Pilot projects and research into the international student experience in the UK 2017-18

Contents overview

P = Pilot project **R** = Research

* Winner of the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2018
** Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2018

Introduction

In our 50th anniversary year we are bringing together reports on pilot projects and research that were completed in 2017-18. The projects and research were funded through the UKCISA Grants Scheme with funds ranging from £1,000 - £5,000. The scheme was established to support innovation in the support for international students who come to the UK to study and you will find the range of reports published here demonstrate that innovation and creativity is alive and well in the sector. What these reports also show is the significant commitment of staff who work so hard to ensure that international students in the UK have the best possible experience. UKCISA is proud to support this work through our Grants Scheme that clearly Changes Lives For Good.

Each report outlines how the projects were set up or the research methodology, lists successes, challenges and offers practical recommendations for the sector to learn from the findings and/or adapt pilot projects. Details on how to contact staff who carried out the research of ran projects are listed at the end of each report. If you have any questions about the Grants Scheme, contact Director of Policy and Services, Julie Allen 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 our colleagues and Board members for their support in the assessment of the 2017-18 projects and research applications: Prof. Koen Lamberts, Kate Dodd, Dr Sharon Bolton, Paul Rossi, Lynsey Bendon, Sally Saca.

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Mindfulness for international students
Bangor University

Sue Williams, Student Counsellor
Kate Tindle, Head of Counselling

Project rationale

The Counselling Service at Bangor University has been providing a variety of psychological services, including Mindfulness for all students for many years, but in annual audits of the service the consistent findings were that there was less uptake from international students[1].

The area in which international students are most likely to make use of counselling resources is through the groups and workshops programme. The evaluation received from international students is that they appreciate the group work that has been offered.

Previous feedback indicated that Mindfulness is a resource that enhances wellbeing across many cultures, and across all faiths and none. With the funding awarded by UKCISA in 2017-18 the Counselling Service at Bangor University piloted a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course tailored specifically to international students. Mindfulness courses are always delivered in ways which are appropriate for each group. One way in which the delivery of the course was adapted for international students was to avoid working in pairs and encourage small group work which students found less pressurising.

Research has shown that MBSR courses deliver many benefits, including increased ability to handle stress, improved concentration and an enhanced sense of well-being. Learning mindfulness skills takes some time and practice and a course where the skills build cumulatively from week to week has proved to be a very effective learning experience.

The project aimed to:
- provide an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course targeted at international students as a way of offering psychological support to a group under-represented in one-to-one counselling
- research the effectiveness of this intervention through recognised outcome measures and qualitative feedback
- enhance cross-cultural relationships between different international student groups
- investigate the appropriacy, efficacy and generalisability of providing such group work in a Higher Education Institution (HEI)

It was also anticipated that the project would enhance and improve the interface with the University's International Welfare Support Services. The group was run in the environment of the University's faith centre, which had the additional benefit of familiarising more international students with this venue as a useful resource for them.

Project outcomes

22 international students were recruited in all, across two MBSR groups. The course was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures. In qualitative feedback 100% of participants rated the overall course as good or very good. From the feedback gathered it is evident that participants derived many different benefits from the course. They learnt skills which enhanced their personal development and capacity to manage stress and difficulty. From observation it was also clear that friendships and cross-cultural relationships developed among the participants in both groups. Both groups formed supportive communities where participants felt safe, free to be themselves and were able to understand and support each other. Of those who completed the course all clinical outcome measures (CORE 10), 69.2% showed improvement in levels of functioning and wellbeing.

Project delivery
Advertising, recruitment and attendance

> "Discovered skills and resources that have proven to be very useful in moments of distress or discomfort but also in moments of joy too".

The eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Course (MBSR) targeted at international students was advertised before and after the December 2017 break. The course ran from the Orientation session on Monday 22 January until Monday 19 March 2018. The course was advertised through all-student emails by the Counselling Service. In addition, the International Student Service advertised it through their newsletter, posters prepared by the Support Officer, via social media and personal contact. Some students picked up application forms in the International Office and submitted them there. The forms were then forwarded to the Counselling Service. A few students were met with individually to assess the appropriateness of the course for them.

The application and assessment process ensures that students who may have experienced trauma or previous mental health problems understand the nature of the course. The counsellor can assess the appropriateness of MBSR for individuals and students can make an informed decision about joining.

During the same timeframe the Counselling Service was running its usual provision of an MBSR course open to all students, but on a different day. Owing to timetabling commitments some international students opted to join the general course and some home students joined the international group. In

MBSR group for International Students

many ways this has proved advantageous, allowing a greater mix of students in both groups.

Both courses were delivered by Sue Williams[2], one of the student counsellors in the counselling service and a fully-trained Mindfulness teacher, who has extensive therapeutic qualifications and experience, in addition to the Level 2 Teacher Training for Mindfulness[3].

22 international students were recruited in all, 12 in one group and 10 in the other. The mix of nationalities included Philipino, Turkish, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, Malaysian, American, Norwegian, Austrian, Swedish, Czech, Lithuanian, Romanian, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and German.

One of the International Support Officers attended the course billed for international students as a participant and as extra support for both the students and the course teacher. His enthusiasm was a key factor in good recruitment of participants. His presence also enhanced co-operation between the Counselling and International Services. Both Services gained a better understanding of each others' departments and personal relationships were built between staff. Both these aspects will facilitate easier referral between departments in the future.

In past years around seven to 10 international students have been recruited to the general all-student MBSR course so **the targeted recruitment and participation of the International Office increased recruitment substantially.**

The course consisted of the orientation meeting followed by eight weekly afternoon sessions of two hours. The orientation session is an opportunity for prospective participants to get an idea of what the course involves, the demands of attending, the potential benefits and to meet other group members. They also have an opportunity to experience the approach. The session involves a short meditation followed by a period of enquiry. This helps people to make an informed decision about their participation and reduces drop-out rates. There was also a requirement for participants to undertake a daily home practice of 30-60 minutes.

Four students dropped out during the course; two for personal reasons and two because of clashes with an academic commitment. All absences were followed up by email with an offer of an individual meeting if extra support was needed. This offer was taken up on two occasions. This follow-up helped to contribute to a low drop-out rate.

18 students completed the course with an average attendance of seven out of the nine sessions.

Evaluation

The course was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Qualitative measures

At the end of the course all those attending the final session filled in a paper evaluation about their experience of the course. 15 evaluations were

completed; three people were unable to attend the final session and efforts to collect these forms via email were unsuccessful.

The table below summarises the answers to question 1[4] of the evaluation form:

Question 1
Please tick the number that you feel most closely represents your opinion of the workshop (5 = very good, 1 = poor)

	5	4	3	2	1	
Cyflwyniad o'r cwrs	11	4				Presentation of the course
Taflenni a chyfarpar gweledol	12	3				Handouts and visual aids
Sut yr ymdriniwyd a'ch cwestiynau	13	1	1			How your questions were dealt with
Defnyddion a perthnasol i chi	10	4	1			Usefulness and relevance to you
Mwynhad cyffredinol o'r cwrs	10	4	1			Overall enjoyment of the course
Barn gyffredinol o'r cwrs	12	3				Overall rating of the course

From this it can be seen that satisfaction ratings were very high. 100% of participants rated the overall course as 'good' or 'very good'.

A selection of personal feedback comments in response to the other questions on the form follows. This offers a flavour of the experience of the participants.

What skills/knowledge have you learnt from the course?
"Taking more distance from negative thoughts and preventing spiralling."

"I have learnt strategies to cope with everyday stress, identify triggers and acknowledge them but not react".

"Discovered skills and resources that have proven to be very useful in moments of distress or discomfort but also in moments of joy too".

"I learned how to 'see' my thoughts and recognise my emotions. So the act of rationalising what I think and feel helps me to face situations with more awareness and serenity".

What aspects of the course did you find most useful?
"The accepting atmosphere really helped me to be vulnerable and work on myself".

"Practices that worked on stress and anxiety and the group aspect of the course, interacting with other people".

"Living and enjoying the present".

What aspects of the course did you find least useful?
"Not every awareness exercise felt like it worked, but then sometimes that is just from the individual not the fault of the practice".

"I struggled with self-practice at home. I really needed reminders to practice, because I forgot it a lot".

"Amount of time spent on body scans".

Did you gain any additional benefits from the course? If yes, what were they?
"My classmates are all very good at sharing and listening. I feel really relaxed during the class".

"I now have more tools to deal with stress. I feel more connected to my body".

"I reduced the time I spend with a negative thought".

"I have a different (better) attitude towards myself".

"I learnt a new way to see the real life".

"I have benefitted greatly from the course and I would strongly recommend it to other students. You are in a group where all the students are there for the same reasons so you feel understood and not judged. Besides nobody forces you to speak or do something, so everything is done in your own time".

Please note any further comments about the course/facilities that you would like to make.
"The organisation behind the whole course was perfect. The sessions took place in a very quiet and warm room. Moreover we were provided with all the material that was necessary for enjoying the most our experiences".

"The instructor was very competent and kind".

Quantitative measures
All students filled in two research questionnaires at the start and end of the course. A well-researched mental health measure, CORE 10 was collected[5]. A second measure FFMQ (Five Facet Mindfulness

Questionnaire) was also collected[6]. This captures data relating to the mindfulness skills targeted in the course. 14 sets of forms were collected in total.

According to the CORE data collected, one participant deteriorated (this result was highly anomalous compared to the participant's other feedback, suggesting possible misunderstanding of the questionnaire). Three participants recorded 'no change', four participants improved, one participant clinically improved and four participants clinically and reliably improved [7].

The Paired Samples T Test was used to analyse data from the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire[8]. In the group overall there was a significant improvement in three of the domains measured: observing, acting with awareness and non-reactivity. There was also an improvement, although not significant, in the domain of describing. Only in the non-judging domain was there no evidence of change.

Reflections

From the above it can be seen that participants derived many different benefits from the course.

The group facilitator also requested feedback from the staff member from the International Office, Marcel Clusa:

'The MBSR course was a great platform for international students to learn about techniques and tools to manage stressful situations. The fact that it was targeted towards international students made it more engaging for them but also gave them extra confidence in discussing their thoughts and feelings in their non-native language knowing everyone was on the same boat. It was a safe space for all and the internationalisation of the course definitely helped in that sense.

We would like to see more courses like that in the future to help improve the students' wellbeing. With mindfulness courses, students can open up about how they feel and learn how to address and react to stressful situations, which is something that will positively affect not only their personal life but also their academic performance and future success.'

Appropriacy, efficacy and generalisability

The results above would indicate that the pilot project delivered a service to international students that was helpful, appropriate to their needs, and valued by a wide spectrum of international students; male and female, of varying ages and

nationalities. Staff resources permitting, it is anticipated that the Counselling Service at Bangor University will continue to promote its Mindfulness programmes to international students, and work to maintain the very positive contact made with International Office staff. The Counselling Service and the course facilitator have subsequently been approached by other university counselling services for advice and recommendations on providing such groups for their own students.

Recommendations to other services would include

- Ensuring that such groups are led by a qualified Mindfulness teacher

- Appropriate recruitment and, if need be, assessment and selection of group members, as well as an orientation meeting before the group commences

- Securing an appropriate venue for the duration of the course. MBSR courses are best taught in a large room (some meditations are lying down) with moveable furniture and a carpet. It needs to be private, and quiet is helpful but not essential. Access to yoga mats, cushions, meditation stools and blankets enhance the experience but are not essential.

- Securing the support and assistance of the HEI's International Office staff at each step of the process, particularly in promotion and recruitment of the course.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the International Office at Bangor University; especially to Marcel Clusa, for their help and support, to Sarah Plum for her help with data analysis, the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University for advice on appropriate Mindfulness outcome measures, and Helen Williams for all her administrative support across the year. Last, but by no means least, to UKCISA for the funding that made this project possible.

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Further information

Visit www.ukcisa.org.uk/Bangor for the following:
1. Application form
2. Information sheet for participants
3. Poster
4. Quantitative results data

5. Background information on Bangor University
6. CORE 10 form

References

[1] See findings from University of Plymouth report, 2016, UKCISA
http://bit.ly/2EadTsD

[2] An account of the mindfulness work of the Counselling Service including the international aspect of this work can be found on this blog: https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/blog/experiencing-our-common-humanity-33172

[3] https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/professional-practice.php.en

[4] As Bangor is a bilingual University, all forms are bilingual- Welsh and English

[5] In the original UKCISA application bid it was proposed that CCAPS 62 would be used but this proved impractical because of the number of questions, and also the need to input data electronically on only one iPad. Instead the facilitator chose to use paper copies of CORE 10 and collate and analyse data later. CORE 10 (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation) is a nationally used system of audit and evaluation that allows mental health services to monitor and evaluate clinical/reliable improvement in their clients/patients (it is used widely across the NHS and HE Counselling Services) See www.coreims.co.uk These forms allow the Service to monitor improvement (or no change/ deterioration) in their clients.

[6] Baer, R. A., Smith, G. T., Lykins, E., Button, D., Krietemeyer, J., Sauer, S., & Williams, J. M. G. (2008). Construct validity of the five facet mindfulness questionnaire in meditating and nonmeditating samples. *Assessment*, 15(3), 329-342. (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1073191107313003).

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire used by Baer et al: https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Five_Facet_Mindfulness_Questionnaire.pdf

[7] 'Clinical and /or reliable improvement' is measured firstly by whether a client moves from above to below the clinical cut off, and secondly, those clients who significantly improve. 'Above clinical cut off' is the term used for a score that is representative of users of users of mental health services in the NHS sector.

[8] See Appendices in the online version of this report for table.

Healthy body, healthy mind.
Hands-on nutrition for international students
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Alex Iossifidis, Student Adviser and International Adviser (Music)

Project aims

Our project aims to improve nutritional understanding and practice amongst international students. Guidance around wellbeing and settling in to a new country often emphasises the importance of healthy eating in combatting homesickness and mental health issues. However, academic studies have found that international students face particular barriers to eating well. We wanted to develop a replicable model which can inculcate and facilitate good nutritional habits for international students in the UK and help overcome these barriers.

Background to Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Trinity Laban is a leading international conservatoire of music and contemporary dance offering higher education programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level in contemporary dance, music and musical theatre. As performers, our students are expected to have some awareness of nutrition as it pertains to their performance abilities. Trinity Laban is a small institution of 1,338 students, 31% of whom are from outside the UK (EU and non-EU). We are based in the London boroughs of Greenwich and Lewisham, which are areas rich in diversity.

Project outcomes

The project delivered two workshops on nutrition and practical tips on food buying and preparation. Questionnaires were distributed before and after workshops to assess their impact. Results from questionnaires indicate that the workshops had a positive impact on students' awareness and habits.

Session organisation and timeframe

We hoped to achieve our aims through delivering sessions which combined nutritional information with practical tips ("food smarts") on how to implement good nutrition. We decided to hold two sessions to help cover all of the content and solidify understanding. The sessions were held in January and February of 2018 and were followed up with a final questionnaire in March. The questionnaires were completed before the sessions at timepoint one and two.

22 January	*Questionnaire one & Session one (Timepoint one)*
26 February	*Questionnaire two & Session two (Timepoint two)*
26 March	*Questionnaire three (Timepoint three)*

An email was sent to all international students inviting them to participate with an incentive of a £25 supermarket voucher to attend both sessions and complete all three questionnaires. Selection was based on the time of the response. From an initial group of 20, we ended up with 14 participants attending from Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain and Switzerland.

Session content

Nutrition. The nutritional information for the sessions was delivered by a nutritionist who also teaches at Trinity Laban. He was selected as he had given nutrition talks to music students at Trinity Laban in the past. The nutrition part of the sessions tackled the basics of nutrition and what we need to function and thrive. The nutritionist explained the need for fibre, carbohydrates, fats, protein, minerals, vitamins, water and how we get them. The nutritionist discussed types of food and their benefits and answered questions from students. There was also discussion about participant's food and cooking habits and cultures.

Food Smarts. This part of the sessions was delivered by the Student Adviser and covered the everyday practicalities of eating well.

Food Smart session one covered meal planning and cheap cooking; a broad discussion on why it is good to plan meals was followed by small discussion groups covering what meals they knew how to cook and considered healthy. Meal planners

were distributed to students, consisting of 100 sheets of a day-by-day meal plan and weekly shopping list. Students then filled in a sheet based on the group discussions which were fed back to the whole group. For the cheap cooking activity, students worked in groups to guess the cost of the

ingredients for a Tarka Dhal recipe. This was fed back to the wider group and the true costs revealed. Students were extremely surprised that the total came to just £1. (See the recipe in Appendix 1.)

Food Smart session two covered time management, budgeting, smart shopping and habit change. A large group discussion was held on making time for cooking and shopping, the students who had a set time for activities found it easier to also make time for cooking. A large group discussion around budgeting was held with the aid of a handout of the *Trinity Laban Money Guide* (link available at end of the report) which includes a budget sheet and further information. Small group discussions on tips for "smart shopping" fed back into the wider group. This was followed by a quick "deal breaker" challenge, asking students if they would go for particular "deals" they might find in the shops. Students were then presented with the cumulative cost of food habits such as buying coffee or lunch from a shop every day. Students were introduced to the idea of habits being a cycle of cue, habit and reward. They were given slips to complete in private where they could identify a habit/routine they want to replace with the cue and reward remaining in place. (See notes on the activities in Appendix B.)

Challenges and changes

- Our initial timeframe of starting in November and catching students early in the year had to be pushed back. This was in part due to difficulties in securing a nutritionist who could commit to the sessions.
- We brought a Dance Science researcher into the project to help develop the research methodology and advise on delivery. She found that some of our original plans were not sufficiently outcome orientated and would over-complicate the project. This led to several changes to the original plan:
  - We removed a planned transport subsidy to local cheap supermarkets and a planned pot luck event. Instead we focussed on the delivery of sessions.
  - We dropped the idea of creating an international food map. Once the project started we realised that students were aware of where they could find international foods locally. (Prior to the project, we had identified difficulties with finding international foods in the research review but perhaps this was specific to location of the study (parts of the USA) and time of the study (when less retail information was available online).
- We were concerned that students might drop out or not complete all of the sessions and surveys so we incentivised completing all elements with a £25 supermarket voucher.

Measuring the impact of the pilot project

A 35 item questionnaire was designed with the aim of capturing participants' nutritional knowledge, current nutritional and cooking behaviours, and perceptions of barriers to healthy, nutritious eating. The questionnaire items provided a combination of pre-defined responses, utilising a sliding scale, for example from 'never' to 'rarely' to 'sometimes' to 'always', and multiple choice answers. The questionnaire was created to evaluate the pilot project's efficacy of encouraging and supporting international students' healthy eating behaviours to improve their general wellbeing alongside their psychological wellbeing, with a focus on concentration and mood.

Previous research informed the questionnaire development[1], allowing for the construction of appropriate questions which would endeavour to capture the effectiveness of the pilot projects' ability to meet set aims, and also to ensure that the variety of pre-determined responses provided were in line with previous findings. Participants were provided with an 'other' option should the question possibly require an alternative response.

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants at three separate timepoints, the beginning of the first session, the beginning of the second session and then at a follow up timepoint of one month. The questionnaires were the same at each timepoint and once completed they were collated, coded and analysed by the Dance Science researcher.

You can view and download the questionnaire using the link at the end of the report.

Questionnaire main findings

The results of the questionnaire revealed a number of findings related to the participants' eating and cooking behaviours and displayed trends suggesting that the pilot project was in part successful.

Eating and cooking behaviours

The participants' responses suggested that they perceived their cooking and eating habits to have altered since coming to university, with the majority stating that it had changed for the worse. The common factors which were reported to bring about this change were money, time management, and the availability of produce. There were a small number of participants who stated that since coming to university they had tried to include more vegetables into their diet and had made a conscious effort to cook more healthily, however on average, the majority of participants felt that their dietary habits had become more unhealthy overall.

Following the first nutrition session, a trend in the data suggested that more participants were likely to plan their meal preparation a few days in advance as opposed to on the day, which was found pre-session. More were likely to prepare meals with fresh ingredients on a regular basis when compared to the initial questionnaire responses. These findings were maintained at the one month follow-up suggesting the effectiveness of the first session.

The food groups which were reported as being consumed in the largest quantities at timepoint one were vegetables and carbohydrates which is in line with the UK Government's 'Eatwell Guide' (2016)[2]. At timepoint two, these findings remained stable, however there was also a reported decrease in the consumption of other convenience foods and sugary foods which demonstrates healthier eating behaviours (see figure 1).

At timepoint one, prior to the session, participants reported drinking on average 1 litre of water per day, a month later there was a reported increase to 1.5 litres on average per day (see figure 2). This suggests that as a result of the project, participants increased their water consumption, improving their health behaviours.

Nutritional knowledge, food purchasing and organisation

Participants reported that they were more likely to purchase food in line with their budgets when completing the questionnaire at timepoint two, and a trend in the data also suggested that participants were more likely to plan time into their daily schedules to prepare food. Although this was only a small increase from timepoint one to timepoint two, it suggests that the pilot sessions had a positive impact.

Participants reported purchasing the majority of their food items from supermarkets followed by markets at the initial timepoint (see figure 3), at the one month follow up participants were still most

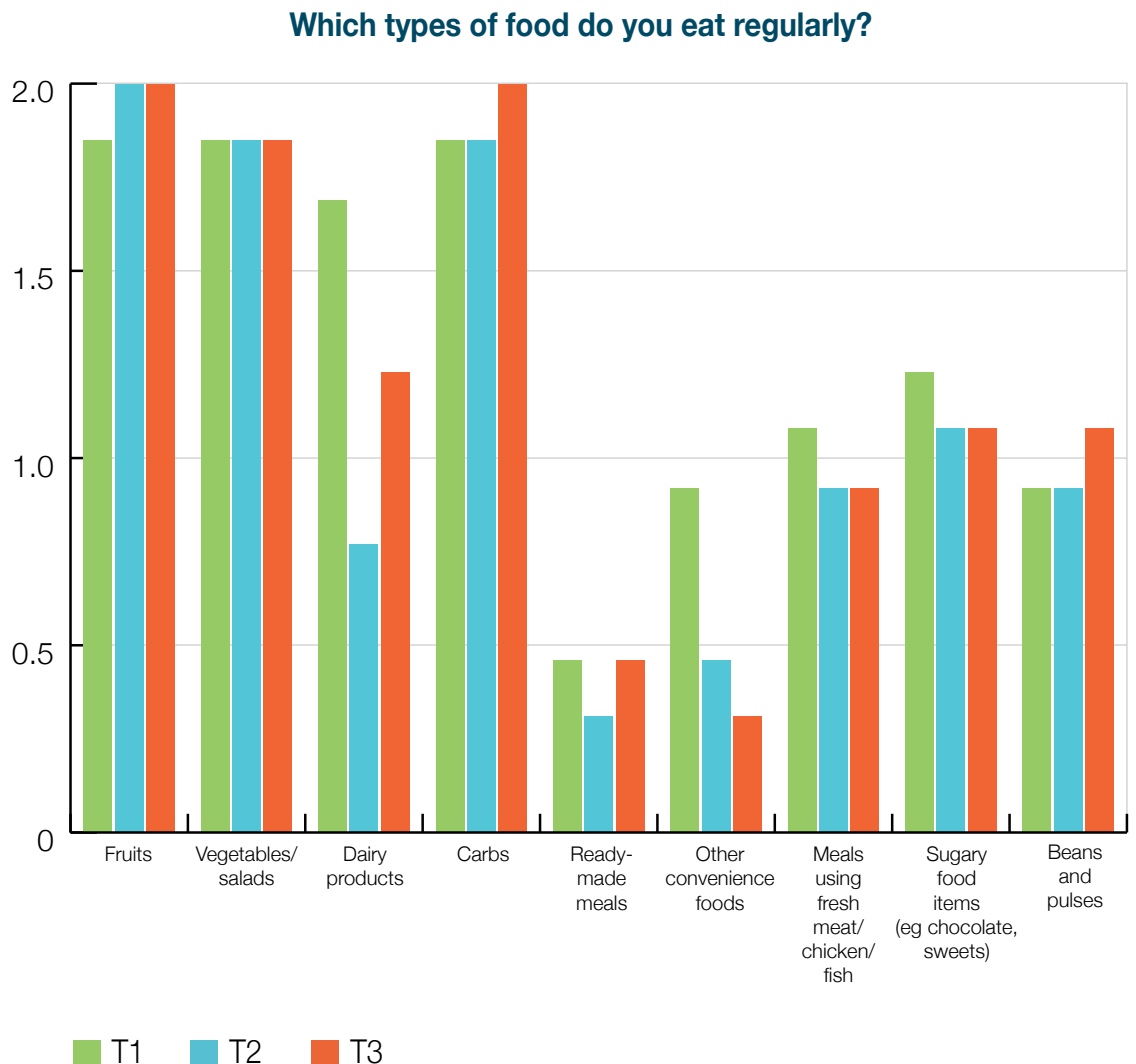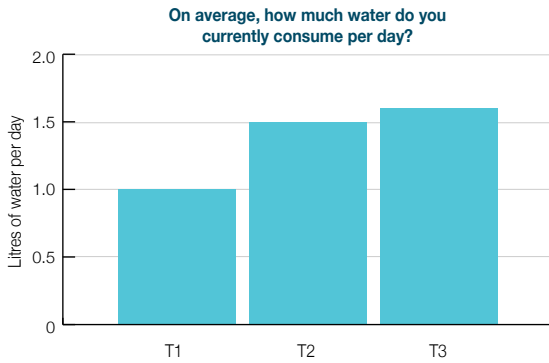**Fig 1:   Questionnaire responses for timepoints one, two and three.**

Which types of food do you eat regularly?

T1   T2   T3

Fig 2:   Questionnaire responses for timepoints one, two and three.

On average, how much water do you currently consume per day?

likely to shop at supermarkets, however, there was a reported increase in those who would purchase groceries from markets, suggesting an increased awareness of alternative locations to purchase items.

The main factors considered at timepoint one when purchasing groceries were reported as the price of the food and the quality of the ingredients. Following the session, the taste, the participants' budget and whether they knew how to prepare the food items or not, were also reported as a consideration.

Barriers to healthy eating

Reported barriers to healthy eating were perceived as being time management, knowledge, cost and the availability of food. This remained consistent across all three timepoints. At timepoint one motivation was the most commonly reported barrier, however at timepoint three a trend in the data suggested that time management was perceived as the greatest barrier. This may indicate that the pilot increased the participants motivation and/or their awareness of time management which was touched on in the sessions.

Psychological wellbeing

When exploring the items of the questionnaire which addressed psychological wellbeing, and more specifically the participants' concentration and general mood levels, it was reported that these factors improved slightly following the first session and this was maintained following the second session. These findings could suggest that the pilot aided the students in improving their nutritional behaviours and this in turn supported an improvement in their perceived concentration and mood levels.

Fig 3:   Questionnaire results for timepoints one, two and three.

Where do you usually buy your food?
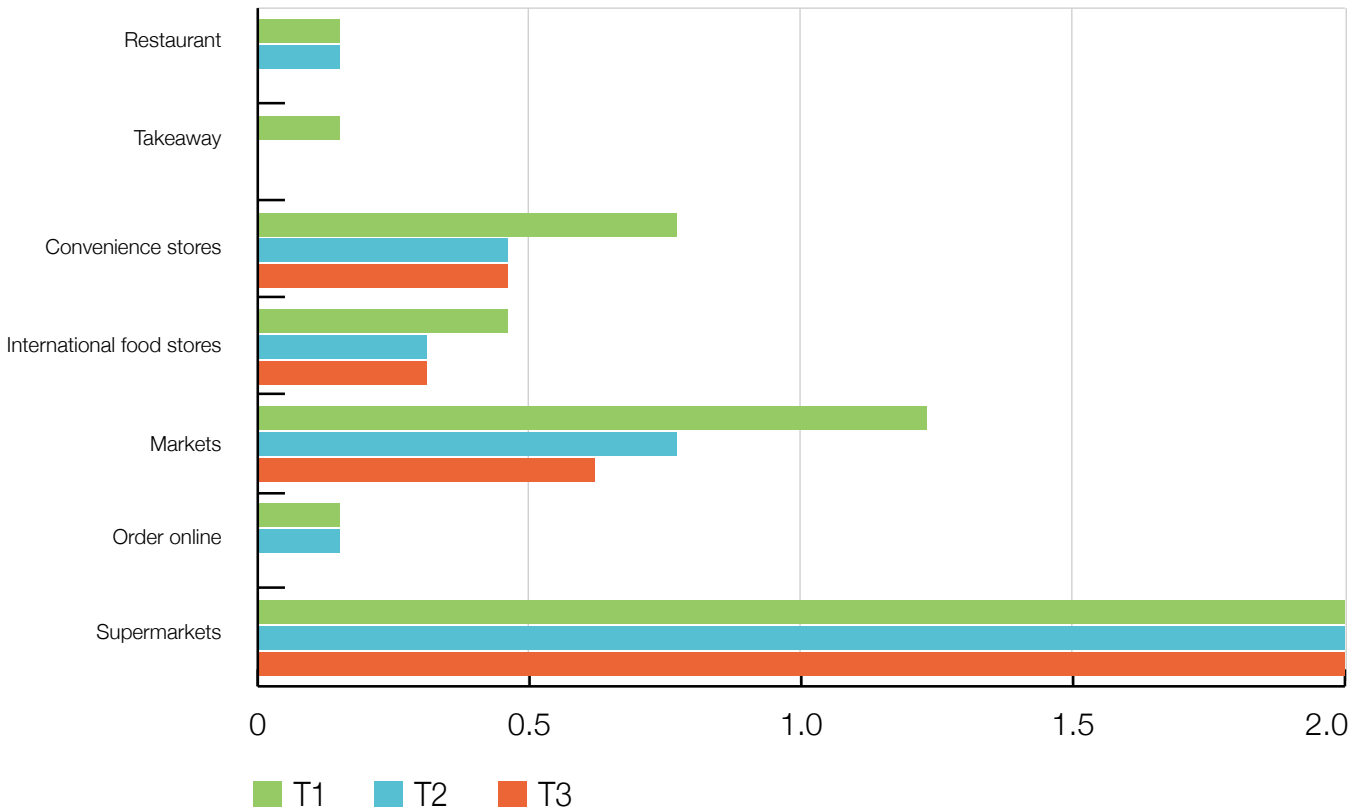
Conclusions

The project has demonstrated the ability to improve elements of international students' eating and food organisational habits which is reflected in certain data trends. The session content will continue to be refined in order to ensure that it is also improving the participants' nutritional knowledge as there was no evidence of the impact of this in the results. (This may be due to students already having a good foundation in nutritional understanding.) If the project were to expand there would be further consideration of the most efficient and effective modes of data collection and to perhaps further explore the impact of the sessions on a greater number of both physical and psychological well-being variables, alongside nutritional knowledge and behaviours.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

Institutions can replicate these sessions relatively easily.

- Meal planners were purchased with grant funds but templates are also available online (although a nice planner may encourage usage).
- Given the main improvements were seen after the first session, it may be that one session will be sufficient to have an impact and will be less resource-intensive.
- The main cost is in hiring a nutritionist; if no funding is available it would be possible to show videos to provide a basic understanding of nutrition and follow up with the interactive Food Smarts activities.
- Much of the Food Smarts element of the sessions will be familiar to Student Advisers and can be easily delivered, time permitting.

References

[1] Fahlman, M. M., Dake, J. A., McCaughtry, N., & Martin, J. (2008). A pilot study to examine the effects of a nutrition intervention on nutrition knowledge, behaviours and efficacy expectations in middle school children. *The Journal of School Health*, 78(4), 216-222.

Perez-Cueto, F., Verbeke, W., Lachat, C., Remaut-De Winter, A. M. (2009). Changes in dietary habits following temporal migration. The case of international students in Belgium. *Appetite*, 52(1), 83-88.

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Alakaam, A. A., Castellanos, D. C., Bodzio, J., Harrison, L. (2015). The factors that influence dietary habits among international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 5(2), 104-120.

[2] Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland. (2016). *Eatwell Guide*. Crown Copyright.

Further information

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Appendices

- Cheap meal ingredients and activities for Food Smart session
- Nutrition questionnaire
- Money guide

Available online www.ukcisa.org.uk/Laban-nutrition

The international student food project
University of Reading

Dr Liz Wilding, TNE Programme Director, International Study and Language Institute

Project aims

Food plays a significant, but sometimes unacknowledged, role in the wellbeing of international students. The overall aim of this project was to engage international students and staff in the creation of a food induction toolkit: an online resource to provide materials supporting students' adjustment to shopping, cooking, and eating at university in the UK. The key steps were to elicit students' views, raise awareness of key challenges, and provide a resource of practical resources and advice.

> "International students can get through all the cultural shock if they get great or familiar food in another country."
>
> (Questionnaire respondent)

Outcomes

A food-focused survey on students' food perceptions and experiences was distributed and has informed the implementation of the project. In collaboration with students at the University of Reading, a series of online informational materials for student self-access and induction has been designed and trialled with international students. Activities to bring students together around food, including competitions and chat sessions, were also organised. Preliminary feedback from students and university stakeholders has been positive. Materials are now available on the project blog (links at the end of this report) and will be used for international student pre-arrival and induction from autumn 2018. The winning recipes from the competition will be distributed in halls and the campus shop.

Background

The project arose from the understanding that food is an issue of central importance to the life and adjustment journey of many international students, but has remained relatively unexplored in the higher education sector (Brown, 2009). At the same time, such food acculturation is a complex and multifaceted process that can be affected by individual, cultural and external factors (Hartwell et al 2011). Each student may have very different interests or needs in their food transition, meaning that one size cannot fit all. A certain amount of food-related material directed at international students already exists but it is often dispersed across different media, difficult to find, and/or limited in its scope. It was therefore felt that more could be done to support those students who wished for more, and provide more easily discoverable, information or assistance with preparing and consuming food at university.

Left: Bogdan Andrei, photo competition winner in the 'most delicious' category for his shot of a home-made pizza.

Photo credit: Dr Liz Wilding

How was the project set up, run and evaluated?

The project was initiated and implemented by Dr Liz Wilding (International Study and Language Institute).

The project blog: http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/ international-student-food-project/
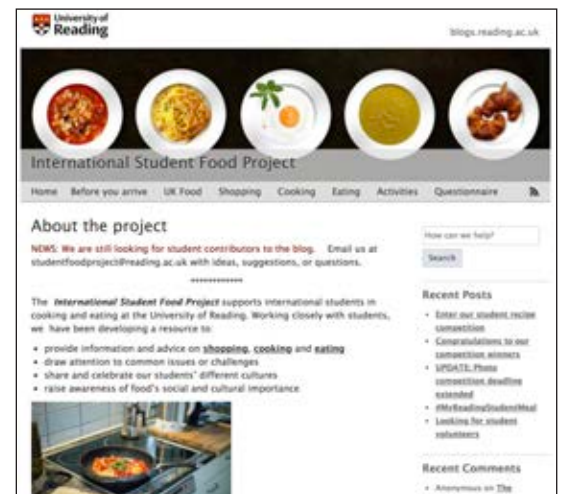
It was supported by the project assistant HuiQi Yeo, (PhD student in the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences), who was extremely active in engaging students and producing materials for the blog.

