvertent misconduct. Of all the support types, students were least enthused about the usefulness of mentoring/buddying in education around academic misconduct.

Part of the questions around academic support were optional text entry fields, inviting respondents to comment on the support they had received and support they felt they would benefit from. Many of these text responses around support which had been received aligned with the themes which would

Figure 4 What support would help students understand academic malpractice?



"We always got told things the first few weeks and it never really goes in so when it comes to actually referencing for example I don't know what I'm doing."

later be explored in the focus groups, such as referencing education being front-loaded and concentrated in the early weeks of the university experience and issues with limited ongoing support:

> **"We always got told things the first few weeks and it never really goes in so when it comes to actually referencing for example I don't know what I'm doing."**

> **"Information about referencing is quite brief leading students to become confused".**

With specific reference to support which students thought would be helpful, students commented on issues such as the need for ongoing support ("[students should have a] small amount of lecture time allocated to academic misconduct explanations. If it was a whole lecture I think it's unlikely students would attend.") and an ambivalent attitude toward optional classes ("at uni, I feel people are less likely to attend optional classes so they wouldn't tend to help" and "optional classes aren't usually attended by students as they feel like they think it's not important"). These last comments illuminate the way students see optional classes and their content.

With regard to buddying schemes as a tool to improve knowledge of academic misconduct, students were ambivalent. Some responses in the free text fields were negative ("mentoring isn't helpful"), while others expressed positive (though qualified) views ("one to one buddying could help a lot of people but it is very time consuming").

5.1.4 Summary

The survey yielded a number of interesting findings which complemented and supported the results of the focus groups. It demonstrated several nuanced differences between the attitudes of home students and those of overseas, particularly with respect to why people engage in malpractice. The depth of the dataset also means that further analysis may shed light on nuanced, contextual issues which are likely to mean that students' approaches to malpractice, and their understanding of different terms, are likely to be highly individual and, thus, will reduce the treatment of 'overseas' as a uniform block (which can lead to the danger of stereotyping).

5.2 Focus groups

"Working with international students means working with people with different points of view, and allows you to approach problems from lots of different angles."

The focus groups took place at University of Leicester, Loughborough University, and University of East Anglia, and were designed to elicit general feelings around university experience, engagement with academic support, and knowledge around unfair practices. The approach was to open with more benign and general topics, before becoming more specific. Because the conversations were quite wide-ranging, this section focusses on key areas of interest.

5.2.1 General university experience

There were substantial differences between the declared university experiences of different groups of students at the different universities. Positivity (or otherwise) at this point was generally reflected throughout the remainder of the discussion. For example, students who declared themselves most happy with their general experience also tended to be more satisfied with the levels of academic support they had received. Activities which tended to engender positive emotional responses included well-organised induction weeks, attitudes of staff and ease of accessing support, whereas poor organisation, inattentive staff, and difficulties in accessing services were common in students who held relatively negative views of their experience.

> **"When it comes to international students they are with us during the induction which lasts a whole week; my first week experience was amazing."**

> **"The lecturers; it's always obvious how much they care. They come to the lecture and they have this energy. It really makes it more fun."**

5.2.2 Integration with home/ international students

The discussions around interaction with other students were included in an effort to understand the transfer of academic skills and knowledge between students. In general, most students exhibited positivity to the potential afforded by interactions with overseas students – though students who had a mixed friendship group were relatively rare.

> **"Working with international students means working with people with different points of view, and allows you to approach problems from lots of different angles."**

Numerous students commented that cementing and solidifying of friendship groups over the course of a degree meant that early interactions were very important, and that this was particularly relevant if overseas students had direct entry into second-year.

Several students highlighted that most of their home/overseas interactions came about through randomly allocated group work and were broadly positive about the experience, but segregation of international students (see below) made this task harder. Of particular interest were several comments that acknowledged that poor integration may impact on knowledge exchange between home and overseas students.

> **"If you don't have integration, you're kind of limiting who [international students] can talk to about things and where you can get knowledge from."**

Segregation of home and international students was seen as universally negative – particularly the segregation of Chinese students through centres such as INTO. Non-Chinese students felt this impacted on their ability to make friends with this group and that it negatively impacted when it came to group work (unfortunately the study was not able to recruit any Chinese students to focus groups , which remains a priority for future research).

