Mental health and wellbeing
of global access students

The University of Edinburgh

Research into the
international student
experience in the UK
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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 2.2 Use of technology 2.3 Socio-political instability at home	2.1.A Collectivist vs Individualist culture 2.1.B Concepts of time
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)

Appendix *(continued)*

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