Following recruitment of the project assistant, individual students and representatives of student societies were invited to participate in and contribute to the project in a variety of ways. They were encouraged to:

- Respond to an online food questionnaire distributed via the Bristol Online Survey tool
- Take part in planning and organisational meetings
- Join a focus group
- Participate in scheduled but informal 'Food Chat' sessions in the language resource centre
- Enter a food competition
- Contribute ideas and materials

The questionnaire responses helped identify key themes and informed the direction of the project. Face-to-face sessions with students formed the heart of the project, with the most successful being targeted sessions, for example for student groups from particular programmes. Foundation students were invited to 'snack and chat' with the team, with home-made food provided as an additional incentive. A series of 'Food Chat' sessions directed at Pre-sessional students attracted students interested in the opportunity for English discussion as well as in the topic of food. Areas covered during the sessions included: restaurant recommendations, favourite foods, advice for new students, ideas for the website, and suggestions for activities/events. The overall structure and main topics covered in the blog derived from these qualitative and quantitative information-gathering methods. We also took the opportunity to gather feedback at other meetings, such as the celebratory gathering for competition winners. Two competitions were conducted:

- A photo competition was organised around the hashtag #MyRdgStudentMeal, in order to raise awareness of the rich cultural diversity of cooking and eating taking place.
- A recipe competition (#MyRdgStudentRecipe) was less successful, most likely due to the fact that the timing ran up against the exam period.

The original plan was for student volunteers to co-produce materials, but in the face of limited time the project team produced them based on the student comments and input we had received. Students were then given the chance to comment and provide feedback. Therefore, this blog strongly reflects students' interests and concerns as elicited during face-to-face discussions and chat sessions. The inclusion of practical information, such as a local supermarket map, a guide to online shopping, and a list of Halal restaurants were in direct response to this feedback. Listening to students, hearing their concerns, challenges, experiences and recommendations – has been the most powerful aspect of the project. The strength of the project and of the materials produced lies in the fact that it reflects our students' interests and voice.

Support and engagement were also elicited from key university stakeholders from the accommodation, international support, catering, and recruitment units, as well as campus retailers. The benefits of shared practice were noticeable and allowed for a widening of the scope of the project. For example, we discovered an overlap in aims and motivations of the project and the University's residential life programme, Your Halls Life (YHL). Not only were we able to exchange information and ideas, but the project could direct students back to YHL's food events and experiences. We have shared information and material with a number of such units, and some of the project's output will be embedded in relevant university web pages and/or distributed in hard copy.

Evaluation of the project has thus far come from informal discussions as well as the use of a focus group. Looking ahead, use of the blog will be monitored via Google Analytics and feedback on materials will continue to be elicited as it is used for new student induction programmes.

> "I always believe that food draws people together. By being able to appreciate food, we can easily create a community."

> "Having familiar foods helps settle you in and combat homesickness, while trying local foods is part of the experience of being here."
> (Questionnaire respondents)

Timescale

The project ran from September 2017 to the end of June 2018. The initial stages (desk-based research, questionnaire design/distribution and assistant recruitment) were completed on time in the autumn term. Recruiting student volunteers was more challenging than anticipated. It therefore took longer than planned to engage students, as it was necessary to design a series of additional activities in order to generate interest and involvement. These included targeted leafleting at food-focused events such as the weekly campus produce market and outdoor lunch stalls, and engagement with campus retail outlets to provide publicity and prizes for the competitions. Greater success came with the more targeted student sessions (as listed above) in the spring and summer terms, after which food induction materials were completed, shared, and tested. The web pages are now live, with material still being added. Recipe cards are being edited and prepared for distribution in the autumn term 2018.

Challenges

The major challenge of the project was garnering enough rich input from students. We received 170 responses to the questionnaire, which was a lower number than anticipated, even though we extended the closing date several times. Positive support was forthcoming in principle from university stakeholders, the Students' Union, and individual staff and students. However, they were often unable to commit the time and resource initially hoped for, slowing down progress significantly, especially in the beginning stages.

Students consistently expressed an interest in receiving support with food-related matters, but we struggled to engage them in co-designing materials. It was also a disappointment that student groups and cultural societies were not more involved and in the future we need to find new ways to engage them more successfully. We undertook significant project publicity through mainstream channels (eg email, posters and flyers) and social media (Twitter and Facebook) in order to counter this trend, but progress was slow at times. The result was that some student-generated ideas, such as a recipe book and live cooking demonstration, were not achievable within the timescale of the project.

Furthermore, certain issues were felt to be beyond the scope of the project. In some of these cases, however, we were able to pass on useful feedback to the relevant university unit. Student questions about food labelling (in relation to Halal food labelling at Reading), for example, were raised at university level.

Sustainability

The blog should be a sustainable resource that can be accessed by students at the University of Reading and other institutions. Our own students will be actively directed to the site through our

communication channels and information about it has been incorporated in the University welcome pages for new international students. Some materials (for example, practical information guides and recipe cards) will be distributed in hard copy. Dissemination of the project is continuing via conference presentations and by being shared through partner networks, such as the University Pathways Alliance. Institutions are welcome to contact the project lead for sample materials or for access to the questionnaire. In addition, the structure of the online resource could serve as a template upon which other institutions could build their own materials.

Reflections

"I feel a lot of students eat very unhealthy food so a compulsory workshop or similar might be helpful to remind students of the importance of eating healthily to do well at uni."

The project has been successful in a number of ways, not only in producing the finished blog. A key outcome has been how it brought different groups together around food and has provided an opportunity for potential collaborations in the future. On a practical level, it has highlighted sector-wide interests as well as more local concerns, including practical everyday information that could be easily put onto our website. A common theme emerging from online feedback and face-to-face discussion has been the need for students to learn to cook, suggesting the importance of offering more practical guidance in this area. The project has further underlined how varied student perspectives on food can be. These views can undergo change depending on where students are in their journey. For example, it may be that food becomes more important after arrival in the UK and perhaps we should not rush to introduce too much information too early in the year. In our questionnaire:

- 66% of respondents reported that they did not have concerns about food prior to arrival. However;
- 95% of respondents (students already in the UK) feel that food is important to the transition experience of international students.

There is room for the project to continue to grow and develop. Ideally, we will garner additional input from a wider range of students, both home and international, and enhance the ways in which we celebrate cultural and culinary diversity. Overall, it is intended that additions be made to the online materials, that more practical activities be introduced, and that the institution-wide approach to supporting international and home students be consolidated.

Survey results regarding the importance of food

How important is the food transition experience of international students?
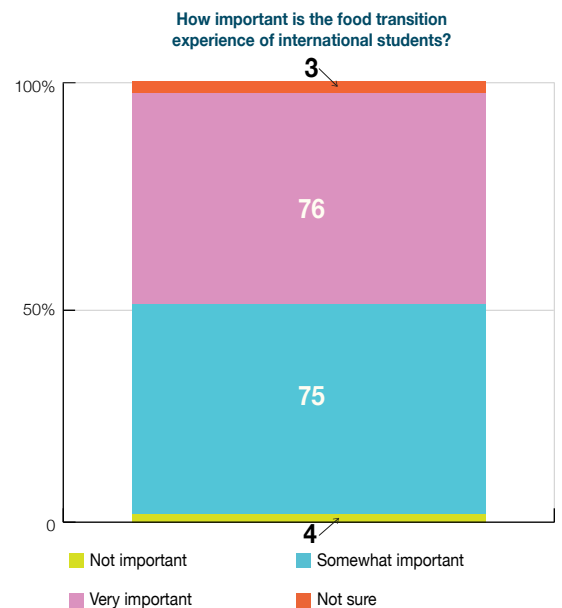
"Thank you for doing this project."
(Questionnaire respondent)

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Start as early in the academic year as possible in order to gain support from student groups or societies as they begin to plan their events and activities.
- Get buy-in from the Students' Union (we benefitted greatly from the support of the Diversity Officer).
- Do not underestimate the time needed to work with multiple stakeholders and groups.
- Provide good food at any meetings.

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Links and further information

The blog is available here: http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/international-student-food-project/

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Mental health and wellbeing of global access students
The University of Edinburgh

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Contents

1.   Introduction

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Programme (MCF) at the University of Edinburgh (UoE) provides access to education for inspiring young African students who have great potential but few educational opportunities at home, by providing them full scholarships and leadership training. The MCF team members work closely with the scholars at every step of the programme, as they are responsible for recruitment, leadership training and providing overall support and pastoral care. In the first year of the programme at the UoE (2016-2017), the MCF team welcomed six undergraduate and six postgraduate students and it quickly became evident to those involved, that there was an increased need for attending to the students' psychological wellbeing. The team observed that the scholars' transition to a new place (Edinburgh), the difference in academic demands, the use of a foreign language, the separation from family, the unfamiliarity with Western culture and the pressure of success, were often experienced as a struggle, as is the case with many international students (Mori, 2000).

At the same time, the team noticed that the provisions that were available at the University (eg counselling service, personal tutors, international office) were not providing the holistic support the scholars needed. With an awareness of the cultural gaps that may be present for these students and a sensitivity towards their cultural norms and practices, the MCF team wanted to understand their students' experiences of transitioning into the UoE life in more detail and develop support provisions that do not create an additional point of conflict for their students.

2.   Research aims

This research had a twofold aim:
- To explore the scholars' challenging experiences in relation to their transition into the UoE life and map their needs in relation to wellbeing.
- To consult them in order to develop culturally-appropriate support provisions for them, future cohorts and the wider population of international students.

3.   Motivations for research

The opportunity to further understand the unique challenges that the scholars go through will not only enable us to develop tools and resources to support them and their 200 future cohorts that the UoE will welcome over the course of the next seven years, but also other students who come from similar backgrounds where there are few educational opportunities, as part of the wider University strategy. By sharing the findings with our partners across the MCF network, we also have the chance to improve the experiences of MCF scholars across the world.

Furthermore, research suggests that the transitional challenges experienced by Black-African international students (IS) have unique characteristics, based on factors such as their cultural heritage and the frequent encounter of prejudice and discrimination (Boafo, 2014). However, there is very little research that explores in detail the experiences of this particular group of students. Through the publication of our findings in peer-reviewed journals, we hope to address this knowledge gap and contribute to this wider academic discussion.

4.   Summary of research outcomes

Our interviews and focus group with the participants allowed us to build a robust understanding of the various challenging experiences that the MCF Scholars go through as they transition into the life of the UoE. The thematic analysis identified four overarching-superordinate

Table 1 Themes in the thematic analysis

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Themes
1. Minority identity development	1.1 Developing racial self-awareness	
	1.2 Encountering microaggressions	
2. Ethnic and cultural background	2.1 Culture	2.1.A Collectivist vs Individualist culture 2.1.B Concepts of time
	2.2 Use of technology	
	2.3 Socio-political instability at home	
3. Academic difficulties	3.1 Different learning environment	
	3.2 Language difficulties	
	3.3 Psychological wellbeing and academic performance	
4. Attitudes towards counselling and psychological wellbeing	4.1 Mental health stigma	
	4.2. Use of University counselling services	
	4.3 Keeping emotional distress private	

themes that supported 11 subordinate themes (Table 1). An additional group of themes that combines focus-group and interview findings that reveal how the MCR support provisions (already available) have been assessed by the students, is presented in section 6.5 of this report.

5. Research methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research paradigm was employed. Specifically, a phenomenological, 'experience-near' methodological approach was used (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), in order to examine the thoughts, experiences and emotions of the MCF Scholars. To address its aims, this study had two phases: in the first phase, we conducted in depth, semi-structured interviews with current undergraduate and postgraduate MCF Scholars (n=6) in order to get an insight into their experience of studying at the UoE and explore their needs in relation to psychological wellbeing (January-February 2018). Individual interviews were selected as a method of data generation to ensure privacy and a sense of safety. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. This dataset was analysed by following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data was also inserted in NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) for management and transparency purposes. In the second phase, we ran a small focus group (n=3) to explore how the scholars understand support and wellbeing and see which MCF support provisions they find useful and appropriate (April 2018).

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the School of Health in Social Science Research Ethics Committee of UoE. Like any 'evaluation-type' project that targets a specific intervention, openly conducting research on the MCF Scholars programme meant that the small pool from which participants were recruited (n=27) is publicly known. In order to protect the participants' identities, we have excluded identifying information. However, we had two male and four female interview participants, and one male and two female participants in the focus group, who were in their late teens and early twenties.

6. Key research findings
6.1 Minority identity development
(Appendix, Table 2)

> 'It's odd to think that if I missed a lecture, the lecturer noticed because simply there's no black person in the room.'

The most prominent overarching theme that emerged from the participants' contributions is that prior to moving to the UK from primarily Black-African communities, being a part of a minority group was an unfamiliar experience which was encountered for the first time in Edinburgh. As the participants disclosed, while they 'never had to think about race before', their transition into UoE, entailed 'recognising their race in relation to other peoples' races'. The process of acquiring this new minority identity, was described as occurring through experiences that took place on both a personal and interpersonal level and as constituting a source of emotional distress and intense mental preoccupation.

The common phenomenon of partaking in ethnically non-diverse environments, such as lectures where there were very few or no other Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, accentuated the different ethnic background of the participants and made them feel that they stood out from the rest the group. This experience was accompanied by feelings of exposure, hypervisibility and discomfort that made the participants become conscious of their different ethnic background and develop an increased sense of racial self-awareness.

Furthermore, being a BME person was seen in connection to a long history of discrimination and racial stereotyping for the participants, who expressed the fear of being rejected or judged negatively by peers, teachers or people outside the MCF group, due to their ethnic background. Although none of the students involved in this study were subjected to any overt forms of racism, the majority encountered more subtle expressions of aversive racism that could best be described as microaggressions (Louis et al., 2016). These included remarks, actions and ideas that the participants described as 'passively racist'.

6.2 Ethnic and cultural background
(Appendix, Table 3)
6.2.1 Culture
Coming from cultures that favour a more collectivist way of life, the participants reported difficulties in adjusting to a culture that places greater emphasis on values such as autonomy and self-reliance, as is often the case with international students from cultural backgrounds that are different from those of the host country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The participants were prone to difficulties when placed in social situations in which they felt that they were expected to show independence and interdependence was seen as less appropriate, particularly in relation to help-seeking. In contrast, in their home environment, there was a sense that in the event of problems or 'unknown situations' (eg using services, asking for directions etc.), help was always at hand as reaching out to others for support, even if they are strangers, is widely accepted. On the other hand, Edinburgh was experienced as a less safe environment, as the participants felt that they needed to be more

self-reliant and asking for help could make other people see them 'as a burden'.

Another theme that emerged was that part of their transition to Edinburgh was an adjustment to a different **'understanding and concept of time'**. As they disclosed, back at home 'planning' is seen as an activity which is more focused on the day-to-day reality, rather the long-term future. As authors suggest (Hayes, 2000), in certain African cultures a more elastic understanding of time can be observed, which can also take the form of an unspoken understanding that actual deadlines are different from stated deadlines. This was confirmed by the participants of this study. Although punctuality and the ability to complete required tasks at a designated deadline, particularly in relation to their studies, was experienced as demanding by the participants, it was also described as an extremely valuable life-skill.

6.2.2 Use of technology
Contrary to the UK, where technology plays an integral part in most aspects of everyday life, in more rural areas of the African continent there can be a limited use of technology. Some participants who come from more rural backgrounds, described their encounter with unfamiliar forms of technology (eg supermarket self-service machines, gym equipment, etc.) as a very daunting and confusing experience. This difficulty to cope with forms of technology that they had no prior experience of, was connected with feeling less self-confident in everyday life and the fear that they will face discrimination from others.

6.2.3 Social and political instability at home
Many nations of sub-Saharan Africa have witnessed a high number of wars and conflicts during the last decades, with tensions being ongoing in certain areas. During their studies at the UoE, there were periods when socio-political instability and violent conflict were present among some of the participants' countries of origin. This experience had a significantly adverse effect on students' psychological wellbeing, as they experienced intense anxiety and fear for the safety of family members. During these periods, they were highly preoccupied with the events that took place in their counties and reported finding it exceptionally hard to concentrate on their studies and fulfil their academic obligations.

6.3 Academic difficulties
(Appendix, Table 4)

"And then sometimes then I'm just like, 'Why I'm I finding it so difficult now here?' This is just like totally new stuff just being thrown at you and it can be overwhelming".

The participants experienced a number of difficulties in relation to academic life. In comparison to their educational experiences at home, they described UoE as a **different learning environment**, in which 'things often happened at a desperately quick pace', due to speed and volume that new course material was introduced into their programmes of study, and the numerous deadlines for course submissions that they needed to keep up with. This resulted in feelings of isolation and fatigue, as the participants reported a difficulty in maintaining a balance between academic and social life, due to the time and effort they had to dedicate to their studies.

Language difficulties were also reported as being intertwined with academic difficulties. Some of the participants felt insecure about their accent and avoided participating in class conversations because of their fear that they 'sounded different'. Essay writing was also experienced as particularly challenging for those studying in the Humanities, as they felt that they were required to transition to a more critical way of writing than they were unaccustomed to.

Our findings also identified that **academic performance** which was perceived as being poorer than the participants anticipated prior to commencing their studies, had an extensive **negative impact on their emotional wellbeing**. Coming from African communities where there are very few educational and professional prospects, the chance to study at the UoE as MCF scholars, was perceived as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by the students and a ticket to a more secure future. This created immense pressure to succeed and led some of the students to setting unrealistically high expectations in relation to academic performance. In many cases, the inability to meet these expectations led to feelings of frustration and disappointment.

6.4 Attitudes towards counselling and psychological wellbeing
(Appendix, Table 5)

'So you always feel like, "I have to be strong, I have to put on a happy face, I have to act as if am brave'.

Counselling was described as a highly unpopular service that is surrounded by various negative resonances and stereotypes in many of the participants' respective countries of origin. The negative connotations of counselling were linked to the reported presence of prejudicial beliefs and **mental health stigma** in the participants' communities. Specifically, counselling is often perceived as 'a sign of weakness' and as a service meant only for those with serious mental health

issues. Interestingly, the participants who accessed the **University Counselling Services** (UCS), described it as a very positive and helpful experience. At the same time, the small number of sessions offered by the UCS at the UoE (four to six), was perceived as being **too limited** to fully address their needs.

A common theme observed in the participants' contributions was the tendency to **keep emotional distress private**, by isolating themselves from other MCF scholars and the team, even when they were trying to cope with very challenging emotional states. For certain scholars, this theme was connected with an overall hesitation to disclose wellbeing difficulties, which was based on a perceived incompatibility between emotional vulnerability and the idea of **Mastercard leadership**.

6.5 MCF support resources: definitions and focus-group findings
(Appendix, Table 6)

The last group of findings focuses on how MCF support provisions (already available) were assessed by the scholars. **The Postgraduate Buddy System** and **MasterCard Families** were both described positively, as they provided the scholars with an opportunity to form friendships and the chance to share thoughts and questions around academic issues with their peers. The close relationships that were formed within the **MasterCard Families** were described as particularly supportive, as they helped alleviate feelings of homesickness and loneliness.

Overall, the **reflection coach system** was described as the most supportive and helpful resource that was available to the scholars. This relationship was experienced as not only providing a space for reflecting on academic challenges and successes, but also on issues of a more personal nature. On the other hand, the sharing of more intimate information, raised concerns for the participants, as they sometimes reported feeling exposed and concerned that they might be revealing too much personal information to the reflection coaches. This was particularly true in the case of **dual relationships**, when members of the MCF team also acted as reflection coaches. In relation to that, although the MCF team was described as helpful and willing to accommodate the students' needs, the sense of accountability and gratitude towards the team, made it difficult to discuss openly about challenges faced by the students.

7. Recommendations and ideas for further research

This research has identified the MCF scholars' transitional difficulties, in order to determine how appropriate and holistic support provisions that would promote their wellbeing could be developed. The main challenges that had an impact on the wellbeing of the research participants were connected to socio-cultural experiences, academic difficulties, and the presence of various factors that held them back from addressing their emotional distress. These findings could also be applied to improve the experience of other African BME students who are based in different institutions. To this end, the research team can make the following recommendations:

- As the students had no prior experience of belonging to a minority group, they had fewer opportunities to develop personal resources to cope with related difficulties. An open discussion with current or alumni African BME students, that would address both the positive and more demanding aspects of living and studying in the UK (including the different learning environments), prior to the students' arrival, would help them set more realistic expectations and be more prepared about the differences they might encounter.

- Even when students encountered serious emotional challenges, they were hesitant to seek counselling support, mainly due to the presence of mental health stigma. Extending the conversation around psychological wellbeing (eg. group-discussions/workshops around mental health, self-care or stress-related issues etc.) would help reduce some of the stigma and would make BME students more open to the idea of seeking help when it is needed.

- **Recommendations for MCF:** The inclusion of staff that would be responsible for providing one-to-one confidential support to the students but would not have any dual relationships with them, would be an important step towards providing the students with the wellbeing resources that they need. In this research, the majority of the students faced various challenges and the need to share and discuss them was very much present. Half of the students who participated in the interviews voluntarily sought and received counselling through the UCS, but described the number of sessions as too limited, whereas the other half was considering seeking counselling support. Although the MCF teams' open-door policy and reflection coach system were experienced as useful, there were also concerns around the limitations and appropriateness of this support. The research

teams' view is that a clearly defined relationship, disconnected from the MCF programme, would be more suitable for the discussion of more sensitive issues.

The inclusion of staff that would provide this type of support has already been discussed with the MCF team, who have expressed willingness to implement this recommendation and to that end have started conversations with the MCF network to secure the appropriate financial resources. Future research that would focus on assessing how useful this resource is for the MCF scholars would provide valuable information, as it would allow a further examination of the wellbeing needs of African BME students.

8.   Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions

By removing financial and other barriers that might have otherwise prevented these students from studying abroad, the MCF programme plays an important part in the university's wider global access strategy to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. Through a more diverse student community, universities in the UK become richer and the culture and knowledge exchange that occurs on campus more dynamic. In order to strengthen the positive learning environment generated by the presence of global access students, it is important to remove additional barriers that these students might encounter after their arrival.

One of the key learning points of this research project is that transitional difficulties, such as the ones encountered by the participants, act as a barrier for African BME students, due to their impact on students' psychological wellbeing. University staff working with BME students should be aware of the complexities of their needs. To this end, it is important to raise intercultural awareness among university staff, to ensure that they are sensitive to the difficulties faced by BME students. Universities should also ensure that there is ease of access to counselling for BME students who may need to address issues related to their psychological wellbeing.

Lastly, to identify the areas that require further attention and establish intervention pathways that can provide a solid basis for the design and development of appropriate support systems, the promotion of research that examines global access students' experience in detail across different institutions can also play a substantial role.

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Appendix

Table 2 Minority identity development

Theme	Selected illustrative quotations
1. Minority identity development	
1.1 Developing racial self-awareness	'I've never had to be aware of that part of myself because it's not been a part. I wish I had mentally prepared myself for this experience. I just didn't think of it, because I never had to think about race before'. (Participant 3) 'I became aware of who I am. I became very very self-aware. I became aware of what I looked like in that space because I went to the lecture and the first thing that occurred -- Like I sat down, I don't know how it occurred to me that I was the only black person in the class ..And to this point now I sometimes consciously count If I'm in a space...so how many are the black people in this room? And then if I can count one two then now for some reason I get a sense of comfort. Okay, I'm not the only one. Why? Because I would feel I'm not... That I'm not exposed'. (Participant 3) 'It's odd to think that if I missed a lecture, the lecturer noticed because simply there's no black person in the room. That's been…that's affected how I see myself, and it's been tiring'. (Participant 6)
1.2 Encountering microaggressions	'You could meet people who would be so surprised that you speak English. I love that one, "Oh my gosh, you speak English so well.", "Oh, you know--" I guess…I don't know how to-- and I meant to say thank you. I don't know how to react to that kind of a statement. Little things like, "Oh, your hair is really cool, how does that happen?" And like people touching my hair. What are you doing? I don't just grab your ponytail, or like I understand, there's some kind of physical boundary to it. But it makes me feel like an exhibit or a tourist attraction, if you think you could touch me like that, this is not normal'. (Participant 6) 'We don't think about what it means to be African…but when I moved here I started thinking about what it means to be African more than what it means to be a citizen of my country. My continent meant much more than my country itself. I became under the bracket of Africa and not the bracket of my respective country. Which I felt is quite…it was quite unfair because everyone else…their country matters'! (Participant 3)

Table 3 Ethnic and cultural background

Theme	Selected illustrative quotations
2. Ethnic and cultural background	
2.1 Culture 2.1.A Collectivist vs individualist culture	'It's like we live in a more communal way back home, but here it's like each man for himself, you know. You just do your thing, I do my thing. You see to your own stuff, I see to my own stuff. Back home, people are-- they look out for each other a lot. You go somewhere, and people take you as their own child or something. If you're just walking around, and something is not okay, or you need to ask for something, it's so easy for you to do that, but here everybody has their own like problems going on…so you can't just ask a random person you met "Please, I don't know how to do this." Or, "I don't know how to fix this." (Participant 2)
2.1.B Concepts of time	'Back home, it's not a culture of expectation. You don't know what's happening in a month unless it's a wedding. Like, really live to the day to day. So I lived from Monday to Tuesday, and that was fine. But coming here and being expected to state my availability in a month. It's like, I don't know what I'm doing on Tuesday. What do you mean what we're doing on the 20th of March? I have no idea'. (Participant 6)
2.2 Use of technology	'Okay, so, for instance, when you're going to a supermarket, you know, the self-service thing and stuff and you are just there, standing. You-you don't know how it works and people are just looking at you like, "Where did you come from?" You know, and it makes you feel confused sometimes. Like, "How do they see me, how do they perceive me?" So I remember I was standing there and I'm like, "How does this thing, specific thing work?" And I couldn't know, I was trying to figure out, "How does this work?" And I remember people, they could actually see that I'm trying to figure out, "What is happening here"? (Participant 2)
2.3 Socio-political instability at home	'So during the summer there was elections, a few killings and riots.. A few killings it sounds so…Anyway, it's really sad. Um, a number of killings and then the elections were nullified... What's going on around home is affecting me. I had missed a number of classes and tutorials…And somebody died in a place where I knew my mom would be sometimes...So I was like what if that day she was there. Like I knew she was safe but I was like there's that feeling of, "Hmm, I have walked these streets 'I've been in a stampede where people thought there was a terror attack and we started running...Like there was just a false alarm. Now imagine people going through that and it's the actual thing happening'. (Participant 1)

Appendix *(continued)*

Table 4   Academic difficulties

Theme	Selected illustrative quotations
3. Academic difficulties	
3.1 Different learning environment	'And then sometimes then I'm just like, "Why I'm I finding it so difficult now here?" Maybe-- You just feel like, "Maybe I chose the wrong program" or something but you really feel deep down that you did not, this is your passion-this is what you want to do. It's just a totally new thing and you're not used to this.. This is just like totally new stuff just being thrown at you and it can be overwhelming'. (Participant 1) 'But when I got my grades I was like, "No, I need to stop doing everything else and just focus on my books." So my second semester was me trying to focus but it didn't happen. I got through, uh, -- A really tough point again emotionally where I'd find myself sleeping more'. (Participant 2)
3.2 Language	'I just wasn't confident in making little steps. I was afraid that…I think I had the perspective that I had to take this, read it and understand it immediately. If I didn't do that I wasn't smart enough. And the fear that if I contributed in a class group discussion, I would appear as stupid maybe because I talked different, I sound different. Um, yeah…it was a confusing moment' (Participant 1)
3.3 Psychological wellbeing and academic performance	'Why waste someone else's time by attending this lecture or this tutorial and you know you don't deserve to be here…you probably can't figure this out so why try. So I just went back to sleep.. I just didn't want to leave…I didn't want to go out go for my tutorials on my lectures or anything because I was sad... I felt incapable…and attending a lecture or tutorial just going to magnify that for me so it didn't seem worth the effort'. (Participant 6)

Table 5   Attitudes towards counselling and psychological wellbeing

Theme	Selected illustrative quotations
4. Attitudes towards counselling and psychological wellbeing	
4.1 Mental health stigma	'Mental health is not at all a topic in my household…my mom and dad and aunts and uncles didn't speak of it around me'. (Participant 4) Because there is a lot of stigma about what counselling means. Counselling is seen as you're weak.. you're not strong enough, you're not good enough, you have so many problems and no one wants to be convinced they have problems. Um uh so there's definitely a barrier…I don't want to generalize and say people from Africa, but certainly people from my country…counselling is not being encouraged.. And so it comes with a lot of um, like, stigma for or you to break through those walls, it takes a long time. Even when no one is judging you for going there, you will be judging yourself for going there'. (Participant 3)
4.2. Use of University Counselling Services	'It helped so much and helped like, recover a lot of things. Not just…Not necessarily uncover them, but change my perspectives in a way that's more loving towards myself and more supportive towards myself for me. That was amazing. It was hard to stop because I wanted to keep on going'. (Participant 1) 'So, I had five sessions…so the minimum is four, maximum is six. And I went to the longest possible but my case wasn't as extreme or as…Which is a sad thing, but like not as less extreme as…So I got five. And I actually wanted it to be long'. (Participant 1)
4.3 Keeping distress private	'I was here in Edinburgh and I was…not doing well as a human being, I was not sleeping, I was not doing University, I did not leave my room for three days'. (Participant 6) 'And you just thinking I have failed people, how do they see me now and you know, trying to always put up a brave face…you know, because you are said to be strong, intelligent, unique individual, Mastercard Foundation scholar, a leader, something like that. So you always feel like, "I have to be strong, I have to put on a happy face, I have to act as if am brave'. (Participant 2)

Appendix *(continued)*

Table 6 MCF support resources: definitions and focus-group findings

Definitions	Focus-group findings
Postgraduate Buddy System An informal peer support network, led by recently-graduated MCF postgraduate Scholars that aims to help new postgraduate students settle as quickly as possible, in order to promote a better academic and social experience.	Experienced as useful, another chance for creating friendships and an opportunity to share thoughts, questions and ideas about studies. Discussions were described as somewhat limited to academic issues at times.
MasterCard Families Peer support groups consisting of three MCF Scholars. This system was co-designed by current MCF Scholars as a way of providing extra support to incoming undergraduate Scholars as they seek to transition into their new lives at the UoE	Some minor issues were reported with how students are matched with their families (not having classes together and not being in the same year of studies). Overall this system was experienced as very supportive, and it was described as a 'family away from home'..
Reflection Coaches The Reflection Coaches are responsible for facilitating a monthly one-to-one session that elicits the successes and challenges that the scholars are facing. They also provide a sympathetic ear to problems and refer students to appropriate support services if necessary	Described as the most supportive and helpful resource that was available to the Scholars. Concerns were raised by the students about the presence of dual relationships with members of the MCF that also act as coaches.
	Selected illustrative quotations
Feelings towards MCF team- selected illustrative interview quotations	'We were ideas..We're going to have 12 scholars in this year! I guess it's an idea and now we're human beings and I imagined that they magnify us or they magnified us or whatever it is but it's a big deal, it's a massive opportunity and we should be worthy of it. But then you're here and you are suffering in first year, you're like…This is very bad, I can't tell anyone because…I should be fine, I should be fine…They chose me in some roundabout way for some list of reasons and I can't tell them that they made a mistake.. I need to prove that this is fine and I can do this and I can handle this because- at least they don't need to know that they might have made a mistake'. (Participant 6) 'But we do have this…I mean it's only in my mind, but I do feel this level of accountability and responsibility to them'. (Participant 4) 'We're doing badly but we can't tell you because we can't disappoint you… because you deserve better than us failing you'. (Participant 6)

STRIDE: Social Transition Research into International Doctoral Experiences
Open University and University of Dundee

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Winner of the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2018

Contents

Left: Robert Hook
building at Open
University Campus in
Milton Keynes.

1.   Introduction

The STRIDE (Social Transition Research into International Doctoral Experiences) project sought to understand the role of holistic social support networks in international postgraduate students' transition experiences across three key areas: 1) social communities with fellow doctoral students, 2) social connections with university staff members, and 3) social support networks outside of the university. These findings were compared cross-institutionally between The Open University and the University of Dundee to unpack the role of institutional contexts in students' experiences.

2.   Rationale for research

Undergoing doctoral study, although rewarding and intellectually stimulating, can be an exceptionally demanding experience with unique academic, social, and life challenges (Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010). Perhaps as a result, one recent study identified that half of doctoral students experienced psychological distress (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Similarly, doctoral students frequently experience social isolation or loneliness (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014), perhaps due to the independent nature of their work. These experiences are particularly poignant for international doctoral students, as they might simultaneously encounter social stressors related to living and learning in a new country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), which could exacerbate feelings of isolation (Gareis, 2012; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

3.   Research aims

This project, therefore, examined the social experiences of international doctoral students through three research questions:
- How do international doctoral students build social support networks within their university departments?
- What is the role of social networks outside of the university in supporting international doctoral students?
- In what ways can institutional support mechanisms enable successful transitions?

The project unpacked international doctoral students' social transitions, defined by the researchers as 'the ongoing experience or process that students undergo to adapt to the multifaceted changes in their social support networks as a result of doctoral study in the UK.'

4.   Background information to the research

An in-depth comparison of students' social community development experiences was undertaken in this study by focussing on a single social sciences department at each of the two participating institutions.

Institution 1: At the time of data collection, this institution had 28 full-time PhD students (around two-thirds of whom were international students), who were all fully funded with a living stipend. As a stipulation of their funding, students were required to live within commutable distance of the institution and were expected to have regular attendance on campus. The department provided regular trainings and weekly research group meetings, which doctoral students were expected to attend. All students were provided with a desk, spread between three locations in the department's building.

Institution 2: This institution had 67 doctoral students: 20 full-time PhD (mostly international students) and 47 part-time PhD/professional doctoral (mostly domestic UK) students. Apart from international students, students were mostly self-funded or funded by their employer. For home students, there were no formal living or attendance requirements for study. The department held a monthly optional doctoral student seminar and other training was provided through the department and wider university for attendance at students' discretion. There was a room provided for full-time students, but some opted to work from home or elsewhere in the university.

In this study, there were strong differences in approaches towards doctoral study at each institution, which will be apparent in the results.

5.   Research methodology

Four research methods were used in this study. All doctoral students in each department were invited to participate in one or multiple phases of the research. As the research considered the social community as a whole, domestic UK students were also invited to participate.

Longitudinal Reflective Diaries (31 participants). A longitudinal diary was utilised for six weeks, whereby participants were contacted once a week to fill out an online reflection about their social engagement with peers. These contributions were analysed using multi-level narrative analysis.

Social Network Analysis Surveys (28 participants). Social Network Analysis is a quantitative survey-based tool for mapping and visualising social relationships on a macro level.

Questionnaires were sent to doctoral students to mark who they were friends with and who they received social support from, both on and off campus.

Interviews (21 participants). In-depth interviews with doctoral students were conducted, focussing on three main areas: 1) social community development with fellow doctoral students, 2) social connections with staff, and 3) social support received outside of the university. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

Student Vignettes (17 participants). The project hosted a public-facing blog, where doctoral students wrote personal narratives about their social transition experiences. These can be viewed at: https://strideresearch.wordpress.com/. These posts had over 3,000 reads from visitors in 67 countries.

Altogether, this mixed methods approach allowed for triangulation and cross-validation of findings from multiple perspectives, providing a well-rounded understanding of how international doctoral students experience social transitions.

6.   Key research findings

6.1 Connecting with fellow doctoral students

Throughout this project, it was evident that social networks were invaluable sources of support for doctoral students at both institutions. In many instances, social support was key to 'surviving and thriving' during the doctoral experience.

