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International Students' Transitions into Scottish Higher Education: A Scoping Study

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Executive summary

Scotland, like many other English speaking countries in the world, has seen an increase in the number of international students coming into its Higher Education (HE) sector in recent years, particularly from East Asia. This has led to discussion and debate about the transition experiences of those students, and how they might best be supported.

The Student Transitions Enhancement Theme has provided an opportunity to conduct a scoping study to consider the key features of international students' transitions and how they are supported by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. In this way, it is hoped that individual HEIs will be better informed to meet the needs of those students.

The key features of international students' transitions lie mainly in the challenges they face when transitioning: socio-cultural integration, English language ability, and academic expectations and integration, along with the resultant impact of those challenges.

These challenges do not appear to affect all international students equally - those from the EU and English-speaking countries often cope better than those from East Asia, for example.

These challenges can lead to feelings of loneliness, homesickness, powerlessness and loss of identity.

There is a view that most international students are unprepared or unfamiliar with the methods of assessment and academic literacies required for HE study in Scotland.

English language ability seems to be an issue for some international students even when exceeding the English language requirements of the institution. This is due to the wide range of dialects and colloquialisms used, in conjunction with academic conventions, jargon, and technical terms deployed in the learning environment.

There are a number of practices which HEIs have in place to ease the transitions of international students and to try and overcome some of the aforementioned challenges: pre-arrival activity; induction and orientation; social and cultural events (often provided by the Students' Association); Buddy or Peer Mentoring Schemes; English language courses; and academic ancillary support.

Adaptation or adjustment plays a large part in the transitions process for international students. However, there is an argument for 'mutual adjustment' to take place to reduce the perception of misalignment or mismatch of social, cultural and academic expectations.

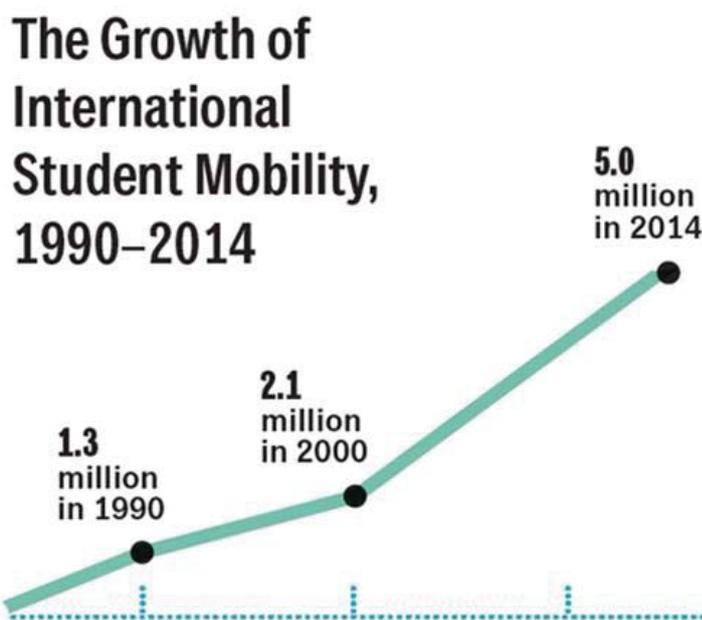
Some international students, mainly those from East Asia, may make strategic choices to join and remain in co-national groups for social networking and support purposes.

There are a number of key features in successful transitions for international students, which, for example, can be grouped according to personal characteristics, language agility, and psychological factors; and engaging and empowering organisational and social cultures, aided by differentiated and timely support.

While individuals in HEIs work hard at being welcoming to international students, there is a recognition that there are also areas for development.

1 Introduction

Scottish universities have traditionally always welcomed international 'sojourners', whether cultural associates, research partners, visiting scholars, or students from across the globe. Contemporary Scottish HE is building on this tradition and, like many other HE sectors (particularly English-speaking ones), has been at the forefront of the drive to attract international students into the country.¹ HEIs have been successful in receiving significantly more students, from a wider range of countries, than in the past. This is a result of demographic changes, globalisation, economic growth and rising incomes in certain parts of the world, which has led to an increased demand for higher education and expansion in student mobility. Figure 1 illustrates this rapid growth in students studying outside their home country, which more than doubled between 2000 and 2014, and was more than triple the number of 1990.



Source: Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, (OECD), 2015

Much of this growth has been driven by demand from Asia; one of every six internationally mobile students is now from China, over a quarter of all students studying outside their home are from China, India and South Korea and over half of all students studying abroad are from Asia. Postgraduate programmes have also grown in importance as higher proportions of international students enrol at advanced levels of study. (OECD, 2015).

The international student sojourner has been the subject of much discussion and debate in recent years as increasing numbers of international students enter higher education across the world. Some of this discussion and debate has revolved around the help and support that those students should or should not expect and receive from their host institution as they make those transitions.

¹ International students are those who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of tertiary study (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). Although they are no more a homogeneous group than any other group of people or students.

Student transitions scoping study: aims and intended outcome

The current Enhancement Theme,² *Student Transitions* (2014-17), has provided an opportunity to consider how Scottish HEIs support international students into Scottish HE.

It is hoped that this study will deepen the understanding of how international students' transition experiences differ from those of their peers, as well as how they might be best supported.

The aim of this study is to identify the key features and aspects of international students' transitions, in addition to how institutions support these students.

The intended outcome of this study is that the higher education sector in Scotland will be better equipped and informed to meet the needs of this specific student group.

Method

In 2005, Arksey and O'Malley published the first methodological framework for conducting scoping studies, and while it provided a 'solid foundation' for scoping study methodology, subsequent researchers have adapted or modified the approach, mainly to incorporate consultation and the identification of policy and practice implications (Levac et al. 2010).

This scoping study has been designed to be a rapid reconnaissance of activity and practice, rather than a comprehensive summary or in-depth examination. Both staff in Scottish HEIs and student representatives in Scottish Students' Associations were consulted as part of this study. Their responses are summarised in Section 2. Details of method, design, administration, and response rates can be found in Appendix 1.

1.1 Factors in attracting international students to study in Scottish HE

English as a language of instruction in the receiving country remains a pull factor in international students' considerations of where to study, in addition to the perceived quality of programmes on offer and the costs of study, (both fees and living expenses). However, higher fees do not necessarily discourage prospective students if the quality of provision is perceived to be high. Immigration policy is an important determinant of attractiveness for international students, mainly through the ease and speed of visa administration, the opportunities for work during studies and the possibilities of employment thereafter. (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015).

These findings are corroborated by a large survey undertaken by Hobsons in 2015,³ of students who had applied for, or enquired about, study in the UK in 2014. The prospective students were asked to rank their five most important criteria for choosing one country over another; quality of education and international recognition of qualifications were selected as key factors by more than half of respondents. Also important to prospective students was the safety of the country and its hospitality towards international students. Post-study options was one of the top four main factors also influencing that choice.