> **"If you're struggling with a foreign language that you need to speak at the university, and you know all these people that live in the same place as you, speak the same language as you, that there's the same culture – it's more likely that students will push toward that and stay inside their comfort zone. That's how I can see how some students end up a bit cut off."**

Finally, there seemed to be some degree of interaction between the organisation of extra-curricular activities which created mixed groups (such as through organised sports) and general levels of interaction.

> **"When I was playing sport I'd always be socialising with international students, and now when I see my old sports friends they're still in the same mixed (home and international) groups."**

5.2.3 Academic skills

Students were asked to rate their knowledge of and competency in a range of academic skills. Almost universally, referencing and citations were an area of concern for students; this included confusion over citation style, limited support classes, poor timetabling of these events (mainly right at the start of the university experience), lack of concrete examples, and inconsistent application of rules around referencing. Common trends included dissatisfaction with centralised provision of support, and most focus groups, irrespective of university, stated that they would prefer regular workshops or assistance organised around their lectures.

Although some students mentioned the idea of having their work proof-read by colleagues, there was limited mention of skills transfer between peers – this may be an area on which to focus more attention in future.

For other academic skills there existed variation between students and/or institutions, though with little pattern.

5.2.4 Academic malpractice

Students exhibited a range of understanding of different forms of academic malpractice. Several common themes and suggestions which emerged included:

- Confusion over the boundary between cooperation and collusion, and the need to clarify this for students.
- Confusion about the difference between plagiarism and paraphrasing in essays, and a general lack of self-confidence in avoiding plagiarism. For both plagiarism and collusion, students felt that the provision of concrete examples would aid their understanding.

  > **"If they were to have examples of essays saying "this is plagiarism", "this is where it can be a grey area", and "this isn't plagiarism" it would definitely be helpful."**

- Students generally felt there was a qualitative difference between commissioning and exam-based misconduct, and plagiarism or collusion – based largely around certainty of intent. Most students expressed a moral objection to the purchasing of essays, stating they would be willing to report this behaviour but were uncertain how to do so. Some students made the suggestion that commissioning of essays could be related to time management.

  > **"I do think some of it is black-and-white, like examination room misconduct. We know this is wrong, but other stuff like collusion and plagiarism has grey areas which need to be explained to us."**

- Specific penalties were often not clear to students. Some students suggested the idea that all assignments might be issued with an information sheet outlining the expectations around conduct, with examples of what constitutes misconduct, and what doesn't. Participants remarked that they considered overly harsh regimes of penalties as being unfair, being that most felt that students who engaged in misconduct may have done so inadvertently due to a lack of knowledge.

  > **"I think the idea of a cover sheet would be helpful, explaining plagiarism is 'this' and 'that' and the consequences. But there should be an extensive, well-explained, booklet or something which you can read so you actually understand this stuff for what it actually is because most students don't actually know what constitutes plagiarism or examples."**

  > **"It's difficult, there's so much out there that it's hard to make your own words a lot of the time. You might get picked up without even realising it – to say you're not allowed to progress at uni would be really unfair."**

6. Conclusions and reflections on learning points for UK institutions

This study, carried out by the University of Warwick in partnership with three other UK universities[2], engaged with a range of both home and overseas students regarding their university experience and their knowledge of and attitudes to academic malpractice. Through an online survey and wide-ranging focus group conversations, several key ideas emerged which could be relatively easily integrated into university policies.

6.1 Information for students

Students repeatedly raised the issue of uncertainty around what constituted particular practices. Universities should consider the publication of a student-centric guide to misconduct featuring plain-English explanations, examples of misconduct, and the likely penalties arising from such behaviour. Similarly, terms-of-reference cover sheets for assignments outlining expectations will help reinforce those expectations.

6.2 Training

Participants repeatedly commented that formal face-to-face training tended to be focussed in the early stages of their first year, a period where students have many interests competing for their time. Universities may consider either running multiple workshops throughout the year (around the time of major assignments), or (since students commented that non-credit classes tended to be poorly attended) integrating malpractice education within other modules.