> **"I had a really difficult supervision meeting and then I went out really frustrated and I wanted to quit the whole PhD…So I discussed that with my fellow students and I had some really positive feedback…They said to me this is normal, it happens all the time, you need to familiarise yourself with that. That was a really positive experience. They helped me overcome that barrier."**
> (Interview Participant 4, Institution 1, male, international student)

However, there were variations between students on the degree to which they felt part of a social community with peers, with several factors impacting experiences.

6.1.1   Regular attendance on campus
The nature of doctoral study in the UK is relatively independent; research students do not take classes and can often complete their work remotely. In this study, there was a wide spectrum of how often doctoral students were physically present on campus, ranging from every day to once every

month (or less). There were particular differences between Institution 1 (where regular attendance was expected) and Institution 2 (where there was no formal attendance requirement for home students), with students more frequently present in Institution 1.

Participants who more frequently worked in their department on campus (often in Institution 1) typically reflected more positively on their opportunities to participate in the doctoral community.

> **"If they're on campus a lot, then obviously they meet more people…For example, if we ask after work if anyone is up for a drink, then obviously just the people who are on the campus can attend that."**
> (Interview Participant 13, Institution 2, male, international student)

There were many factors that impacted students' abilities to visit campus (family or work commitments, preferences to study alone, physical distance, etc.) and when not physically present, there were fewer social opportunities.

6.1.2   Physical working spaces
Dedicated working spaces for doctoral students provided opportunities for social communication between peers from different countries, which was more immediately developed for those at Institution 1 (where PhD student rooms were more frequently used). Participants most easily formed social relationships with those who were within their immediate physical proximity, as 'small talk' during the working day supported relationship development.

> **"I personally find it a very sociable environment in our office…We can support each other in there, and talk a lot more…I think it's good to be all in together."**
> (Reflective Diary Participant 1, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

Participants also reflected that separations between different physical working spaces led to artificial social barriers. For example, students in Institution 1 were assigned desks across several rooms around the building and participants more easily formed friendships with peers who were seated in their own room.

6.1.3   Students-only communication spaces
Participants at both institutions valued having communication spaces that were only accessible to students, as they provided a medium for supporting each other. These were frequently created through students' own initiative using social media tools. For example, doctoral students at Institution 1 had a 'students-only' private Facebook group and those at both institutions used WhatsApp groups.

"We also have this closed private PhD Facebook group. It's good to be there because you know it's just students and it's very supportive. If you have any questions, you just post it and, of course, it might take several hours or days, but someone is going to reply."

(Interview Participant 3, Institution 1, female, international student)

"Two PhD students I know are graduating next week so they've made an invite on WhatsApp for us to join them."

(Reflective Diary Participant 18, Institution 2, female, international student)

However, because these groups were student-maintained, there were often inequalities in who had access. For example, participants in Institution 1 held multiple WhatsApp groups for students from different study years and, as a result, they would often organise social events that were not advertised to their wider cohort of peers. At Institution 2, the WhatsApp group did not include all doctoral students and some students were unaware that it existed.

"I know there are WhatsApp groups with students but I know I'm not in a WhatsApp group. Like when I have discussions with others, they'll just say "Let's just WhatsApp each other" and then I'm thinking alright, okay [laughs]**."**

(Interview Participant 2, Institution 1, male, domestic student)

6.1.4   Leadership in the community

At both institutions, there were key doctoral students who served as leaders in their social communities, frequently organising social events and encouraging participation. Community leaders often acted as 'bridge-builders' between students from different backgrounds (that is, cultures, age groups, study cohorts, etc.) and were, therefore, central to developing a more inclusive community. Social community leaders tended to be international students or domestic students who were newly established in the local area; they typically had relatively few existing ties within physical proximity but placed high value on being part of a vibrant social community.

"I think there are certain individuals…that help bridge those connections. Those people, in particular, might initiate certain events or they're just kind of a hub where people go to and they're easier to connect to, so they kind of get other people to get together."

(Interview Participant 7, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

Other doctoral students often relied on the initiative of these leaders to support their own social networking opportunities. However, it was frequently noted that this reliance meant there were inconsistencies in social opportunities, for instance when community leaders were busy or away from campus.

"Last week there was the graduation ceremony for some of our colleagues and we were supposed to have a nice gathering to celebrate them, but we didn't (until now). Maybe because nobody took the ownership or the initiative to create any event and also could be the lack of time."

(Reflective Diary Participant 15, Institution 2, female, international student)

"It depends on how busy the frequent social event organisers are. There's only a handful of people who often take initiative to organise social events, and if they are busy, then nothing's going to happen."

(Reflective Diary Participant 11, Institution 1, male, international student)

6.2 Connecting with staff members

Many participants described limited social interaction with staff members, particularly beyond their supervision team. Almost universally, it was felt that staff members were perhaps too 'busy' to make connections with doctoral students.

"I only see them during supervision. They're always so busy and I'm always so busy, so we don't find time. I never offered [to see them informally], I never tried to do this. I don't think they'd refuse if I offered this, but I know they are busy."

(Interview Participant 15, Institution 2, female, international student)

Participants who did have close relationships with staff tended to: 1) be frequently physically present in the department; 2) undertake research requiring them to network with a broader range of staff; 3) work on 'side projects' in addition to their doctoral research; and 4) be interested in remaining in academia after their studies.

6.2.1   Cultural differences in power distance

Many international students in this study, particularly those from outside the EU or North America, described cultural differences in power relationships between students and staff. For some international students, it was viewed as culturally inappropriate or uncomfortable to develop social relationships with staff.

'There's a big distance between academics and students in [home country] universities. You need to be polite and don't need to disturb. You can't even sit in the same table

and eat something, it's impolite because it's different hierarchies.'

(Interview Participant 4, Institution 1, male, international student)

6.2.2 Desire to develop more social relationships with staff

Despite these cultural differences, most participants recognised the value in developing more personal relationships with staff, and in particular with supervisors. In this way, doctoral students wanted staff members to recognise their lives outside of their studies and initiate friendly conversations.

"I'd like them to know I'm not only a student. I am a human being. I have perspectives about life. I have issues about life. I have different views about life, about everything here. About the system, the culture, the relations, about everything. This is what I am. Only a small part is a student."

(Interview Participant 14, Institution 2, male, international student)

6.3 Support from outside the university

Participants in this study consistently demonstrated that a wide social circle outside the university supported their doctoral experience. This is nicely summarised in Figure 1, whereby Vasudha Chaudhari visualised her support network for her blog contribution for this project.

Table 1 demonstrates those who were most commonly mentioned by doctoral students as social support networks. Participants also emphasised that different kinds of support were contributed by different people in their lives

Table 1: Different types of social support from connections outside the university

Person	Type of support
Partner	Emotional, financial, motivation, perspective, household help, proofreading, minor research tasks
Parents and family	Emotional, financial, motivation, perspective, motivation
Children	Emotional, motivation, perspective, household help
Friends who have experience with doctoral work	Emotional, academic
Friends without experience with doctoral work	Emotional, perspective, escape
Peers from their country or culture	Emotional, cultural adjustment, escape
Neighbours or housemates	Social adjustment, belonging

It was frequently noted that social ties outside of the university often had very little understanding of their doctoral process, but nonetheless offered invaluable emotional support.

"My family…if I said I had a job at a checkout at Aldi, they'd have more understanding of what that entails…. Honestly, they haven't got a clue. Nobody's been to university. If I said I'd landed on the moon, they'd have more idea."

(Interview Participant 11, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

7. Conclusions and ideas for future research

This research has outlined the important and varied types of social support that international doctoral students experience during their studies. It has also highlighted that social transition experiences are

Figure 1: Doctoral student's visualisation of her social support network
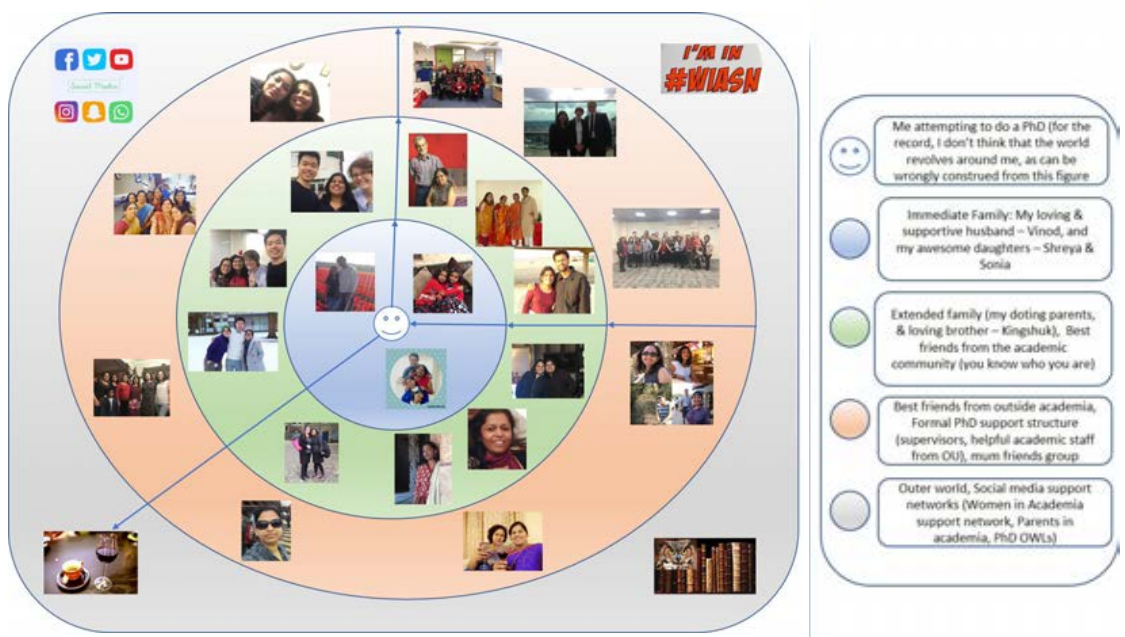
complex and multifaceted, with both institutional and personal circumstances influencing the degree to which students feel socially supported and part of a community.

In particular, the project has provided evidence for the need for universities to think purposefully and critically about the social support offered to doctoral students. As such, future research should build upon these findings by evaluating concrete and specific solutions or actions for supporting international doctoral students' social transitions.

8. Recommendations for practice

This project puts forward the following recommendations for supporting social community developments of international doctoral students:

1. Encourage doctoral students to regularly work within their department (where possible and appropriate).
2. Provide inclusive physical spaces for working and socialising between peers from different backgrounds.
3. Identify community leaders within the doctoral community and provide them with support (financial, access to resources, etc.) to develop regular, inclusive social opportunities with peers.
4. Support students-only communication spaces on social media and develop protocols for making them available to all doctoral students in the department.
5. Develop regular programming that explicitly focuses on social networking. Ensure that social events occur not just during welcome week, but are sustainable throughout the year and inclusive to students from all backgrounds.
6. Encourage staff attendance at seminars or events and build in opportunities for social exchange between staff and doctoral students.
7. For doctoral supervisors, share personal information about your own life and hobbies (as you feel comfortable) and build in time to ask students the same. Ask questions about students' social transitions and provide resources for students who are struggling to make connections.
8. Offer opportunities for doctoral students' wider social networks (families, partners, friends, etc.) to attend social events and include these networks in celebrations of their successes.

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10. Resources

STRIDE blog
https://strideresearch.wordpress.com/

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Research

The impact of Brexit on the international student experience at Stirling
The University of Stirling Students' Union

Astrid Smallenbroek, Union President
Dr Amy Eberlin, Democracy and Research Coordinator

Contents

1. Introduction: the impact of Brexit on UK HE

Brexit is an important topic in the current political climate, impacting every aspect of British systems of living, trading and governing. Its impact on Higher Education (HE) especially in Scotland, is unquestionable, causing concern about potential restrictions to the movement of students and academics from Europe to Scottish institutions, and future funding opportunities and partnerships for Scottish research. The recognition of a threat to the international competitiveness of UK, and more specifically Scottish HE and its institutions led to the publication of a report in April 2017, by the House of Commons Education Committee *Exiting the EU: challenges and opportunities for HE* which examined the challenges and opportunities for HE following the UK's exit from the European Union. In its wake, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Innovate UK and Jo Johnson MP issued a press release on July 4, 2017 confirming that the UK government is investing £100 million to attract highly skilled researchers from India, China, Brazil and Mexico to the UK. While this was certainly an encouraging initial step to safeguarding the UK's HE sector against any detrimental impact following its exit from the European Union, the UK government has not moved to alleviate the fears of international students about their immigration status, inclusion in net migration figures or potential increases in tuition fees following the aforementioned departure.

2. Research aim

The project aimed to demonstrate the need for increased support to be developed to ensure that international students seek out a Scottish university education, feel welcome at our institutions during their studies, and believe that their Scottish degree will still enable them to be competitive in an international job market following graduation. Using the University of Stirling, an institution which has been recognised for its welcoming and inclusive environment for all students, as a case study, the project aimed to gather and analyse students' perceptions of their experience in Stirling after the referendum to leave the EU, and to suggest improvements that the University of Stirling and the University of Stirling Students' Union could make to their current provision of support for international students (*International, Global Position* University of Stirling, 2018).

3. Motivations for research

There has been a clear demand for research into the potential impacts of Brexit on the lucrative UK HE sector since the EU referendum. The University and College Union undertook a survey in early 2017 to question its membership on the impact of Brexit on their jobs. The survey found that 76% of non-EU

UK University academic staff members are more likely to leave the UK HE sector and that 29% of respondents already knew academics who had left the UK (UCU, 2017). The results of Hobsons' International Student Survey 2017 highlights the need to consider the influence of the 2016 referendum on the recruitment of international students and their experience at Scottish institutions. Hobsons found that 42.7% of the 43,919 respondents said their decision to study in the UK had been affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU. The majority of those respondents (82.9%) said they were less likely to study in the UK, whilst 17.1% said they were more likely to study in the UK. Additionally, they found that 82.9% of international students are less likely to study in the UK due to Brexit and that the most common reason given was the perception that the UK is less welcoming to international students than before (Hobsons EMEA, 2016). While this research into prospective student and current staff feelings surrounding Brexit is highly beneficial to our overall understanding of its far-reaching impacts, there have not been any studies of the feelings and experience of current international students. As the top university in Scotland for welcoming international students, according to the 2016 ISB, and its large international student population (23%), the University of Stirling was the ideal institution and student community in which to consider the changes to international students' experiences following the 2016 referendum (*International, Global Position* University of Stirling, 2018).

4. Summary of research outcomes

The research project resulted in a greater understanding of the diverse experiences of the international student community at Stirling, the development of specific and directed support for international students, and an increasing emphasis on the value of cultural exchange between British, EU and international students within the student community.

5. Research methodology

A mixed methodological approach was chosen because it provided a greater complexity to the information that could be gathered about international students' experiences following the referendum to leave the EU and their perspectives of Brexit.

5.1 Student survey

In Autumn 2017, a 10-question survey, was advertised to the University of Stirling's international student community. The survey was advertised online on the Students' Union website, and flyers (see below) were put out in the Students' Union offices. A direct post was made to the international society Facebook group and an all-student email

was sent out to increase the number of respondents.

The survey asked students to reflect on whether their experience as a university student in Scotland had changed following the June 2016 referendum. It asked students to suggest ways that the University of Stirling and the University of Stirling Students' Union could improve the support that it provides to its international student community. The survey was completed by 159 respondents, 111 of whom were from the European Union. International students outwith the EU and EEA were the second largest group to respond with 36 respondents, followed by students from within the EEA (four students) and Scotland (four students). Three respondents did not disclose their nationality and one respondent was from a country within the European Economic Area.

5.2 Focus groups

In Spring 2018, a series of small focus groups and individual interviews were run to create a more complex picture of the differing experiences that international students have had in Scotland since June 2016. The focus groups and interviews were primarily run by the student researcher and when this was not possible they were run by the Union President and Democracy & Research Coordinator. Four focus groups were held during the academic semester, which had 17 participants across all four focus groups. The focus groups ran for a duration of half an hour to one hour, and asked students to reflect broadly on their experience as an international student at the University of Stirling and in Scotland.

5.3 Interviews

Following the conclusion of the focus groups, seven individual interviews were run to delve further into the individualised experience of international students. Most of the interviewees were also participants of the focus groups, however there were a few students who did not attend a focus group who were interviewed. The interviews were not as directed as the survey or focus groups. Instead, the interviewee was invited to reflect on the opportunities and challenges that they had experienced, and to speak about any support that they had sought from the University or the Students' Union.

6.   Key research findings

Several key themes emerged from the survey, focus groups and individual interviews, three of which will be detailed in this section: the challenge of transitioning to university, the benefit of a welcoming community, and fear of the unknown.

6.1 Challenge of transitioning to university life

International students, much like British students, can find the transition to university life challenging. Students spoke of the time that it took them to get used to living in a new town, a new country and experiencing a new culture. One student spoke particularly about the role that cultural differences played in their experience of transitioning into university life. It was quite common for the students to discuss cultural differences or cultural change within the context of their educational experience. One student spoke specifically about the different understanding of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) between international and domestic students. They went on to say:

> "And, just, like finances, but not to do with the universities, but, like, just money generally, because you're not used to that currency, so obviously it's a bit harder to get."

Others spoke of the challenge of speaking in a second language, even if they felt confident in their ability to speak and understand English. One student stated that:

> "It's like, whenever, you can have excellent English skills, according to your school, and then you arrive and you are just like nope!"

Another student supported the idea that the language barrier could be an initial challenge for international students by explaining that:

> "It's kind of the little things, and, like for me, the language was kind of hard for me in the start. Like, even though most lecturers are talking plain, simple English, the accent, there are still words that you don't quite understand."

However challenging undergoing a university education in a second language can be, many students acknowledged that they had chosen to attend the University of Stirling because the degrees were taught in English.

One student also acknowledged that the transition to university life was not unique to international students, but that, in some cases, it was heightened because it was not easy for them to go home:

> "I'm pretty sure a lot of students go through these things, absolutely. I have some friends that are from, say, Shetland, from the UK in general, from England or from Scotland. They come from, say, Glasgow or Edinburgh, which is literally not that far to Stirling and they also mentioned that it was quite difficult at the beginning. They really wanted to go home too and, just, it was kind of daunting at the beginning. I guess it's quite a uniform experience for everyone, but I guess it's just a bit stronger for international students."

6.2 Benefit of a welcoming community

Most of the students who participated in this research project identified the significant benefit of the welcoming community to their experience at the University of Stirling and, more broadly, in Scotland. A large contributing factor to students feeling that they were part of such a welcoming community was the number of other international students at the institution. Students commented:

> "It's really interesting when there's so many international students, so many nationalities, it's really cool, and I just think the atmosphere is really welcoming to it."

> "It's very multicultural and that's really important for international students."

Indeed, many students commented that because they had met students from around the world, their university experience was enriched by different cultures and perspectives. Many international students felt that multiculturalism was important to them and central to their university experience.

The topic of international staff was also raised several times during focus groups and interviews. Students felt that having a multicultural learning environment both in terms of their peers and lecturing staff was a great asset. It seems that students valued the varying cultural experiences and background in and out of the classroom and viewed as a great asset to students' learning. One student stated:

> "There's so much variety [speaking about staff and students at the university of Stirling], I find that a big source of richness."

Several students mentioned that they had met someone else from their home country, which they had not expected but that they had welcomed. One student spoke of arranging to meet up with students, who were from a similar geographic area to celebrate cultural traditions that were not celebrated within the UK. While many students spoke of the benefits of meeting international students from all over the world at Stirling, many also identified meeting people with a similar cultural background to be a source of comfort and that it provided them with opportunities to celebrate their culture in the absence of their family. Additionally, some students spoke about the fact that other international students were unlikely to go home during the weekends, unlike their British counterparts. Shared experiences at university such as the distance from their home and being unable to travel frequently, was noted by many international students as a bonding experience.

When discussing how the referendum to leave the EU impacted on how welcome students felt within Scotland and the rest of the UK, many students expressed a comfort in Scotland, but not necessarily within the wider United Kingdom. One student said:

> "I just feel, like, really welcome here, and I feel more comfortable here than I do back home."

Another student spoke of changing perceptions towards international students in the UK, following the June 2016 referendum:

> "It's [perception of the UK] definitely changed towards, like, a negative rather than a positive because we don't feel as welcome as we did probably like two years ago."

Another student said:

> "I feel more scared in general now, like, I feel like, yeah, I think I would be anxious maybe down in England."

Many students expressed the view that they felt welcome in Scotland, due to its overwhelming wish to remain within the EU. In stark contrast, many students expressed negative feelings towards the rest of the UK and a growing feeling that they were unwelcome there. It is clear that, for many international students (particularly those from EU countries), the June 2016 referendum impacted their sense of belonging within the wider UK, but not within Scotland.

6.3 Fear of the unknown

For some students, how they feel within the UK is closely linked to the lack of certainty and clarity they have about their status, and rights following Brexit. When asked about potentially wanting to remain in the UK after graduation, one student said that:

"I just don't know because, it's Brexit next year, I don't know what rights I will have, I don't know if I need a special visa requirement, some kind of ribbon around my arm."

A feeling expressed by many students who participated in this research project was their frustration surrounding the lack of information about Brexit and its impact on their lives. Immigration policy, student loans, tuition fees, visa requirements, the period of time that students could stay post-study, the ways that students could stay within the UK, work and employability were all topics mentioned to be lacking clear guidelines and information, and identified as causes for concern and anxiety.

Many students' concerns were about the unknown and the uncertainty surrounding their futures, because of Brexit. When asked how they felt about Brexit and its potential impact on their lives, one student said:

"Well that's the thing. I don't know what's going to happen after Brexit. I'm kind of impatiently waiting if I'm going to be destroyed or not [laughs]. Will they kick me out or not? Will I be able to stay or not really? Because I'm kind of, uh, I'm kind of dependent on funding and scholarships and grants because of my family finances."

The uncertainty about the implications of Brexit make international students unable to plan for the future or, in some cases, wary of any kind of future planning.

Additionally, several students mentioned that not knowing about future financial support, for example from SAAS and other funding opportunities, could negatively impact on their pursuit of a postgraduate degree. This lack of clarity, many stated, discouraged them from planning to pursue further educational study within the UK. When asked about future planning, one student said:

"Absolutely [Brexit] comes up a lot and people are concerned about how it's going to affect their, um, education and so on."

Another stated:

"Well, um, I still don't know, especially in terms of immigration for EU students. Also, funding for EU students or, um, the exchange programmes."

The uncertainty surrounding the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has already fundamentally impacted the experience of international students – a continuing lack of clarity around the implications of Brexit on international students within the UK more broadly, and Scotland specifically, will continue to negatively impact our international student communities. Summing up an important issue for many students, one said:

"I wouldn't say I'm worried about, that you're going out of the EU. I'm more worried about, like, not having enough information about it, if that makes sense?"

7.   Conclusions and ideas for further research

This research project found that international students, much like their domestic counterparts, can struggle with the transition to university. For many international students, regular challenges in transitioning to university are heightened by the distance between themselves and their families, communicating in a second language, and adapting to a new and unfamiliar culture. However, students felt that the welcoming community that they found within Scotland and at the University of Stirling helped them to feel comfortable and enjoy their university experience. In the same way that the University of Stirling works to support students in their transition to university and to foster a welcoming community for international students, a growing focus of work, in Stirling and at other UK HE institutions, is to provide its students with as much clarity as possible during this uncertain period. During the Brexit process, universities need to ensure that their international student communities are provided with as much information as possible about the future.

This research project was undertaken at a Scottish HE institution with a positive record for welcoming international students. Further research should be undertaken within English, Welsh and Northern Irish HE institutions to understanding the differing impacts that Brexit has had on international student communities across the UK, and their varying support needs.

8.   Application of research findings at the University of Stirling

Since the start of the project several actions have been put into place to help support international students throughout the Brexit process. Students clearly identified the need for clear communication and information surrounding Brexit. Leaflets, posters, and business cards have been made to inform students of the findings of the UKCISA-funded research and where they can get up-to-date information on Brexit. The business cards will be given out specifically at a welcome event for international students to send a strong message that the Students' Union is doing everything it can to support students throughout and beyond Brexit.

These publications will also include a link to the jointly organised (between the University of Stirling

Leaflets, posters, and business cards informing students of the findings of the research and where to get up-to-date information on Brexit.

and the Students' Union) Brexit information sessions for students. Four sessions have been organised and are due to take place in September, November, February, and April in the academic year 2018-19. These sessions will be led by a specialist immigration lawyer to update EEA/European students around developments within the Brexit process and what options students have to secure continued UK residency. It will also advise students about their post-study options; how long students can stay after graduating, employment issues, and eligibility to work.

International students also said they wanted to see more international-focused events. In response to this the University and the Students' Union are working together to organise a "Dialogue Dinner" which invites all students to come and share a national cuisine and to discuss an intercultural topic.

An event has been organised to present the results to the Principal and several other members within the senior management team, as well as those university staff members who work directly with EU and international students (eg immigration team, Director of Learning and Teaching). Several international students have been invited to attend. This event will give staff the information needed to take any relevant steps to support international students. There will be time left after the presentation for a discussion.
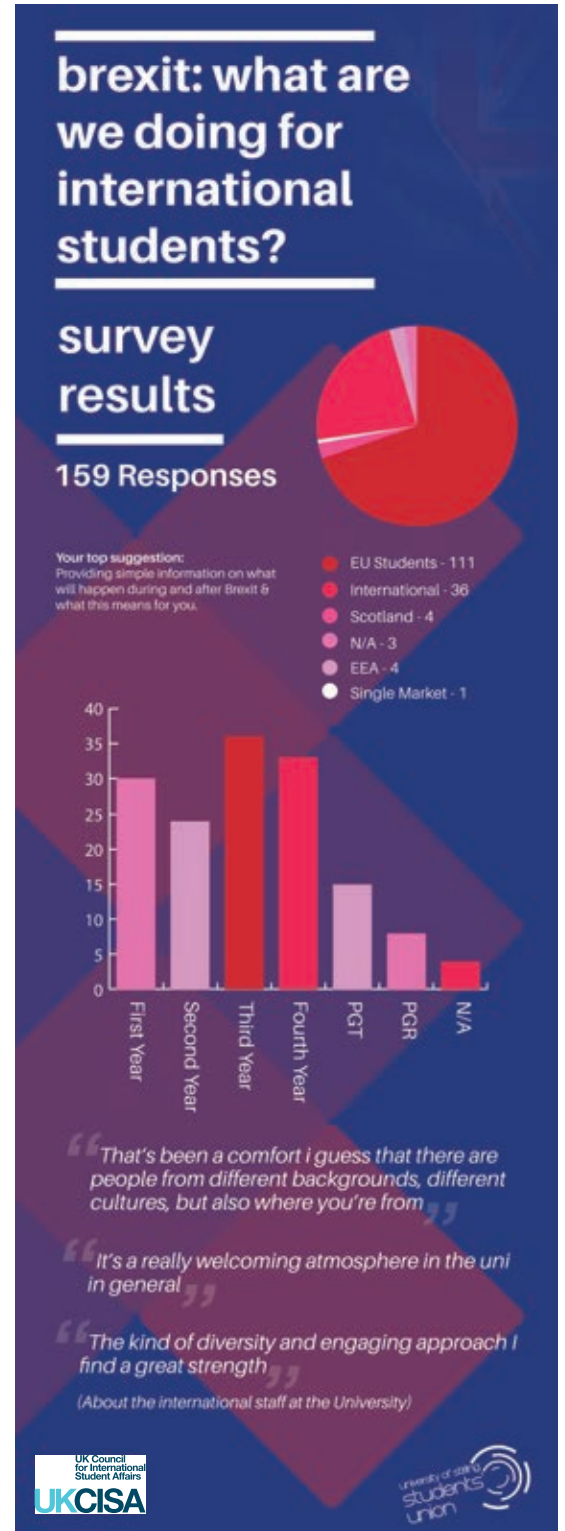
9. Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions and links

It is important that all UK HE institutions proactively work with their international student communities to ensure that they are providing necessary support for their students. In the case of the University of Stirling, the international student community identified a need for clear communication and information about Brexit, increased international-focused events and ensuring that Stirling remains a

welcoming environment for future cohorts of international students. It is important that other UK institutions use these findings as an initial stepping stone or as suggestions, and not as prescribed steps to supporting their own international student community. The responses of UK institutions should be as unique as their university-environment, international community, and geography.

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The lived experiences of international students renting in the private sector in Brighton and Hove:
an investigation into student experience to guide future practice.
University of Sussex

Rebecca Nash, Housing Services Manager
Lucy Walker, Housing Officer

Contents

1. Introduction

This research project carried out by Housing Services at the University of Sussex investigated the individual stories of students who had rented in the private sector within the previous two years in order to capture the thoughts, feelings and experiences around the renting process and support available. Both home students and those from the EU or non-EU took part in a series of focus groups in order for researchers to compare and contrast experiences and gain a clear understanding of the unique challenges that international students face when renting.

The research aimed to develop a key understanding of the areas in which international students would benefit from additional support and services, as well as highlight areas where the University and other public sector services could intervene to make the private rented sector fairer for students and other international renters.

2. Research objectives

In conducting qualitative research, the study aimed to meet the following objectives:
1. Evidence the journey that students take when renting accommodation in the private sector, mapping the barriers faced and support services accessed throughout the process.
2. Assess the benefits of specific advice for international student renters.
3. Identify the impact of legislative changes on the experiences of international students renting in the private sector.

3. Motivation for research

In 2014, the National Union of Students (NUS) published their Homes Fit for Study report, highlighting the often poor environments that students face in private sector accommodation and revealing that over a third of students had problems with the condition of their home (NUS, 2014). Additionally, research from Universities UK (2015) outlined the importance of the cost of accommodation to undergraduate international students in assessing the competitive advantages of study in the UK. When focusing specifically on students in the private rented sector, Rugg et al (2002) assessed the demand from students for private sector housing, with a focus on market dynamics, and Smith (2008) focused on the impact of high-density student populations on the communities in which student housing is situated. Private sector student accommodation is a widely researched area, allowing university housing professionals access to a wealth of information to help shape policy and decision-making within their services. In recent years however, a number of external political factors have influenced the student housing market, and anecdotally, Housing Services at the University of Sussex have come across markers of concern whilst advising international students and hearing about their experiences.

The introduction of Right to Rent legislation in England from February 2016 has created barriers for international students to renting and much confusion amongst landlords and letting agents around their obligations. Research conducted in February 2017 by StudentTenant.com, a year after the legislation was introduced, found that 23% of student landlords were less likely to consider a non-British tenant since the introduction of Right to Rent, and 76% would not consider a tenant if they could not provide Right to Rent documentation immediately. Additionally, the impact of Brexit is an area for concern amongst universities around the

Rebecca Nash (left) and Lucy Walker present their research findings at the UKCISA Conference in June 2018, University of Edinburgh.

Photo credit: Roberto Ricciuti

recruitment of international students, but little attention has yet to be paid to how it may affect the lives of international students that do choose to study in the UK once it has left the EU.

Like many institutions, the University of Sussex offers a wide range of support services for students renting in the private sector, including information and advice materials, events across the year and housing officer appointments to guide students through the renting process. However, these services are for all student groups, without distinction. With concern mounting around the impact of legislative changes on international students in particular, it is more important than ever to listen to the student voice and mould services in response to their lived experiences, creating tailored advice and support for different student groups.

4.   Research methodology

The research took place at the University of Sussex, an institution with over 17,000 students, of which 24% are international fee-paying students. The research was granted full ethical approval from the Social Sciences & Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University, and an academic advisor was obtained to support the researchers in the design and implementation of the study.

As researchers aimed to learn about the thoughts, feelings and experiences of students renting in the private sector, qualitative research methods were employed in the form of in-depth focus groups, with questions designed to map the journey of renting from searching for a property, moving in, living in the rented sector, moving out and lessons learned. As students in groups quite often share the ritual of finding accommodation, a focus group method was preferred in order to examine the interactions between students when discussing private rented housing, as well as singular experiences. As highlighted by Kitzinger (1994):

> **"We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Our personal behaviour is not cut off from public discourses, and our actions do not happen in a cultural vaccum."**
>
> (Kitzinger, 1994:117).

Six in-depth focus groups, each lasting up to one hour 30 minutes were carried out, with a total of 13 participants attending in varying numbers across the focus groups. One of the intended focus groups changed into an in-depth interview as only one of the expected participants attended. The sampling criteria included current students at the University of Sussex, who had rented accommodation in the private sector within the previous two years. A mixture of home students, EU students and

international students were recruited to participate in order for researchers to compare and contrast their renting experiences. The researchers initially aimed for a larger sample size, but found that recurring themes appeared in later focus groups, giving confidence that many key areas were covered.

All focus groups were recorded on digital audio devices, and recordings transcribed for coding before being deleted from file to protect participants' anonymity. Thematic analysis of the data was carried out to identify key areas of discussion throughout the research.

5.   Key research findings

Through thematic analysis of the data, six key topic areas emerged from students' experiences that reflect the research objectives and highlight the barriers that all students face when renting. The research findings also revealed clear distinctions between those challenges experienced by home students, and for those coming from outside the UK. Emerging themes are knowledge, experience and advice; Right to Rent; landlords and letting agents; financial and legal; homestay and lodgings; and networks.

5.1 Knowledge, experience and advice

Across all focus groups, there was an overall theme of a lack of knowledge and experience when embarking on the renting process. This is not surprising considering the demographic of participants and the nature of living away from home for the first time whilst at University. However, the lack of awareness around advice services available to students was concerning, with many learning 'on the job', through informal networks, or most worryingly, from letting agents or landlords themselves.

> **"I don't think I was particularly equipped, I just went on Google and started going. Once you had a look at a few you can kind of gauge, it doesn't take too long to kind of know what's what."**

As the University offers a comprehensive package of support, this may be an indicator that more awareness needs to be generated for students to access these services, or better relationship-building between the University Housing Service and students should be the focus, enabling students to feel comfortable to seek support. Previous experiences from home countries also contributed to the participants' approach to their private sector search, even if that experience was negative:

> **"But when I find out the contract was the whole year, and I had couple of bad experiences in Canada because I went there**

a couple of months I didn't want to rent a place in which I wouldn't be physically so I preferred to find another way to stay in a place in which if I don't like it I can leave to something else."

The above student experience also highlights an additional barrier to the private rented market for international students. Many will only remain in their country of study for the academic year due to financial or visa restrictions, but would be expected to rent a property on a 12-month contract, leaving them to effectively pay for a vacant property for a number of months.

Many of the international student participants also reported difficulty in securing a room due to not being in the country to view the property before agreeing to take it, and so relied heavily on the knowledge and experience of others online to make informed decisions:

"The most difficult thing is because I was in my home country, I couldn't afford to come here just to find an apartment, and then leave just to come back. So I had to do everything via the web."

The importance of networks will be discussed in more detail later in the report, but it is interesting to note that many international students relied on their networks to gain knowledge for them. For example, one participant reported allowing her friends who were in the UK to make the decision on which house to choose without her present, and instead viewed the property virtually through a Skype chat during the viewing.

Almost all participants (both home and international) came to realise across their experience just how competitive the lettings environment is and how quickly properties come on and off the market. This added to the challenges faced by international students, as there is additional pressure to accept properties without taking the time to give them proper consideration.

"I was looking for something where I could have an easy commute to the University so something on the number 25 bus route. But I was pretty desperate so the area didn't matter too much."

What is troubling about this experience is that it highlights not only the lack of choice that international students perceive to have when renting, but also the urgency of the process, something that was observed amongst other participants:

"Things do go really fast here, so it was constantly searching and searching (for a property). Once we found one, it happened pretty quick. I was in Canada with family

looking online and because of the time difference, I was the first person to see it and grab a viewing."

