

Research

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

University of Plymouth



Research project into the international student experience in the UK
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**UK Council
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Examining the efficacy of a buddy programme for international students' integration, language ability and academic performance

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



Contents

1.	Introduction	25
2.	Research aim	25
3.	Motivations for research	25
4.	Summary of research outcomes	25
5.	Research methodology	25
6.	Key research findings	26
6.1	The influence of buddying on international students' perceptions of their own language ability	26
6.2	The impact of buddying on international students' integration with home students and host society	27
6.3	The association between buddying and international students' academic performance	28
6.4	The experiences of students serving as buddies	29
6.5	International students' and buddies' recommendations for enhancements to the Hello Project	29
7.	Conclusions and recommendations	29
7.1	Recommendations for universities	29
7.2	Recommendations for buddy programme administrators	29
7.3	Recommendations for research	30
8.	References	30
9.	Research team	30
10.	Contact	30
11.	Appendices	
	Appendices are available with the online version of this report:	
	www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports	
	Appendix 1: Survey: Examining the experience of direct entry international students at the University of Plymouth	
	Appendix 2: Survey: Examining the impact of the Hello Project	

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

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

1. Introduction

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

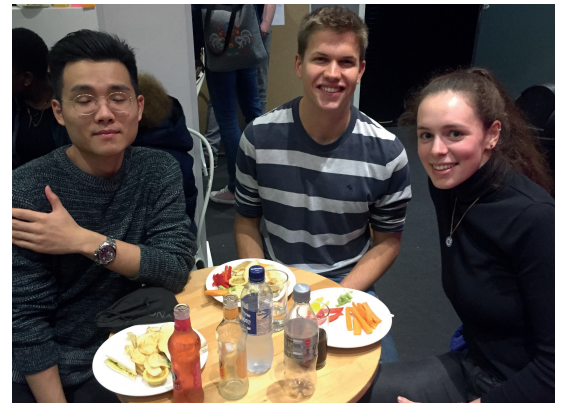
2. Research aim

The current project sought to:

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

3. Motivations for research

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



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

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

4. Summary of research outcomes

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

5. Research methodology

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

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

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

See the Appendix online to read the full surveys.

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

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

6. Key research findings

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

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

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



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

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

Some students identified the language barrier as an acute challenge:

"the language barrier is the main element that comes between me and my buddies ..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

“I think for the Hello Project ... lots of students are so pressured or they’re homesick ... it’s a good way to release the pressure. Even though they just say they care about us we feel so touched ... I just think it’s so good, I just feel not so lonely.”

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

“... they [the buddies] can take us to know more about Plymouth. It can help lots of activities.”

“I think the first valuable information is about culture differences. They can discuss and talk about everything and sometimes they have different opinion...They cook something...then they would like to try our Chinese food ... we shared lots of stories”

“It does help me to be more confident about my life study because I can talk to with [name] the one on our course, about our study, which really helps me a lot.”

“It’s hard to be familiar with the surroundings and environment and the buddies can help to deal with these problems, for example how to find my personal tutor”

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

“I think we managed to give them more self-confidence...we went to a karaoke party, as it was their first time when they actually experienced some nightlife. And in the end some sense of belonging.”

“I think [the buddy scheme] relieved a lot of their anxiety”

“... even small things like they went to a shop and they were able to communicate and they were proud of themselves ... so I think they’ve become more confident generally.”

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

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

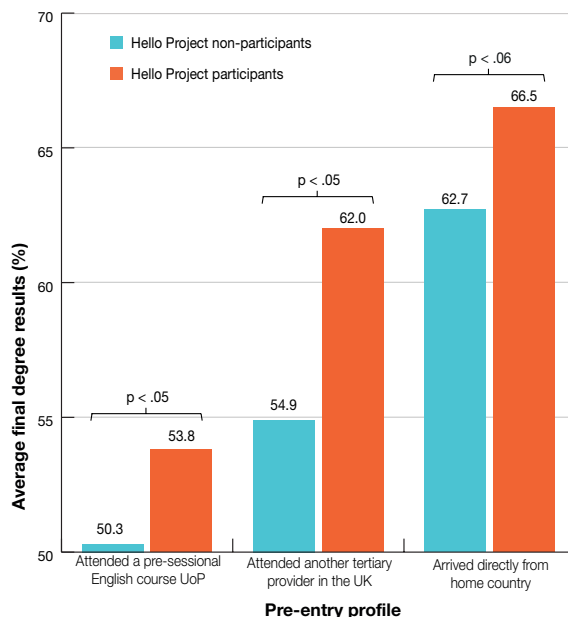
6.3 The association between buddying and international students’ academic performance

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

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

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

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



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

6.4 The experiences of students serving as buddies

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

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

“I think it opened up a lot of friendships to me that I wouldn’t have necessarily had before.”

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

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

“I do cultural studies as part of my degree ... so I just want to know how people feel, how they interact, what they’re looking for.”

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

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

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

7. Conclusions and recommendations

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

7.1 Recommendations for other education institutions

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

7.2 Recommendations for buddy programme administrators.

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

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

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

7.3 Recommendations for research:

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

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

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11. Appendices

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

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

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