

**STUDENT EXPERIENCE:**  
student community

**Research**

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

Ulster University, University of Brighton,  
University of Edinburgh



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

Ulster University, University of Brighton, University of Edinburgh

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## 1. Executive summary

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

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

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

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

## 2. Motivation for research

A considerable body of knowledge has been built up about international students' perceptions of their academic challenges and experiences (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2008; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). As a consequence, it is widely acknowledged that students attending universities in a culture different from their own have to contend with novel social and educational organisations, behaviours and expectations – as well as dealing with the problems of adjustment common to students in general (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). Additional academic challenges

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

have been found to include language difficulties (Sawir, 2005) and stress or confusion relating to alternative teaching and grading styles (Durkin, 2008; Kingston & Forland, 2008). Alongside academic adjustments, international students have also been shown to encounter social and personal problems including loneliness and isolation (Edwards & Ran, 2006) and culture shock (Bamford, Marr, Pfeiffer and Weber-Newth, 2002; Ward et al, 2001; see also Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen and Van Horn, 2002).

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

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

### 2.1 How the PASS/PAL scheme works

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



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

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

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

### 3. Research aim

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

- Evaluate the impact of the PASS/PAL peer-led learning programme on the integration of international students into HE. In doing so, the

research project also sought to acquire a better understanding of the broader issues associated with the successful transition of international students into university life, including non-academic factors among primarily postgraduate international students.

- Create a Community of Practice (CoP) at a national level to help others in the sector share good practice and in so doing, provide the highest quality of support possible for international students. In the present context, the aim of the CoP was to review the findings from this study and make recommendations.

## 4. Summary of research outcomes

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

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

accents are also perceived as particularly problematic.

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

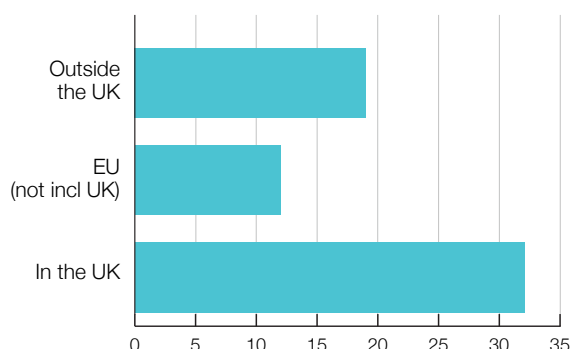
## 5. Research methodology

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

### 5.1 Pre-evaluation survey

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

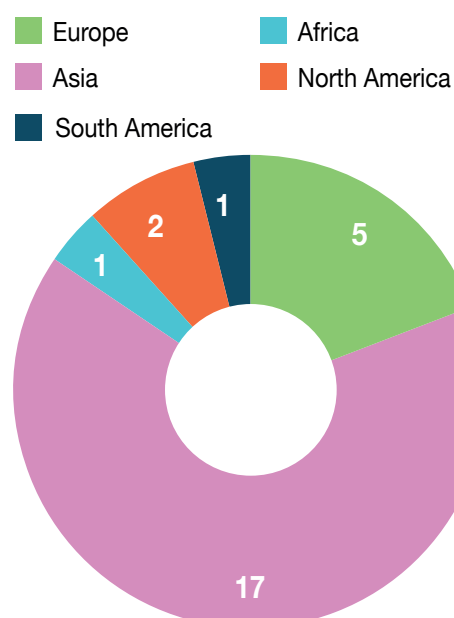
**Figure 1. Pre-evaluation survey participant domicile before HE attendance in the UK**



### 5.2 Interviews and focus groups

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

**Figure 2. Origin of birth for qualitative participant sample**



### 5.3 Data analysis

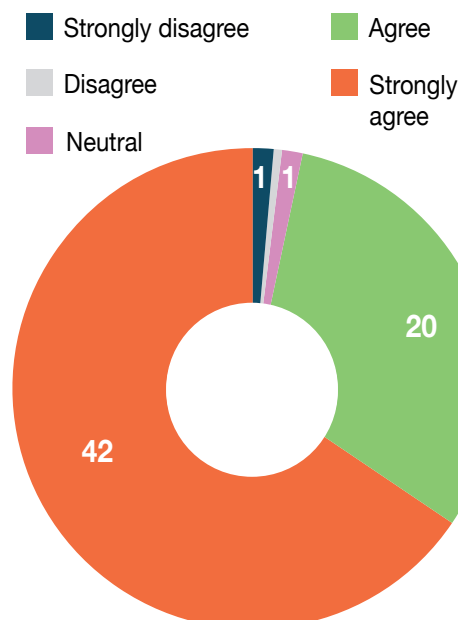
Data collected from interviews and focus groups were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA), described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data’. The TA used in this research adopted a realist method, reporting the experiences, meanings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