From all participants, it was clear that they could have been better equipped with the knowledge of the renting process, common pitfalls and timescales needed to carry out a successful search. Although the University is a source of this information, it became clear from the research that this support needs to be offered more explicitly, through a wider variety of channels and at an earlier stage. The research also revealed areas in which the sector is not compatible with international student renters, such as the issues with 12-month contracts and lack of ability to view potential properties.

5.2 Right to Rent

Although Right to Rent was not mentioned explicitly by any of the participants, it is identified as a key theme within the research due to the lack of knowledge and confusion when researchers presented the term to participants. Almost all participants, whether home or international did not know what the Right to Rent check was, and when discussed further, many revealed that they had been asked to provide a student card, two international participants were asked for passports and only one had the full correct check. The findings indicate that not only are the students unaware of the legislation, but there was also a lack of correct knowledge from many landlords and letting agents carrying out the check.

When asked about identity documents provided, responses varied:

"Just a form with my name on. As I wasn't with an agency it was really basic."

"In my case, they just wanted contact details of someone else in case, I guess, if something happens to me or need to pay my rent."

The lack of knowledge amongst the student population around Right to Rent legislation is concerning as although none of the participants reported examples of some of the discrimination outlined in the literature, if students are unaware of the correct practice around Right to Rent, they may not identify when potential discrimination is occurring.

What is equally concerning is the variation between participants in checks by their landlords or letting agents. The number of students that reported needing to only show their student card as identification may indicate a trend amongst landlords to assume that the University has validated the students immigration status on their behalf.

It is clear that attention needs to be paid to Right to Rent in both the advice and information that University support services are disseminating to students, and in conversations with local regulatory bodies to ensure that landlords and letting agents are better equipped to carry out checks fairly and correctly. The small sample size of this study revealed only a single correct Right to Rent check, highlighting that it may be a widespread issue within the private rented sector in Brighton and Hove.

5.3 Landlords and letting agents
The relationship between students and their landlords and letting agents was a recurring theme in the data, however home students were far more vocal with regards to issues with that relationship than international students, particularly when it came to maintenance reporting. As discussed previously, this may be due to the competitive nature of the lettings market in Brighton and Hove and could be an area for additional research – are international students in the private sector less likely to complain due to a perceived lack of choice and security?

During the search for accommodation, international students reported difficulty in getting in touch with landlords and knowing who to trust without any prior knowledge of how the lettings process works:

> "For me, the most difficult part was I have sent many emails to many landlords and they didn't reply so that's the most difficult because I didn't know if they agree or not. Some did agree but they say I cannot join immediately they asked me to stay in Airbnb for some days and you can come later and some are on vacation for the summer and will be returning on this date so till then can you hold on for a bit."

Once again, this flags a conflict between the academic year and the availability of some student properties, which for international students, provides a further uncertainty about where they will be living upon arrival in a new country.

One student, living in homestay accommodation spoke of the flexibility that her landlord afforded her due to her international student status:

> "I need to thank my landlord a lot because I explained my situation and she just accepted that and said 'give me the deposit when you arrive and we can do the paperwork when you arrive. Just come and rest and we can talk about it later'."

Although the above is an example of a good-natured and flexible homestay host, it does highlight the lack of security that the particular student had upon arrival. The student was required to place a high level of trust in the landlord and as they travelled to the UK without a contractual agreement for housing, the landlord could have reversed their agreement at any point, leaving the student without accommodation in a new country.

A further point to note from the research is that all but one of the international students studied lived in houses let by private landlords, host families or sublet. This could be due in part to additional barriers in place when renting through an agent such as requiring a UK based guarantor, large deposit requirements or needing to pay rent in advance. If this is the case, once again it reduces the level of choice that international students have in an already fast-paced and highly competitive private sector housing market.

5.4 Financial and legal
Many of the largest barriers that international students faced when renting in the private sector in Brighton and Hove were the financial and legal requirements placed upon them. Difficulty in finding a UK based guarantor was by far the most common of these barriers, with most participants stating that it was impossible to have one considering it was their first time in the UK. Difficulty in securing a guarantor forced international students to seek landlords who would not ask for one, sublet, or live with a host family as outlined in the previous section.

> "They asked me for a UK guarantor which is crazy as I cannot have one. I haven't been in the UK before!"

One of the participants, a PhD student, reported a unique difficulty amongst participants in that the student was in receipt of a salary from the University and could afford to pay for housing, yet the agent still classed them as a student which caused difficulty in securing their accommodation:

> "I couldn't persuade them (letting agent) that I could afford the flat so the fact that I was getting paid from the University, because I am a PhD student I couldn't prove that…I couldn't persuade my landlord that I would get paid."

Anecdotally, from advice given within Housing Services at Sussex, many students with children face a similar issue. They are not eligible to rent student properties because they have dependants, but then struggle to find non-student rental properties that will accept them as tenants because of their student status.

International student participants in the research also reported having to pay six to 12 months rent in advance without a UK-based guarantor, with some even paying the whole rent in advance, just to take the property off the market:

> **"I know some fellow international student friends who had to pay six months, one of my friends paid a full year in advance as he wanted to secure the place."**

Once again, this highlights the competitive nature of the private rented market for students and the power that landlords have when it comes to standards and setting of terms, as international students take extreme action to secure properties due to few other options.

The issue of a reference was also a barrier to renting reported by one of the international student participants, as although the student had rented in her home country, the concept of a landlord reference does not exist there and her previous landlord could not speak or write in English. One participant also spoke of the financial difficulty in having contracts cross over due to different start and end dates:

> **"Having two deposits killed me last year. That was hard. Almost £1,500 floating."**

This is clearly a large financial burden on the student, however if they choose instead to separate contracts, it can also be problematic:

> **"There's not much help for what I'm meant to do when there is a month where I have no house. Sub-letting, which is obviously illegal, but that is what I do and that is what everyone ends up doing. There is nothing else you really can do."**

One of the points to note in this section is that many of these problems can be solved with support functions available at the University, for example, the University has a rent guarantor scheme. The rent guarantor scheme acts as a guarantor for up to 20 Sussex students a year and provides at least 20 homestay places to students who do not have UK guarantors. Places are offered on a first come first served basis and are subject to eligibility criteria. The scheme guarantees up to £135 per week (approximately £578.57 per month) of rent only, and does not guarantee bills. An additional support is letting to students on a short term basis over the summer. It is clear however, that this information is not reaching the student body effectively enough, leaving students to find often-stressful solutions to these issues.

5.5 Homestay and lodgings

Perhaps the most unexpected thoughts and opinions emerged when researchers questioned participants on homestay and lodgings. At the University of Sussex there is an active homestay and lodgings programme, recruiting over 200 landlords per year and advertising rooms to students as an alternative private sector option. It has been widely assumed that the flexible nature of

homestay and the lack of need for a guarantor or large deposit makes it an attractive option for international students; however, the data in this study speaks to the contrary. All participants in the study were asked about their opinions of homestay and lodgings as a private sector option, and none, either home or international, wanted to live with a host family. In fact, one of the participants currently living with a host family stated that they would not chose the option again.

Most participants commented that they felt living in homestay would be like living with their own family and that they wanted greater freedom:

> **"Definitely feel like I'm in someone else's house. Because I have so many restrictions, I can't cook in the evenings. This is the most difficult task for me. She doesn't like me cooking in the evening but I come to Uni in the morning and return in the evening so whenever I have some food in the evening I can eat that otherwise I can't eat at night as she said 'if you want to cook, you cook in the morning or afternoon' as she says she wants to rest."**

In the case of the above participant, once the focus group was complete, the student was offered alternative accommodation due to the concerning restrictions placed upon her by the homestay host, which was declined. At the University of Sussex, all homestay hosts are visited and sign up to a code of conduct preventing restrictions such as these, however this host was found through an alternative website, and the situation faced by the above

participant further highlights the often uncomfortable living situations that international students accept due to restricted alternatives.

Although none of the participants would choose to live in homestay, some stated that they are glad the option is there should they need it, however it is clear that more work should be done to ensure that all student groups have fair access to choice, rather than last resort options.

5.6 Networks

The final key theme that emerged from the research is that of the importance of networks when renting for students. Many of the participants spoke of utilising networks available to them; however, one of the barriers for some was finding a suitable network to access. For one international student participant that lived in the UK previously, it was much easier to secure a property as they had developed a network of people with whom they could live:

> "I had lived in England before so I had experience of Right Move and different sites, so at the end of my first year I tried to do the usual student thing of finding people you want to live with and then looking for a house altogether."

For this student in particular, their church network also allowed them to find a UK-based guarantor and gave them access to advice and support through many who had rented before.

Participants also highlighted the risk of trying to meet people online and develop appropriate networks to secure a group of housemates:

> "I started to look at Spare Room and everything but these websites if you are overseas are difficult because actually you are not in the country, you face a great risk."

One participant felt that by using University tools, such as the dedicated, monitored student house-hunt Facebook page, they felt more secure in the knowledge that they were speaking to other students, highlighting the importance of the University as a network that can be utilised and trusted during the house-hunt.

Students also spoke of the importance of networks that they were a part of as a student:

> "Within the international community on campus, if most international students hang out with international students we might not get all of the full information, whereas I have a network of UK based people, I'm lucky that, if I didn't I can't imagine that it would have been much better to find a place and do it calmly."

It is clear that the creation of useful networks is an area that University housing and advice departments can develop further to offer international students peer-to-peer advice, support and companionship throughout the rental process that could reduce some of the barriers and stresses that are currently faced.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear from the data presented that international students are facing unique pressures when renting accommodation in the private sector, often forcing these students to take extreme measures to secure accommodation, or 'settle' for housing that they do not desire or are comfortable in. For institutions without an abundance of university managed accommodation to offer to international students, these private sector challenges must be fully explored, accounted for in advice services and in many cases lobbied against.

As predicted in undertaking the study, Right to Rent poses challenges to renting for international students, and it is important that housing advice services bring attention to the legislation when disseminating advice, as only with a full understanding of their rights, can a tenant know when those rights are being ignored. Although this research did not generate any explicit examples of discrimination in response to other legislative changes, it should be noted that the small sample size may not be generalizable and does not mean discrimination is not happening and so further research is required.

Within Housing Services at the University of Sussex, this research has been incredibly enlightening and the service is committed to continuing to listen to students throughout their private renting searches to ensure that support is as relevant and useful as possible. The Housing Service is very good at collecting data from students that live in University-managed accommodation, however this UKCISA grant-funded research has enforced the equal importance of measuring the support the service offered to students who do not. As such, the research recommendations are presented below, along with the University of Sussex Housing Services commitment to set an example through our own practice:

1. **Create advice and support materials and services that are tailored to the international student experience when renting in the private sector.**
   University of Sussex Housing Services are now committed to developing specific printed and online materials for international students, private sector webinars and Skype advice appointments that consider the geographical barriers faced. A

review of the awareness of housing advice services amongst students will also take place to identify ways to spread the word.

2. **Generate relationships with relevant stakeholders to lobby for change to unfair practice in the private sector.**
University of Sussex is a founding member of Rent Smart Brighton & Hove, a service offering advice and support for renters that also joins stakeholders such as Universities, Brighton and Hove City Council, Citizens Advice, Landlords Associations and other partners to lobby for fairer renting practice:
www.rentsmartbrightonhove.org

3. **Survey and interview students prior to arrival, across the academic year and after advice is given to review practice.**
The research stated within this study will continue through the next academic year and beyond in order to respond to new challenges as swiftly and effectively as possible. The Housing Services team at the University will fund small scale focus groups, of up to 20 people in total, twice a year. The funding will go towards incentives for students to take part, as the Housing Services team will carry out and transcribe the focus groups, which means no external funding will be required.

4. **If you are able, offer international students a guarantor service**.
The findings of this research will contribute to a review into the University of Sussex guarantor service to see if it can be advertised more effectively and support more students.

5. **Facilitate the creation of networks to offer support to international renters.**
University of Sussex Housing Services will invite colleagues from other relevant services across the University to explore the idea of the creation of an online network for student renters, offering peer-to-peer support, advice from University services and clear information to help with a private sector search.

We hope that the research carried out inspires others to think about their own offering of housing support and how although home and international students experience many of the same challenges, international students face unique barriers to renting that with the right support can be overcome effectively.

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8. Contact

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This Is Me
Bridgend College

Samantha Gunnarsson, Wellbeing and Safeguarding Manager

Project aims

'This Is Me' was aimed at raising awareness of the number of students who attend Bridgend College from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The aim was to celebrate differences and welcome cultural diversity within Bridgend College. It was also anticipated that the increase in awareness would help everyone to learn by sharing experiences of religious festivals and cultural events.

Background to Bridgend College

Bridgend College is one of the highest performing colleges in Wales and is rated as 'Excellent' by Estyn. In 2017 the College was awarded an Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Award for Leadership and Governance and is the highest ranking FE College in the Sunday Times Top 100 not-for-profit Best Companies 2017.

Bridgend has a population of 140,100 and of that population only 3,900 describe themselves as from a 'non-white' background (Statistics Wales, 2018). However, Bridgend is situated equidistant between the Welsh capital, Cardiff and the city of Swansea. Both cities have ambitious city deals and regionalisation along the M4 corridor presents both exciting opportunities and challenges for the College.

Project outcomes

There was a lot of good work already happening but 'This Is Me' has enabled us to invest in this area to ensure the College and wider community have been made aware of the cultural diversity at Bridgend. We have also been able to celebrate cultural and religious events. We would not have had the opportunity to do so, on such a large scale, if the funding had not been available.

The project outcomes include:
1. Greater knowledge and awareness of cultural diversity
Jane Richards, the tutor for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) took the lead in rolling out this project and has won a staff award for Teaching Excellence. Staff commented that Jane has been instrumental in raising awareness of cultural diversity across Bridgend College. We now have active social media streams that promote cultural and religious events.

2. A greater understanding of cultural and religious values
A series of events took place over the academic year to promote the inclusivity of Bridgend College and welcome students from all cultural backgrounds. The events celebrated their heritage and raised awareness of British values and citizenship of living in Wales.

The following activities took place:
- a languages quiz
- a Chinese New Year event
- a community cohesion event
- an educational trip to the Senedd in Cardiff Bay
- clog dancing
- promotion and celebration of successes throughout the academic year
- a multicultural bake-off

3. An increased representation of BME and overseas learners involved in Learner Voice and Learner Engagement activities
A number of Learner Engagement activities were attended by BME and overseas learners. We raised the level of participation in Learner Voice (the College student representative system) by having forums in the classroom. Staff then shared students' comments with a wider audience (this was in place of students' direct involvement as there was a lack of confidence to speak publically).

Project set up

It was strongly felt that all the good work that has been done to support students from culturally diverse backgrounds had not been promoted and shared widely enough across the College and the local community. This project and the funding enabled the ESOL team, who have the most contact with students from a variety of cultures, to raise awareness across the academic year in a variety of positive and innovative ways that fully engaged their students, as well as other students across the College.

The initial plan was to include ESOL students as part of the Learner Voice structure within the College, but due to the fact that English is their second language, they did not feel confident enough to speak in a large group. It was agreed that the curriculum staff would ask the students what events they would like to join, in order to share their experiences of, for example:
- living in their own country
- the structure of politics
- national dishes
- national folk dance

Student welcome

A banner of artwork was created to welcome all students in as many languages as possible and is on the College website as well as the top banner of the ESOL Bridgend College Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Project activities and timeline
Facebook
The Facebook page had an increased focus on cultural topics. It promoted and reminded students

of many religious festivals and celebrations and national days within the UK. We celebrated ESOL students passing the Life in the UK test. It also:
- offered volunteering opportunities,
- highlighted changes in current politics (eg the budget)
- shared information from ESOL students in London about how to stay safe online
- promoted wellbeing and focused support
- provided information on anti-slavery, drug and alcohol support
- celebrated National Women's Day

September 2017
Online quiz. To celebrate European Languages Day on 26 September, all ESOL students said 'Hello, How are you?' in their own language and participants had to identify the language.

October 2017
ESOL students celebrated Shwmae Day with mini Welsh lessons (students learned how to express likes on the topic of food).

ESOL students visited Castell Coch.

November 2017
The College received a visit from PC Dave Lawrence, the Hate Crime Officer, to raise awareness and inform students how to recognise and report a hate crime. He also promoted job opportunities to work for South Wales Police 'Working Towards a Representative Workforce' to BME / black and minority Communities.
(An ESOL student responded to this and received confirmation that she has been offered a place to train as a Police Officer).

December 2017
ESOL students attended the Christmas Pantomime which was a new experience for many.

There was a Christmas party with food from each culture provided as well as cards, gifts and a quiz.

ESOL students gave presentations on:
- famous people from their country
- the political systems in their country
- famous places in their country
and they also produced posters on what to do in different emergency situations. Students voted for their favourite presentation or poster and prizes were awarded in each category.

January 2018
ESOL students celebrated Saint Dwynwen's Day when they visited the Student Services area and had tea and Welsh cakes.

February 2018
ESOL students, Childcare and Health & Social Care students celebrated Chinese New Year and enjoyed the Bridgend International group performing plays, Korean Martial Arts, songs and traditional lion dancing. Chinese food was provided and everyone who came to watch received a Chinese calendar and a fortune cookie.

This was the first time many Bridgend students and staff had witnessed and been involved in such an event. When tutors saw the quality of the event, they contacted peers to bring additional groups of students to attend and be a part of the celebration. Following the event there were many positive

comments from students, staff and external visitors about how much they had enjoyed the experience. They were excited to be involved and we received emails from tutors expressing their thanks.

March 2018
Saint David's Day - Sut mae tywydd heddiw? What is the weather like today?
The students and staff used icons and Welsh language to describe the weather they were experiencing that day to celebrate Welsh history and language.

Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team (EYST) event to offer support and meet the needs of BME young people, families and individuals including refugees and asylum seekers living in Wales.

ESOL students took part in Welsh Clog dancing with Tudur Phillips with instructions in Welsh. Students participated in a 'twmpath' among other dances.

June 2018
ESOL students went to Cardiff Bay, saw many landmarks and visited the Senedd. They met with RAF personnel, received a speech from the First Minister Carwyn Jones AM for Bridgend and met with Kirsty Williams, the Minister of Education in Wales. Students thanked Kirsty for the support ESOL students receive from the Welsh Government.
End of term party with a traditional dish from the country of each student.

Challenges
Ensuring the project was delivered consistently and was embedded within the curriculum was challenging. Priority was always given to exams and deadlines and ensuring students completed their courses successfully. The budget (£2,000) was adequate to deliver the project which included outside partner agencies, trips for all students, transport, participating in clog dancing, hosting a community cohesion event and a prize for the languages test.

Sustainability
There is an ESOL team in the College who promote pathways (education and employment) to their students and work hard to promote cultural awareness and diversity. When the student moves onto a full time, FE course, they are encouraged to take advantage of the support from the Wellbeing Team. This is to continue to promote and encourage all students to take advantage of the student engagement opportunities such as Learner Voice, Be Active and Be Involved.

Regarding 'This Is Me' activities, we will continue with those that had an initial start up cost (eg marketing and promotional material that has been time protected). There have been positive links made within the community which has enabled us to work collaboratively with some groups in a way that is mutually beneficial, such as South Wales Police and the local Chinese community. There are new initiatives being developed within the Bridgend community to identify ethnic minority groups and to establish positive support and inclusion. The College will continue its efforts to actively raise awareness of cultural similarities and differences and to make support available to all, but also to have increased representation of international students in Learner Voice and student engagement activities.

Recommendations for other UK institutions:
- Identify staff that are equally invested / passionate in raising awareness of your project aims.
- Identify course areas that lend themselves easily to your key goal and tasks
- Identify local partners/organisations that are willing to support your project at little or no cost – they are out there!
- Work collaboratively so that the work is shared out rather than one person trying to manage the entire project and bring ideas to fruition.
- Use promotion/branding/hashtags that are immediately recognisable and encourage all involved in the project to use them, share posts or retweet to get as much coverage as possible.

Links to further information
Statistics Wales, 2018 https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Equality-and-Diversity/Ethnicity/ethnicity-by-area-ethnicgroup

Social media has played a pivotal part in raising awareness and sharing cultural experiences at Bridgend College.

Bridgend College Website - English for Speakers of Other Languages: https://www1.bridgend.ac.uk/our-courses/learn-english-esol/

Bridgend College Website - Important College Events which include Equality and Diversity events: https://www1.bridgend.ac.uk/important-dates/

ESOL Twitter account - ESOL Bridgend College @jerichards4

Facebook Page - ESOL Bridgend College: https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Language-School/ESOL-Bridgend-College-778774598886649/

All photos posted on the ESOL Bridgend College Facebook page promoting Religious Festivals, Cultural Events, Citizenship and Awareness weeks / months: https://www.facebook.com/778774598886649/photos/a.778789318885177.1073741828.778774598886649/1652233251540775/?type=3

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Pathways to Success
University of Kent

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Contents

1. Executive summary

This project has been devised in order to collect information from students studying at universities across the University Pathways Alliance (UPA) about their experiences on international pathways to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the UK.

The research identifies benefits and challenges derived from studying on an international pathway programme and makes recommendations through students own voices, which are intended to be relevant to international students who are planning to follow similar programmes in the future.

In this way, the project is intended to present a student-to-student resource which will have relevance across the sector and to students all around the world.

The surveys and interviews, used to collect data in this project, were organised according to six categories. These were as follows:

- Subject knowledge
- Study skills
- Adapting to life in the UK
- Personal and social development
- Language
- Global citizenship

The results indicate patterns of perceived benefit in joining a pathway programme in terms of students' views on their development across the identified categories. This has then enabled the identification of a set of recommendations for educators to take into account in their development and review of similar pathways programmes, across the sector. The student views gathered will also inform a student handbook and set of video resources which will be open source. (Links will be available on the UKCISA website)

Please note that a longer report which includes further demographic data and appendices is available online.

2. Introduction and rationale

The main aim of this project has been to continue to further enhance and support international students across the UK, as they seek to embark on international pathway programmes, which will ultimately qualify them for undergraduate or postgraduate studies at UK universities.

The term 'International Pathways', has been used to refer to a range of different areas of programme delivery which provide access for international students to undergraduate or postgraduate study. This includes:

- International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) leading to undergraduate study,
- Pre-Masters Programmes, in preparation for postgraduate study, and

- Pre-sessional Courses in English for Academic Purposes and Academic Skills. Pre-sessional courses can lead to either undergraduate or postgraduate study and can be combined or taught in different level groups.

The study draws on the expertise and proactive collaboration of the eight member institutions of the University Pathways Alliance (UPA). The UPA (2018) is an alliance of highly-respected international pathways to UK degrees which are designed, managed and delivered directly by UPA member universities. The UPA has been established by eight high-ranking UK universities and is intended to provide effective mechanisms for information exchange and communication. Current UPA member institutions are as follows:

- University of Birmingham
- Cardiff University
- University of Kent
- University of Leeds
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of Reading
- University of Southampton
- Queen Mary University of London

As noted by Hyland (2006), in recent years, international student recruitment has become a fixed priority for the UK and the international university sector at large. Also on the matter of internationalisation in HE, Leask (2009) contends that, institutional interest in aspects of internationalisation is a result of the "increased interconnections between nations and peoples of the world" produced by globalization (p.205).

This project takes the view that 'international students are crucial to the diversity of our campuses and the experience of UK students, both academically and culturally. When students return home, or move on to the world of work, it is these strong professional and personal links that provide long-term, 'soft power' benefits for the UK.' (University of Edinburgh and the British Council, 2017 and Manning, in Britcher 2017). Evidence such as that gathered by HEPI & Kaplan (2018) also shows how the benefit to the UK of international students is ten times that of the costs.

In line with this phenomenon, the provision of international pathway programmes as a means for international students to access HE, is an area of activity which has also developed rapidly in recent decades. The importance of this route into HE is highlighted by the volume of students who are engaging with such international pathways. Similarly, given these circumstances, quality and innovation are of critical importance to allow international pathway programmes to continue to thrive (Manning, 2018).

A recent estimation (Study Portals, 2015) has calculated more than 1,000 programmes across the world and almost two thirds of programmes based in the UK.

According to some of HESA's most recent statistics (2015) 7,990 non-UK domiciled students were registered at UK universities for non-degree undergraduate courses, many of whom would represent registrations on IFPs or Pre-Masters programmes.

Data for private providers of international pathways (Centre Forum, 2011) shows that private providers in the UK enrolled more than 15,400 students onto their pathways in 2011 and that an estimated 40% of non-EU HEI students had previously studied via a pathway provider in the UK in 2013/14.

The findings drawn from this research project will create important new resources which will harness the power of international pathways students' own voices in order to support new students in their quest for success in pathways to UK HE.

The impact of the research will be broadened through the creation and championing of the newly-created resources by the eight institutions of the UPA, each member of which will contribute to the project and the implementation of the resources which emerge. The materials, in the form of a handbook and set of video testimonials, will also be made available in an open-source format for future pathways students and international pathway programme providers to access within the UK and beyond.

3.   Theoretical framework

As Duff (2002, p.22) acknowledges, a greater understanding and appreciation of different research methods can assist in developing the scope of research in the academic field. Furthermore, according to Dörnyei (2007, p.44) insight into complementary realities can be particularly advantageous in Applied Linguistics. It is clear to see that this is true of other instances where information on international students' needs has been collected. It is an approach that enables

the identification of complementary realities to be seen as positive for the validity and reliability of interpretations.

Pragmatism is generally regarded as an appropriate paradigm for mixed methods inquiry (Denscombe, 2010, p.149). It comprises a set of assumptions about ontology and epistemology, which differentiates the underlying philosophy from positivism and interpretivism whilst including a number of the features advocated by critical theorists and decontructivists. A number of the axioms associated with pragmatism have been summarised below in Table1:

Table 1: Pragmatism - a paradigm for this research into student perceptions of success

Features of pragmatism	Type of support
Ontology	Today's truth may not be truth tomorrow. Absolute truth is a hopeless cause.
Epistemology	Knowledge is provisional and based on practical outcomes. Knowledge is judged on usefulness and how it can be applied.
Methodology	There is no single best method leading to indisputable knowledge. Perceived dualisms in research paradigms and methods are seen as unhelpful. There is scepticism about the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods.
Friends who have experience with doctoral work	Emotional, academic
Friends without experience with doctoral work	Emotional, perspective, escape
Peers from their country or culture	Emotional, cultural adjustment, escape
Neighbours or housemates	Social adjustment, belonging

The construct used to steer this investigation and the collection of data to respond to the research questions was developed through consultation with colleagues across the UPA and a collective understanding of how students should expect to develop and progress through study on international pathway programmes, as mechanisms to join undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Once an initial construct was developed, this was also informed with reference to areas of focus within the International Student Lifecycle project (Advance HE, 2018). In addition, given the international focus of the research and the researchers' interest in students' international student experience a set of items was added in the area of global citizenship.

As a result, the construct and key themes for areas of perceived development and progress, as measures of challenge or success, used for the questionnaire and interviews, were as follows:

Table 2: Thematic construct for the project

Construct for areas of student perceived development and progress as measures of challenge or success
▪ Subject knowledge
▪ Study skills
▪ Adapting to life in the UK
▪ Personal and social development
▪ Language
▪ Global citizenship

This stage of the project was essential in order to establish accurately the type of data which needed to be collected, Mason (2002, p.48-50) The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data collected from both the survey and interview tools was used to provide an additional level of corroboration for the identified findings (Dörnyei, 2007, p.165).

4.   Research questions

The venture recognises the importance and impact of international pathway provision as a key route into HE for international students from across the world. A key aim of the project is to enhance the understanding of the challenges faced by this group of international students, which occupies a marginal position within HE, in order to improve the experience of future international pathways students.

The 'Pathways to Success' project seeks to collect the views of students who have completed international pathway programmes, such as IFPs, pre-sessional courses and pre-Masters, in order to identify patterns and present recommendations which will help future students.

The research questions which underpin this project is as follows:
- What are the views of international pathway students regarding the challenges faced in taking an international pathway programme?
- What are the benefits which they have derived from this route into university study?
- What recommendations do these students who have progressed have for future students who are following in their footsteps?

5.   Research methodology

The research involved the design and dissemination of a survey tool and the conducting of interviews with international pathway students across the eight universities in the UPA. It should be noted that the original research proposal referenced the collection of data from focus groups, however, when considering the need to video students and the number of willing participants, it was decided that interviews would be a preferable approach.

In line with the pragmatic paradigm approach, the research followed a mixed method approach to data collection. This involved the following research tools:

A. The design of an online survey tool, including items which enable both quantitative and qualitative analysis of collected data. The survey was designed in order to be administered to students across the eight institutions of the University Pathways Alliance. In order to capture information regarding the challenges experienced by pathways students who have now successfully progressed onto their intended degree programmes.

B. The design and running of a series of interviews, also to be filmed, with students studying at different UPA universities in the UK.

5.1 Survey design

For the purposes of the survey created for this research agenda, it was decided to use an online survey tool in order to be able to access a sufficiently wide number of respondents across the UPA institutions. The survey was designed and offered for review by the eight member institutions of the UPA.

Typically, questionnaires and surveys are complex structures used for data collection focusing on items which request quite specific information. It is generally accepted that questionnaires seek to measure factual, behavioural and attitudinal information (Bethlehem, 2009, p.44; Denscombe, 2010 p.11-13; Dörnyei, 2003, p.5; 2007, p.102). Given this situation, it can be seen that the questionnaire is useful for the quantitative aspect of this research agenda, a number of questions were also included which also allowed for flexible open responses in the survey and qualitative analysis. The full questionnaire, which was administered to respondents is available in Appendix 2 of the online version of this document.

In order to ensure that the questions were fit for purpose the following steps were implemented (Bryman, 2008, p.241-244):

- The research questions, were kept in view in order to ensure that the survey items accurately reflected the research objectives
- Questions were written with the solicitation of specific types of information in mind and
- Questions were revised in order to attempt to ensure that they were not too general or obtuse in nature.
- Where possible ambiguous and technical terminology was avoided and where applicable complex concepts were explained

5.2 Interview design

In designing the interview protocol, a semi-structured approach to questioning was identified in conjunction with the research questions for the project, and there was also close reference to the construct under investigation, as discussed earlier

in Table 2. In addition, key themes which emerged from analysis of the survey, were also available to the researcher, so that these could assist with identifying patterns of information which could potentially be supported or refuted through the interviews.

The framework adopted for the interviews is evident from the interview summary records in Appendix 3 (which you can read in the online version of this report at www.ukcisa.org.uk).

6. Research ethics and confidentiality

The proposed research adheres to the University of Kent's ethical approval procedures for data collection and usage and retention and pays close attention to the regulations as described in new GDPR regulations. In advance of embarking on the research, ethical approval was gained and participants were made aware of this through the Participant Information Sheet. All participants were required to confirm their understanding of the purpose, aims of the research and use of their data

during the completion of the survey and in advance of participating in the interviews and associated videos.

7.   Analysis

For the purpose of analysing the data collected through the survey and interview methods, a series of tools were identified. This includes histograms, representing the results of Likert scale items and pie charts to indicate incidence and spread of responses. These mechanisms were utilised in order to identify common or prevalent tendencies which emerge from individual questionnaire items and Likert scales.

Content analysis was identified as an appropriate analysis method for open responses in the survey and interviews. This tool examines and organises patterns of meaning in data such as, qualitative open-response data and interview responses. (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p.314). For the purpose of this research project, it was used with interview summaries and video records, in order to identify meaning or trends embedded within

qualitative responses. In qualitative content analysis categories of meaning surface through close examination and, according to Denscombe (2010, p.281-283), as a result content analysis can reveal otherwise hidden aspects within texts.

One aim in using mixed methods and the above-mentioned forms of analysis is to enable triangulation of findings which can then inform recommendations. These recommendations will inform the handbook and the arrangement of video resources on the website where the project materials will be displayed for public access.

8.   Findings
8.1 Summary of demographic data

Overall, the demographic data from the survey respondents appears to show that there was a sufficiently high level of engagement with the survey in order to make the extrapolations relevant for broader generalisation. This was due to the broad range of respondent domiciles which also correlated with the most frequent regional domicile groups of the broader UK international HE. The interviewees also included representatives from a broad range of nationalities and had representatives from the Asia, Europe and Africa regions. Despite a slight skew due to the high volume of pre-sessional students at one institution, the spread of programmes which survey respondents have referred to also mirrors the breadth of engagement with pathways in the wider UK sector. The data also provides sufficient volumes of information from survey respondents who have attended undergraduate and postgraduate pathways. The interview data also showed a spread of

programmes of study across both undergraduate and postgraduate pathways.

Data from both the interviews and survey also indicates that respondents and interviewees have completed their pathways study sufficiently recently, so as to be able to provide relevant data on their experiences in their transition to higher levels of study.

With regard to gender split, the survey data mirrors the sector, to some extent, showing a higher number of female respondents. However, the interview data shows more male interviewees than females. This could be considered as a mitigating mechanism to balance the views of the survey responses which gained a higher proportion of female respondents.

Full details and analysis of the demographic data is available in the online version of this report.

8.2 Survey item analysis

The survey questions were organised into six main categories, as linked to the construct for the investigation, as follows:
1. Subject knowledge development
2. Study skills development
3. Adapting to life in the UK
4. Personal and social development
5. Language development
6. Development as a global citizen

For each category, respondents were asked to identify whether their programme of study had helped them to develop in that particular area and to grade their progress. In addition to this, they were asked what they had found the most difficult and the most useful relating to each specific category, and what they would do differently if they were to do the same programme of study again. These latter open questions provided rich feedback which we have rationalised into main themes.

8.2.1 Survey quantitative results

Results show there is clear benefit in joining a pathway programme in terms of students' perceptions of development across the identified categories, with an overall of 77% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that their programme of study had helped them develop and 90% of respondents awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories (with 5% as progressed a lot and 0% indicating no progress at all). There is variation between the programmes of study with only 60% of IFY students strongly agreeing or agreeing that their programme of study had helped them develop and 87% of respondents awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories. By contrast, 68% of pre-sessional students and 78%

Table 3   Most common themes in open questions (What was the most difficult? What was the most useful? What would you do differently?)

Open question themes
Academic writing and essays
Adapting to UK
Available resources including electronic materials
Be better prepared
Be more open/attentive to others
Communication with locals
Critical thinking, analysis and applying knowledge
Feedback/supportive teachers
Finding something in common with other students
Grammar
Independent living
Interacting/socialising with different cultures
Language barrier/communication
Listening
Listening skills
Reading and library skills
Research and referencing
Sharing different cooking
Social interaction (generally)
Speaking
Study skills development and independent learning
Subject focus and particular modules
Unwelcoming British
Views and opinions on lecturers and support and guidance
Vocabulary/reading

of pre-Master's students strongly agreed or agreed that their programme of study had helped them develop and 90% of Pre-sessional students and 96% of pre-Master's students awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories. It was hoped that the open questions would allow for some indication as to why there is such variance but the responses have not shed light on this. This is therefore an area to be researched further in order to identify reasons for the variance.