To improve integration of home and international students (as highlighted as a problem area by a number of students) institutions can incorporate malpractice education in assignments. In the interests of sharing best practice, cultural exchange, and understanding the boundaries of conducts characterised as a 'grey area' such as collusion, universities may consider low-stake assignments which involve pairing home and overseas students. Such a strategy can be implemented as a 'repeated game' with increasingly tight criteria.

6.3 Policy

Universities should focus on the rehabilitative aspects of policy and building policy which permits experimentation by students around the boundaries of what is expected of them. Participants in both parts of the study expressed anxiety around inadvertently engaging in malpractice – allowing a forgiving sandbox for experiential learning around misconduct enables students to discover for themselves what is appropriate, and what is not.

6.4 Further research

This study has also opened up further avenues for research including gaining a better understanding of student 'laziness' and motivation, and how to include groups who were not engaged by the present study, for example, Chinese students.

7. Notes

1 HESA report that 37% of students studying Business and Administration (subject area D) come from overseas, with a figure of 36% for Economics (L1), compared to an average across all subjects of 20%.

2 University of East Anglia, University of Leicester, Loughborough University

3 Implementing the survey remotely, via the sharing of an internet link, resulted in zero responses at University of Nottingham.

4 Poor Academic Practice (PAP) was explained to students as "for example, including small amounts of material from other sources without recognition or quotations", a catch-all term to describe very low-level offences which (if discovered) might be expected to result in a warning, rather than more significant disciplinary action.

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11. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

Research

International students working in group and project-based activities at university

University of Southampton Students' Union

Research team:
Martin Hiley, Insight Manager
Fern Francis, Insight Assistant, postgraduate student
Patricia Zmole, Insight Assistant, undergraduate student

Contents

1. Group work in higher education

Group work plays a significant role in the modern university experience. Whilst, historically, the academic journey at university was an individual quest for knowledge, universities have gradually placed greater value on the concept of students working in groups.

Group work can be extremely positive for students and indeed employers are increasingly searching for graduates who can exhibit the skills they expect them to have acquired through working in groups at university. However, it also presents complex challenges to students' academic experience and is a system with multifaceted flaws that requires careful consideration by institutions.

2. Motivation for research

The primary motivation of this research is to make a positive change for international students who participate in group work during their time at university. As the University of Southampton has over 6,500 international students from more than 135 countries[1], it provided a very suitable environment to undertake this research. However, whilst the University of Southampton is an ideal microcosm for exploring the issue, it was foreseeable that the research findings would be applicable to a much wider audience, benefitting students across the UK.

The ultimate aim of undertaking this research is to improve the experience for international students working in groups. Previous research suggests group work can present particular challenges for international students and these can have a profound impact on their educational experience, employability prospects and their health and wellbeing, making it a serious and important issue for UK universities.

For example, Australian researchers Summers and Volet (2008) found that "international students' attitudes and skill over their three years of study were unchanged whereas home students became less willing and less able to work with others who they saw as 'different' and many thought communicating with those whose English language skills were developing was a waste of time and effort.

This is an extremely serious and concerning finding, which would impact on the academic experience of an international student. Indeed, where students should theoretically be building increasingly positive relationships at university, the research suggests that students are gradually becoming more intolerant of their colleagues.

In 2011, the Higher Education Academy also undertook research on group work among students studying engineering degrees and they identified the "need for enhanced support" and the "recognition of cultural capital"[2].

Therefore, in order to improve the student experience of group work, firstly, we needed to understand what challenges *all* students face when they undertake group work as part of their course at university. It was important to acquire this knowledge to contextualise the wider issues that group work presents to the general student population, rather than merely attributing these far-reaching issues to a particular cohort of international students.

Our first aim was to acquire information from the wider student population in order to provide a comparative dataset from which we could see which of the issues were more, or indeed less, challenging for international students. Following this, our second aim was to understand specifically which of these general issues were particularly prevalent or problematic for international students. Thirdly, our aim was to focus specifically on the issues that international students identified as being challenging or concerning for them and develop solutions that could improve their experience in group work situations.