² Enhancement Themes are selected by the Scottish Higher Education sector and they provide a means for staff and students across the sector to work together in enhancing the learning experience. Each Theme facilitates sharing and learning from current and innovative national and international practice (QAA Scotland).

³ International Student Survey 2015: Value and the Modern International Student

1.2 International students in Scottish HEIs in 2014-15: data at a glance⁴

- There were 50,215 international students studying at Scottish HEIs in 2014-2015, which is approximately 22% of the total student population: (EU (Non-UK): 20,805; Non-EU: 2,185; Non-European: 27,225), with the top ten overseas countries shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Top 10 overseas countries

Top 10 overseas countries	Number of students
China	8,450
US	4,145
Germany	2,755
Ireland	2,110
Nigeria	1,835
Bulgaria	1,625
Greece	1,580
France (includes Corsica)	1,530
Malaysia	1,415
India	1,405

- The University of Edinburgh had the highest number of international students studying in Scottish HE, at 12.4% of the total in 2014-15, while the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland had the lowest at 0.42%.
- However, international students as a percentage of individual HEIs' total student numbers in 2014-15 showed that the University of St Andrews' international students were the highest (at 47.2% of their total student numbers), and the University of the Highlands and Islands the lowest (at 3%).
- Non-EU domicile student fees accounted for 12.8% of total income for all HE providers in Scotland in 2014-15.
- UK-wide, business and administrative studies have the largest proportion of international students (38.4% of students in this subject are international), with engineering and technology second (33.1%) and law third (26.3%).⁵

1.3 Context

Why is internationalising HE important?

For individual institutions, internationalisation can provide global reputational advantages or standing, along with opportunities for international partnerships or networks, and can create or maintain evidence to support achievement and progression in teaching and research.

Internationalisation exposes students and staff to a larger and more diverse pool of people and ideas. It strengthens knowledge creation, enhances and embraces diversity of knowledge, languages and culture, and helps to promote learning and future employability.

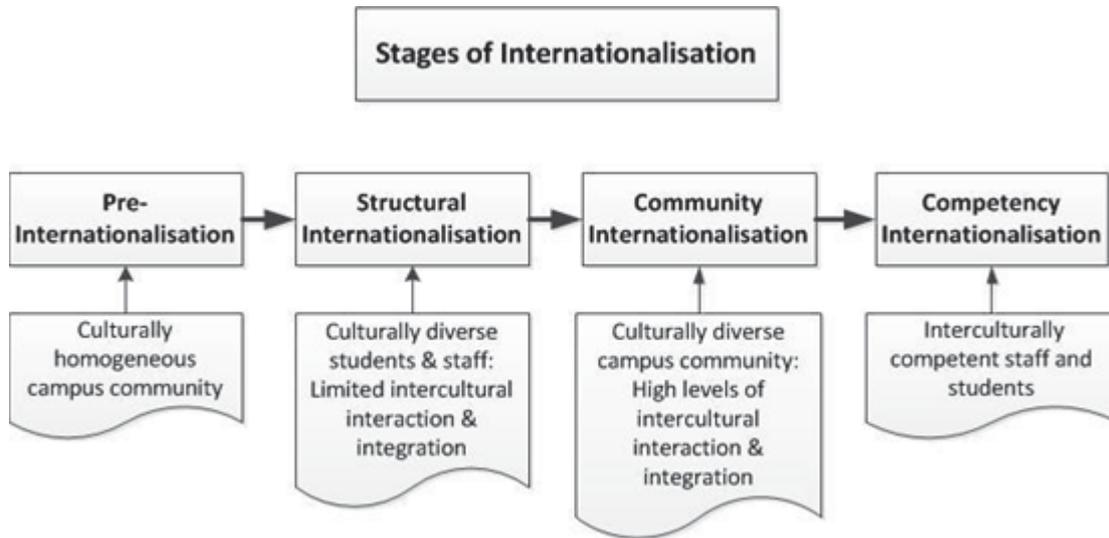
In terms of the curriculum, it can bring an '...intercultural and international dimension into the content of the curriculum, as well as the teaching and learning processes and support

⁴ Data extracted and adapted from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Tables, released March 2016.

⁵ UK Council for International Student Affairs (2015)

services of a programme of study' (Leask 2009, p 209).

Figure 2: Developmental stages of internationalisation



Source: Spencer-Oatey, H and Dauber, D (2015, p 8)

Figure 2 depicts the trajectory or continuum that most HEIs will follow in the developmental stages of internationalisation, moving from a 'culturally homogeneous campus community' through increasing stages of cultural diversity and intercultural interaction and integration, leading to an 'interculturally competent staff and students'.

Internationalisation strategies in Scottish HE

Most institutions have explicit internationalisation strategies or policies in place. Some are more advanced than others, some are in the process of being rewritten and some are embryonic. Eight of the nineteen HEIs in Scotland appear in the 'Top 200' of the 'world's most international universities 2016', according to rankings published by Times Higher Education.⁶

All however, include reference to a global ethos or vision, the advantages or benefits of global connectedness, either through an internationalised curriculum and or mobility schemes and having globally aware and capable students.

Most Scottish HEIs have strategies or plans to grow their international student numbers, either by recruitment to the home campus and or by transnational provision. The examples in Appendix 2 provide a snapshot of those approaches.

⁶ www.timeshighereducation.com/features/200-most-international-universities-world-2016

2 Key findings

There are many cultural, educational and social benefits in having international students on campus in terms of enriching perspectives, knowledge, languages and cultures. It has also been observed that, '...when they leave, [they] are international ambassadors for Scotland and for Scottish higher education' (The Scottish Government, 2016). In addition they are net contributors to the economy through both fees and living expenses and in their social, cultural and leisure expenditure. This is estimated at £337 million every year in fees and an estimated £441 million in off-campus expenditure (Universities Scotland, 2013).

However, as Section 2.1 shows, international students may face a number of challenges when transitioning into Scottish HE and these may be grouped broadly under three headings: socio-cultural integration, English language ability, and academic expectations and integration. It is important to recognise that some home students may also experience similar challenges, particularly in relation to culture or learning shock; conversely, some international students may have little difficulty in adjusting to the new culture or cultures.

2.1 Summary of staff and student responses

2.1.1 Challenges faced by international students

Socio-cultural integration

International students can face a number of socio-cultural challenges when transitioning into Scottish Higher Education, including 'culture shock; orientation to a new environment, both emotionally and practically, can result in feelings of homesickness, loneliness and isolation. This may lead, in some cases, to a reluctance to integrate with home students and a preference to mix with students of a similar cultural background.

Student respondents, in particular, made a point of identifying the impacts of the lack of support networks for international students, and the additional pressure of family expectations back home. They also suggested that some institutional practices might be detrimental to integration, such as events which are only open to international students.

The negative effects of culture shock can also be exacerbated by starting late or at non-standard entry points in the academic year, which often means missing any welcome/orientation activities provided by the institution, and the opportunity to make friends or mix with teaching staff outwith the learning environment.