Overall, respondents saw the programme supporting their development the most in study skills (84%), language (82%) and subject knowledge (81%) and the least in their development as a global citizen. The above is true of respondents on all programmes with study skills, language and subject knowledge development being top for IFY, pre-Master's and pre-sessional students alike. However, while both IFY and pre-sessional students have identified their development as a global citizen being least supported, pre-Master's students have identified adapting to life in the UK and personal and social development as the least supported on their course. The fact that more pre-sessional students (73%) than IFY students (65%) saw their

course as supporting subject knowledge development could be seen as contradictory given that IFY will invariably include subject modules as part of the programme whereas pre-sessional will not focus as clearly on subject knowledge. The efforts on pre-sessional courses to bring in authentic materials and require students to write about their chosen subject specialism, however, seems to counteract the lack of clear subject focus.

Respondents indicated they had made the most progress in adapting to life in the UK and their study skills development (both 91%) but the least development in becoming a global citizen (85%). While adapting to life in the UK was not one of the categories where respondents saw their programme of study supporting their development the most, they felt they had developed a lot in this area. This discrepancy can be expected given that much of the adapting to life in the UK will happen outside of the programme of study. There is little variation across the different courses although 100% of pre-Master's students indicated they had improved or improved a lot in their language skills development.

8.2.2 Survey qualitative results

As mentioned above, in relation to each of the six categories respondents were asked what on the course they had found the most difficult and the most useful, and what they would do differently if they did the same programme of study again. There were a wide range of responses to these questions for each category and these have been rationalised into a maximum of five main themes which attracted the highest number of similar responses and one 'other' which encompasses all other responses. Some themes are common across most questions; writing and speaking both appear nine times across a total of 18 questions. What respondents would do differently regarding their development as a global citizen attracted the fewest responses (27) whereas difficulties in language development attracted the most (90). It should be noted, however, that the *'what you would do differently'* questions consistently attracted fewer responses. The main themes listed against each of the questions and references to difficulty, usefulness and areas which students would approach differently in future, are included in Appendix 2 (which you can read in the online version of this report). Table 6 gives an overview of the most common themes referenced by respondents, spread across themes and questions.

What is apparent from the data is that respondents identified the same items for *most difficult* and *most useful*, and in many cases *what you would do differently*. This seems to suggest that students found those items challenging either before joining or once on their programme of study but then

found that the training received was useful in overcoming that same difficulty. Where items recur in all three questions one might conclude that students had now reflected on their needs in more depth and were they to start again would focus more on those areas they now understand and both challenging but useful.

For the three categories which we may see as more traditional learning outcomes for pathway programmes (development of subject knowledge, study skills and language) the main themes from responses also match a traditional English for Academic Purposes syllabus, including academic writing (specifically of essays), reading (of academic writing), and academic interactions (more specifically lectures and seminars). Some of these themes also appear in the other three question sets (adapting to life in the UK, personal and social development and global citizenship) but with a different focus. For example, speaking is mentioned as challenging in the context of adapting to life in the UK, of personal and social development and of developing as a global citizen, and consistently speaking more to more people in a wider range of contexts appears as something respondents would do differently.

It seems advisable for all involved in the management and design of pathway programmes to ensure they give students the largest number of opportunities to engage with the items identified in each theme. It might also be useful to more clearly highlight the advantages of each category and their themes to learners, in order for us to better support our students and for them to gain the best advantage of their learning opportunity.

8.3 Interview analysis

In total eight interviews were conducted with participants stemming from five of the eight UPA member institutions. Although attempts were made to recruit participating students from each of the UPA institutions, as this relied on volunteers, after a number of attempts the researchers accepted that the number secured was the optimal position.

Interview questioning followed the same pattern as the structure of the survey and involved asking

students to comment on their development and progress in the areas associated with the thematic construct for the project:

- Subject knowledge
- Study skills
- Adapting to life in the UK
- Personal and social development
- Language
- Global citizenship

At the time of the interview sessions, the interviewer also had access to the most prevalent themes which had emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative items in the survey.

8.3.1 Interview themes

With regard to **subject knowledge** there appeared to be a consensus from interviews that their knowledge developed during the pathway programme which they attended and this was closely linked to their progressively developing skills in using English for academic purposes.

Comments linked to **study skills** overlapped with those made about subject knowledge but a number of interviewees referred to aspects of critical thinking and referencing skills as particularly important and useful.

When interviewees referred to **adapting to life in the UK**, a common thread was linked to communication with local people and the challenges associated with initiating successful conversations in informal situations.

As far as personal and **social development** is concerned, all respondents made reference to the importance of strategies for integration with the wider university or external community, with the strongest thread throughout all responses and themes being the shared view that joining university societies is important for personal and social development.

When discussing **language development**, all respondents mentioned the importance or challenges of developing listening skills in the academic and social context. Other language skills referred to by numerous interviewees, also overlapping with references to study skills, include, reading and speaking.

Regarding the **development of global citizenship**, nearly all interviewees appeared to recognise the value in mixing with a wide range of different nationalities and the intercultural understandings which could be benefitted from. Three respondents, spread across three different institutions referred to the fact that their broader international experience at university was challenged by large numbers of students from a particular nationality grouping.

On the matter of additional reflections, the researchers found these to be particularly engaging accounts which provide further meaningful contextualisation of the points raised across the themes in the survey responses. These were deemed important to capture within the video resources which will form part of the project output.

8.4 Summary of survey overall findings combined from the survey and interviews

The results of the quantitatively focused items demonstrate that international pathway students acknowledge a clear sense of development across all the subcategories listed.

Of all the areas of potential development within their programme of study, which students were asked to comment on, respondents agreed most strongly that development in study skills, language use and subject knowledge was derived through their studies. This was also supported by comments from respondents in open questions.

The interview data also supports the fact that students feel that their knowledge and study skills have developed during their pathway programme. In addition to skills in using English for Academic Purposes, the interview comments reveal students' appreciation of developing skills in critical thinking and referencing their research.

It was noted from the quantitative data that a sense of development through students' programme of study was heightened amongst students who had followed postgraduate-focused pathways. Interestingly, in the open comments from the qualitative data, there also appears to be a linkage between references to challenge, which is embedded within programmes of study, and student perceptions of usefulness. This indicates that students realise that they need to confront complex ideas and skills in order to make significant progress.

In terms of where respondents felt they made the most progress during their programme of study, the quantitative data suggests that this was in adapting to life in the UK and study skills development. This is also backed up by the interview data which shows how a number of students took time to learn how to communicate with local residents in different social contexts.

In the qualitative survey data, language development also received the highest number of comments in the open questions. It is also clear that writing and speaking were frequently occurring themes across all open questions when reference to development and challenge is made. Other frequent references include reference to student

focus and teaching of subject knowledge and study skills. This is backed up with frequent references to the same topics within the quantitative survey data and through reference to the importance of study skills, via the interview data. During the interviews when discussing language development, listening skills were the most commonly referenced priority.

Lower levels of development and progress were noted or made reference to in Global Citizenship in both the qualitative and quantitative data from the survey. When this is considered in conjunction with the interview data it appears that this may be due to large groups of international students from particular nationality groups and the influence which this has on students who are representatives of smaller populations of nationality on their programme of study. Linked to this aspect of networking and social integration, when commenting on personal and social development, a number of interviewees made reference to the importance of strategies for integration with the wider university or external community. There appeared to be consensus that joining university societies is important for personal and social development.

9. Conclusions and implications for the handbook and video resources

As a result of the analysis of data collected and the key findings which have been extrapolated, the following recommendations have been reached. These are intended to be transferable to a broad range of contexts where educationalists are working with international students who are preparing to study in overseas contexts and will also, more

specifically inform the design and usage of the student handbook and video resources which will accompany this project.

- The students who have participated in this particular research project acknowledge that their programme of study has had an important impact on their success in preparing for higher levels of study in an international context. This is evidenced through patterns of perceived areas of development and progress, on international pathways programmes in the UPA group. As the UPA institutional membership is drawn from a cross-section of HE institutions and shares features of good practice with other high-quality providers in the broader sector, many of the categories and themes identified by students are relevant for interpretation and action in the wider international pathway arena. With regard to additional outputs from this project, the handbook and video resources, designed for open access, will draw on the key themes and messages, as presented by student participants. It is envisaged that this could help future students around the world to learn from their predecessors, and to help focus their attention on key areas of study as well as fostering broader supportive interaction with their community and new host culture.

- Respondents agreed most strongly that development in study skills, academic language use and subject knowledge was derived through their pathways studies. As a result, materials designed by educators for students' use should take this into account. Other areas which have emerged from the data, which are relevant for

consideration across the sector include the importance of continuing to encourage future students to develop their general EAP and Academic Skills. The data suggests that this is particularly the case in certain areas, including: critical thinking, reading and listening in and outside the classroom.

- The sense of development through students' programme of study appeared to be heightened amongst students who had followed postgraduate-focused pathways. This suggests that educators are likely to need to continue to assist students studying at pre-undergraduate level in tracking and noting their learning trajectory, in addition to giving ongoing attention to formative opportunities which encourage assessment for learning. The student handbook and videos from this research may also need to present the views and advice to undergraduate pathway students in a way which seeks to address the different approaches between undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

- Data from different sources shows that adapting to life in the UK was identified as a particular area of progress for students and that this can also be linked to personal and social development, when comments on communication strategies with local residents are factored in. This means that the handbook could also usefully draw future students' attention to the likely transition that they will experience when they start a pathway programme in the UK and strategies for understanding and engaging with local people.

- The results showed lower levels of progress and development in the sense of global citizenship, compared to the other sub constructs. Views expressed also refer to challenges of networking or interacting brought about by large groups of students from particular nationalities. When this is considered alongside the consensus that joining societies helps integration, it is strongly felt that this situation should be represented in the handbook in order to encourage students, from across the sector, to benefit from co-curricular support and mechanisms which assists with integration into the community.

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11. Contact

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Supporting the engagement and experience of international students in group-work activities
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Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2018

Project aims

The aims of this pilot project were to:

- establish if the use of LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) can enhance the experience of non-native speakers (NNS) of English in group work activities at the University of Strathclyde, and
- evaluate the use of LEGO® Serious Play® in the HE setting.

Summary of project outcomes

This pilot project offered three separate University of Strathclyde MSc class groups the opportunity to use LSP in a group work activity designed to support their transitions from teacher-led, class-based learning to more independent 60-credit research projects. The groups consisted of both non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS) of English.

Results indicate that LSP was effective in enhancing the group work experience of both NNS and NS of English, supporting the notion that inclusive learning and teaching practice benefits all students.

Background information

With a core undergraduate and postgraduate student population of 20,000 students (5,000 of which are international) Strathclyde University has a strong reputation as a leading international technological university with our international outlook permeating everything we do. This is reflected in the increasingly international and collaborative nature of our research, scholarship, knowledge exchange and innovation, but also in our drive to deliver a teaching and learning experience which equips Strathclyde graduates with the necessary attributes to flourish in the global workplace. As such it is essential that we adopt engaging ways of creating flexible and innovative learning environments that support all students to achieve their potential.

The problem with groupwork for NNS of English

> "Completion of collaborative learning activities in culturally diverse small groups is a highly complex, socially and emotionally demanding experience."
>
> (Kimmel and Volet, 2010)

All students find group work activity challenging for a variety of reasons. International students, who will be referred to hereafter as non-native speakers (NNS) of English are well-recognised in the literature as facing particular challenges in UK academic life. Difficulties facing NNS include self-perceived language deficiencies and differences in educational background (Berman, Cheng 2001, Hardman 2016) and these challenges impact on the ability of these students to participate fully in group work activities

(Medved 2013). Importantly, learning must be available to all students. Having an understanding and recognising the challenges facing NNS participating in group work is the first step to supporting these students.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the literature highlights that speaking in English within a classroom situation is a task that NNS find difficult. Some of the challenges (related to group-work) cited in the literature for NNS are outlined below:

- Speaking tasks identified as being most difficult were: delivering oral presentations and taking part in class discussions (Berman, Cheng 2001).
- Lack of confidence in speaking meant that NNS lacked confidence to speak up/participate in class discussions (Medved et al 2013, Guo and Chase 2011).
- NNS often feel their language skills are insufficient to allow them to fully engage in a group work environment of their peers, which may include heated and passionate, fast-moving debate. Engagement in this may be viewed in some cultures as disrespectful (Taylor, Ali 2017).
- The prospect of making mistakes causes anxiety (Kimmel and Volet 2012); and
- NNS feel they need time to formulate a response to questions when compared to NS, a lack of response may be mistaken for a lack of knowledge, which is not the case (Jin 2017).

While academic challenges faced by NNS are readily identified in the literature, there is a lack of practical solutions to support group work in the higher education (HE) classroom. This pilot project sought to evaluate if LEGO® Serious Play® could enhance the engagement and experience of NNS in group work activities.

The authors fully appreciate that the challenges outlined above may be experienced by all students, including native speakers (NS) to varying degrees. This project was undertaken with a further aim that potential benefits could be realised for all students.

LEGO® Serious Play® as a Practical, Innovative Solution

LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) is a thinking, communication and problem-solving tool. It is proposed that LSP provides a practical and innovative solution to address the challenges faced by NNS of English in HE classroom group work activities.

The principles of LSP are such that a very particular inclusive group dynamic is generated and this is done through ensuring that:

- everyone is required to participate all of the time;
- everyone is required to participate in all of the phases of the LSP process; and

- participants are given time to reflect and gather thoughts before speaking to describe their model.

The principles with regards to how the LEGO® bricks are used in LSP also support the generation of an inclusive environment for learning and these include:
- the LEGO® bricks are used to unlock and construct new knowledge;
- there are no right or wrong ways to build with the LEGO® bricks;
- everyone has an obligation to build and the right to tell the story of their LEGO® model;
- the builder owns the LEGO® model, its metaphors, its meaning and its story;
- participants must accept the builder's meaning and story of the LEGO® model; and
- only the LEGO® model and its story can be questioned – not the person.

The LSP method offers a number of solutions to specific challenges faced by NNS of English in HE classroom group work:
- LSP offers a universal language of building through which storytelling takes place where the builder is safe in the knowledge that questions are asked of the model. It should be reinforced that the focus of LSP is in fact not the bricks or the models created but the story and metaphors created from the bricks. (Kristiansen and Rasmussen 2014).
- LSP is a useful way to encourage creative and innovative thinking and facilitate in-class discussion. It is a technique which is proposed to improve problem-solving. (Kristiansen and Rasmussen 2014).
- Lego® models serve as a basis for group discussion, knowledge-sharing, problem-solving and decision-making. By focussing on the creative task, learners can 'step outside' themselves in order to reflect. With the introduction of a delay, this allows participants to 'think with their hands'. Importantly the Lego® models and meaning belong to the builder. Following LSP etiquette others may ask questions of the model and the story, not the individual, thus creating a 'safe' environment (Kristiansen and Rasmussen 2014).

Project design and evaluation

Led by two certified LSP facilitators, this project offered three University of Strathclyde MSc class groups (MSc Forensic Science, MSc Advanced Pharmaceutical Manufacture, MSc in Pharmaceutical Analysis) the opportunity to use LSP in a group work activity designed to support their transitions from teacher-led, class-based learning to more independent 60-credit research projects. This transition was selected as the topic

for the LSP workshop to be evaluated because,
- the same topic could be used and was relevant to all groups;
- it represented a genuine support need; and
- students electing not to participate in the activity would not be disadvantaged in terms of coverage of their course curriculum.

All three groups consisted of both non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS) of English. All students who expressed an interest in the project were provided with a participant information sheet which detailed what was involved in participating in the study. Participation was voluntary. The LSP session was offered over and above the normal project preparation. (The appendix to this report includes a copy of the participant information sheet.)

Initial survey

Prior to participating in the LSP activity, all participants were asked to complete an initial electronic survey (on their own devices) at the beginning of the LSP session in order to:
- provide consent for participation in the activity and this study;
- self-identify as a NS or NNS of English; and
- rate their perceived ability in relation to a number of everyday university tasks using a 5 point Likert scale.

(The appendix to the online version of this report contains a copy of the survey).

All participants included in the study provided consent for their inclusion, and of these participants, 50% identified as NNS with 50% of the overall group identifying as NS of English. (See also the appendix to the report for the online version of the consent form.)

The initial questions related to the participants' perceived abilities provided information about the particular difficulties facing NNS, particularly in relation to group work activities.

Findings from this initial survey included,
- 36% of NNS indicated that they found giving oral presentations in class somewhat difficult compared with 23% of NS.
- 43% of NNS expressed that taking part in class discussions was neither easy nor difficult while 100% of NS report this as being extremely easy or somewhat easy.
- 36% of NNS reported that asking questions in class was neither easy nor difficult with 8% of NS agreeing. The remaining 92% reported this task as being extremely easy or somewhat easy.
- 30% of NNS indicated that talking in a group in class was neither easy nor difficult whereas

100% of NS indicated that this was very easy or somewhat easy.

These findings supported the challenges faced by NNS cited in the literature and provided specific information about the cohorts participating in the LSP activities.

The LSP session

A LSP session was designed in consultation with the instructors for the cohort to ensure it met with their objectives and expectations for the session. The session was designed to follow the four steps of the LSP process:

- **Challenge**: the facilitator asks a question to the group
- **Build:** all of the participants build their answer using the Lego® bricks
- **Share:** all of the participants have the opportunity to share their model and its meaning with the rest of the group.
- **Reflect:** questions and reflections

During the LSP activity the facilitator led the participants through a detailed and structured LSP session that is summarised in the following steps:

- **Skills building**: this allowed participants to have some practise and demonstrate Lego building skills required for the session in a fun way
- **Individual build**: the participants were asked to build their proposed research project which they then modified to represent problems that they might encounter in their projects
- **Shared build**: the participants worked in teams of four to create shared models of potential

problems where, as a necessary part of the shared build, everyone's ideas were incorporated into the final model
- **Discussion and reflection**: participants were supported to use the models to reflect on what they had learned, what they might need to do now, and what action points they would take away from the session

Figure 1 shows an individual build from one of the participants and Figure 2 shows an example of a potential problem identified in the group build. The engagement and degree of insight evidenced by the students is clear. LSP allows them to 'tell their story' using the bricks, effectively using metaphors to do so.

Post-session evaluation

Following the LSP session, participants were asked to evaluate their experience of completing group work using LSP by completing an online survey. They were also invited to attend semi-structured interviews to provide feedback on the session. (The appendix to the online version of this report includes a copy of the consent form used prior to the interviews.)

The results from the post-session survey can be seen from the graphs in Figure 3 and are summarised below:

- 80% of NNS and 75% of NS agreed or somewhat agreed that "time designated to building the LEGO® model helped me to formulate a response to the question asked."

Fig. 1

Figure 1: A participant's individual build from the LSP session. Describing this build the student expressed that from the outset the prospect and challenge of the master's project was well-defined with a clear goal depicted by the front view photograph on the left. However, the reality was quite different, looking at the same build from the side with numerous challenges expected along the way depicted by windows that do not open, walls and barriers and trees blocking the path.

Fig. 2

Figure 2: In this model from a group build, students have identified the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with laboratory technicians. The flowers on the lab technicians head represent knowledge and experience and the phone represents the importance of communication.

- 80% of NNS and 75% of NS agreed or somewhat agreed that "the LEGO® model I built helped me to formulate a response to the question asked."
- 60% of NNS and 50% of NS agreed or somewhat agreed that "I was able to communicate more effectively in the LSP session when compared to normal group work settings."
- 60% of NNS and 50% of NS agreed or somewhat agreed that "I communicated with more confidence in the LSP session when compared to normal group work settings."
- 100% of NNS and 75% of NS agreed or somewhat agreed that "I can see value in LSP as a way to learn."

Six students elected to participate in the LSP post-session semi-structured interviews, three NS and three NNS. Upon analysis of these, five key themes emerged. A few key participant statements relating to these themes are outlined below:

- Enhanced participation
  "Everyone contributed, we didn't have a big group leader, everyone could share their ideas."
  "Each had their own part to play."

- Enhanced communication
  "When you want to describe something, you can describe it more if you can also show it."
  "When presenting the group build, you can point at bits and pieces . . . . you won't lose track because it's there in front of you."

- Accommodates different learning styles
  "Some people learn by hearing, some people learn by seeing, some people learn by doing."

"If you build something it's easier to remember it."

- Facilitates modification
  "Making changes in the model is very useful . . . sometimes you need to make changes to a project, we need to be able to be flexible."
  "You can change (your model) in the middle, you can change your ideas."

- Playful learning
  "Everyone seemed a bit more relaxed."
  "More fun way to look at things."

The results overall indicated that LSP offers an engaging and innovative solution to the challenges faced in group work activities by NNS, and importantly benefits all students.

Project sustainability

Responses from the participants of this pilot study indicate that students find LSP an engaging and supportive activity for group work, not only for NNS of English, but for all students and this is encouraging for future sustainability.

Participation in this study gave the authors the opportunity to discuss this work at the University of Strathclyde's playful learning network. This has allowed the practice to be disseminated beyond the participants in the pilot project and others are expressing interest in developing skills in using the LSP method within their teaching to enhance the student experience. A further 10 staff from across the institution have now attended training to become certified LSP facilitators, contributing to sustainability and emerging institutional expertise.

LSP kits were purchased using the funding awarded for this project and have become a resource which academic staff can book and use within their teaching.

Recommendations for other institutions

The outcomes of this work have already been presented at a number of sector-relevant conferences (UKCISA and HEA Learning and Teaching conferences) in order to ensure sustainability across the sector and to support dissemination and uptake in other institutions.

A key consideration for institutions will be the initial investment expense associated with certified LSP facilitator training and kit purchases. Institutions may wish to consider training key staff (such as academic development staff) who can then disseminate key principles of the method as they relate to learning and teaching with staff from across their institutions. They might also consider an institutional purchase of LSP kit which can then be booked and used by teaching staff.

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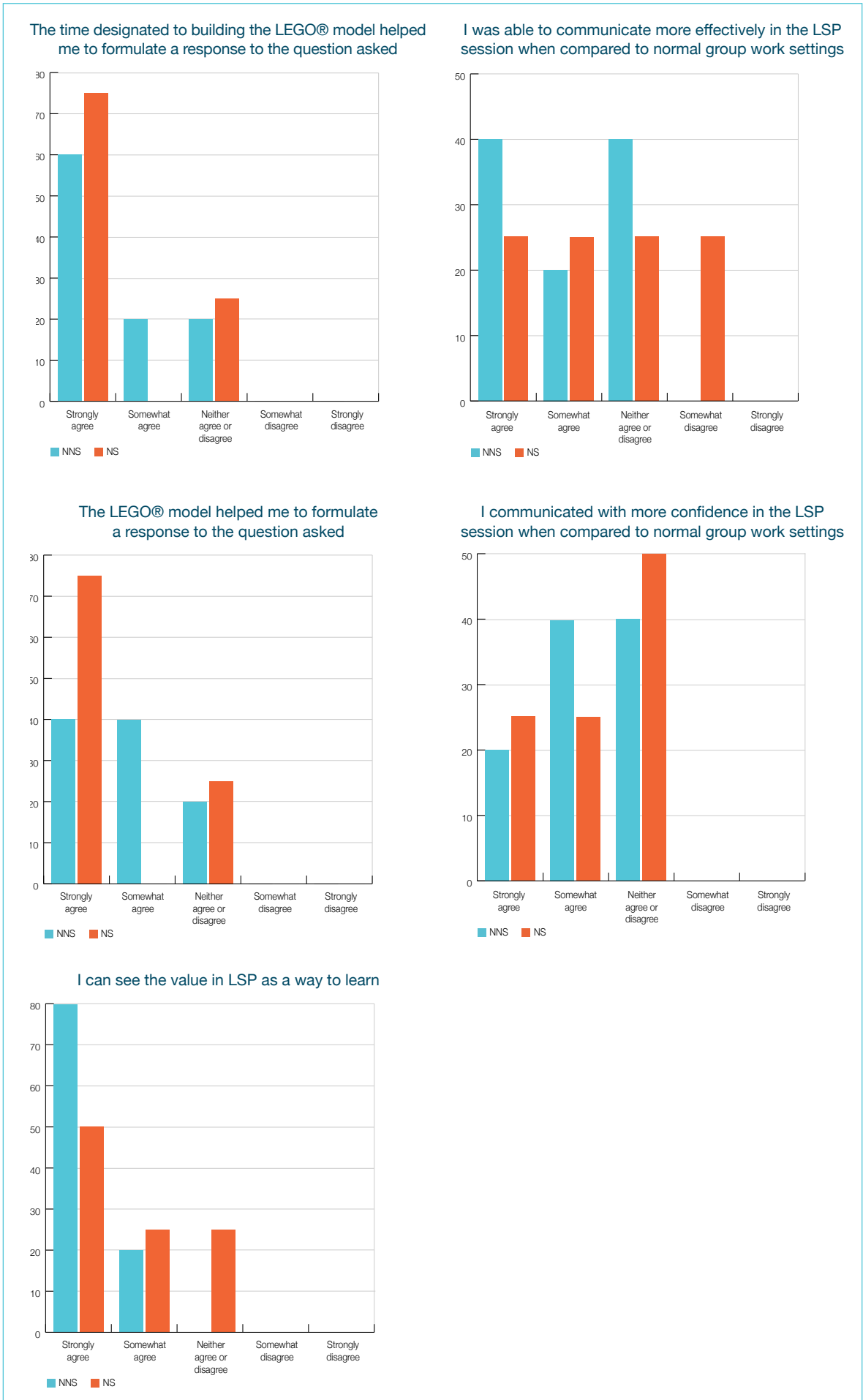
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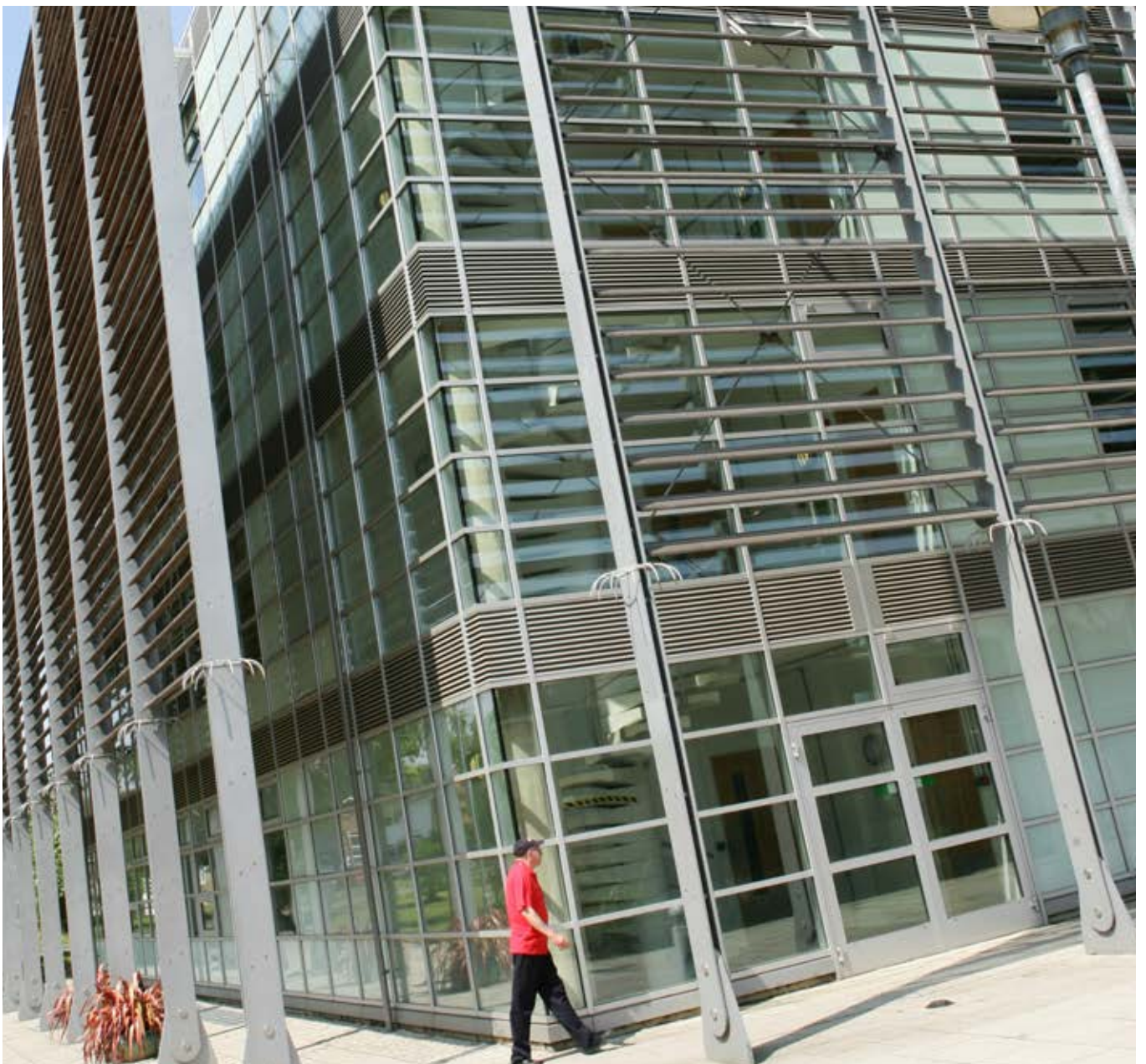Contact: Suzanne.faulkner@strath.ac.uk

Fig 3:   Results from the LSP post-session participant survey

Culturally-Informed Assessments Toolkit (CIAT)
The University of Bedfordshire

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Project aims

In the literature related to teaching and learning of international students in higher education, the emphasis on intercultural teaching and learning is well recognised. What is not so evident is the integration of intercultural teaching and learning practices informing and being embedded within assessment strategies. In addition, it is not evident how academics can adapt the skills and practices they have adopted in inclusive teaching to shape and inform their assessment practices. Furthermore, from the literature it was evident that for some international students there was a perceived disconnect in their understanding of their assessments, which was primarily due to difficulties with expectations, language used in assessment guidelines, and the cultural context of assessments.

The aim of the project was to design a toolkit which supported culturally-informed assessment practices, aiming to enhance the students' learning experience, providing an added value to their learning and potential employability. Incorporating such a process could have the potential of not only making the assessment more meaningful to the students, but also enabling the enhancement of a pedagogical approach, which triangulates teaching and learning with assessments. It is hoped the toolkit will provide support in the constructive alignment of intercultural learning and teaching with assessment strategies. Whilst there is clear evidence suggesting that assessment practices should be culturally responsive (Slee 2010), there is currently a scarcity of informed guidance on how academics should achieve this. This project seeks to contribute to the field by developing a tool which aims to support academics in designing culturally-informed assessments and enhancing their culturally-inclusive assessment and feedback practice.

Project outcomes

The CIAT toolkit has the potential for students to be important partners in their learning and development. The toolkit is a portfolio containing 15 tools designed to support both academics and students in designing and completing assessments. A number of tools are interactive and have the flexibility of being used either in the classroom as group activities, be set as individual student tasks or used online. They are triggers that academics can adapt to suit their particular needs.

Each tool has an introduction based on feedback from students and academics to set the background to the development of each tool. Suggested guidance on how the tool can be used is provided.

About the University of Bedfordshire

The University of Bedfordshire (UoB) has its main campus in Luton which is a large town and sits in the unitary area of Bedfordshire. It has other campuses in Bedford, and Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. Luton is a very diverse town in which over 120 languages are spoken. 50 percent of the local student population are students at UoB. Every year UoB welcomes over 2,000 international students, from over 120 countries.

UoB is a widening participating institution, working closely with schools and colleges and has in place supporter academic infrastructure to support the diversity of students studying at UoB. In particular, for international students the Communication Skills Department provides a breath of academic skills development and the Centre for Learning and Excellence provides developmental support in teaching and learning for academics. In addition, UoB has a student support scheme (PAL) to provide one-to-one support. Furthermore each Faculty has an Associate Dean for Student Experience and the Faculty of Healthcare has a School Lead for Internationalisation. The University has a significant number of international partnerships and therefore having this toolkit could be of valuable support for our international partners in the development of teaching and learning to support assessment development.

Delivery

Undertaking the project involved the use of questionnaires and focus groups. The questionnaire was reviewed by the Institute of Heath Research for validity prior to use. To capture the students for distributing the questionnaire, the researchers accessed the Communication Skills sessions that international students attend in the first and second semesters. A presentation about the study was given to the students prior to the questionnaire being completed.

29 questionnaires were completed. The data from these were used along with incorporating the principles of Universal Design for Learning (inclusive/intercultural learning), to frame the direction of the focus groups. Three focus groups were organised; 30 international students from across different faculties (nursing, public health, social work, business, communications and IT) were divided into two groups of 15. One focus group of 15 academics (who teach international students) was also convened. For each focus group, there were three tables with specific questions and the participants rotated around each one. Ideas and discussions were captured on flipchart paper.

Following the completion of the focus group sessions, the collated data was then analysed to identify recurring themes from both students and academics. The themes then led to the identification of 15 areas requiring a specific tool (see Figure 1 below). Each tool had a similar format in its presentation. Firstly, each tool begins with a 'findings' section which contains verbatim responses from students and staff and provides the rationale for the design and development the tool. Next, each tool has information 'about [the tool]', which explains what the tool is, followed by a guide as to 'how to use [the tool]'. The tool itself is then introduced.

Fig 1: List of themes developed in the toolkit

Theme	Tool number and name
Issues with terminology	1. Jargon buster
Unclear/inconsistent instructions	2. Assignment brief template
Miscommunication of cultural concepts	3. Comprehending concepts
Gaining higher grades	4. Process for progress
Making assessments relevant	5. Let's get personal
Inexperience in certain assessment modes	6. Mix it up
Unsure how work was graded	7. Understanding marking criteria
Misunderstanding the marking process	8. Understanding the marking process
Critical thinking	9. Debate yourself critical
Understanding plagiarism/ academic integrity	10. Check yourself before you wreck yourself
Benefits of peer assisted learning	11. Peer and self-assessment
Knowledge of how an assessment relates to the whole course	12. Reflecting on the assessment
International employability	13. Examining employability
Clarity of assessments	14. Creating assessment clarity
Unclear/vague feedback	15. Feedback, feedforward

The tools that have been developed are designed to be interactive, can be classroom-based, used online or offline, and in groups or individually by students. The tools are flexible and therefore can be adapted by lecturers. They are developed to provide ideas that could stimulate other creative ways of engaging students in the assessment process and developing assessments that are more culturally informed. The toolkit was created and disseminated to teaching colleagues for feedback and evaluation. This is ongoing.

Timescale

The project was delivered over a 12 month period. Timetabled activities were planned to develop the questionnaire, organise the focus groups, draft the toolkit and have it evaluated. Over the next 12 months we plan to pilot the tool, ready for a full review in June 2019.

Challenges

The pilot project faced a number of challenges, mostly related to encouraging involvement from others. Despite using several communication channels to attempt to boost interest from students, the project co-ordinators found that it was difficult to get communications to students regarding taking part in the project and the project's potential advantages to the student experience. This meant a new communication methodology was needed. Instead of using usual communication channels (ie email drops, announcements, etc) the project co-ordinators spoke to students face-to-face in order to fully explain the project, highlight the advantages of engaging and answering any of their questions. This approach had an instant impact as the workshops went from one or two attending to over 20. The students came more prepared and

ready to contribute and their appreciation for the project was clear from the start.

A further challenge was the recruitment of evaluators to complete an evaluation of the toolkit. As the toolkit became larger, it became harder to ask colleagues to take time out of their usual role to complete the evaluation. This had the knock-on effect of the project losing the time it had allocated to disseminate the toolkit outside of the University. As such, this dissemination will take place in the six months following the close of the project to ensure the toolkit has the highest possible level of impact.