## 6. Key research findings

### 6.1 Impact of the PASS peer mentoring programme

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

Figure 3. Satisfaction with PASS/PAL sessions



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

Table 1. Mean scores on key outcome measures

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

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

#### Approachability of PASS/PALS

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

#### Settling into university life

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

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

a relationship transition and building new friendships.”

#### Awareness of course expectations

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

#### Assignment help

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

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

#### Study skills

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

#### Co-learning skills

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

#### ‘Insider’ knowledge

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

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

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

#### Dissatisfaction with PALS leaders

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

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

#### Dissatisfaction with content of sessions

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

#### Lack of structure

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

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

#### Over-reliance

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 6.2 International student experiences

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

- The first theme **Intercultural Experiences** captured information about the cultural differences experienced by international students and the impact this had on their sense of self and their personal sense of identity.

- The second theme **Transitional Experiences** explored international students’ [early] academic and social experiences and adaptations into UK HE life.
- The final theme **Sources of Support** discusses both external and internal support mechanisms that international students found useful for buffering potential stressful transitional situations.

### 6.2.1 Intercultural experiences

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

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

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

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

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

### Identity

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

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

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

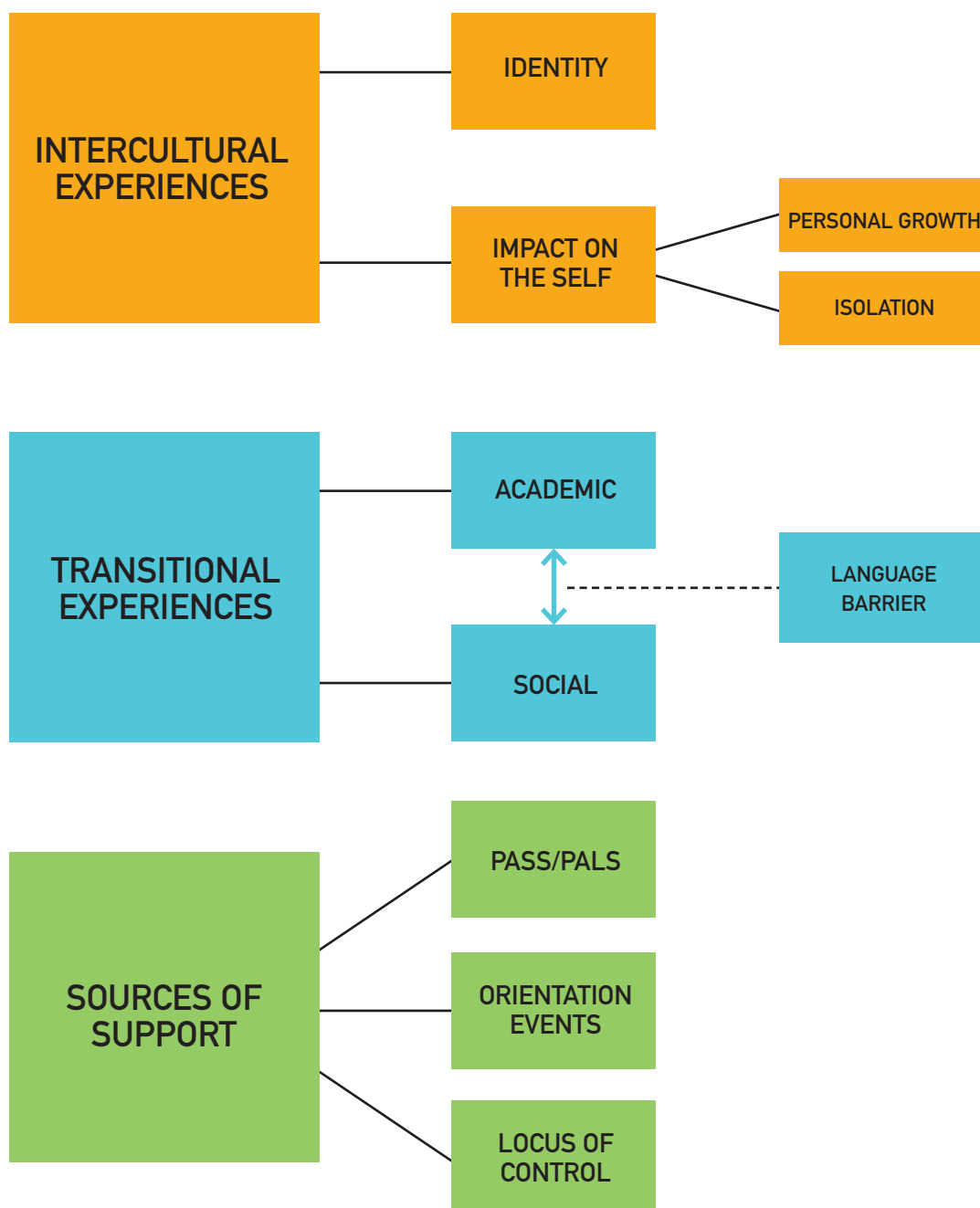
**"When I make new friends and introduce myself, I talk about where I'm from. Originally, I'm Egyptian so that's what I say and if people seem interested about where I come from I can talk more about it. And that's what happened with people I'm trying to be friends with – I talk to them about my culture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