In addition, undertaking a particular type of course might compound the problem by including less free time to make social connections. This was seen as an issue for some postgraduate students.

These, and other, transitions are experienced not only by the student, but also by any accompanying family members, with partners feeling isolated and children experiencing educational and social challenges.

Most of these findings relate to non-EU students, although some did recognise that starting late in the academic year could bring similar challenges for ERASMUS students.

English language ability

Almost all staff respondents referred to English language ability or levels in relation to international students. There is a general belief that students with good English language skills, typically those from within the EU and from English-speaking countries, integrate well.

However, students with lower levels of English language ability can face difficulties in their transition which can impact upon their engagement and performance. The wide range of English spoken in universities (and outwith), encompassing colloquialisms and regional dialects, can be problematic for international students. This is also true of the types of academic language used in class: conventions, jargon and technical terms can be mystifying for some non-native speakers.

Many staff respondents believed that the level of English language required by some institutions is set too low for effective learning and academic success.

Even when students exceed the language requirements set by the institution, students can face difficulties adjusting to the intensity of study in a second (or other) language, particularly in relation to the amount of time they are expected to spend reading.

A view expressed by some students, and many of the staff, related to the challenges that home students and staff may also experience when communicating with students who use English as a second or other language, particularly in relation to communication difficulties in group work.

There was also an indication that there was a lack of comprehension by some international students as to course work requirements, which could be as a result of English language ability or a misinterpretation of the requirements, based on previous academic/educational experience, or both.

Academic expectations and integration

The main challenge for some international students in making the academic transition into Higher Education in Scotland is the mismatch or misalignment between previous educational experiences and new academic cultures. This is manifested around issues of types of learning; the unfamiliarity of independent learning and different learning styles, teaching methods, academic conventions, literacies and skills. Most of the respondents referred to an adjustment process taking place. However, this was described in relation to different student populations and level of study.

This misalignment would seem to be particularly true for students from East and South East Asia, in relation to rote learning, a perceived lack of experience in independent learning, differences in methods of assessment, a perceived lack of critical thinking, and underdeveloped academic writing skills. The final two issues were seen as particular problems for postgraduate students.

Students from the EU and Commonwealth countries were seen to be stronger independent learners, with better developed critical thinking skills. However, students from North America were used to more directed learning, continuous assessment and feedback and higher pass marks.

The role of the teacher, teaching techniques, and staff-student relationships were seen as particularly challenging for some international students' transitions into a new academic environment, with some, if not many, expecting a didactic approach to teaching, not to question teaching staff and to accept knowledge as given. There were difficulties in engaging some students in group work and/or integrating them in teams with home students.

It was suggested that methods of assessment, academic writing conventions and the role of academic literature are issues for all international students. In addition, the incompatibility/unfamiliarity of grading and weightings in the Scottish HE system was problematic for some students.

Students who enter at non-standard points in the year or on the course can face particular

academic challenges in their transition due to missing prerequisite study, reduced time to prepare Master's dissertation proposals or not receiving an induction.

While many international students integrate very well in their new host country and embrace the host culture, both socially (in terms of making friends) and academically (by performing well), others face a complex set of interconnected socio-cultural and academic challenges, exacerbated by English language difficulties, which may make their transitions problematic.

2.2 International students' engagement with professional/ support services

Responses from HEI staff would indicate that there is a very broad range of engagement, as defined by enquiry and use. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the diverse needs of individual students, time constraints for international students on particular courses, and point on programme. It is of course, also dependent on the scale and scope of the respondent's area of responsibility.

There is some indication that exchange students, EU and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students (albeit later in their courses) are more engaged with support services than undergraduates from outwith the EU.

In terms of English language support, engagement varies, but there was a suggestion that some students might benefit from such support being a required element of their course.

Some staff took the opportunity to indicate that discipline-specific support, embedded into programmes and provided by dedicated teams, may be more effective in terms of both engagement and outcome.

Similarly, there was a view that degrees of engagement can be positively influenced by lecturers creating space for this kind of support in their programmes.

A few staff members believed that as their institutions were very 'internationalised' there was no need for differentiated international student support services.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions as to how 'engaged' transitional international students are with support services; however, it would seem that perhaps those students most in need of support (for example, undergraduates from outwith the EU) are also those least likely to seek it.

2.3 HEIs internationalisation strategies: relevance and resonance for transitioning international students

These responses ranged from high-level, ambitious plans for growth (for example, increasing international partnerships, staff and student exchanges, and international student numbers), to local (as in faculty/department/programme) interpretations and applications of the strategy. Internationalising the curriculum was mentioned, although there was little explanation as to how this was relevant or had resonance for transitioning international students.

The Student Transitions Enhancement Theme has raised awareness of international students' transitions experience in at least one institution, and the use of the International Student Barometer (ISB) was also seen as a way to help institutions shape their support for international students.

There was a wish for closer collaboration between the pathway provider and the receiving

institution to facilitate closer alignment between teaching and learning pathway provision and on-campus experience. Similarly, there were concerns raised about the quality of provision by some pathway providers, and the English language requirements of some institutions, with a few respondents believing they were too low. The proportion of international students on some programmes and the potential negative impact on home students was also mentioned, in relation to the latter group's educational experience.

'Welcome Back' transitions need to be considered in the context of trying to mobilise domestic students to participate in outgoing exchanges, which seems to be a challenge for a number of institutions.

Staff mobility - actual and aspirational - was cited, but there was little mention of how this could have relevance for international students' transitions.

The issue of placements and work experience for international students, and the impact of changes to post-study work visa requirements were mentioned by a few respondents. These were considered to have a detrimental effect upon the overall international student experience in Scottish HE, and cited as potential barriers to attracting more international students to Scotland.

Student responses, although limited, recognised the benefits of diversity in the learning environment and of a curriculum that sought to foster international perspectives. Most of the responses referred to the structural aspects of their institutions internationalisation strategy, which is perhaps to be expected given the responsibilities of those who answered this question. At least one senior member of staff did indicate that a variety of innovative approaches may require different types of transition support for both domestic and international students.

2.4 Reflections on how welcoming and responsive individual HEIs are to transitioning international students (as reported by individual staff)

The perceptions of how welcoming institutions are to incoming international students ranged from 'very welcoming' to 'not currently very welcoming or responsive'. The majority stated they thought their respective institutions were welcoming overall, but added caveats that there were areas which could be improved. A couple of responses referred to external factors, outwith institutional control (namely the aforementioned post-study work visa issues).

Some respondents believed that individual staff worked very hard to be welcoming to international students and a few also mentioned the involvement, particularly in terms of welcome and induction activity, of Students' Associations. However, most recognised that this was a challenging area, and said that more could be done to be responsive to the needs of transitioning international students.

Section 3 is a summary of those practices which HEIs in Scotland currently deploy to aid the transitions of international students.