Implementation and sustainability

The output of the toolkit has made the project a very sustainable one. The toolkit has already been embedded within UoB's Centre for Learning Excellence (CLE) where elements of it will be incorporated into CPD activities, such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Academic Practice and CPD route to HEA recognition. It has also been included in a larger scale resource around assessment and feedback enhancement at the University which is set to be launched in September 2018. This launch will give the toolkit even more attention and allow the impact to be measured as part of a larger scale resource. In addition to this, sharing the toolkit with the other central teams within the institution (eg StudyHub, Student Services, International Office, etc) will increase the visibility of the tools for students and further increase the project's sustainability.

The sustainability of the project also lies in the toolkit itself. The flexibility of the tools in the toolkit means that it can be used across disciplines and different modes of delivery (eg online, offline, blended, etc). This means that the toolkit (or, at least, some tools within the toolkit) can be utilised by both teachers and students across higher education, adding to its sustainability factor.

Reflecting further on the dissemination of the project, the project team realise that in order to have a large impact and fully implement the learning points, institutional buy-in from educational leaders is necessary. The inclusion of the toolkit within the institutional resource goes some way to help with this but the project team will be going even further by attaching the toolkit to other agendas within the University, such as cross-institutional committees related to student success, progression, attainment, inclusivity and teacher training.

Further to this, the project team believe that more could be done in the evaluation of the project. The toolkit was never intended or designed to be a static resource, but a dynamic one which can evolve over time. One line of further evaluation the

project wishes to pursue is to ask academic staff to report back on their use of the tools and co-develop short case studies which can add to the tool itself. This will create further interactivity, contextualise the tool for other staff and allow for good practice to be disseminated. It is envisaged that this further work will be completed throughout 2018-19 and beyond.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

The project team make the following recommendations as a result of this project:

- Student input – gaining student input was the most valuable part of the creation of the toolkit. The students gave rich, knowledgeable responses which directly related to the assessment and feedback practices of the institution. For example,
   "I gain more experience completing other assessments but there's a clear difference in the education systems."
   Students also appreciated having the opportunity to be a part of creating a resource that could enhance practice around assessment and were keen to know the impact and outcomes of the pilot:
   "We would like changes to be made and appreciate the opportunity to voice our opinions. Please send an email out when this is completed."
- Transparency for students – students were aware of their ignorance and felt that the whole assessment and feedback process within higher education could be far more transparent. The project would recommend involving students in the creation of resources around assessment in order to increase dialogue, understanding and transparency.
- Enhancing staff awareness - one thing noted from the pilot study was the students' feeling that their educational and cultural background was not considered within assessments. The project recommends to other institutions that staff awareness around this issue is addressed through increased staff/student dialogue and flexibilities within assessment setting.
- Consideration of staff timeframe – after feedback from staff, the toolkit aimed to be as simple to use as possible so as to prevent the need for a training session or long instructions of how to use it. The project recommends that any resource being created acknowledges the time constraints on staff and is designed to alleviate some time, rather than add to it. This might include having resources which have both online and offline options or designing in more flexibility to any recommended tools.

Link to toolkit

– The 'Culturally-Inclusive Assessment Toolkit' has been added to the Centre for Learning Excellence's webpages on Assessment and Feedback https://www.beds.ac.uk/cle/focus/assessment

– The toolkit is also available on the University's internal website and Virtual Learning Environment.

Reference

Slee, J., 2010. 'A Systemic Approach to Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices and Evaluation'. *Higher Education Quarterly*. 64(3), p. 246-260.

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Enriching international students' understanding of critical thinking and problem-solving skills through gamification
University of Greenwich

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Aims

The aim of the pilot project was to produce an eLearning resource that could help international students to understand and improve the skills required to study in a UK higher education (HE) context. The project targeted the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills using an interactive, gamified approach. We aimed to specifically address the linguistic and cultural factors that can lead to social isolation and inadequate learning strategies. (Weiley, Sommers and Bryce, 2008)

The pilot stage involved the development, adaptation and testing of resources with direct entry international undergraduates.

Project outcomes

A workshop has been developed which allows international students to hold a facilitated discussion about the challenges of acclimatisation to higher education study in the UK. Two prototype games have been developed to support the workshops that allow students to explore what is meant by critical thinking and problem-solving in a UK HE context, as well as the cultural factors that can lead to misunderstandings.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshops will be offered to staff from the autumn term 2018 to allow lecturers to examine the needs of Chinese students who are adapting to UK HE, and devise effective teaching and learning strategies to support them.

Background to University of Greenwich

The University of Greenwich has an international community of students from 176 countries. It also has an extensive Transnational Education (TNE) network with 49 partner institutions in 21 countries delivering University of Greenwich degree programmes. In China, the University has 12 TNE partners who send their students to complete their studies in the UK.

Students coming to the UK typically have achieved an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) level of 6.0, with 5.5 being the absolute minimum in each component.

The project journey

The focus, aims, research and development of the project evolved throughout the process.

General or specific?

The project team had a choice between developing general resources for all international students or focussing on the distinctive needs of students from a specific country. On the one hand, the University of Greenwich attracts students from all over the world and so a generalised resource would be useful. On the other hand, the University of Greenwich has a particularly strong relationship with Chinese HE institutions and attracts a large number of direct entry students who come to Greenwich to complete their studies. Anecdotal evidence from lecturers suggested that there were particular challenges that these students face that are as much cultural as linguistic.

The project was fortunate to have Dr Yang as a member of the team. As a Chinese national, Dr Yang was able to provide an insight, based on her own experience, of the sort of challenges that Chinese students might face, trying to adapt to the requirements of UK HE The decision was taken, therefore, to concentrate on the needs of Chinese students for the pilot stage and use the lessons learned to develop a more general application after proving the concept.

Amending the project plan.

The initial idea was to develop stand-alone eLearning games that TNE students could use to prepare for attendance in the UK. The project team sought the advice of lecturers within the University's department of computing with expertise in games development. For the project to produce meaningful results that could demonstrate how effective the games were in the development of understanding of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, it was necessary to think about analytics at an early stage. The project was advised that the level of detail being sought was too ambitious for a pilot project and would be too expensive and time-consuming to implement. The project team were advised to develop proof of concept resources and then seek additional funding for further development, if required. This advice was accepted and influenced the decision to develop games that could work in a focus group setting where it would be possible to gather qualitative and quantitative data via discussion and questionnaires.

Focus groups

A focus group was held in November 2017 with nine Chinese students who had been recruited via the University of Greenwich's Students' Union Chinese Society. Each attendee was rewarded with a £10 coffee voucher. All of the students had joined the University in September and were asked to comment on how the reality of UK HE compared with their previous experiences and prior expectations. Perhaps, because the students were still finding their feet and had yet to undertake a major assignment, most of the observations focused on the differences in educational culture and language issues rather than the specific issues of critical thinking or problem-solving, for example:
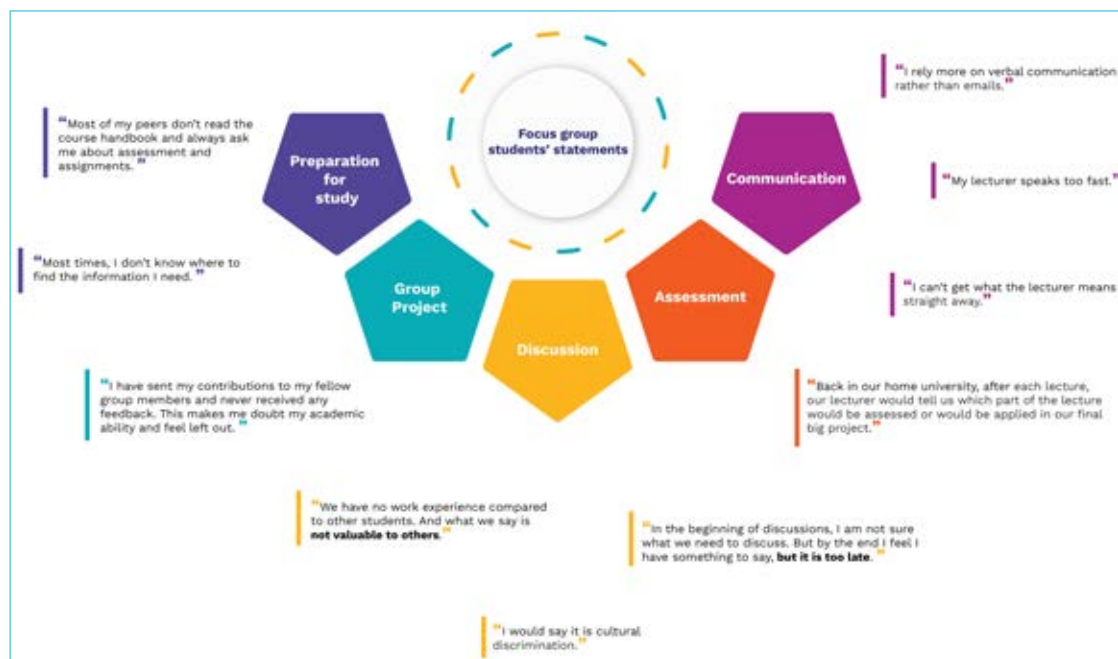
"Most times, I don't know where to find the information I need."

"I rely more on verbal communication rather than email."

"My lecturer speaks too fast."

A decision was taken to stage another focus group meeting after the students had acquired experience of a formal assessment and demonstrate some game ideas for possible development. The second focus group was attended by five of the students who attended the first meeting and one new student. At this meeting, the students made some interesting observations about the differences in approach to group work and assignments:

"Back in our home university, after each lecture, our lecturer would tell us which part of the lecture would be assessed or would be applied in our final project."

"Most of my (Chinese) peers don't read the course handbook and always ask me about assessment and assignments."

Students also contrasted the difference between themselves and the home students:

"We have no work experience compared to other students. And what we say is not valuable to others."

"I have sent my contributions to my fellow group members and never received any feedback. This makes me doubt my academic ability and feel left out."

"I would say it is cultural discrimination."

A number of quiz games that require critical thinking and problem-solving skills were demonstrated to the students who selected the best two for further development.

The students enthusiastically expressed their opinion that the focus groups had been really useful. The experience had provided an opportunity for them to consider how cultural differences might be having a specific effect on their learning. The students had discussed these issues informally amongst themselves but they found it beneficial to have a guided discussion in a more focused environment. This strongly influenced the final decision to design a workshop with the games initially used as resources to promote discussion and reduce social isolation. After further refinement they could be deployed as originally intended as stand-alone web resources to help TNE students prepare from afar.

An hour-long workshop was held at the start of the summer term, facilitated by Dr Yang. The outputs from this workshop are currently being reviewed with the intention of staging regular workshops aimed at TNE students in the autumn term of 2018.

The games

The games that were developed are adaptations of games that we had created previously for another resource, the Independent Learners' Toolkit. This toolkit is designed to ease the transition of UK A Level and further education students to UK HE.

The Toolkit was demonstrated to the focus group students who then selected the activities that were most interesting to them. Those games would form the basis for redevelopment. PowerPoint was used during the focus group stages but the final games were developed using Articulate Storyline. The games can be exported as a Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) to be hosted within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and allows us to track student activity and performance.

The Milk Snatcher

The students were particularly enthusiastic about The Milk Snatcher, a game that explored the challenges of living in communal accommodation in a fun and light-hearted way. Students have to use their critical thinking skills to analyse the witness statements of students living in an apartment in a hall of residence and deduce the identity of the person who is stealing milk from the communal fridge.


The Milk Snatcher game was chosen for redevelopment as it was thought that this could be a good icebreaker activity for the workshop. It introduces the idea of critical thinking as a skill that most people have and use on a daily basis before discussing what it means in an academic context.

The quiz

The second game is a quiz. Students are provided with a statement and four questions. The students have to choose the two questions that are most useful to evaluate the statement. See Figure 2.

During the workshop, we started with easier questions that related to day-to-day life and gradually moved towards more academic questions that students might encounter while attempting a written assessment. The students were very engaged with this activity which provoked enthusiastic discussion about why some questions were more useful than others.

Fig 2: List of themes developed in the toolkit
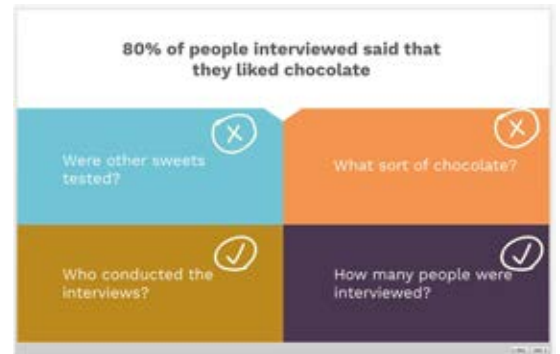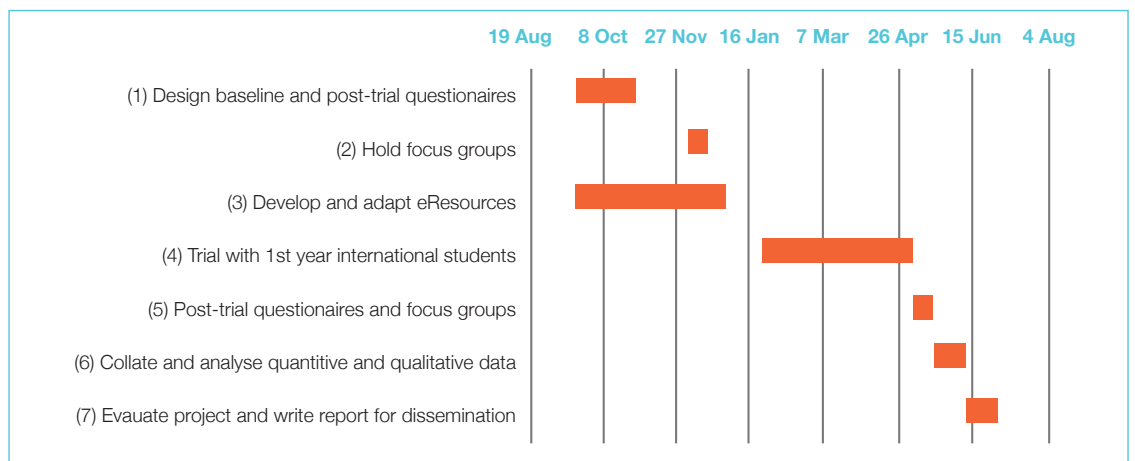

Further development

The project is continuing to develop both games, although in the short term, efforts will focus on development of the quiz game which involves expanding the question bank. It is also planned to create different levels of game play where at the highest levels, the statements will be aligned with the type of essay questions commonly found in UK HE. It is envisaged that this could become an online resource that we share with our TNE partners to help students prepare for transition in advance.

The Milk Snatcher game in its current form is quite easy to solve, so it is ideal for an ice breaker but needs to become more challenging. One idea is for the game to be just one level in a suite of detective games set in a university campus where students have to use their critical thinking and problem-solving skills to solve the mystery.

Challenges

The main challenge faced by the project team was attracting and maintaining the interest of the students. Of the original nine who took part, only two attended the fully developed workshop. Although the workshop and the games were well-received, the project team cannot be confident that the intended workshops will exactly meet the needs of new TNE students.

Timescale:

	19 Aug	8 Oct	27 Nov	16 Jan	7 Mar	26 Apr	15 Jun	4 Aug
(1) Design baseline and post-trial questionaires								
(2) Hold focus groups								
(3) Develop and adapt eResources								
(4) Trial with 1st year international students								
(5) Post-trial questionaires and focus groups								
(6) Collate and analyse quantitive and qualitative data								
(7) Evauate project and write report for dissemination								

Project sustainability

The games have been developed with a small set of quiz questions. The project is expected to develop the games further by continuing with the creation of a larger multi-level question bank. These games will be used in regular workshops to support the Chinese students.

Having established a workable base, the next stage of the project will also include analysis of the students' gaming performance data to assess the impact (if any) on students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

A workshop for academics working with TNE students has been added to the roster of CPD events and will be facilitated by Dr Yang.

Recommendations for other institutions

The games are proving to be useful resources but the most effective aspect of the project has been the development of workshops that allowed students to discuss their anxieties about study in the UK in a structured and supportive environment. The project team would recommend that institutions provide spaces where TNE students are encouraged to network and support each other.

References

Weiley, S., Sommers, J. and Bryce, H., 2008. Reducing social isolation and loneliness through technological communication, Conference Proceedings of the 19th ISANA International Education Conference, 2-5 December 2008, ISANA International Education Association, Available at: <http://isana.proceedings.com.au/docs/2008/paper_Weiley.pdf> [Accessed 1 July 2018].

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Supporting international doctoral student writing
University of Sussex

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Aim

This pilot project aimed to design, run and evaluate a writing group for a range of international doctoral students studying in the UK who were writing-up their thesis in the Social Sciences. The project was prompted by the need for writing support for international researchers that went beyond instructional concerns of language and grammar. Its purpose was to explore, and to critically engage with, broader matters of linguistic, social and cultural assumptions embedded within UK research traditions.

The project established the 'Writing into Meaning International' (WIMI) group and blog space. This was piloted at the University of Sussex and at Goldsmiths University, London. The group was evaluated through 19 interviews and a focus group with six international doctoral students. This has produced recommendations for practice, as well as an online toolkit, to enable others to run similar groups elsewhere.

The University of Sussex and Goldsmiths University were chosen as examples of universities with strong reputations for research within social disciplines. Both have around a third of their student body comprised of postgraduate students with 32% (Sussex) and 25% (Goldsmiths) coming to study from outside the UK.

How was the project set up, run and evaluated?

The WIMI group is a collaboration between three colleagues in the Department of Education at the University of Sussex who have interests in writing, inclusive teaching and supervising doctoral students, the majority of whom are international. WIMI was intended to be a supportive and productive space to write together, to think about how processes of writing are shaped by identities and socio-cultural experiences and to consider creative ways to develop the quality of research writing and thinking.

WIMI at Sussex was comprised of weekly two-hour sessions on Wednesday afternoons in the autumn term of 2017. The sessions ran for 11 weeks and were a mix of peer-led and facilitated activities. It was advertised to students via relevant school doctoral co-ordinators. Sessions were facilitated fortnightly by the project team and were interspersed with peer-led workshops to provide participants with an independent space to think and write. Facilitated sessions included creative prompts for getting started with writing (including pebbles, drawing and poetry), space to write and critical discussions of each individual's writing and the processes of producing it. Peer-led sessions were based around a reading or question suggested by

the facilitators or by members of the group. In addition, WIMI had a blog which included resources and additional readings, as well as reflective posts composed after each session by either facilitators or students. The blog provided opportunities for further writing and the possibilities of remote participation.

The weekly topics for Sussex WIMI were:
1. Coming to research writing: my plans and priorities
2. Position and identity: what of me do I bring to my research? (Peer-led)
3. Writing internationally: crossing disciplinary/cultural spaces
4. Getting it 'right': what might it mean to 'master' research writing? (Peer-led)
5. Writing about data: finding a way in to making meaning
6. Writing as a method of analysis (Peer-led)
7. Re-writing the thesis for different audiences: capturing its totality
8. Who is my audience and where is my voice? (Peer-led)
9. Peer feedback on writing - the value of writing together
10. Open session (to be decided by the group) (Peer-led)
11. Writing for publication

There was a core of around 10 students attending the group each session. These included those studying Education, Social Work, Gender Studies, Media and International Development. Participants' countries of origin included Germany, USA, Zambia, Chile, India and Malaysia. The group was not exclusive to international students and included those who crossed this boundary, for example, their first language was English but they were conducting their research in an additional language. We also ran a session of the group at Goldsmiths University in March 2018 on 'The International Researcher Experience of Academic Writing'. This was attended by 15 students from a range of disciplines and countries of origins including the USA, Taiwan, Canada and Italy.

Evaluation

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 international doctoral students at the University of Sussex and a focus group with six participants at Goldsmiths University. Interview participants came from 15 different countries including Germany, India, Egypt and Macedonia and were all studying PhD programmes in social sciences or humanities. Nine had taken part in WIMI and the others were recruited via emails from school doctoral co-ordinators. Focus group participants similarly came from diverse contexts including the USA, Taiwan and France and were all studying social sciences

Fig 1: Brighton beach pebbles used as part of a group freewriting activity
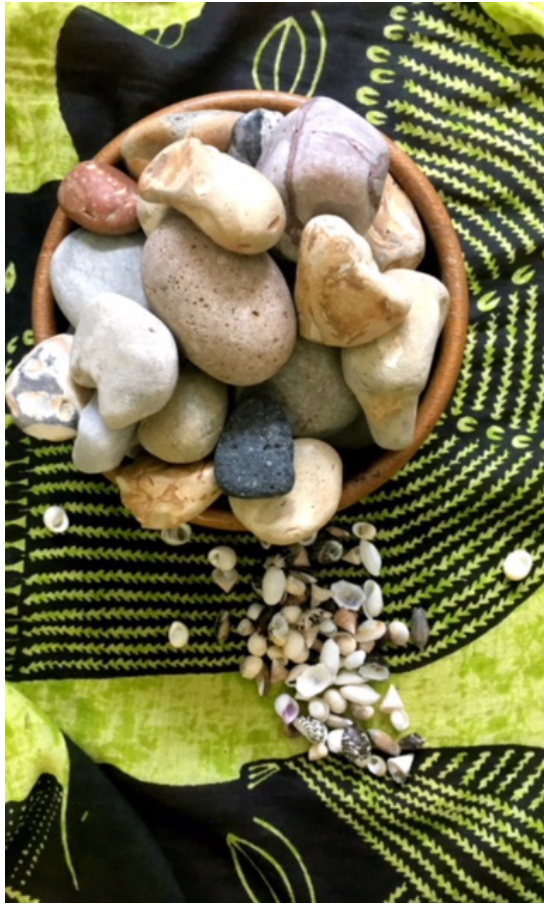
PhD programmes. They were invited to take part in the group after the writing workshop. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software and via a collaborative analysis meeting.

Students' real names have been changed for this report.

The themes that emerged included:

- **The problematic label of 'international'**. Many students did not identify with this, feeling that the term is too generic to account for the differences among them particularly in terms of language proficiency. As one focus group participant stated: **'What do you mean by international? In my mind, my work is not wedded to any declination or community'**. Many interviewees also experienced the tendency for 'international' to be used as a form of negative 'othering' in relation to their writing, rather than as a way of recognising the strengths. Another focus group participant agreed **'to use that word [international]… can create hierarchies or certain power dimensions'**.

- **Experiences of racism and misrecognition through writing and research practices.** This included references to experiencing a dismissal or a patronising attitude in group discussions. One participant, Gajra, said: **'you don't feel as included in things as you thought it would be'** and that this 'lingers' across 'the whole doctoral journey and the writing process'.

- **International researchers felt the 'double duty' of acting as a translator of context, as well as ideas to those, including supervisors, who were unfamiliar.** In addition to the issues raised by translating texts, such as the need to find the right words to convey nuanced meaning, there were also concerns about translating cultural contexts appropriately. As Alfonso explained: **'I need to give justice to what was said… I have the responsibility to get the message across.'** This lack of familiarity by others, was experienced by some interviewees an 'an extra load' (Kate) in terms of their time and input in explaining them to others.

- **International as a term also bringing a wealth of research abilities.** This includes access to a wider range of literature and different cultural practices. In addition, the lack of understanding of their context offered the opportunity for the student to explore their unique and enhanced perspective in interesting ways. This could be regarded as an asset to the enhancement of their thinking, researching and writing. As Kate explained: **'it's a good use of my skills, [ ] to be able to access this world and make it then accessible for others who can't otherwise access it.'**

- Participants expressed the need for **multi-faceted support for writing**, including advice on negotiating emotional and cultural boundaries, as well as the practical and logistical aspects of doctoral writing. The use of freewriting as a strategy explored within WIMI, was described by Erika as being 'strengthening and very positive for my writing processes'. Raina described the group as being 'very therapeutic'. In addition, Raul found attending the workshops useful in helping him to develop what he saw as the correct English 'etiquette'. However, while the focus on a supportive and generative space for thinking about writing was important, the evaluation also revealed the need for there to be a balance between doing this and making time for more 'actual writing' at particular stages of the doctoral journey. Gajra explained that she **'was in a very precarious stage when that group started…and I felt, oh, I need to do more structured writing. I don't want to do free writing'**.

- **The group as a 'collective' support for writing** using peer and facilitated writing spaces was discussed by interviewees as being very

supportive as a way of enabling the sharing of writing concerns, for the generation of new ideas, and for the formation of writing networks. Raina shared the feeling that the group's benefit was **'the realisation that I'm not alone, to feel lost in this maze of writing a PhD thesis'.**

These findings have enabled us to reflect on the challenges faced by international doctoral students, as well as consider what might be done elsewhere within the University and sector to better support their development.

What was the timescale of the project?

The project lasted between September 2017 and June 2018. WIMI ran at Sussex between October-December and in Goldsmiths in March. The interviews and a focus group were conducted with international doctoral students alongside this. April and May 2018 involved analysis of the data, followed by the development and dissemination of the online, research-informed, toolkit in June 2018.

What challenged the delivery of the project on time and on budget?

The project progressed on time and to budget but two aspects of the project plan were altered. First, the function of the research assistant, Marta Paluch, was modified from collating materials for the toolkit to instead conducting the research interviews themselves. The project team felt that proper attention should be given to listening to, and critically evaluating, what international students thought about the project and the provision of support to international students. Second, the project team decided not to present at the University of Sussex teaching and learning conference. Instead they decided to go further afield at points during the duration of the project to honour their commitment to critically engaging with 'international' contexts more authentically. This perspective led to the delivery of a conference paper and writing workshop at Hiroshima University Japan, and at the Royal Northern College of Music, UK; the delivery of a research writing workshop for early career-researchers at the University of Seville in Spain; and consultancy on supporting doctoral writing at the Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany (to be repeated in January 2019). Conference attendance was funded by the inviting organisations or through existing university research grants.

Will the project be sustainable?

The considerable work involved in this project was not calculated within the project team's teaching workload. However, given that work was shared across the team of three, the programme will continue to run at the University of Sussex for the next academic year in a slightly modified form. This will include the workshops becoming part of the University's researcher development programme to enable broader representation from across schools and departments.

In addition, an online toolkit for other facilitators has been produced to support them in creating a similar space for writing. This has included the production of handouts, lesson plans and examples of research readings to stimulate discussion. The purpose of this is to enable the project to grow, sustain and modify itself beyond the University of Sussex. Key evidence that this has already happened has been that many of the WIMI participants have set up a data analysis group, using many of the WIMI writing techniques, named 'Writing Data into Meaning'.

Reflections on implementing learning points at the institution

1. Overall the pilot was a success. The creative and supportive format of the group, as well as its attention to matters of culture, emotionality and identity were very well received. Feedback indicated that the group offered an important contribution to supporting the doctoral writing journey for those involved to counter feelings of isolation and despondency.

2. One participant questioned whether there was enough specific targeting towards international students and what this might look like given the differences between participants. There is a need, going forward, to approach the 'international' both more broadly, and more specifically. This is important to account for the diverse range of experiences and perspectives that international students bring, as well as creating a space to discuss both the challenges and opportunities faced by researching across cultures and languages, including, especially the fascinating issue of translation and its practical, theoretical and methodological challenges.

3. The writing group format is adaptable to suit the context. Before undertaking the pilot, the 11-week course was felt to be crucial to creating a comfortable and affirming space for the participants. However the success of the Goldsmiths afternoon workshop also indicated that other formats may work well too. Consequently the project team felt the success of such a group is not so much about its duration (although regularity seems important) but more about the quality of the space provided.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

1. Design writing support for international students that provides a way to discuss and deal with the emotional and cultural boundaries crossed by a range of international students. While writing support for grammar and vocabulary is essential (and needs to be provided through some named channel), the group's focus on going 'deeper' and 'wider' into what constitutes 'good' doctoral writing is important in engaging with the range of challenges faced by international students.

2. Approach writing (and the support for writing) collectively and collegially, where possible. Working together as facilitators and as participants was a productive and enjoyable way to navigate the highs and lows of research writing (for the project facilitators as much as the students). It is important to create the writing group as a space in which learning will be uncertain and surprising for all whether as facilitator or student.

3. Create opportunities to get started with writing that are joyful and upbeat. Instead of assuming that writing will pour from head to page, experiment with techniques of 'writing as inquiry' such as free-writing, drawing or writing poetry, to inject creativity into the writing process and, consequently, into the production of final doctoral texts. Such approaches challenge the notion that only certain prescribed formulations of text are appropriate and legitimate. The project found that this is particularly important for international researchers to be alerted to in order that the richness and diversity of their cultural, multi-lingual, and identity experiences can be championed in the final doctoral text. As one focus group participant said after the Goldsmith workshop: 'I really liked it [the workshop] because it helped me feel with the fact that that's my style. That's how I do things and here I'm learning something different but I don't need to not do it in that way because that matches who I am and how I write and that's okay'.

Links to further information:

The project website provides more detail on the key findings from our evaluation, as well information on the way the group was organised and run, resources and reading that inspired us and blog reflections from international students and facilitators. It also includes a toolkit for others to use in order to run similar doctoral writing groups.

http://writingintomeaninginternational.wordpress.com

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Chinese international students' perceptions of personal tutoring – are we hitting the mark? University of Plymouth

Ricky Lowes, Senior Personal Tutor, Plymouth Business School

Contents

> 'Personal tutors' characters are different, and then value they provide could be various. It is a good beginning to set 'personal tutor', but in my opinion, their roles are to be clarified and improved to deliver more value to international students. I should say, personal tutor is the part should be invested more to improve student experience.
>
> (Open comments, student survey)

1.   Introduction

This research seeks to understand Chinese international students' perceptions of the role of Personal Tutor. Tutors have considerable potential to enhance international students' experience of study abroad. Chinese students' needs may also be particularly complex, given the transition they have to make from their home, social and academic culture to one that may be alien to them. However, there is currently a lack of information on how Chinese students perceive and respond to personal tutoring and the factors that influence this. This study contributes to closing this gap.

We describe the perceptions of staff and students as communicated to us and pick out salient themes. In comparing differing views, we hope to clarify differences and similarities between them, leading to a better understanding of where and why there may be misalignment between expectations and behaviours of tutors and tutees. Finally, we draw conclusions based on evidence and with some level of confidence make recommendations of helpful ways to proceed.

2.   Research aim

The aim is to explore Chinese students' and UK tutors' perceptions of the role of the personal tutor, and gain insight into potential barriers to student engagement.

3.   Motivations for research

The study was carried out with a view to exploring the issues and generating insights in order to create new knowledge and a grounding for further exploration, as well as practical recommendations.

4.   Summary of research outcomes

The findings indicate that there are differences in expectations and perceptions of the personal tutor's role between staff and students. However, both groups appear to have an ill-defined idea of the role, although staff have clearer views than students. Very few positive comments on the role emerged compared with the number of negative comments, which confirms the study's starting point that personal tutoring is not working optimally for international students. Students have a pragmatic, results-focussed orientation, regard the tutor as a resource, and wish for more focussed, directive and practical support, while tutors have a

developmental orientation and would like students to become more autonomous and proactive.

5.   Background information

UK HEIs increasingly see international students, and particularly Chinese students, as an important source of economic and cultural capital at a time when home student numbers are in decline for demographic reasons. Chinese students outnumber those from any other country, have shown a 14% rise over the last six years, reaching 95,090 in 2016-17 (HESA data accessed on UKCISA website, 2018) and are predicted to reach 130,900 in 2020 (Ianelli and Huang, 2014).

There is evidence that Chinese students do not achieve as highly as home students (Iannelli and Huang, 2013; Crawford and Wang, 2014). Their wellbeing may also suffer as a result. Bentley's (2017) research found that international students are less likely to make use of wellbeing and mental health services, despite the fact they suffer from poorer mental health than home students (Nicolas et al., 2013; Raunic & Xenos, 2008). This suggests a reticence to make use of university services or a lack of awareness of their entitlement. Personal tutors act as an important conduit to central university services, such as counselling. Recent research suggests that some international students feel dissatisfied with the level of support offered by personal tutors (Bentley, 2017), which indicates some misalignment of expectations. Personal experience, reports from staff and tutoring records from the researcher's institution indicate that levels of engagement by Chinese students with their tutors is low.

6.   Research methodology
6.1 Methodology

Situated in an interpretivist paradigm, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of participants and a mixed methods approach was taken (interviews, focus groups, and an online survey, which centred on metaphors being rated for appropriateness).

The research team consisted of a British principle investigator, a Mandarin-speaking co-researcher and a Mandarin-speaking research assistant. Chinese student participants could express themselves in Chinese to remove a potential barrier to communication.

The conceptual framework used metaphor as the central heuristic device for gaining in-depth insights into the perceptions of the tutor's role. Metaphor is a means of communicating and exploring meaning found across human cultures. Clearly, there are culturally specific variations in interpretation (Wang 2011), which were taken into consideration in the design of the study. A similar method was used by Jin and Cortazzi (2013) to gain insight into Chinese students' perceptions of teachers. The choice of metaphors was based on suggestions from colleagues, including Chinese colleagues, and the literature, eg Mackinnon (2004). Metaphors were presented with a picture and gloss, and the students' survey had Chinese translations where students were asked to rate how accurately the metaphors 'captured the essence of the role of personal tutor' (see appendix 1).

6.2 Data collection
Ethical approval for this study was granted from the researchers' institution.

An anonymous online survey (See appendix 1), in English (with Mandarin translation for the student survey) was sent to 434 undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Plymouth Business School (PBS) of mainland Chinese origin. A parallel staff survey was sent to all PBS personal tutors (N=101).

In addition, an identical survey was sent to 200 pre-sessional students and 412 undergraduates at two other UK institutions. In total 127 completed responses (Nstudent = 95, Nstaff = 32) were collected with an overall response rate of 11.1%.

A survey was also sent to students at a Chinese public university. The small sample (N=24) means that the results cannot be considered representative, but are used for illustrative purposes only. We carried out two semi-structured focus groups in Chinese (40 minutes each), with three postgraduate and four undergraduate PBS students. A selection of staff (seven British and four Chinese lecturers) were also interviewed individually (less than one hour).

7. Key research findings
7.1 Quantitative analysis
7.1.1 Survey results - metaphor
Table 1 gives the mean scores of the rating of the metaphors by groups, with highest and lowest scores indicated. Students from the Chinese institution are included as there are interesting differences in their scores from the other two groups.

Table 1. Rating of metaphors

Metaphor	Staff N=32	Students (UK) N=95	Students (China) N=24	Diff between groups
Spring	1.19	1.71	2.48	1.3
Tree	1.22	1.65	2.31	1.1
Gas station	1.22	1.87	2.88	1.7
Line manager	1.31	2.17	2.23	.90
Bench	1.41	1.79	2.60	1.2
Broker	1.53	1.95	2.27	.74
Doctor	1.84	1.94	1.96	.12
Sage	1.91	2.18	2.04	.13
Parent	1.97	2.25	2.50	.53
Fiduciary	2.03	2.11	2.46	.43
Counsellor	2.13	2.22	2.58	.45
Older sibling	2.13	2.44	2.58	.45
Friend	2.13	2.38	2.69	.53
Coach	2.34	2.55	2.48	.22
Mountain guide	2.41	2.34	2.58	.17
Mentor	2.78	2.46	2.58	.32
Range	1.59	.90	.92	

Overall, there was quite a high level of agreement in the rating of metaphors, and a tendency towards the mean. However, staff ratings of metaphors differed from students' in several respects. Firstly, the range of scores given was wider: from 2.78 to 1.19, a range of 1.59; whereas students had a range of 0.92 and 0.90.