This research aims to provide an important update to research that was undertaken a number of years ago. Since this research was undertaken, the international student demographic has evolved considerably and this important issue deserves and requires an update. We planned to build on previous evidence and contribute a new perspective to a wider discussion on the experiences of international students working in group and project-based activities.

3. Summary of research outcomes

This research has resulted in a greater knowledge of the issues that affect all students in group work projects. Further, it provides a detailed understanding of the specific challenges that international students encounter and offers suggestions that aim to inform better practices at universities across the UK.

4. Background information and scope

This research was undertaken during the course of the 2018-19 academic year and the scope of the project was limited to students studying at the University of Southampton. However, the knowledge acquired and the subsequent proposals will be relevant to other institutions across the UK.

Due to the complex issues the research was exploring, a mixed methodology approach was adopted. Initially, the research assumed a quantitative approach by publishing a survey that was available to the whole student membership (see Appendix 1, available with the online version of this report). It was promoted through the Students' Union's social media channels, email correspondence and by asking students in person to complete it. The survey received a total of 222 responses and the breakdown of the domicile and level of study of students who completed it can be found in Appendix 3, available with the online version of this report.

We followed up the survey with a qualitative approach by interviewing students face to face to explore specific areas in detail. By analysing the results of the survey, there were clear themes emerging that it was important to discuss in more detail with students. The focus groups were undertaken by the authors of the research and followed a structure to cover the key points (see Appendix 2, available with the online version of this report). However, this was not wholly prescriptive and the resources allowed the flexibility to pursue particular lines of enquiry if there was a clear opportunity within the conversation. There were 13 sessions and 17 students attended in total, meaning the majority were one to one sessions and, on average, they lasted 17 minutes each with students very keen to inform the researchers of their experiences.

5. Key research findings

Key findings include:

- Group work for all students is plagued with fundamental flaws. These defects undermine the whole experience and, furthermore, they minimise the opportunities available to students.
- International students experience these systematic faults but also encounter further specific challenges when undertaking group work and these can have a profound impact on their educational experience.
- Whilst there are significant flaws in the group work process, the research offers recommendations that should improve the experience for students.
- The large amount of data highlighted four key themes:
  - Insufficient guidance or training
  - Cultural/language barriers
  - Group allocation
  - Mental health

5.1 Insufficient guidance or training

Summers and Volet (2008) found that "if you force students to interact without appropriate support, training and motivation, you risk fostering less rather than more mutual understanding and respect".

Therefore, it was interesting to note that the first area that students immediately identified as a barrier to effective group projects was insufficient guidance or training on how to work in groups. Whilst students may have undertaken some form of group work during their previous educational experiences, the difference in undertaking a group project at university is significant and, currently, formal or consistent guidance or training does not effectively support the transition.

Consequently, in our quantitative research, the top four issues that students had experienced in group work situations were:

- Group members not pulling their weight 68%
- Difficulties scheduling group meetings 67%
- Group members not turning up for meetings 59%
- Group work taking longer than personal work 43%

When these were analysed further as part of the qualitative research, these issues were largely underpinned by a lack of group organisation, which stems from students not having sufficient knowledge of how to manage a group project situation. The focus group data highlighted that students start with different levels of experience and knowledge regarding how to approach a group project and that there is little in place to provide further advice or bring all participants to a similar level.

This often causes structural challenges within groups from the very outset and these consequently lead to wider issues in managing group projects.

5.1.1 Logistics

Students encountered logistical challenges during group projects that included the time, location and regularity of meetings.

Accommodating the timetables of a diverse group of students with academic and social commitments can be problematic. However, if the entire group is not able to meet regularly, it hinders the ability of the group to function and causes profound challenges to successfully completing the project.

In particular, when students miss group meetings, this is often where communication breaks down between the individuals. This can range from meeting notes not being taken or circulated to miscommunications or fundamental misunderstandings. This can lead to inherent flaws in the group project that then become extremely challenging to overcome.