3 Key practices in supporting international students' transitions to Scottish HE

Many international students, like other students, are anxious about starting university life; becoming a student in a new country and entering a new academic environment, away from family, friends and the familiar. It is crucial, therefore, that they feel a sense of connection with the university, and/or their course, even before they start. This can be fostered through personal communications and pre-arrival activities, social or academic or both. This engagement should be reinforced upon arrival by HEIs providing a welcoming, supportive environment, and one in which the student feels a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012).

All HEIs in Scotland have, to a greater or lesser degree, mechanisms and strategies in place which aim to help international students make a successful transition into their new academic and social environment. These include those designed specifically for international students, as well as those aimed at the student body in general.

The following approaches and examples are products of both desk-based investigation and information provided by the staff and student consultation. They are not intended to be a comprehensive review of every type of transitional support that exists for international students in Scottish HE, though they do provide good and useful typified examples of transitions support upon which practitioners and institutions may draw. They are summarised and grouped around the three main challenges identified in Section 2: Socio-Cultural Integration, English Language Ability and Academic Expectations and Integration; where those practices are highlighted, illustrative examples are available in the remainder of the Section. (Additional examples are in Appendix 4).

It must be reiterated that the three challenges identified are not one-dimensional or stand-alone, and similarly the practices aimed at addressing those challenges can of course have more than a single outcome. However, grouping them in this way provides a convenient frame of reference.

Table 2: Summary of key transition practices

Socio-Cultural Integration (B)	English Language Ability (A)	Academic Expectations and Integration (C)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-arrival engagement • Orientation guides on living and studying in the UK • Dedicated induction (institution or department based; with or without home students) • A range of student services: health, wellbeing, funding, counselling, etc. • Dedicated personal/academic advisers and international student advisers • Buddy/Peer Mentoring Schemes • Social and cultural events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-sessional English language classes • Sessional English language classes • Informal language groups • English for Specific Purposes courses • Subject related English language preparation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-arrival academic preparation • Academic writing, academic/study skills support • Targeted learning resources • Embedded academic support • Transition Programmes (with pathway providers), • Foundation and Pathway Programmes

3.1 Socio-cultural Integration

3.1.1 Pre-arrival, welcome and induction

Web welcome: the institution's website is usually the first port of call (recruitment fairs and local agents excepted) for prospective international students looking for information on the institution/study options/living in the local area. In addition, many HEIs give information about their summer schools, which offer tasters of their courses for prospective international students, allowing them to experience the study environment and meet with staff in what is often a relatively informal context. (More details are in Appendix 3).

Pre-arrival: some institutions attempt to engage incoming international students either through informational resources such as videos (with some using international and other students to provide information), or through a more individualised approach. An example of the latter is the Making Transitions Personal Project at the **University of Edinburgh**, which allows the Visiting Student Office to identify concerns of EU and non-EU students prior to arrival, thus allowing the office to tailor their formal welcome talk to address those concerns.

Vignette: Social Media Groups

The **University of Aberdeen** uses Facebook groups to promote engagement and aid the transition to university.⁷ The purpose of the groups is to allow potential students to ask questions. It also allows academic staff to post information about the course and for current students to answer questions from a student perspective. This seems to be a particularly popular strategy for international students who often find other students from their home country to meet up with and ease the transition not only to university but to life in a new country.

Induction: many HEIs in the UK use the Student Transitions and Retention (STAR) guidelines, developed at the University of Ulster, to tailor their approaches to induction and welcoming new students. Key features include engaging the students in activity before they arrive, offering an initial induction in the first few weeks of the semester, and then a phased or extended induction for the remainder of the first year. Careful design and implementation can encourage socialisation amongst students, break down barriers between students and staff and promote conversational English for non-native speakers. Academic and course-specific information can be released on a timely basis, which reduces the problem of information overload that many first year students face (Cook and Rushton, 2008).

Every HEI in Scotland offers induction events and programmes for their students. However, these differ in approach, length and format. Many (usually the larger institutions) have a dual system. A centralised induction might cover, for example, administrative processes and procedures, academic policies and practice, campus orientation, and introduction to student services. In parallel, there will be faculty/college/school/department inductions (dependent upon institutional/programme structures). Both will often include informal welcome/orientation activities, as well as opportunities for students to meet/socialise with each other and university staff. Departmental inductions can include introductions to elective subjects, academic expectations, course specific information and key contacts. Inductions are sometimes repeated for international students entering in the second semester and there are some examples of extended inductions, usually offered by pathway providers. The **University of the West of Scotland** provides welcome/welcome back events in trimester two aimed not only at new/returning students, but all students, therefore allowing them to socialise with their peers on campus.

⁷ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/case-studies/using-facebook-to-help-aid-the-transition-to-university.pdf

Vignette: Creative Induction

Two HEIs in Scotland, the **University of Strathclyde** and the **University of St Andrews**, use UniSmart⁸ as part of their induction processes. This is a worldwide induction programme which uses actors to introduce students into HE in a fun, friendly and informal way, while reducing concerns and allaying fears about entering a new environment.

Vignette: Peer Induction

An example of a week-long, department-based induction programme for new UG and PGT students from Chinese academic partners is offered by the **University of Strathclyde**. This is delivered during the students' English language classes, but prior to the start of their main programme of study. The programme covers academic, cultural and social integration issues, and while it is managed by academic staff, it uses students from Chinese institutions who have already been through the academic process. They provide unique experience and insight for the new students, and support them during their first few weeks of academic term.

Vignette: Extended Induction

The **University of Stirling** has, since 2014, run an extended induction programme called the Flying Start Leadership Programme⁹ for all incoming postgraduate taught students, which aims to address many of these issues head-on when the students first arrive at Stirling. This intensive programme helps the students familiarise themselves with their surroundings and the expectations that are likely to be placed upon them during their studies, while at the same time introducing them to some key personal and professional development aspects which will support them not only during their studies, but also as they work towards entering or re-entering the workplace.

3.1.2 Student Services - Advice and Support

These are sometimes provided along with support services for all students, specifically aimed at international students, for example, International Student Advisers equipped to deal with specific enquiries about most aspects of the student journey. All HEIs in Scotland recognise that being a student can bring with it a number of pressures, especially if away from home for the first time or studying in a completely new environment. They have systems in place to support students' health and wellbeing, including counselling services for those experiencing particular problems. While the following services are available for all students, they might be particularly applicable to international students in this regard, given that 'New academic environments, discomfort in talking about sensitive matters and counselling by strangers as new phenomena also act as barriers to many international students in seeking professional counselling' (Ramachandran, 2011, p 206).

Online Personal Support: the **University of the Highlands and Islands** offers online counselling at a time convenient to student, either by email (asynchronous) or by real time instant messaging via Skype (synchronous), in addition to face-to-face counselling.

Similarly, the **University of Aberdeen** has secured the services of Big White Wall (BWW) to provide 24/7 online support for students, particularly those experiencing mental distress, outwith normal working hours.