There was more variance between individual members of staff, shown by the standard deviation, the largest being that for Parent (1.527), where views were quite polarized (see figure 1) and the smallest being for Mentor (0.820), a difference of 0.707 as contrasted with the largest for students being for Bench (1.306) and the smallest for Mountain guide (1.051), a difference of 0.255. However, the difference in sample sizes means no firm conclusions can be drawn.

Fig 1.   Staff survey results for parent
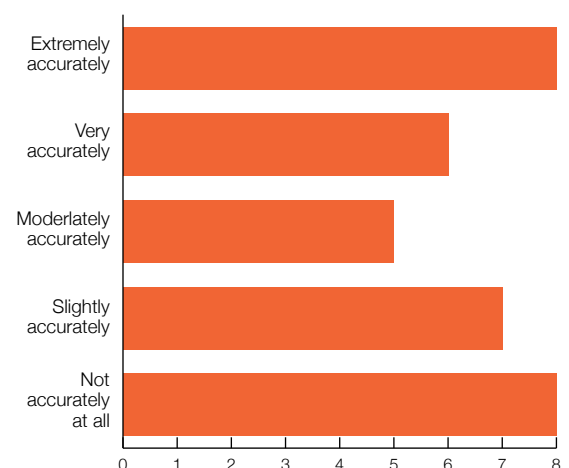
This suggests that staff have more varied and stronger views about most and least preferred metaphors. There is a notable difference between staff and China-based students. Students in the UK are more in line with staff in terms of their preference for metaphors and Mentor, Coach and Mountain guide were rated highly by both staff and students. However, there are still differences as can be seen in the diagrams below.

We compared the number of *'extremely accurately'* or *'very accurately'* ratings for each metaphor for staff and students in the UK.
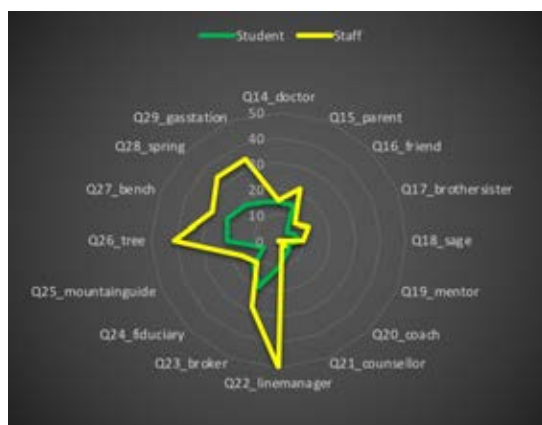
Fig 2.   Percentage of students and staff rating *'extremely accurately'* or *'very accurately'*
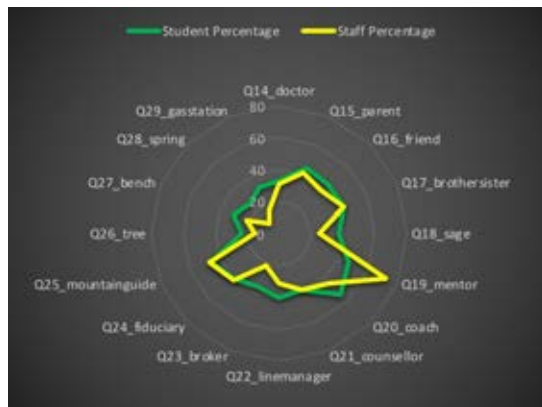
The same was done for the rating of both groups for *'not at all accurately'*.

It is apparent that staff have clearer views about most and least preferred metaphors.

Fig 3.   Percentage of students and staff rating *'not at all accurately'*

7.1.2 Characteristics and qualities of personal tutors

Students and staff rated a list of characteristics and qualities of tutors from *'Extremely important' (5)* to *'Not at all important' (1)*. Most characteristics were considered important, with a mean rating of between 3.6 and 4.5 for students and 2.5 and 4.5

for staff. Again, this shows that staff have more differentiated views. Student level of agreement is higher than that of staff, as shown by the smaller standard deviation (see appendix 2).

Staff and students were asked to choose the single most important characteristic of all, and in Figure 4 we can see a clear difference in preference with students having a rather more pragmatic view of what is important in a personal tutor. Chinese staff confirmed that students would not expect or wish to be listened to, but rather informed and directed.

There were no meaningful correlations between important characteristics and metaphor choice for either staff or students.

See figure 4, 'Single most important characteristic of tutor'.

7.2 Qualitative analysis
7.2.1 Method

Qualitative data was analysed using NVivo (a qualitative data analysis computer software package) to see what major and minor themes emerged. Open comments from the surveys were also coded in NVivo. The researchers then examined the relative salience of themes between students and staff.

Four Chinese and seven non-Chinese tutors were interviewed. The student focus groups were conducted in Chinese, transcribed, translated and coded. Students were asked a series of open questions and invited to categorise the metaphors from the survey.

7.2.2 Metaphors chosen
7.2.2.1 Metaphors chosen by staff

In the interviews, staff selected a metaphor which represented the role of a tutor and said why (see Appendix 3). The most favourable metaphors staff mentioned were: Mentor (3), Coach (2), Friend (2). Metaphors that staff mentioned as unsuitable were: *parents, sibling, doctor, sage, friend*. This suggests on the whole that UK staff expect the role to be boundaried and the tutee to take a proactive role.

Staff survey respondents made 20 suggestions for metaphors, and the categories of *Guide, Signposting* and *Support* stood out as salient. *Sounding board, safety net, Siri/Cortana - a personal assistant who can signpost you to the information you need* and *111 operator* were also suggested. One member of staff, evidently struck by the multiplicity of the role, suggested a *mixed metaphor*!

7.2.2.2 Metaphors chosen by students

Postgraduate students' suggestions of metaphor for the ideal tutor were: *mountain guide, line*

manager and consultant. They expressed a desire for someone who was proactive and directive in helping them make progress. They divided the metaphors for tutors on the basis of relationships, how close these were and what they could get from them. They valued the qualifications of the tutor, and preferred someone with experience. They had not had contact with their allocated tutor.

The four undergraduates were somewhat similar, suggesting *gas station, compass, psychologist and big brother*, again giving reasons that indicated a wish for concern and guidance. However, they would not apply these metaphors to their current tutor, who they felt did not measure up to the ideal.

In the survey, students made 100 suggestions, most of which can be categorised into three main areas: *academic* (words like *teacher, instructor, supervisor*); *affective* (words such as *friend, friendly, love, soulmate, guardian*); *guidance* (*guide, advisor, beacon, light*). Some suggested dissatisfaction: *stranger; useless pretend to care for students*. There were a range of interesting metaphors which defied categorisation: *rain in spring* and *wind in summer*; *like chicken breast*, t*asted not delicious while it is really healthy* and a few which sat alone: *mirror; agent, babysitter*.

For both staff and students 'Guide' was the largest category

Terms used by staff suggested a professional, boundaried role: *Someone to support and guide you in all aspects of your academic journey*.

For students it was a more emotionally attached role: *when you are lost in life path, he/she can show you the way.*

7.2.3 Views of tutorials

7.2.3.1 Staff

Most staff complained about lack of attendance at tutorials and lack of engagement when students did come. The Chinese tutors said that the students had no idea of the purpose of personal tutorials. Tutors found students generally reticent to speak, either due to shyness, language difficulties or unwillingness to admit to having problems. They also reported that students were not proactive in asking for a meeting and did not take up the support and opportunities signposted. Generally, Chinese students were perceived as reluctant to integrate with other nationalities and cultures.

The three female Chinese tutors said they had a clear agenda which explained their tutorial sessions.

Most tutors felt the only use the students perceived in the tutor was to provide references for further study.

Fig 4.   Single most important characteristic of tutor
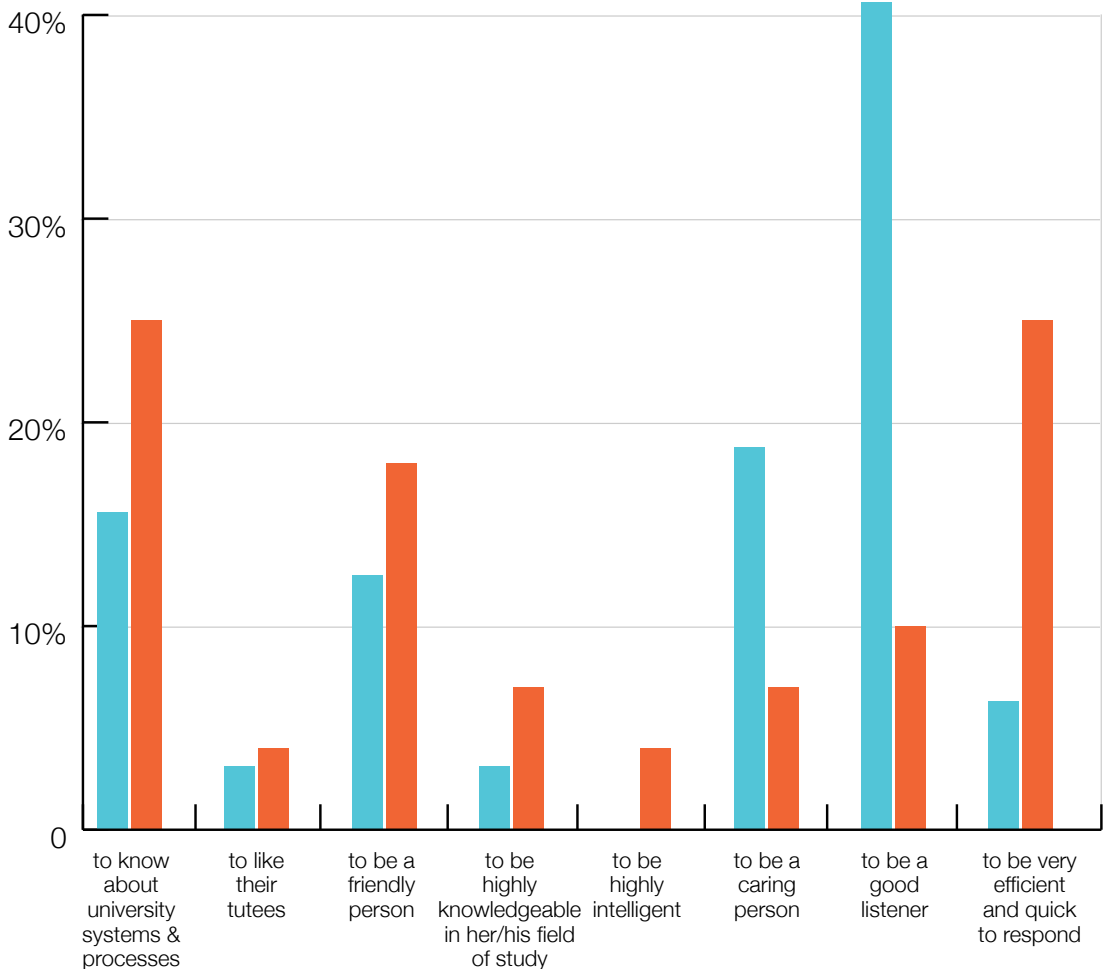
7.2.3.2   Students

None of the postgraduate students had seen their personal tutor for a one-to-one meeting. They said the tutor was too busy and that they did not need his/her help, as they felt they had not encountered any particular problems. This contrasted with their views of the ideal tutor, who would give advice, help them through difficult patches and point them in the right direction. The female undergraduates felt they had some benefits from the relationship but one student had never met his personal tutor. He stressed the importance of getting a reference letter, the only function of the personal tutor from his point of view, although, ideally, he wanted academic help from a personal tutor. One student mentioned character and emotional intelligence as important qualities. Another was concerned about the ability, ideas and age of the personal tutor. One sought practical answers and guidance.

7.2.4 Cultural differences

Cultural differences were mentioned by UK lecturers more than Chinese staff but, interestingly, students in the focus groups did not refer to them. Tutors felt differences can pose a barrier to communication and developing a relationship:

> **"But culture is [a barrier], because … when they say one thing I don't know whether that is what they really mean or whether it is a euphemism for something else."**

Male Tutor.

One of the main differences mentioned was conservatism or reticence to share personal issues. This lack of openness was mentioned as a barrier to providing effective and timely support. One tutor had noticed that Chinese students do not declare

disabilities, whereas British students would seek support. He also noted that Chinese students do not seem to apply for extenuating circumstances.

7.2.5 Language ability

Language difficulties were mentioned by Chinese staff (two references) and UK staff (15 references). The non-Chinese staff perceived language as a barrier to students' progress and to communication in tutorials. Tutors are concerned that poor English will affect students' studies, and so encourage them to engage in activities to develop their language skills.

Limited time was part of the problem and skill and patience are required to overcome the barriers. This language barrier can affect the relationship:

> **"Some of them would only come in pairs because the one who wanted to see me was too shy to speak or felt that their English was not very good. "**

Female tutor.

The only students who referred to language were the two female undergraduates who had only been in the UK for three months.

7.2.6 The relationships between tutors and tutees

All the tutors said that the relationship varied with the individual student and their level of engagement. However, they felt some generalisations could be made. Time was mentioned by many tutors as an issue that inhibited the development of relationships, and one tutor mentioned that she gave her Chinese tutees more time.

Table 2. Most frequent words by group

Non-Chinese staff N = 21,591 words			Chinese staff N = 9,837 words			Chinese students N = 9,950 words		
Word*	Count	%**	Word	Count	%	Word*	Count	(%)
students	403	3.67	students	229	2.19	students	206	3.84
Chinese	209	1.91	Chinese	108	1.03	tutor	184	3.43
English	133	1.22	time	61	0.58	help	76	1.42
different	102	0.93	need	40	0.38	questions	36	0.67
tutor	92	0.84	help	38	0.36	friend	34	0.63
time	85	0.77	want	38	0.36	university	33	0.62
want	80	0.73	problem	33	0.32	studying	32	0.60
role	75	0.68	system	30	0.29	need	32	0.60
problem	74	0.67	reference	29	0.28	hope	30	0.56
feel	65	0.59	different	29	0.28	life	28	0.52

*Word - includes a variety of forms of the word – eg tutor, tutors, tutoring, tutorial, etc.

**Weighted percentage – the frequency of the word relative to the total words counted.

The male tutors made reference to the fact it was a professional role:

> **"It is fairly standard personal tutoring. I've made myself available."**

Chinese staff seemed to empathise with the students, using words like, share, friend, and need, and two tutors in particular showed a keen interest in the progress of their students and how to support this. One raised the notion of being responsible for her tutees, and in return appreciated their sense of respect. Another considered the relationship to be the basis for being able to support the students effectively.

A number of teachers felt the relationship could not be developed through personal tutorials alone. This is a problem with final year direct entry students where there is a short period of time for the relationship to develop.

From the survey comments (N=16) three main categories emerged:
- challenges of the role;
- the importance of the role;
- student engagement.

Staff felt that the personal tutor role was undervalued by students.

The metaphors students chose (see Appendix 4) indicate a desire for more concern and involvement from the tutor. In the open comments on the survey (N=34), the largest group focussed on students' dissatisfaction with tutoring:

> **"Don't waste time or speak nonsense. Give all the tutorial to something meaningful or related to studies".**

Students also acknowledged the importance of the role and expressed the view that the role of a tutor was to give focussed, practical help.

7.3 Linguistic analysis

Staff and student corpora were created from the data and analysed for word frequency to see if this shed light on the salient issues for each group. The most frequent 100 words in a text were examined. Ambiguous or non-specific words were removed until the list was reduced to 37 significant and core words (see Appendix 5).

Naturally, both 'students' and 'tutor' have a very high count for all groups, but after that the highest for students is 'help' – far more frequent than all other terms; for non-Chinese staff: 'Chinese' 'English' and 'different', and for Chinese staff: 'Chinese' followed by 'time'. A comparison of the top 10 terms for each group indicates differences in concerns: it is clear that the largest overlap is between the two groups of staff and really, given that students and tutors are inevitably common terms, there is no overlap between non-Chinese staff and Chinese students.

See Table 2, the 'Most frequent words by group'.

8. Conclusions and ideas for further research

The findings suggest some degree of misalignment between the views of Chinese students and their UK tutors, both in terms of practical details and underlying orientations.

UK tutors, even those of Chinese origin, may have a less hands-on, directive approach than Chinese students would like, which leads to the students feeling that the tutor is not meeting their needs.

Findings indicate that Chinese students appreciate their tutors taking a vivid interest in their progress, they would like practical and constructive suggestions, particularly on academic matters, in a timely fashion, and that they value a caring attitude.

They are unlikely to be as proactive and independent as UK tutors might expect.

A major limitation is that the small sample makes statistical analyses less reliable and, as it was not a random sample, we make no claim for representativeness. The low response rate for the online survey suggests that the topic did not engage students' interest, which may in itself be significant. A larger number of respondents would have enhanced the richness and reliability of the data. In the thematic analysis, saturation point was not reached.

Analysis of qualitative data is interpretative and as such open to bias. The use of two coders from different backgrounds should have mitigated this danger.

The option of speaking in Chinese facilitated more effective engagement with the concepts and freer expression for both students and staff, and we strongly recommend use of the mother tongue in any future research.

In retrospect, it would have been useful to have had a control group of British students, to see whether they share the same concerns as Chinese students.

In addition to rating the metaphors, survey respondents could be asked to provide a reason for their rating. This would give greater insight into their interpretation of the metaphor.

This study does not claim to be anything other than exploratory and further ideas for understanding international students' views of, and engagement with, personal tutoring in UKHEIs is strongly recommended, including carrying out a large survey in the People's Republic of China to explore the Chinese context.

9.   Recommendations

Based on the findings, a number of recommendations for improving student engagement with personal tutors emerge:

- Explain the personal tutoring system in terms the students will understand. This may require support from Chinese colleagues.
- Provide a framework for tutoring and a structure to tutorial meetings. If students can understand exactly what they are being offered and why, there is a greater chance of them engaging.
- Be aware of the precise needs of the students. Final year direct entry students in particular are under tremendous pressure to meet their academic targets and cannot spend time on anything other than essential issues. Identify

what these are. This may require liaison with module leaders and programme leaders.
- Focus the tutorial meetings on students' expressed needs and on practical, tangible outcomes, related to academic targets.
- Target language support at the students' specific needs. For final year students, this may be in the area of dissertation writing.
- Advice and guidance must be timely. This means that tutors must respond to requests for information and assistance promptly, and tutorials should be scheduled at times when the information or skills development offered is most relevant.
- Provide cultural briefings for tutors working with Chinese students. Again, support from Chinese colleagues or colleagues specialising in intercultural communication may be helpful.
- Match tutors with students they teach wherever possible.
- Allocate sufficient time for tutoring. Chinese tutees may require more time than a home student would.

Lastly, is a recommendation to care about the progress and wellbeing of Chinese students and to try to understand them. Far from home, they are engaging in challenging studies in a foreign language and culture. Our findings suggest that they appreciate an engaged and directive approach.

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11. Acknowledgements

12. Further information

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Project outcomes

The project has helped highlight to international students the value of professional networks in generating unique connections and relevant work experience. It has sought to provide a platform from which they can gain a deeper understanding of UK business culture and access to local social life through an ambitious and exclusive collaboration that promotes a concerted and systematic approach to enhancing the international student experience. Furthermore, aspects of it have promoted dialogue between home and international students helping to create meaningful friendships and community links for both.

About Canterbury Christ Church University

Internationalisation of the student body is of vital importance to Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) and is demonstrated by its increasingly global orientation. This vision is marketed to both domestic and international students and, as a consequence, the University is developing a range of strategies for integration of its international students into the local community.

Why this project?

Anecdotal evidence has previously identified a need for international students to be given specific support to find meaningful work prospects. It is acknowledged by Spencer-Oatey & Dauber (2018) that employers look to recruit graduates with 'global skills'. Developing global graduates forms an important strand of the CCCU Internationalisation agenda.

Canterbury is a small city boasting three universities and several further education colleges and competition for experiential learning and work placements is fierce. This, coupled with the fact the University is alert to opportunities for cross-cultural engagement, led to the initiative being developed. The project was specifically designed to take advantage of the fact there are several Rotary Clubs in Canterbury; each with extensive local and global connections. One in particular (the Rotary Club of Canterbury Sunrise) has collaborated with CCCU on previous occasions and is keen to support schemes such as this. A similar programme has proven extremely successful in Australia ('g'day [sa]').

Aims of the project

- Help prepare international students for the global workplace through sustainable work-related activities, civic service and professional networking; all of which are concepts supported and championed by local Rotarians

Left: Students taking part in professional work-based learning at BBC studios.

- Encourage students to design a personalised package of activities based upon needs they themselves have identified
- Promote community cohesion by advocating the idea of partnership between CCCU, Christ Church Students' Union (CCSU) and local Rotary Clubs

Set-up and evaluation

As a medium through which to deliver the project, Christ Church International Rotaract Club was created with support from the project lead. It was decided to locate the club within CCSU to ensure student buy-in; it is open to all but, for the purpose of this project, specifically promoted to international students. It is a fully established club with agreed constitution and elected officers. Email and social media accounts were created and marketing materials produced. Regular committee meetings have taken place throughout the year with guest speakers invited by the student members. Some speakers were Rotarians, chosen because of their specific business backgrounds and others were representatives from local charities. Fundraising events have also taken place, including a Christmas shoebox collection. Christ Church International Rotaract Club is mentored by members of the Rotary Club of Canterbury Sunrise.

The strength of this project lies in the fact it endeavours to be as student-driven as possible. International Rotaract students were encouraged to identify their own employability needs via informal focus groups and discussions conducted by the project lead. Students were then invited to participate in a bespoke employability package delivered throughout the academic year which included a combination of core and free choice activities designed in collaboration with the Rotarian mentors.

Examples of 'work ready' activities delivered by Rotarian mentors included:
- CVs and interviewing techniques
- Presentation skills
- 'Working Across Cultures: Critical Incidents and What They Tell Us'
- Professional work-based learning opportunities in fields such as Broadcasting; Law; Publishing; Police; Speech and Language Therapy – diverse vocations that reflected Rotarian areas of expertise (NB: these were purposefully not described as 'work experience' or 'placements' for the simple fact that each varied in terms of format. The intention was for them to be seen as 'tasters' and an opportunity for exposure to a particular working environment without being overly burdensome on the individual hosting the session.)

International Rotaract students were then supported to connect with the wider Rotary network by attending local meetings, events and national conferences. This was with a view to better understanding business and civic culture and to enjoy opportunities for:

- professional networking
- business conversation
- international fellowship
- community integration

Towards the end of the academic year, participants were encouraged to demonstrate 'job readiness' via participation in the Christ Church Extra Award (Higher Education Achievement Report).

Key findings and learning points

The project is helping to secure an equitable student experience for international student participants by facilitating links with the local community and actively developing networks to support their post study employment. All the while, it is promoting the exchange of ideas and sharing of best practice; emphasising the benefits to students of being able to articulate how they add value to future employers.

Participants are very receptive to the idea of forming links with clubs in their home countries and discussing future joint fundraising initiatives. There is evidence of real passion and commitment amongst students to make connections beyond the university. Where this has happened, participants agree that their day-to-day experience is enriched and are only too happy to speak positively about the project to their peers.

Participants have enjoyed the opportunity to engage in individual coaching sessions delivered by a CCCU Careers Adviser. Sessions were designed to encourage Rotaract members to set clear goals and identify realistic approaches to achieving them.

Professional work-based learning opportunities (generally lasting a day) were far easier for the project lead to negotiate and manage than would have been the case for longer term placements. They were designed to be 'tasters' and an opportunity for students to ask mentors about their chosen career path.

Student feedback

"I recognise that many university students in Canterbury invest their free time in their future career. I have wanted to behave like them."

"Thank you for giving me a hands-on experience of British life."

"Being part of the Rotaract Club means to be part of a worldwide community which has the aim to spread the meaning of goodwill and peace. It is great that there is an opportunity for the younger ones to be part of this amazing project."

"Being a part of Rotaract allows me to be part of a community."

"I enjoy getting involved with like-minded people who are dedicated to providing service at the local, national and international level."

"It allows me not only to be able to do what I love, but also allows me to build up myself on a more professional level, through working together on projects and through meeting good speakers."

"Joining Rotaract is one of the best decisions I have made in my life."

"I wanted to thank you for reaching out to me and getting me involved with the

Rotaract initiative. The sessions I attended were very insightful and inspiring. I am very grateful for the opportunities this presented."

Timescale

Officially, the project ran from September 2017 to June 2018. However, due to positive engagement and the feedback received, university money has been set aside so that it may continue.

Phase 1 (September 2017): Participants were recruited to the project through a promotional stand at Fresher's Fair and direct invitations

Phase 2 (October – November 2017): Creation of Christ Church International Rotaract Club

Phase 3 (October 2017 – March 2018): Participants undertook a series of 'work ready' activities

Phase 4 (March – June 2018): Participants connected with a local Rotary Club

Phase 5 (June 2018): Collation of feedback and impact assessment conducted

Challenges

The project has not been without challenges although each of these can, in future, be mitigated with appropriate staff and student buy-in.

- At the start of the project, international students were significantly underrepresented in terms of CCSU involvement. Creativity and perseverance was required in advertising the project and attracting them to it
- Motivating students who expressed an initial interest in the project but declined to commit over the long-term due to academic pressures and general lack of time can be disheartening and required a degree of staff resilience
- Ingenuity is sometimes required to help students identify the intangible benefits of building professional networks
- Time, energy and enthusiasm is required to help students navigate the formalities involved in officially chartering a Rotaract Club (indeed, this process has been delayed until next academic year once the club is more established)
- Extensive liaison and diary management with both students and external stakeholders required considerable staff time, particularly in the early days of the project when it was vital to maintain momentum
- Mitigating the perennial problem posed by students graduating was, and is, a challenge. New participants must be recruited each year to ensure continuity

Sustainability

Despite the challenges, the project is very affordable, sustainable and can be easily replicated across the sector. Relatively little money is required; rather a commitment to foster ties between international students, the university and the local community. The project also impacts positively on the ways in which we serve domestic students by promoting and encouraging conversation and a collaborative approach amongst all participants regardless of nationality. As the club has grown, more domestic students have expressed an interest in joining.

The project promotes the idea of students 'personalising' their university experience by allowing them to share newly-acquired employability skills with the local community. Crucially, the benefits are long-term in that Rotarian connections made in the UK can be enjoyed by international students who elect to join their 'home' club in future. The project promotes the concept of 'end to end' experiences which do not cease upon graduation and serves as an effective retention tool. It is recognised that international applicants are increasingly looking for sophisticated offerings when deciding where to study. A project such as this helps offer a point of differentiation while encouraging international students to be university advocates in the community and ambassadors of the UK when back at home.

The involvement of Rotary helps ensure that high quality intercultural interactions are enjoyed and gives students increased opportunities to participate in life-enriching activities. The intention was always for this project to be viewed as a prestigious opportunity that offers a unique insight into the world of work.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Building links with local Rotary Clubs is essential for the project to function. This is relatively easy given that Rotary is a non-political, non-religious global network that supports education
- For participation to be seen as desirable, it is essential to promote the project as offering something both personally enriching and of relevant professional value
- Many international students already have a basic appreciation of the objects of Rotary, often due to parental involvement at home. It is worth harnessing this understanding by advertising opportunities pre-arrival
- To help attract future participants, it is important for students to be given ample chance to share their opinions of the project. They can do this by attending re-fresher's events, writing reviews for the student paper and by appearing in marketing videos designed for incoming students; all the while promoting the benefits of taking part
- Students should be supported to identify personal development opportunities with the help of Rotarian mentors
- Rotarians are often well-connected to local dignitaries who in turn can be invited to support functions. International students typically enjoy civic occasions and can be empowered to utilise their newly acquired employability skills to help host events. This then generates further publicity and helps sustain the project
- Students should be encouraged to attend Rotaract meetings in their home country and/or look for opportunities to 'twin' and work on joint initiatives
- It is useful for a skills awareness assessment to be conducted at the start and end of the project to monitor how participation has added value to each individual
- Reflective diaries and skills monitoring toolkits are mechanisms we intend to introduce next academic year
- Given sufficient resourcing, this specific project can be easily extended to domestic students

References and Links

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Further information

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International Student Talent Pool
University of Portsmouth

Janet Woolnough, Careers Adviser
Luke Hahn, Information and Employment Adviser

This report was written in July 2018 before the project was completed. An update will be available on the UKCISA website in December 2018.

Project aims

The aim of this project was to work with local businesses to find paid internships suitable for international students at the University of Portsmouth (UoP). During 2016-17 the University ran a project exploring employability support for international students. This involved cross-University collaboration, gathering feedback from academics, students and other key stakeholders. The project found that international students were finding it hard to find paid, professional work, despite their visas enabling them to work either part-time during their programmes or full-time after their programmes. A clear need was identified through this project for a targeted offer to international students, including support with finding professional work experience.

Having liaised with a local International Trade Adviser at the Department of International Trade, a need was also identified on the part of employers, who did not feel confident to do business globally because of language and/or cultural barriers. The project sought to address both challenges by linking international students with local companies to support their global business activities.

Project outcomes

The International Student Talent Pool developed paid internships for international students with businesses, primarily in the local area. In order to meet the diverse student need and to fit within Tier 4 visa restrictions, the project sought to find summer internships for undergraduates and autumn internships for Master's graduates. Through employer engagement, 15 new roles have been created, the majority of which have sought specific language skills. Through student engagement, 90 applications have been submitted to the project. To date, 10 students have been placed and the project will continue to run for the remainder of the calendar year.

Context and project rationale

In 2017 the University of Portsmouth had an international student cohort of 2,947 students of which 1,695 were new (56%). This represents just over 17% of the full-time student body. The top 10 nationalities comprise 68% of the total international student body, but 32% come from other countries which demonstrates that the University recruits from a very large number of countries. 58% of the 2017 intake of international students were undergraduate and 42% postgraduate. The top four countries represented within the student body in 2017 were China (33%); Nigeria (8%); Malaysia (6%); and India (4%). International students study programmes across the University, but the majority of students are found in the Business and Law, and Technology Faculties.

Whilst the Faculty Placement teams support students with placement-year activities and some shorter work-based learning and the Careers and Employability Centre offer support to graduates with local job opportunities, there was no bespoke offer for international students who often found it hard to compete for generic opportunities. Within the Careers and Employability Service there were good links to employers in the local area, and these networks proved valuable during the project.

Project development and timeline

The project team, Janet Woolnough and Luke Hahn, are based within the University of Portsmouth Careers and Employability Service. The project involved working collaboratively with Bobby Mehta, International Director of UoP Global and with Paul Govier, International Trade Adviser, Department of International Trade (DIT), both of whom recognised the value of enabling local businesses to benefit from the skills of international students to support their global activities. The project was shaped in discussion between all parties to ensure the needs of all stakeholders were met. The delivery of the project was undertaken by the project team and the International Director was active in referring potential employer contacts. The International Trade Adviser worked with colleagues within the DIT to promote the project to companies in the local area as a resource to support their export activities and global business development. The intention was to seek vacancies relevant to the subject and language backgrounds of the UoP international student base. Roles were sought for the summer period (suitable for undergraduates) and the autumn period (suitable for postgraduates.)

Project set-up and launch (October 2017- February 2018)

The initial planning stages took place in autumn and early spring, working closely with the colleagues mentioned above and with Careers and Employability and University colleagues to establish opportunities for joint working and sharing of contacts. The next phase of the project involved raising awareness of the project to local businesses. This included the creation of a leaflet to be used in employer engagement and the organisation of a business launch event, held in February 2018. Administrative processes were developed to underpin the project, including the development of a vacancy template, liaison with the UKVI Student Officer regarding compliance, and the development of spreadsheets to record employer and student activity. You can view and download the leaflet for employers and the vacancy template with the online version of this report.

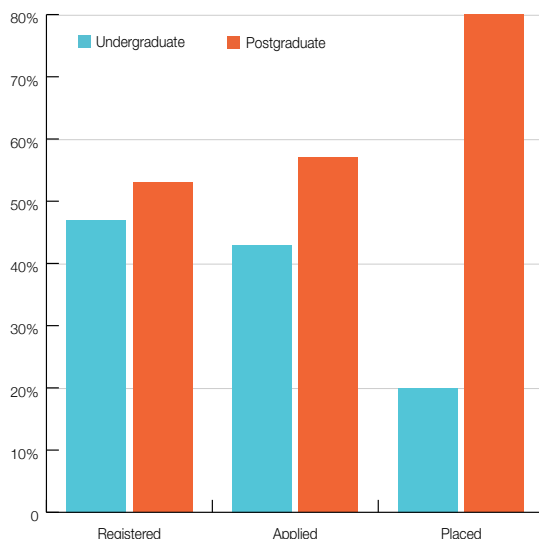## Employer and Student Engagement (March – July 2018)

Marketing to businesses was undertaken in a number of ways including:

- undertaking extensive engagement at business networking events;
- following up referrals from University colleagues (International Director, placement colleagues, employer engagement colleagues);
- direct approach to 'target companies'; following up of opportunities advertised elsewhere that would work well for the project.

'Target companies' were identified as those that had clear 'global' activities either in terms of exporting, or in their core business activity, for example language schools. To date, we have met with or spoken to over 50 employers. Of these, 10 employers offered placements through the programme across 15 different job roles. Carrying employers' initial interest through to a tangible outcome has proven one of the most challenging aspects of the project.

Student marketing was undertaken initially by creating a registration form for students to express their interest in the project. This included questions about language skills and national background, course studied and area of career interest (see the online version of the report to view and download the registration form). The data from this proved very helpful when talking to employers, as it showed the range of language skills and cultural experience available to them. As vacancies were developed, opportunities were directly targeted at registered students, using the database. Vacancies were also marketed directly to students with direct emails using information on their nationality and study area and course level via the University's own online jobsboard.

In total, 166 students registered their interest through the online registration form. 53% of these were postgraduates (Figure 1).

Over half the registrants were from business and finance courses. 50% of those placed were from business-related programmes and 30% were from Humanities and Social Science backgrounds. (Figure 2).

Fig 2. Student registrations/applications and placements by subject area.
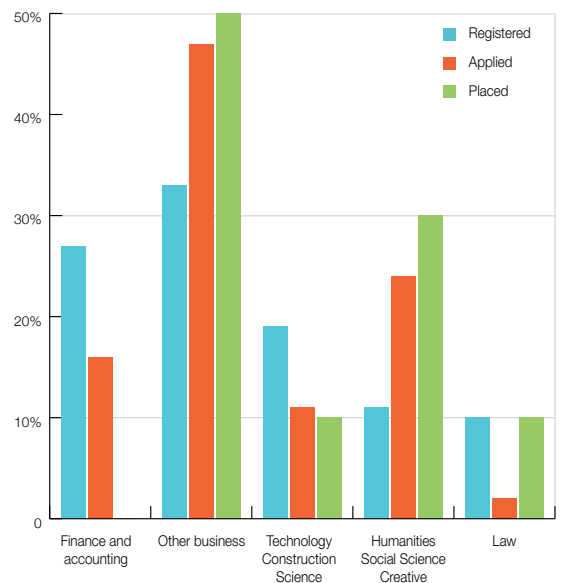
The nationality of registrants was very diverse, with students coming from over 40 different countries. 25% were from China and South East Asian Countries and 25% from African Countries (not including North Africa); and 19% from MENA. The largest numbers of registered students were Chinese and Nigerian, which is representative of the student body at the UoP (Figure 3).