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

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

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

Figure 4. Thematic map from qualitative data



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

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

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

Participants from Ulster University<sup>8</sup> felt that the university could do more to promote greater links between international students and local students. Creating a more social cross-cultural student community outside of academic life may be a challenge because much of the student population at Ulster University are from Northern Ireland and so, on weekends and public holidays, often those students leave the campus to return 'home':

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

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

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

Acceptance is an additional pressure for the international student to contend with, as described above. Furnham (2004, p.17) notes, 'foreign students face several difficulties, some exclusive to them (as opposed to native students)'. In our

research, these particular difficulties were shown to be caused partly by feelings of being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture and the new environment.

### Impact on the self

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

**Personal growth:** When successful, intercultural experience(s) can be a transformative learning process, leading to a journey of great personal growth and development (Gu and Maley, 2008). Many participants described coming to the UK not only to progress their academic careers but also to broaden life horizons, gain a better grasp of the

English language and to seek adventure. This meant that a lot of participants, despite facing challenges in coming to the UK, were motivated to make the most of their stay:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 6.2.2 Transitional experiences

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

#### Academic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Social

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

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

**make the effort, even if it's scary and you don't want to."**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



### 6.2.3 Sources of support

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

#### Orientation events

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

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

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

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

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

University-led events alongside existing peer-learning programmes have been shown to be effective external systems that help to make international students' transition into UK academic life as successful as possible. When attempting to make a successful transition, some participants

commented that they did not rely solely on these external things but described how they were agents of their own success and happiness too. This came in the form of a personalised locus of control over events and the value of prior preparation before coming to the UK. The final section below discusses examples of participants' personal mastery over their own (successful) transition to a new culture and academic setting.

#### Locus of control

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 7. Conclusions

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

## 8. Recommendations

A Community of Practice has been established at a national level which now exists as a special interest group affiliated to the International Academic Peer Learning Network (IAPL) network. This group is comprised of 10 individuals from the universities of Ulster, Brighton, Edinburgh, Loughborough, Manchester, Hull, Bournemouth and Carleton

College in Canada. To date, three one-day workshops have been facilitated (involving student representatives) at the universities of Manchester, Loughborough and Brighton to explore the findings from this project and share good practice. A number of recommendations have resulted from a review of the findings including the following:

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

## 9. Reflections

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

## 10. Notes

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

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ed.ac.uk/about/annual-review/student-numbers>

<sup>3</sup> Cognos report Ulster University Admission Department.

<sup>4</sup> Business (n=6), Economics (n=46), Engineering (n=12)

<sup>5</sup> n=17, n=5, n=5 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> The participating institution with the lowest international student population (n=1,473)

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## 15. Appendices

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