⁸ www.unismart.biz/

⁹ www.stir.ac.uk/management/employability/flyingstartleadershipprogramme/

3.1.3 Buddy and Peer Mentoring Schemes

Most Scottish HEIs have some type of buddy or peer mentoring scheme. These are commonly initiated by Students' Associations and run in conjunction with specific departments, rather than across the whole institution.

Vignette: Buddies Programme at Edinburgh University Students' Association Global
International visiting students are matched into a Buddy Group with five other international students and two current Edinburgh students (these could be home or international). Four of these Buddy groups make a Supergroup, giving students access to a wider social group than just eight. Students can signpost services, support networks and opportunities to find new social experiences, and can also act as a first port-of-call for queries pre-arrival. Run by a student committee who organise events and training sessions for Edinburgh buddies, it is currently only available for visiting students, but there is scope to expand further.

Vignette: E-Buddy Mentoring Scheme

One department at the **University of Strathclyde** has introduced an **e-buddy mentoring scheme** for all International PGT applicants. The e-buddies are existing students who have completed their Masters study and have chosen to remain in Scotland to pursue further education. They are specific to target markets, allocated to applicants based on their home nationality. At point of offer, applicants can agree to be contacted by the e-buddy who is there to provide advice, guidance and support on non-academic issues (what it's like to leave home; challenges to living in a new country; what's university life like; are there good sports facilities; and so on).

3.1.4 Role of Students' Associations (SA)

In addition to the aforementioned buddy or peer support schemes, SA play a large part in welcoming new students onto campus and into and throughout university life. Examples of such initiatives include welcome activities at Freshers' Weeks, social and cultural events, and opportunities to join clubs and societies. Smaller HEIs, such as **Scotland's Rural College**, have International Student Societies; others have societies for specific nationalities, for example, Chinese Societies.

Vignette: The Culture Club

Robert Gordon University's Culture Club evolved from other internationally-focused projects, and a desire by the Students' Representative Council to promote integration and interaction on a larger scale, in a social setting, and in a way that would appeal to more home students. Led by the Culture Club coordinators, club volunteers meet regularly to devise strategies for four or five culturally-themed events throughout the academic year. The intention is that international and home students work together to promote interaction and integration on campus through cultural events which can be promoted to the rest of the student body and, on occasion, to the local community.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has been keen to promote the internationalisation of student associations and developed a toolkit¹⁰ in 2011 which focused, in part, on increasing the opportunities for international and home students to engage with each other. This was an outcome of the Prime Minister's Initiative 2, which also resulted in the International Student Calculator¹¹ and the Prepare for Success Toolkit (Section: 3.3.1).

¹⁰ <http://nussl.ukmsl.net/internationalisation/he-toolkit/sections/>

¹¹ <http://international.studentcalculator.org/>

The NUS International Students' Campaign: the organisation is working on a project which will help Students' Associations to become more supportive towards international students.

3.2 English Language Ability

English Language and Cultural Support: those Scottish HEIs with the largest numbers of international students offer pre-sessional English language courses to international students, typically 4-12 weeks in length and paid for by the student. These usually include social/cultural trips and activities. They also offer in-sessional English language classes; some offer courses based on diagnostic testing to assess the type of support required.

Many HEIs run or encourage informal language cafés; often these are student-led initiatives.

Vignette: Language Learning in a Social Setting

Run by **Edinburgh University Students' Association** since 2007, **Tandem** promotes the learning of languages through an exchange service, effectively matchmaking two students who can help each other learn or improve their language skills in a relaxed and social atmosphere. Lively Speed Lingua evenings are held throughout the year as a sociable way to bring students together to find the right language match for them. Tandem also hosts weekly Language Cafés for home and international students.

3.3 Academic Expectations and Integration

3.3.1 Pre-arrival/arrival Academic Preparation

Many HEIs in Scotland offer pre-arrival academic preparation activities for all incoming students, while some have specific activities targeted at international students.

The former generally covers advice on preparing for university and effective (self) study and the latter introductions to academic cultures and study in the UK, in addition to preparation and study materials.¹²

Vignette: Web Preparation/Learning Tool

Heriot Watt University, the University of Glasgow, the University of Strathclyde and the **University of the West of Scotland** all use the **Prepare for Success** toolkit developed by the University of Southampton.¹³ This is an interactive web learning tool designed to prepare international students for study in Further or Higher Education in the UK. It has activity-based learning resources about different aspects of academic life in the UK and the skills needed for effective study. It also provides scope for English language improvement.

Vignette: Preparing for University, Online Course

Student Learning Services at the **University of Stirling** advertise **Preparing for Uni**.¹⁴ This is a free online course from FutureLearn, started in June 2016, which explores key skills needed for success at university. It includes tips from university teaching staff about where students excel and struggle, along with tips from undergraduates about approaching challenges and coping with the learning environment.

¹² www.bradford.ac.uk/transit/

¹³ www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk/

¹⁴ www.futurelearn.com/courses/preparing-for-uni

Vignette: Key Skills

Edinburgh Napier University, has a pre-arrival/induction programme, **SPICE International**. This includes an introduction to the key skills essential for success on Edinburgh Napier University undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, with short videos and quotes from international students and modules with practical exercises to help students develop academic study skills.¹⁵

3.3.2 Academic Advice and Support for International Students' Transitions

Learning services, like other student services, are available either to all students or targeted at specific groups such as international students. The following are mainly examples of targeted support offered by HEIs; however, other examples have been included in Appendix 4, where they have been suggested by respondents as being effective in supporting international students' transitions or appear to be examples of good practice.

Vignette: Support for International Students' Academic Development/Integration

Glasgow Caledonian University has **Academic Development Centres in each school**. They are staffed by Academic Development Tutors who **support international students with academic writing, giving presentations and other assignments**. Students can sign up for individual sessions, or can opt to attend generic academic skills in subject-specific classes that are timetabled for all students. Resources are also put online, into a virtual learning environment (VLE), for students to access them as required. The academic writing teams support academic writing development through a model that combines workshops contextualised to specific coursework with one-to-one appointments, in which student writing is explored and developed through dialogue with a writing tutor.

Blended Learning: The most recent innovation which has been welcomed in the **University of Aberdeen** is the provision of **online recordings of almost all lectures** to allow students to listen to them repeatedly. In particular, the Student Learning Service (SLS) has enhanced the **e-resources for academic skills development, academic writing and maths skills**, which are available in the VLE. (Online materials and collaboration have been found to be of particular benefit to international students in the processes of reflection and review).

Routes into HE in Scotland: Most of the larger HEIs in Scotland partner with an external organisation, both on and off campus, to provide either **foundation and/or pathway progression routes for international students** who want to study in Higher Education in Scotland. This can allow the student to complete a foundation year and then enter directly into Year 2 of their chosen programme, or from Year 2 into Year 3. Similarly, pre-Masters routes are also offered by these providers. Such routes aim to prepare the student for learning in a new academic environment, and better align their expectations to the reality of studying at their chosen institution.