Fig 3. Student registrations/applications and placements by nationality

Fig 1. Student registrations/applications and placements by degree level.
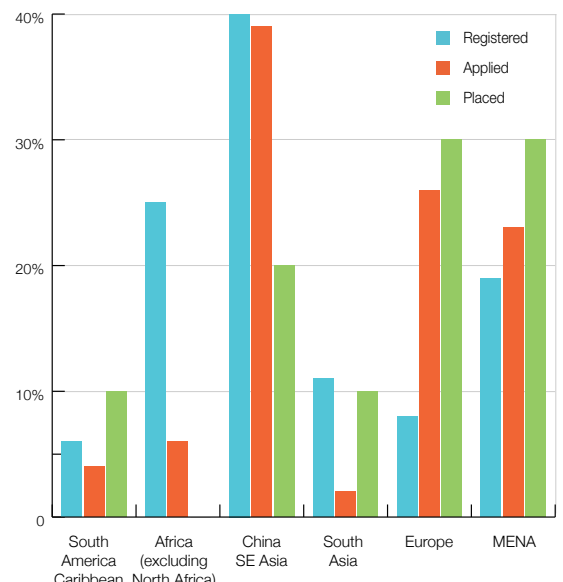
Vacancy management and promotion (April – July 2018)

Vacancies were developed with employers using job profiles which were uploaded onto the vacancy system. As vacancies were developed, the database was used to directly target registered students with opportunities. Academic contacts were used to promote opportunities, which proved to be a successful approach. Applications were sent to the project team and students were required to complete a cover information sheet, providing information on their course and visa end dates with a declaration that they understood their visa restrictions.

Interest in the roles themselves was broad, with 90 separate applications received from 64 different students. These applicants came from 27 different countries (see Figure 3) and were split between undergraduate (43%) and postgraduate (57%) courses (see Figure 1). Though well over half (63%) of the applicants study finance, accounting or other business-related courses, there were applications from across the spectrum of courses offered at the University including 24% from humanities, social sciences or creative subjects (See Figure 2).

To date, the project team has placed 10 students in roles and is currently managing six further vacancies for the summer period. Of the 15 roles that were advertised, seven were marketing-based with six in more general communication and customer-support roles. One focused more on website development and one was a translation project management internship (see Figure 4).

Fig 4.   Talent Pool vacancies by job area needs

Number vs type of job area
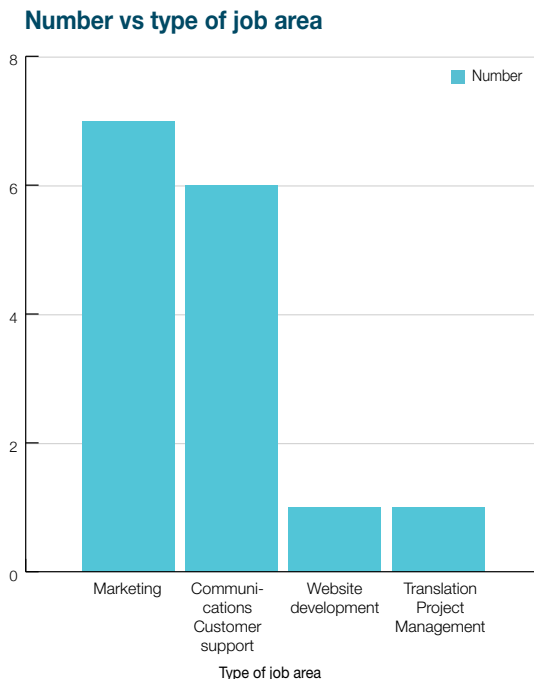
73% of the vacancies required language skills with 40% specifically requiring a Mandarin/Cantonese speaker (Figure 5).

Fig 5.   Talent Pool vacancies by language requirements

Number vs language required
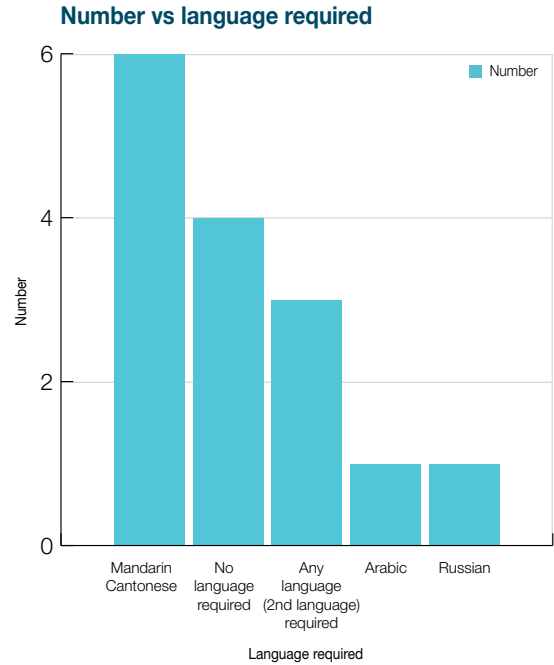
Evaluation and future developments (June – December 2018)

Engagement with employers is continuing to create further opportunities for the autumn period, suitable for postgraduate students. As placements are now underway, the project team will start an evaluation process with employers and students which will continue until the end of the year. The project team is recruiting students to film employers and students in situ to build video case studies to support promotional activities and dissemination. (The online report will be updated with links to these after December 2018). The final evaluation will be completed at the end of the calendar year 2018. The Project Team has started to link with another local university regarding dissemination of the model and employer links. A dissemination event for all local universities will be organised at the end of the autumn term to share information on the project and enable attendees to also share good practice.

Project challenges

One of the challenges has been to convert initial interest into actual job opportunities. There appears to be a variety of reasons behind this:
- the timing of students' availability compared to employer need
- the logistics of getting new roles through HR
- employers having existing internship programmes that took precedence

Chinese website developed by Qian for Landsec

University of Portsmouth student Qian, working as a Marketing Intern, at Landsec

A key part of the employer engagement strategy was to maintain close dialogue with companies to establish the likelihood of a job role materialising and making a clear decision to drop leads and refocus efforts elsewhere.

The planned budget anticipated using the majority of the funds to employ students to promote roles to the student community in the early stages of the project. The decision was taken to undertake student marketing in a more direct way using the project team for several reasons. Firstly, as vacancies started to become available from April onwards, core teaching had finished, meaning student marketing needed to be through emails rather than direct engagement. Similarly, the cultural and national societies in the Students' Union's were no longer active as it was the end of the academic year.

This led to an under-spend of the project budget. Discussions took place with UKCISA to gain permission for a reworking of the original budget plan to include other costed activities. The remaining budget will be used to:

- Support the employment of students to video case studies of the students and employers
- Support the employment of students to promote opportunities during the autumn term
- Support continued travel expenses to enable business engagement
- Provide travel bursaries for students in less local placements

- Organise a dissemination and good practice event for local universities in autumn 2018

A final project report outlining completed activities will be available on the UKCISA website after December 2018.

Future developments and sustainability

There has been a real appetite for this project, both from employers and students, and strategically within the University, as it links closely to the University's Global Engagement Strategy.

Close partnerships have been developed with local employers and it is likely that there will be ongoing opportunities and collaboration. It is intended that the programme will continue and develop on the basis of evaluation received. The project has been successful, it has enabled businesses to use a previously untapped resource and enabled our students to have opportunities targeted at them for the first time. There was no financial support provided to employers but this did not deter them. The project team is confident, therefore, that employers will continue to be interested in the programme.

> **"I am glad that I applied to this program. It has allowed me to get hands-on experience and to apply some of the knowledge I have gained in my course at an organization which embraces flexibility and patience, leading to mutual development".**
> Caridad, Sales Account Intern at Training Vision (Dominican Republic)

University of Portsmouth student Caridad working as a Sales Account Intern at Training Vision

"I thought it would be very difficult for an international student to find an intern in the UK. But staff members of the talent pool have been keeping me updated with job vacancies which fit me well. It is really helpful and efficient to target the potential positions rather than just sending CVs everywhere. They also monitor the process of interviews, which made me feel very supported".

Qian, Marketing Intern at Landsec (China)

"I was keen to confirm that our Intern, who has worked for us the last couple of weeks, has been absolutely fantastic and a real pleasure to have in the office. She has translated our website, which is nearly complete, and has started on some of our Centre literature."

Talent Pool Employer

"We got great support from the team in order to advertise our positions and hire the right students for our project. We have now put together a team of four students of different nationalities, speaking different languages, covering sales positions. We've found the students extremely skilled, ready to work, interested in the roles, extremely reliable and with fresh ideas to implement in our business. We are very pleased with the service that we've received and also we would like to strengthen our cooperation with the University in order to get the chance to host more students in the future."

Federica, Work Placement and Training Director at Training Vision

Reflections on the project
Breadth of opportunities

The initial intention was to find roles suitable for a wide range of students, representing their language backgrounds and career aspirations. It became clear very early in the project that this was unlikely to happen. All the roles fell into two categories:

University of Portsmouth student Murtadha presenting to employers at the project launch

Luke Hahn from the Project Team, meets with Fran Downton from Tourism South East

marketing/communications/translation and customer engagement. The project encouraged students from all disciplines to apply for roles, to see the experience as business experience in the broadest sense. As a result, students as diverse as financial accountants, education and civil engineering applied for marketing and customer roles. Employers were equally flexible, focusing on the skills rather than the subject background of the applicants.

It also became clear that employers were interested in students with specific language skills, in particular Mandarin, and to a lesser extent, Arabic. Other languages were sought, but to a lesser degree. This became an issue for students from other backgrounds such as from Nigeria, who were 'excluded' from the majority of the roles. Negotiation with some employers resulted in language requirements being dropped, and opening roles to a broader talent pool.

The initial intention had been to find full-time three-to-four-month internships to fit the post-study period of students in the summer and autumn. It again became clear that employers wanted greater flexibility than this with many seeking part-time employees. Other employers wanted the role to be for a shorter or longer term employment, and this was accommodated.

International-only student roles

The project group sought the advice of the University legal team and identified that if the internships were 'positive action' to support a group that were struggling, then this would be legal. If the focus was on supporting employer needs this would not be legal. As the primary driver was to improve the student experience, this was permitted. However the project took the decision to open opportunities to home/EEA students if they met the job requirements and they were not offered exclusively to international students. Consequently, UK and EU students also applied and one UK and two EU students were placed through the programme.

Breadth of engaged companies

It was interesting to note that education agencies, language schools and other similar organisations were particularly interested in using the project to support their work.

Payment for interns

The project provided no salary support to employers but this did not prove to be a barrier in relation to employer interest. All the participating companies were happy to pay the UK minimum wage or above. Providing salary support could have set an unhelpful precedent for future sustainability as if employers receive salary support once, they may be more likely to expect it in future.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Do it! There was a clear demand for this kind of project in Portsmouth, and this is likely to be replicated across the country

- Collaborative working is crucial for the success of a project like this, for example working with colleagues across the University, international office, research and innovation, placement teams

- Be active and engage through local business networks and direct meetings and phone calls. This tended to be more successful than email marketing to businesses

- Regarding compliance, if you are managing the recruitment process, your institution may be responsible for ensuring students meet their visa working conditions. It is worth putting systems in place, therefore, to ensure that both students and employers have a clear understanding of their responsibilities regarding right-to-work and visa issues. The project team received guidance from a UKVI compliance colleague at UoP to develop processes including a student and employer declaration

- A project such as this needs staff resource, in particular for set-up and implementation. It is important to think about the sustainability of the work, particularly if there is a desire to scale-up and offer a larger number of opportunities

Further Information

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University of Portsmouth
Portsmouth Careers and Employability Service
See the online version of this report for example vacancies.

Preparing for Placement: developing a cultural toolkit to improve the experience of both international students and placement providers
University of Sheffield

Dr Tim Cooper, International Student Support Officer
Dr Themesa Neckles, Placement Tutor, School of Education
Jenny Butcher, Senior Student Experience Officer, Placements, School of Education

Aims of the project

Recent years have seen significant growth in numbers of international students, particularly from China, attending UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A greater range of courses are proving attractive, including some which include a work-placement element. Since these require students to engage with 'real-world' situations outside of the mainstream teaching and learning environment, they are likely to present specific challenges to both students and placement providers.

In the summer of 2017 the University's School of Education (referred to occasionally below as 'the department') approached the International Student Support team (ISS) in response to specific challenges arising on the recently-developed undergraduate course in Education Culture and Childhood (ECC). The course requires a placement to be undertaken in Year 2 in one of a selected group of pre-school and primary education providers in the city. Feedback received from both students and placement providers highlighted some significant problems concerning international students, primarily affecting the students from China. These included:

- Limited engagement by students with teaching and support staff
- Students were too 'quiet' and' reserved'
- Inappropriately 'direct' communication with support staff
- Problems with punctuality
- A reluctance to complete more than the minimum 60 hours on placement, compared to the majority of UK students who were completing the maximum 180 hours

For their part, Chinese students reported feeling overwhelmed by the placement environment and in some cases this had a negative impact on their ability to engage meaningfully and critically with their projects. This was in turn confirmed by the relatively low scores attained by Chinese students compared to their UK peers. Staff in the placement institutions (henceforth 'placement mentors') ascribed the problems primarily to language difficulties, coupled with the 'reserved personalities' of Chinese students.

Discussion between the department and ISS, while acknowledging that language confidence was an issue, explored the possibility that cultural factors lay behind some of the problems that had arisen. In particular it was suggested that outcomes might be improved by:

- Developing increased intercultural confidence among students, placement mentors and academic staff
- Providing placement mentors with a greater understanding of the range of challenges facing international students

- Providing academic staff and placement mentors with a greater awareness of the educational and cultural background of international students, particularly those from China

For a number of years, the ISS team has provided cultural awareness training for staff and, in some cases students, particularly those starting out on research. Since 2012 it has also developed and delivered training on the specific support needs of Chinese students. Feedback from staff who have participated in these sessions suggests that their greater understanding of the cultural challenges faced by Chinese students significantly enhances the quality of their interactions and their ability to support them towards successful completion of courses. The aim of the current project was to seek to improve work-placement and academic outcomes for the international (and especially Chinese) students on this course through the direct application of some of these training elements to this specific context. A pilot project was designed in three phases:

- **Phase One:** development and delivery of a Pre-Placement Workshop. The event would bring together key departmental staff, international students and placement mentors with the aim of improving understanding of the challenges involved in work-placement within a different culture.
- **Phase Two:** creation of video-based resources to be used online by students and placement mentors to augment the workshop materials in the lead-up to placement.
- **Phase Three:** development of a generic online toolkit for use within the sector by institutions seeking to improve the work-placement experience of their international students and the confidence of staff who support them.

Summary of outcomes

The pilot project suggested that the work-placement experience can be significantly improved for students, departmental staff and placement mentors by the provision of cultural awareness training delivered through a pre-placement workshop, available online for those not able to attend. As well as benefiting from increased cultural awareness, placement mentors in particular valued the insight into the specific challenges faced by international students, some of which are rooted in their educational and cultural backgrounds. Although the specific context of the project was to prepare students for success in educational work placements, it is felt that since these present particularly acute cultural challenges, the conclusions that have been drawn are likely to be applicable to a wide range of placement contexts.

In terms of resources, the project has so far produced the design of a pre-placement workshop, a screen-capture version of the workshop available online and some short videos of the work-placement environment. These will form the basis of a generic 'Preparing for Placement' toolkit currently in construction and which will be available online for use in the sector by the end of 2018.

Institutional background

Sheffield is currently in the top five in the Russell Group for numbers of international students, and the top three for Chinese students where they represent 50% of the total of international students. In 2016-17 there were 10 international students enrolled for the ECC course, including seven from China and in 2017-18 there were 11, including eight from China. In the discussion below, these groups will be referred to as the '2016-17 and 2017-18 cohorts'. Total numbers of students enrolled were 39 and 46 respectively.

Project structure and evaluation
1.   Pre-placement workshop

The pre-placement workshop was designed to address the main project aims and consisted of a presentation followed by a Q&A session between students and placement mentors with contributions by academic staff. Almost all of the 2017-18 cohort of international students attended. The 2016-17 cohort were also invited, though none attended. Invitations were sent out to all nine placement mentors, of whom three were able to attend.

Surveys using Google Forms were sent out to both cohorts of students beforehand and the responses evaluated. Completion rate for the 2016-17 cohort

was 60% and for the 2017-18 cohort 100%. The surveys included questions about the students' educational backgrounds, attitudes to staff and feelings about work placement. (See the links at the end of this report to view the Google Forms). Presentation of the results of these surveys provided staff with insight into how different the students' educational backgrounds were from the UK and thus how challenging the UK school environment was likely to be. A significant component of the project was to compare outcomes for the 2016-17 cohort of international students with those going on placement during the 2017-18 session.

The main components of the workshop presentation were as follows:
- Presentation of key findings from the student surveys
- Cultural background to challenges faced by international students, including the 'culture iceberg' model and a discussion of the causes and effects of culture shock
- An introduction to some of the key 'dimensions of culture' that can affect the quality of intercultural interaction. These were 'time', 'communication', 'social priorities' and 'attitudes to authority'. This part of the presentation included live polling using the 'Turning Point' clicker system, used both as an icebreaker and to stimulate discussion around these key themes

These elements will be incorporated into the cultural toolkit that is being developed for use across the sector. (See the links at the end of this report to view the workshop presentation).

2. Key findings from pre-workshop student surveys

2016-17 cohort. 57% completed no more than the minimum placement hours. When asked how worthwhile they thought the placement had been, 43% stated it had been worthwhile (selecting '4' on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 where '5' was 'very worthwhile'.) 43% responded '4' and 29% '3'. 86% said the placement was 'somewhat different' from what they expected and a further 14% responded that it was 'very different.'

2017-18 cohort. When asked how confident the students felt about their forthcoming placement (where 1 = not confident and 5 = very confident) 64% responded '3', 27% '4' and 9% '5'.

3. Effectiveness of the pre-placement workshop: students

i. The work-placement environment

When the 2017-18 cohort were asked how confident they felt about their placements after attending the workshop, 22% responded '3', 44% '4' and 22% '5'. This is a significant increase in confidence compared to beforehand. They thought the Q&A session with placement mentors was the most useful component (66%). Next was the presentation of the student survey responses (44%) followed by the explanation of culture shock (33%) and the opportunity to meet with departmental staff (22%). Compared to the previous year's cohort, the students were more prepared for the work-placement environment with 33% finding it as they expected, a response registered by none of the students from the previous year.

ii. Engagement with the work-placement experience

More students completed at the minimum level of 70-90 hours (78% vs 57%) but at the same time 22% completed at the maximum level of 120-150 hours whereas none had completed this many hours the previous year. In terms of perceived value of the work-placement experience, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = not worthwhile and 5 = very worthwhile), of the 2016-17 cohort, 42% responded '4' and 29% '5'. For the 2017-18 cohort, the scores were 22% '4' and 67% '5'. This suggests that this year's cohort benefited from the work placement experience to a significantly greater degree.

iii. Confidence in interactions with staff

Of the 2016-17 cohort, in the case of teaching staff 29% felt fairly confident and 57% confident. For 2017-18, the 'confident' figure had gone up to 78%. In the case of support/admin staff, 43% of the 2016-17 cohort had felt fairly confident and the same proportion confident. In 2017-18 the proportion of those who felt confident had risen to 67% and, in addition, 22% felt 'very confident'.

4. Effectiveness of the pre-placement workshop: placement mentors

All three of the mentors who attended the workshop found it interesting and useful. The results of the student surveys, introduction to culture theory, explanation of culture shock and the Q&A session were unanimously deemed to be the most valuable components. All of the mentors felt that the workshop would make a significant difference to their understanding of the challenges faced by international students and that it would

improve their confidence in taking placement students from outside the UK.

5. Work-placement experience: mentors who attended the workshop

Asked to what extent they thought attendance at the workshop had improved their experience of mentoring an international student, on a scale of 1 to 5 all the mentors responded '4'. 67% of mentors felt the student was confident in their interactions with both teaching and support staff. In addition, 67% felt the student interacted appropriately with support staff, an area that had been highlighted as particularly problematic the previous year.

6. Work-placement experience: mentors who did not attend the workshop

Unfortunately, due to an administrative oversight, the link to the online version of the workshop was not sent out to those mentors unable to attend in person. Therefore in these cases, only the student had the benefit of the workshop. Response rate was 50%.

On a scale of 1 to 5 as above, to the question of whether, from the mentor's point of view, the work-placement had been successful, 50% responded '3' and 25% '4' and '5' respectively. Over half responded '3' and above to the questions of whether the students were confident and appropriate in their interactions with teaching and support staff and communicated with them effectively.

7. The departmental view

Both the Placement Tutor and the Placement Officer within the department felt that problems were significantly reduced this year. No issues or concerns were raised by students, student enquiries about placements were significantly reduced and some positive feedback had been received from mentors. Unlike the previous year, no concerns had been reported about inappropriate behaviour and all providers had welcomed the opportunity to take students in the coming year.

8. WeChat Group for Chinese placement students

To facilitate communication with Chinese students during and after the placement period, a WeChat group was set up by the project lead. WeChat is a communication app similar in format to WhatsApp and is used predominantly by Chinese people. It is easily downloaded onto mobile phones. The group included all the Chinese students on placement plus the project lead and, though it was not used heavily, it is felt that it provided reassurance to students that they were being supported while away from the University. Following experience gained on this project and from the UKCISA-funded

2016-17 'WeChat project' also based at Sheffield, departments around the University are starting to express interest in this medium for communicating with their Chinese students. To read the report go to www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-schemes.

Timeframe

	Project component	Method	Timescale
1	Collection of experiences of Chinese students and feelings about forthcoming placement. Experiences of previous years international placement students	Google Forms questionnaire	Originally October 2017, rescheduled for December
2	Preparation of pre-placement workshop materials	Interactive PowerPoint presentation using 'Turning Point' audience-response system	Originally early November 2017, rescheduled for January 2018
3	Pre-placement workshop	Invitation to all placement mentors and both 2016-17 and 2017-18 student cohorts	Originally mid-November, rescheduled for early February
4	Post-workshop survey of placement mentors	Google Forms	February 2018
5	Production of online version of pre-placement workshop	Kaltura screen capture	February 2018
6	Students on work placement; set-up of WeChat group		Early February - mid May 2018
7	Production of work placement environment (classroom) videos	Self-planned, shot and edited videos with subtitles	April-July 2018
8	Post-placement surveys of students and mentors	Google Forms	June 2018
9	Evaluation and report to UKCISA		July 2018
10	Construction of Cultural Toolkit	Video and online resources on the Kaltura platform	July -December 2018

Challenges

The challenges were mainly those that arose from a complex collaborative project involving student support services, an academic department and external stakeholders. Due to administrative pressures on schools, placement allocations were confirmed later than hoped so that the pre-placement workshop had to be put back from late first-to early-second semester, shortly before students went out on placement. Administrative oversight, compounded by the effects of a sector-wide strike, meant that the online version of the workshop was not sent out in time to mentors who had been unable to attend in person. Again,

pressures on the school timetable meant that only a limited number of survey responses from mentors had been received before the summer break. However, despite these challenges, the evidence suggests the pre-placement workshop made a significant contribution to a reduction in problems compared to the previous year, particularly as the great majority of the students had attended. There are good reasons to believe, therefore, that when fully disseminated in the coming academic year, the workshop materials, plus the cultural toolkit in preparation, will lead to further improvements.

Sustainability

The pre-placement workshop and work-placement videos will be embedded within the department's student support resources for ongoing use. Not only will this be of direct benefit to students, it is hoped it will also build a pool of placement mentors with intercultural skills that can be passed on to their peers with the aim of improving the confidence with which they take on non-UK placement students. More broadly, other departments and institutions will be able to use the toolkit, adaptable to their specific needs, to prepare students and placement providers for more successful outcomes from work-placement.

In the coming years, the resource requirements of the UK HE sector are likely to mean that, other things being equal, institutions will continue to recruit heavily from overseas student markets. In addition, UKCISA and other bodies have systematically made the case that the presence of international students significantly enhances the experiences of all students and staff. This project hopes to show that with greater cultural awareness and preparation in advance of work-placement, the sector will be able to further demonstrate the significant contribution that international students can make to both the academic and workplace environments.

Reflections and implementation of learning points

The project highlighted the benefit of exploring ways that we can learn more about the challenges facing international students by engaging in dialogue with students at an early stage, in this case by construction of a questionnaire. This encourages a two-way relationship between staff and students which is likely to have a positive impact across the curriculum.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

The project outcomes so far suggest that institutions should be wary of ascribing 'problems' that arise with international students to lack of confidence in language alone. The amelioration of

problems on work-placement compared to the previous year strongly supports the assertion that intercultural confidence is an equally significant factor in improving overall confidence, especially outside of the immediate academic environment.

Links to documents used in the project

Survey for students who went on placement in 2016-17: https://goo.gl/formsfy7M60zt1RNzKMHs2

Survey form for students going on placement in 2017-18: https://goo.gl/forms/0eh9khRtFMTdziWt1

Pre-placement workshop presentation: https://tinyurl.com/y85jhms8

Further information

The project was led by **Dr Tim Cooper** (International Student Support Officer) in collaboration with **Dr Themesa Neckles** (Placement Tutor) and **Jenny Butcher** (Senior Student Experience Officer, Placements) both of the University's School of Education.

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Using Design Thinking to enhance the international student experience and their understanding of employability
University of Essex

Dr Helen Standage, Senior Employability Education Manager

Project aims

This project had two broad aims: 1) to create a space for international students to identify, explore and solve career issues of personal relevance; 2) to use a novel framework to encourage student collaboration, empowerment and problem-solving, thus alleviating personal difficulties typically experienced by international students, such as isolation and lack of confidence.

Background to the University of Essex

There are 15,000 students at the University of Essex which includes 2,500 postgraduate students (postgraduate research and postgraduate taught).

The University has students from more than 140 countries and 36% of students are international. This makes Essex the most international mainstream university in the UK outside London (The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018).

Project outcomes

The project produced a series of workshops underpinned by the principles of Design Thinking. Design Thinking is ordinarily applied to product creation, but Stanford University has used it to produce an innovative teaching method applicable to any subject that involves uncertainty, eg employability and the overall international student experience. This new teaching method is known as Life Design and was applied in this project.

The workshops were aimed at postgraduate research (PGR) students (both home and international). Each workshop series attracted a small number of PGR students from a variety of different backgrounds. The workshops were extremely well-received, so much so, that a Design Thinking community is expanding at the University of Essex. In addition, an abbreviated workshop was developed that illustrated the technique in a condensed format for the purposes of training other staff in higher education (HE) who may want to use it in their own professional areas.

Design Thinking Methodology

There are five steps to Design Thinking/Life Design

- Empathy
- Definition
- Ideation
- Prototyping
- Test

As previously outlined, these are applicable to both product and personal development. To illustrate, with traditional Design Thinking, the **empathy** step would involve talking to the public about a particular product of interest. With Life Design the individual would **empathise** with themselves and their fellow Life Designers in order to **define** a particular problem and then as a group **ideate**/brainstorm possible "low resource" **prototypes** for individuals to **test** which will provide data from which to work forward. The five steps enable what is known as Wayfinding – the ability to "sneak up on the future".

In conjunction with the five steps are mindsets:
- human-centred
- radical collaboration
- bias to action
- mindful of process
- culture of prototyping

Such mindsets empower individuals to work as supportive and highly enterprising problem-solving teams. Moreover the template encourages individuals to be kinder to themselves and to others thereby fostering personal resource and social cohesion (see Figure 1).

Fig 1   Life Design steps and mindsets
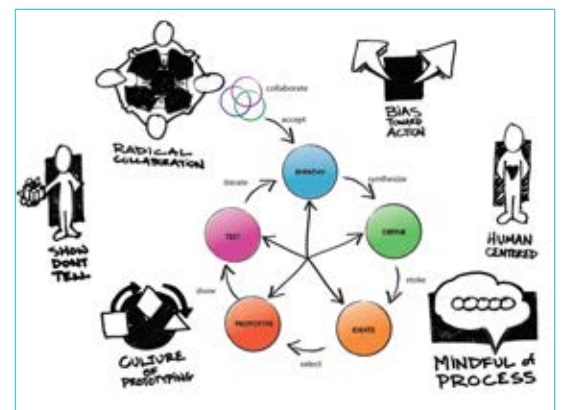
Design Thinking workshops
Workshop preparation

The highly interactive content and activities and the facilitation style were guided by the "Designing Your Life" 2006 publication by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (founders of Life Design).

The content of the workshops was also informed by a survey (see Appendix B) and focus group examining the needs of PGR students. The findings of this research revealed a strong desire for a cross-disciplinary PGR community whereby exchange of ideas (both intellectual and personal) could reduce the sense of isolation often associated with undertaking a PhD which is often experienced more deeply by international PGR students.

Workshop promotion

The workshops were promoted through a variety of methods:
- Departmental Graduate Administrators emailed postgraduate students with details and

- promoted the workshops on the departmental Facebook and Twitter feeds
- Posters were located across the University to promote the workshops
- Details were sent to postgraduate students in the weekly postgraduate Employability and Careers Centre bulletin
- Through student small ads

All promotional material included an enrolment link.

Workshop delivery

The workshops were run by Helen Standage, Senior Employability Education Manager and James Rodwell, Employability Tutor. Two workshop series were offered to postgraduate students: one in the autumn term and one in spring. Each workshop comprised five, two-hour sessions spread across two weeks.

Attendance during the pilot was low with four students in the first workshop series and three in the second series. Students who attended came from countries including Jordan, Romania, Netherlands and from a range of academic disciplines including Literature, Sociology, Computer Science and Government.

Challenges

- Encouraging students to join the workshops. The take-up of the workshop was low, but when students attended, feedback was overwhelmingly positive (see Evaluation below).
- Staff appointed to take on the research had a number of unforeseen difficulties which took them away from their jobs temporarily. On their return they had to 'play catch up' for their core duties and then find extra time to undertake the project and as a result, the project was delayed. In addition, some in-depth analyses had to be substituted with simpler ones.

Evaluation

PGR students received a short questionnaire (see Appendix C) at the end of the final workshop session. Responses took the form of ratings on a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The feedback was extremely positive, for example the mean score in response to the statement "Overall I believe the workshops have been of value" was 5 out of 5 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Mean Ratings (out of 5) in Response to Life Design workshops

	Mean ratings
The workshops were well organised, structured and clear	4.4
The content of the workshops was stimulating	5
The workshops provided a good environment for productive discussion	5
The workshop leaders were good at facilitating the activities	5
The workshops have provided some useful strategies for tackling my future	4.8
I would recommend this series of workshops to other Postgraduate Researchers	5
Overall I believe the workshops have been of value	5

In addition to the quantitative data, the questionnaire allowed for qualitative free text comments:

"Truly a life-changing experience – very much more hopeful about the future now as I have a plan (or a few!)"

"The trainers were excellent – open, approachable, candid, empathetic."

"I liked the way it was facilitated, the trainers worked well together, gave a balance of voices and approaches between them, and linked in well the group thus promoting a very good group dynamic within the sessions."

"My favourite part was the life plans and the brainstorming session at the end, it was very helpful for me and I felt also helpful for other participants."

"I felt very able to explore ideas that I never realised I had and was given the time and space to really develop them."

Future projects

The Life Design workshops were highly successful for those that attended, and there has been a request for "follow up" sessions. Moreover, many staff attending the abbreviated workshop for training purposes also expressed a wish for further Life Design interaction. There are also plans for a second project whereby Life Design facilitators go into sixth form schools and colleges and adapt the content to work with Year 12 and Year 13 students.

Life Design is particularly useful when individuals are experiencing significant life change eg, transitioning from compulsory full time education to tertiary study or work. The Life Design movement at Stanford University has also expanded into schools plus other HEIs.

Likewise, the seeds of a Life Design community are beginning to grow at Essex and gain momentum

with staff (both academic and professional) wishing to roll out workshops to undergraduate students. For example, the University's Student Support Centre has preliminary plans to use Life Design as a platform for inclusivity given its integral principles of radical difference, respect and collaboration. There is a view that using the Life Design methodology with UG students from non-traditional backgrounds, in particular the key principle of radical collaboration, may ameliorate feelings of marginalisation.

Recommendations for other institutions

Time. The main challenge for this project was the pressure on staff time due to external circumstances which led to absences from work which delayed the project. It is advisable to have a larger team that can absorb staff absences or a budget to buy out time to allocate more staff to the project.

Group sizes. Large group sizes (eg over 25) may result in workshops becoming too impersonal. Small group sizes can be extremely effective but we advise running with a minimum of four students.

Conclusions

This project has demonstrated that Life Design can be highly successful within a UK HE context. Whilst uptake of the workshops was low, positive response to the quality of the experience was extremely high with all PGR students enjoying the intimacy of the small groups which nurtured trust and mutually-supportive social connections. It seems that Life Design is an excellent problem-solving tool, but more importantly, the essence of Life Design is to work together in an invested group for the purpose of bettering each other's lives.

However, whilst intimate Life Design groups reap personal reward, they are not financially sustainable. To further develop, Life Design needs to be rolled out to larger cohorts and more facilitators trained to work with larger groups.

References

Burnett, B., & Evas, D. (2016). *Designing your Life*. Chatto & Windus: London.

Facebook, Designing Your Life the Book https://www.facebook.com/DesigningYourLifeTheBook/

YouTube, Designing Your Life - Bill Burnett https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPjoCO5Juj0

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Note that this project was funded in the 2016-17 grants cycle but completed in 2018.

5 WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF UKCISA MEMBERSHIP

Eligibility for a UKCISA Grant for Projects and Research is just one of the many ways that you can make the most of UKCISA membership.

As a UKCISA member, you're part of the UK's leading network of international education professionals working with and supporting international students. This network spans the education sector and our current membership includes every UK university, a range of public and private colleges, schools, students' unions, and other specialist organisations.

Membership is per organisation, so, if you work at a school, college, university or students' union with UKCISA membership, you and all your colleagues automatically have access to our full range of member services. You can read the full benefits of membership on our website at www.ukcisa.org.uk/membership. Here we list just five ways to make the most of it.

1 New to UKCISA?
Read our guide for new members on our website in the members area.

2 Explore the UKCISA website
We continually update the content on our website, not only with up-to-date information on legislation changes but with news, blogs for students and for members, information about events and much more. You can also find:
- the complete catalogue of all projects and research
- links to all the key recent public reports and documents on international student policy
- international student statistics
- a broad range of detailed advice for international students on arrival in the UK, Tier 4, tuition fees, working rules, living in the UK, adapting to culture, accommodation and more to refer your students to.

3 Access members-only content
Log in to access members-only content including the online manual, the lively peer-to-peer discussion forum and members-only news.

4 Sign up for e-news
Our news page is changing all the time and each week we send you a roundup of the weekly news items. Log in to the website to sign up for members' news. You will be first to hear about our events, partner's events, announcements on the grants programme, the conference programme as well as crucial updates on legislation changes. Also encourage your students to sign up for students' e-news from the news page.

5 Attend our training, conference and events
Look at our training programme to find the best course to support your professional development. Our training courses evolve each year to ensure they are up to date, accurate and relevant to your work. And members get reduced rates on our training programme and annual conference. The conference brings together around 400 delegates each year, offers over 50 professional development sessions on an amazing variety of topics, often delivered by peers. Joining our training and conference are the best ways to get involved in the supportive, dynamic and dedicated network of staff who work to support international students in the UK.

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.

Department for Education

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