Indeed, in some cases, the group splinters and individuals form their own sub-groups but without careful design or project management of the task allocation. Students form smaller groups because of others' non-attendance or they are divided by personality clashes that are often caused by the sheer frustration of attempting to overcome logistical issues as part of the project.

Throughout the research, the common perception from students was that students who did not attend group meetings were uncommitted, lazy or entirely undeserving of the final grade awarded to the group. In many cases, the frustration that students expressed is logical but it is important to acknowledge that, in some cases, students do have legitimate competing interests.

For example, a student parent stated that they were simply not able to attend the meetings arranged by the group as the times were outside of their childcare arrangements. Yet despite the often genuine and legitimate reasons as to why a student cannot attend a group session, the consequences for a student of being isolated from a group because they are unable to overcome logistical issues are significant. The separation has an impact on a student's academic experience, with the decisions about the approach and pace of the project being made in their absence. Moreover, student welfare and wellbeing is negatively impacted with students experiencing frustration, isolation and, sometimes, unfair characterisation from their peers.

5.1.2 Communication

Students identified that communication was a very significant issue within group projects. Indeed, during our interviews with students, issues within the group work were directly attributable to poor

communication between the individual members. As one international student explained, "I've had cases where a language barrier has resulted in misunderstandings and things not getting done, but through no fault of anyone, just the fact that there was a barrier there."

This highlights the need for strong and confident communication regarding the allocation and understanding of assigned tasks. Some international students, particularly those from East Asia, may have previously studied in a culture where asking for clarification or explaining that they do not understand what is expected of them is less acceptable. Hence, if this ethos continues to be applied in group work situations in UK institutions, it is entirely predictable that miscommunications are more likely to occur.

However, it is important that communication issues are not solely attributed to the command of language because many of the issues centred on the informal nature of the communication channels within group projects. Students explained that, generally, they communicated with their group via social media, which caused issues regarding:

- The choice of social media to use and issues of inclusion if a student does not use that platform.
- The inherently informal nature of the communication channel, which does not provide the most conducive setting for academic discussion.
- The instantaneous nature of the platforms mean students are contactable at any time of the day, increasing the risk of unhealthy working habits.
- The challenge of keeping an accurate record of the academic discussion.

Whilst communication via social media plays an extremely important role for students, this can be a particular issue for students from different parts of the world who may not use the platforms that are most popular in Western culture. This immediately places a significant barrier to inclusion for international students and results in them having to use an unfamiliar tool in order to be able to communicate with their group.

5.1.3 Rationale

The research found that there was no clear, consistent or overarching rationale conveyed to students as to why they were participating in group projects. Thus, from the very outset of the project there are fundamental issues within group work situations, namely that students do not recognise the potential opportunities and benefits of group work and instead often focus on the negative aspects or make unhelpful assumptions.
Group work has great potential to provide opportunities to build skills both academically and for future employment. Yet the potential opportunities for personal development are not conveyed to students in an effective manner. This ensures that students afford group work a lesser importance than it deserves and often the student perception of group projects is more negative than it should be.

On more than one occasion, students stated that they believed the primary reason for having to undertake group work was that it meant less assessment work for their tutors. With the potential benefits of participating in group work waiting to be realised, it is very unfortunate if these benefits may have been lost in the messaging. Students are making extremely negative assumptions when there is no clear communication to students for the rationale of doing group work.

5.1.4 Risks

The research found that few of the aforementioned challenges were minimised or eliminated from group work, largely because students had not identified these in the first instance. A thorough analysis of potential challenges is commonplace when starting a group project in the workplace, however, this does not appear to be standard practice at university. Whilst some students may argue this is a laborious or pointless process, if it enables the group to function more effectively then it justifies the initial investment of time.
For example, an assessment could help to identify:

- Potential issues with the scheduling of meetings, for example, if a student parent had childcare arrangements that mean certain days or times are not possible for them to meet.
- The most appropriate platform by which the group communicate, including the choice of whether to use social media and, if so, which platform everyone in the group uses.
- Competing deadlines for other work that students have, allowing the group to plan the project effectively and ensure it is completed.
- Personal strengths and weaknesses within the group, to afford each student the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability within the group.