Vignette: Transitioning into Postgraduate Study

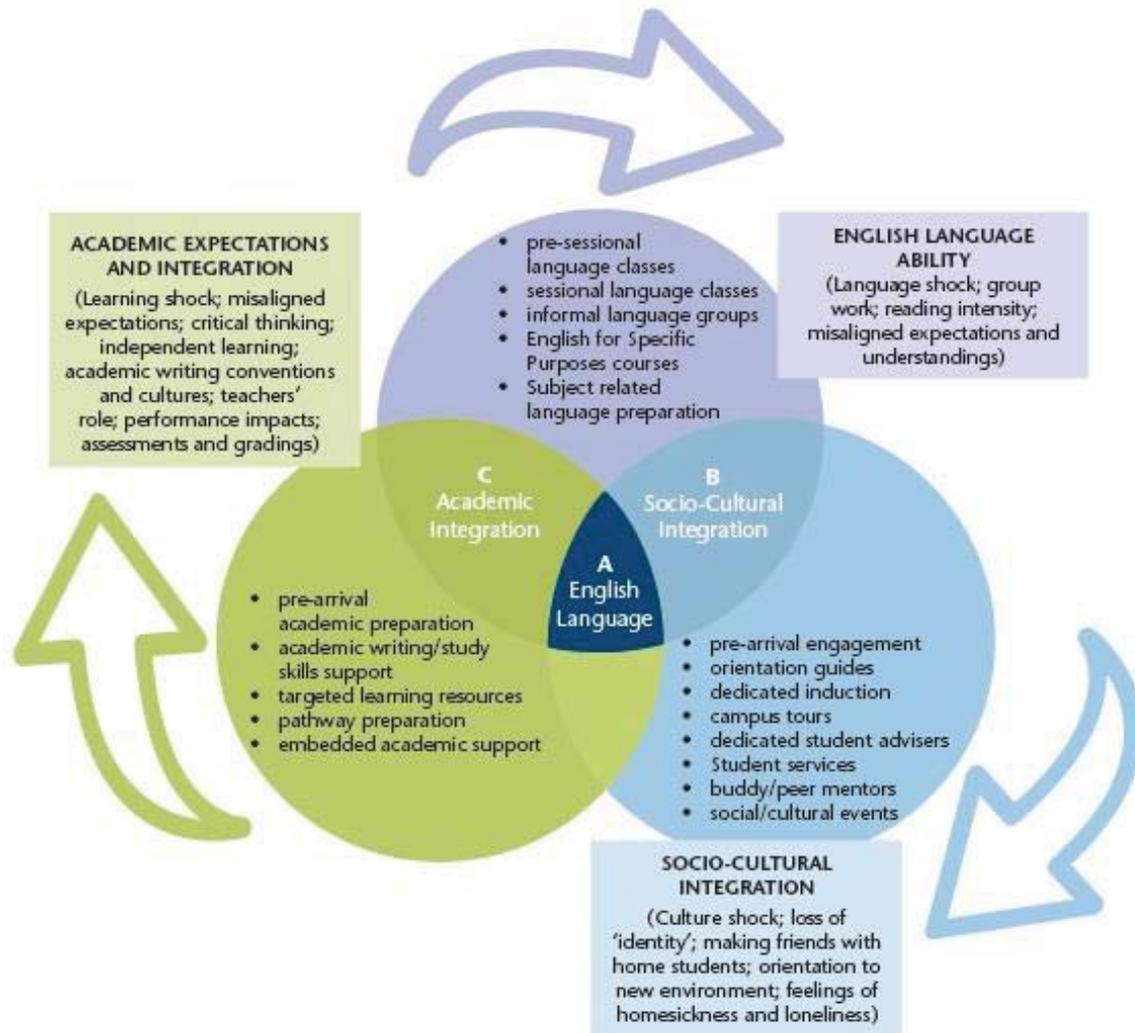
Queen Margaret University has developed support for **transitioning into postgraduate study**¹⁶ which is aimed primarily at students from outside the UK. The programme is designed to introduce students to postgraduate study and the differences they will encounter as they transition from undergraduate study. In addition, as students are entering the postgraduate programme at QMU from other universities outwith the UK, the programme also offers a focus for transition into a new culture and country.

¹⁵ www.spice-int-undergraduate.napier.ac.uk/

¹⁶ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/case-studies/learning-methodologies-for-postgraduate-students.pdf

In summary, there are a number of practices in place which attempt to address the challenges international students face in transitioning into HE in Scotland. Figure 3 illustrates these practices, which are mapped onto the three main challenges identified in Section 2.1: Socio-Cultural Integration, English Language Ability, and Academic Expectations and Integration. While the examples presented here, (and in Appendix 4), can only provide an overview of transition practices for international students in Scottish HEIs, they are useful indicators of approaches and types of methods employed.

Figure 3: Key challenges and practices in international students' transitions



4 Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Key Issues in Socio-cultural Integration

Many of the respondents in Section 2.1, including all student respondents, referred to the challenges faced by some international students in integrating with the host culture and home students; in particular, this affected making friends, getting involved in social activities, orienting themselves to a new environment, and integrating with domestic students on group or team projects.

It must be recognised that not every international student experiences such challenges, nor do all domestic students feel included or well-integrated in the new campus or academic culture (Bradley, 2002).

Nevertheless, as identified by the staff respondents, some international students do experience culture shock, whether it be academic, social or both, in an environment which is alien or unfamiliar to them. They can find themselves stranded or suspended in a personal, academic or social limbo. The effects of this can be loneliness, feelings of isolation, depression and, in an academic context, to what Griffiths et al. have termed learning shock (2005).¹⁷

This is supported by in a two-year study conducted by Gu (2008) which focused on first year undergraduates in four UK HEIs, reporting that students experienced feelings of 'powerlessness', 'a lack of a sense of belonging', 'loneliness' and 'loss of the familiar'. In addition, the study also revealed that students felt their 'identities were challenged through their values and beliefs' and that overall this resulted in considerable pressure on the student (Gu, p 17).

This has obvious implications for the individual student in terms of their confidence and self-esteem, in addition to their health and well-being and ability to complete their studies. Dropping out of a course brings its own potential pressures, in terms of not meeting family expectations and obligations or in some cases, sponsor requirements.

Increasing drop-out rates, if persistent, can further the process of deinternationalisation for the individual HEI or, if more widespread, cause reputational damage to the sector or host country.

Palmer et al. (2009), building on Solomon (2007), refer to a 'betwixt space' of first year students transitioning into the university environment, to contextualise the students' feelings of '(not) belonging to university life'. They introduce the concept of a 'turning point', in which the transition occurs, and suggest that this turning point can be both positive and negative: its associated stressful occasions or situations (for example, leaving home/family) can have eventual beneficial effects (for example, a growing sense of identity/independence and new relationships).