Ultimately, it is for the students to decide whether to assess the potential challenges. However, if institutions were to recommend that students consider some of the potential challenges they might face, it could be a powerful motivating factor to facilitate the group planning proactive solutions, as well as developing useful skills for the workplace.

This research found that insufficient guidance or training on how to work effectively in groups is a major issue for all students but can be particularly problematic for international students who may have the additional challenges of language or cultural barriers.

Students come to university with diverse experiences and approaches to group work and that is one of the most positive advantages. To try to suppress this to ensure a uniform student approach would be to lose a unique opportunity for students from different parts of the world to experience diverse situations and progress their personal development as a result. However, this does not need to preclude good practice guidance from institutions that offers overarching advice on how to manage a group project effectively. Indeed, if one of the core rationales behind requiring students to work in groups is to prepare students for a future workplace, then advice on how to do this effectively should be part of the offer to students.

5.2 Cultural/language barriers

One of the most significant advantages that students identified about working in groups was the opportunity to work with students who come from different backgrounds and cultures. However, simultaneously, both international students and students from the UK acknowledged this as one of the primary challenges.

Firstly, students identified the language barrier as an important issue in group work. This appears to have two major consequences, affecting both confidence in speaking and the effectiveness of the communication itself, with one international student reporting:

> **"I do have friends who are international students and they, well, they're not that expressive when it comes to group work, they feel like their opinions don't matter in the group so they feel left out and maybe they do have some language barrier so that is part of it."**

This was supported in a separate interview with an international student, who stated:

> **"In my first year my English was not very good. Maybe even now is not very good, but it was worse then. And… I felt like some of**

my group mates, they were a bit lazy in understanding me. My accent was even more thick, and they just couldn't be bothered to understand me."

Language can be a significant barrier to effective group work, even though it is entirely surmountable with due consideration and effort from the group. However, it is important to note that a language barrier is not merely between students from the UK and students from overseas. For example, one student from the EU told us, "I'd like to emphasize the difficulties I experienced due to the language barrier, especially with Asian group members".

Further, a student from Asia stated that one of the reasons they wished to study in the UK was to improve their English. However, they found themselves unable to practice in their group project as the rest of the students were speaking in their native language. They told us, "I tried, I tried to talk with them in English, but it just made me feel really weird, well… they counted me English, but they just keep talking in Chinese. It's an awkward situation actually."

Therefore, when discussing a language barrier, it is vital to recognise that this is a multifaceted issue and not merely a communication challenge between students from the UK and students from overseas.

5.3 Group allocation

One of the questions that posed the most difficulty to students was whether they would prefer their groups selected by staff or by the students themselves. Generally, students could see the positives and negatives of both options and answers even changed depending on the context of the project. Table 1 shows data on how students would prefer groups to be chosen (the breakdown of domicile and level of study is listed alongside the chart in Appendix 3, available in the online version of this report).

Table 1 How would you prefer groups to be chosen?

Cohort of students	By lecturer/tutor	By students
EU	31.43%	68.57%
Overseas	37.78%	62.22%
UK	46.15%	53.85%
Average	**42.79%**	**57.21%**

Overall, the research found that 57% of respondents preferred groups being selected by students and 43% would rather groups be chosen by university staff. However, there was a more noticeable difference with 62% of overseas students and 69% of students from the EU preferring groups selected by students rather than university staff.

Clearly, this represents a more significant shift towards students being able to choose the people they are working with in group project situations. When this was analysed further as part of the qualitative research it was found that much of this centred around two key aspects: confidence within group projects and the commitment of other group members. For example, a student from the EU explained, "I believe that teams should be chosen by students as it makes it easier and less stressful to work with friends you know. Meaning that you know they will put the same commitment to it and will want to work hard to achieve a good mark".

5.4 Mental health

From the outset of the project, one area identified by students as being a major aspect of group work was the significant impact that these projects can have on a student's mental health. Whilst universities are responding to the essential conversation around mental health by developing and promoting support services around key academic issues such as exams, the impact and stress of working in groups does not appear to be on the radar of institutions.