Additionally, they refer to the relationship between inclusion and exclusion in understanding students' turning point experiences as a complex one. The authors use induction practices and Freshers' Weeks to illustrate how those can both include, and create the conditions, to exclude: 'The panacea becomes the poison' (Palmer et al. 2009).

This is particularly true for those students who cannot get involved in those activities, or who arrive late. While this research relates to all first year students, it could have

¹⁷ Learning shock refers to experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students. These students find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subject to ambiguous and conflicting expectations. (Griffiths et al. pp 1- 2).

particular resonance for international students arriving late or in the second semester. There is also some indication that even those international students who are in Scottish HEIs at the start of the academic year are excluded from some freshers' activities due to differences in social, religious customs and conventions or leisure preferences.

While most, if not all, universities offer a range of orientation programs, surprisingly little is known about their effectiveness in helping students transition smoothly into university life. (Baik et al. 2015).

4.2 English Language Ability

Many of the respondents in Section 2.1 believed that the English language abilities of some international students were detrimental to successful socio-cultural integration, academic adjustment and performance. This is borne out in some of the literature.

Rastall (2004) believes that culture shock is 'particularly marked' for students from East Asia, and has a detrimental impact upon their success. Research in a London-based university found that 'all East Asian students found it difficult to converse with their English speaking peers to the point.. [that this] was a real obstacle to academic success' (Salter and Dvorak, 2004).

Andrade (2006) found that 'language proficiency does affect the academic achievement of international students but results vary', indicating that graduate students' achievements may be more affected by English proficiency than undergraduates. Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between TOEFL scores and well-developed writing skills with academic accomplishment.

International students transitioning into Scottish HE have already, by dint of acceptance to the receiving institution, demonstrated a number of achievements and proven that they can learn successfully. However, a number of studies suggest that even those with good English language skills can often struggle with the language required for everyday activities, in addition to coping with the demands of English as it is spoken in the classroom. Furthermore, Ramachandran suggests that 'In most situations, although international students may possess subject specific skills that are required to meet the demands of the programme, they have limited exposure to group activity, presentation and other student-led initiatives - all of which also require language specific competencies' (2011).

Much of the literature supports the idea that difficulty in conversing with native English speaking peers can be an obstacle to academic achievement and success, and this may be more likely for postgraduates than undergraduates. Similarly, while meeting the English language and subject-specific requirements of the programme, some international students do not have the language-specific competences required to engage in group activity and presentations.

Courses in English for Academic Purposes may help international students to participate more in the classroom; however, students can still face the challenge of variations in dialects and language nuances in social situations.

Cultural awareness and setting realistic English language development goals are believed to aid successful transitions in international students (Li and Gasser, 2005). Similarly, providing the space and opportunity for social interaction between home students (and staff) and international students outwith the classroom is vital for 'conversational and incidental learning' (Baik et al. 2015).

4.3 Academic Expectations and Integration

Many respondents observed a misalignment in the academic expectations and previous educational experiences of international students, to staff expectations of students' learning styles and strategies. There was a particular emphasis on the perceived rote learning of specific groups of students and how this affected their levels of understanding, in addition to a perceived lack of classroom participation and group interaction.

Morrison (2005) illustrates that there are a number of studies which show that international students may perform better than their home counterparts, even without participation in classroom activities.

Nevertheless this academic misalignment, particularly in relation to students from East Asia, often stems from the belief that students with Confucian philosophies use rote learning methods as the only means of learning. Similarly, this is contrasted with a Socratic approach to learning in which the former is seen as surface learning, which does not generally lead to understanding.

Increasing numbers of students from China and other East Asian countries into European and North American Higher Education institutions has thus led to a perceived 'dissonance between a Chinese culture of learning and 'western' norms of teaching and learning' (Wang and Byram, 2011).

4.3.1 Teacher- Student Power Relationships

A seminal piece of research undertaken by Hofstede (1980) considered the ways in which East Asian education cultures vary with Western ones and looked particularly at the power distance between teacher and student relationships. Low power distance countries are those where students are viewed as independent learners; they are encouraged to challenge teachers, think critically and be active participants in the learning process. In high power distance countries, staff direct learning; students are passive, do not speak in class unless asked to do so, and respect the teacher by accepting his/her expert knowledge. In turn, this has led to a common misunderstanding that students with Confucian philosophies use only rote learning as a means of learning and it is this which can lead to plagiarism as defined by Western educators. Kingston and Forland, (2008) contrast those differing approaches to knowledge between the Confucian 'Conserving' attitude, based on understanding 'expert work' and the Socratic 'Extending' attitude, which favours, critical thinking and a questioning attitude, in Table 2. They highlight the differences in learning styles, but also indicate that a perceived superficial approach to learning might be more strategic than at first apparent, in that many researchers suggest that this perceived surface learning is in fact deep learning; and memorisation is used as a route to understanding, and should not be discounted (Biggs, 2003).

Table 2: Summary of Socratic Versus Confucian Traditions

	Western/Socratic	Eastern/Confucian
Culture (Hofstede)	Low power distance (Individualist)	High power distance (Collectivist)
Attitude to knowledge	Extending/Speculative transforming	Conserving/ Reproducing
Academic approach	Divergent	Convergent
Learning styles for success	Deep Strategic?	Surface Rote/Superficial Strategic?

Source: Kingston and Forland (2008, p 207)

Other research supports the idea that where Western students often perceive that understanding is a process of sudden insight, Chinese students see it as a 'long process that requires considerable mental effort (Dahlin and Watkins, 2000 in Wang and Byram).

In addition, the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and changing culture have led some to believe that Confucian learning cultures are evolving simultaneously and that dissonance between learning cultures is being reduced.

Wang and Byram refer to a study of first year PG students from China and Taiwan, studying a wide variety of disciplines at an English university, to illustrate how both teachers and students saw memorising and understanding as complementary processes. In order to explore some of the differences and perceived notions of Chinese student learning practices, the authors conducted an examination of some of the words those students used to explore the meaning they attach to them.

This group of students '...brought a system of beliefs about learning to their new situation in a British university, including how to obtain knowledge, what the appropriate manners of learning are, and what proper attitudes toward learning are expected. The key ingredients are effort, *ku xin*, humility, *xu xin*, and reflection, *yong xin*. They believed that effort and diligence can compensate to some extent for the inadequacy of abilities. They also emphasised reflection or '*yongxin sikao*' - to use one's heart to think - in one's studies in order to deepen one's understanding' (Wang and Byram).

However, as a strategy this might not be sustained (or sustainable), as the findings of Wang and Byram show that Chinese sojourning students are adaptive and receptive to the new learning environment and attempt to bring their 'old' and 'new' learning cultures together or into alignment. They acknowledge the limitations of the study, but believe that some generalisations can be made from it, in that they point to the compatibility of Chinese core beliefs with a British learning culture. However, they add the caveat that Chinese students would transfer their beliefs from one culture to another 'in either direction, with care' (Wang and Byram).