From the quantitative dataset, the research found:

- 42% of the students surveyed had experienced stress because of group work.
- 8% of respondents specifically identified that they had experienced mental health issues because of group work.
- 20% of respondents stated that they experienced a lack of confidence to express ideas.
- 6% of UK students stated that they felt "isolated, unwanted or not included" in group work but this figure rose to 11% of overseas students and 23% of students from countries in the EU.

Further, previous research on the topic of mental health suggests that people often find it challenging to recognise or acknowledge the impact something can have on their mental wellbeing. Hence, it may be the case that in reality the statistics are even higher and the impact even more significant. Several students indicated this during focus groups, for example, one international student stated, "I don't do well having to do it for other people, it had

me so nervous I was shaking the whole day and scared to death. Obviously, I felt uncomfortable to say as nobody else had that problem…so I didn't say anything."

Another international student told us, "it definitely made me anxious and it was also the first week at university… so really, really stressed, really nervous, and I didn't really want to go to those group works. I was afraid of these situations." Hence, this suggests a significant issue regarding mental health within group projects and it is important that this be added into the wider discourse on the subject.

As the challenges in speaking out about mental health at universities remain, it is important that this research highlights group work as a significant issue. Further exploration is needed.

6. Conclusions and ideas for further research

Conclusions from the quantitative and qualitative research:

a) All students face challenges when undertaking group work at university but for international students these can be particularly profound.

b) A lack of effective, overarching guidance or training for students on how to manage group projects and work together immediately creates fundamental challenges for the group and inhibits students' ability to take advantage of the opportunities that group work offers.

c) Ineffective communication between students underpins many of the problems that groups experience. This includes using informal means to communicate, not considering potential problems and not giving due consideration to language or cultural barriers for international students.

d) Throughout the research, there was an undercurrent of group work assessments affecting students' mental health. This does not receive the same recognition or attention as mental health around other types of assessments but is no less significant. As such, it is a strong recommendation that further research explores the issue of mental health within group project situations.

e) More widely, it must be accepted that working with people who have a different command of the language presents an *opportunity* rather than an *obstacle*. In an increasingly interlinked world, the opportunity to demonstrate and develop skills to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds is invaluable and hugely valued by prospective employers. Thus, the perception and discourse around group work must change in order for the potential benefits of this opportunity to be realised.

7. Recommendations

- This research suggests that more robust, external structures for group work would provide stronger and more secure foundations for students. Institutions may wish to consider what would be most appropriate for their students but these external structures could take the form of written guidance, online training or key tips as to how to manage a group project and capitalise on the opportunity of working with other students. This would aim to increase students' knowledge of the actual processes of group work and boost their confidence within those situations.
- If a more robust support framework was in place, the overarching guidance would ensure all students had greater access to information around the value of the project. This would aim to raise their aspirations and commitment, and place greater significance on the work.

  The majority of students assumed that the reason for undertaking group work was to improve their skills when working in a team. However, it is a missed opportunity if institutions do not explicitly centre the rationale for group work on this theme and encourage students to capitalise on the opportunity to develop their academic and employability skills. It would also help frame the project in a more effective way if students were clear as to what they would be gaining from their participation in the group.

  In terms of the student's assertion that choosing their own groups makes group work "easier and less stressful", this merely shifts the issue rather than resolving it. Hence, it is important that institutions deliver clear, specific and informative guidance about group projects because this should make it easier and indeed more enticing to work with different people.
- To aid international students it is important that institutions support all students in developing communication skills and empower students to feel confident and seek further clarification on a task if required. If guidance or training were to be provided then the skills students developed would ensure a more secure environment in which the group could study, as well as providing valuable experience for a future workplace.
- This research recommends that institutions consider students' mental health relating to group work. The research found evidence that students find group work challenging, stressful and often work which has a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. Whilst institutions are developing their recognition and response to mental health around exam periods, the impact of group work has not been given due consideration. Therefore, it is essential that institutions respond to this challenge and provide students with the support that they need.

8. Notes

1 University of Southampton, 2019. *Studying in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/uni-life/international.page>.

2 The Higher Education Academy, 2011. *Working with international students: Group and project-based activities on engineering degree programmes*. London: Higher Education Academy.

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12. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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