4.4 Strategic Choices and Adaptations by International Students

Most of the responses in Section 2.1 cite some form of adjustment taking place in order for the student to navigate their way into and through their new academic territory and social environment. Theories of adjustment are not new and are often used to describe or explain the feelings and experiences that students have when transitioning into HE. Perhaps the most obvious ones to illustrate the transitions of some international students are those which refer to the Pre-departure, Honeymoon, Culture Shock or Party's Over and Healthy Adjustment periods. This is an amalgam of two theories: The U-Curve theory of Adjustment

(Risquez, et al, 2008) and the Model of Student Adjustment, (Menziez and Baron, 2014). Both models converge around the feelings and experiences during the 'Culture Shock' or 'Party's Over' phase, where students can feel dejected, lonely, depressed, alienated and homesick, but both point to a time when the student becomes more familiar with the environment and starts to make 'healthy adjustments'.

However, Bridges' Transition Model (2011), could be more applicable to other international students, in that it describes three overlapping phases: 'Ending, Losing and Letting Go', 'The Neutral Zone' and 'The New Beginning'. The first phase may represent students arriving at university and experiencing a new environment, new people and new living arrangements. These changes can lead to feelings of depression, loneliness and homesickness. The second phase sees students trying to adapt to the new circumstances, but still attached to the old one and experiencing feelings of anxiety and stress about their role. When students become more confident about their capabilities and adapt to university life and learning, then they are considered to have reached the third phase.

4.5 Mutual Adjustment

Kingston and Forland (2008) suggest that with an increasing emphasis on internationalisation, it is unlikely that the adjustment *process* will only be one-way: that there must be compromise on both sides. This has given rise to the idea of cultural synergy in this aspect of transition.

However, as noted by Zhou et al (2008), any type of 'mutual adjustment by both teachers and students towards a maximised academic outcome will not necessarily occur to the same degree in both directions.'

This in turn can be influenced by a number of variables, such as the differences in the individuals themselves, personal motivations, and whether the students arrive as individuals or in a group. Motivation is identified by Andrade (2006), alongside academic skills, age and year of study, as a factor which can affect the academic success of international students.

In order to enhance the student learning experience educators should encourage students to use or mobilise strategies from their inherent/inherited learning culture while exploring new ways of learning. Kingston and Forland agree with Biggs' (2003) argument that educators should focus on 'what the student is *doing*, instead of what the students *is*'.

All students are strategic, and international students are no different; they make choices about how they will navigate their way through their studies and the learning environment. Some home students adopt an instrumental approach to just get by, (or aim for maximum academic success). Where the difference might lie with some international students is in their strategies, which might of necessity be about how to get through the course, rather than any real choice over the academic outcome. This might entail a number of approaches, but self-determination has been cited as a key factor in sustaining personal and academic achievement (of East Asian students) in host countries, with evidence of a strong sense of agency and resilience in strategic adaptations (Gu).

International students in general experience more anxiety, stress, homesickness and loneliness, and have less social support, than domestic students. Evidence suggests that friendships with home students positively affect adjustment, but may be difficult to form (Andrade 2008). However, Menziez and Baron (2014) found that international postgraduate students experienced negative transition experiences in the beginning, but adjusted as time went on. Involvement in the Students' Society was beneficial for transition, as it gave students the opportunity to make friends, and these friends, in turn, gave students social support, which assisted with their learning and transition.

Both staff and student respondents in Section 2 referred to a lack of integration between home students and some international students, who preferred to be in groups of their own nationality. This is not unusual as such groups help to bridge the gap between the home and host culture.

Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) suggest that some international students might choose to remain in, or join, a co-national student group for the socio-cultural and academic benefits that it could bring; in providing a social network and information/support in regard to study. In addition, they believe it is possible that acculturation might take place in co- or mixed- national groups as transitioning students' 'beliefs about their own culture within a new environment might change'. They also note, however, that 'successful transitions are possible without successful acculturation taking place'.

In summary, international students make multiple concurrent transitions of many dimensions: they transition into a new country with unfamiliar social customs and mores; a different way of living; and an unfamiliar academic environment and conventions. They may also be developing from an adolescent into an adult, from a school pupil into a university student, or a postgraduate into a professional, while potentially also being a transitioning partner or parent.

These transitions are not linear or static but dynamic, and require a complex interplay between an amalgam of personal characteristics, linguistic agility and psychological factors, including a sense of agency and self-efficacy, in addition to engaging and empowering organisational and social cultures. As Gu notes, '... It is the management of this amalgam, as well as the availability of differentiated and timely support which results in intercultural adaptation, and the successful reconfiguration of 'identity'.'

4.6 Differentiated and Timely Support

HEIs in Scotland clearly offer a range of support services specifically for transitioning international students (Section 3.1.2), in addition to the generic services offered to all students. However, it is difficult (and outwith the scope of this study) to determine the level of engagement with, and effectiveness of, those services.

Responses from HEI staff would indicate that there is a very broad range of engagement, which is perhaps unsurprising, given the diverse needs of individual students.

Andrade (2008) highlights a number of studies which indicate the effects of collaboration between academics and learning specialists, through development of academic reading and writing skills, or English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors in building students' language skills. Students attained significantly higher grades in the former example and equivalent or higher grades in the latter.

Variations in levels of engagement might also be attributed to cultural differences in seeking support. Some of the literature suggests that students from certain cultures would not ask for help from strangers, for fear of 'losing face' and/or being perceived as a 'failure'.

Additionally, other individuals from particular cultures typically enter Scottish HE with relatively high cultural capital and very good levels of English language, but are not necessarily proficient in colloquial or classroom English; these students may therefore not recognise the value that language support may offer.

There is the issue for the non-native English speaker of the deficit associations of support, in that support can be regarded as an admission of weakness or failure. Terms such as 'drop-in clinic' or 'surgery', borrowed from healthcare, have further potential to confuse.

Colvin and Jaffar (2008) believe there should be an 'equity imperative' underpinning an institution's student support strategies, to ensure that the international student's voice is '...heard, serviced and monitored, and not lost against the dominant culture.'

4.7 Summary of the Key Features of Successful Transitions for International Students

- **Influencing variables:** individual personal characteristics, including linguistic agility, motivations and whether sojourning as an individual or as part of a group, are known to be important in successful transitions.
- **Self-determination:** a strong sense of agency and resilience are understood to be crucial in the strategic adaptations of some international students to sustain personal and academic achievements.
- **Managed expectations:** the potential for academic misalignment can be reduced by more explicit information and direction in the learning, teaching and assessment process. Pre-arrival engagement through a range of activities is seen as particularly valuable in managing those expectations for both students and staff.
- **Age, previous educational experience, academic skills and year of study** are particular factors which are perceived to impact on the academic success of international students.
- **Cultural synergy:** (towards maximised academic and social outcomes) requires some form of give and take by both parties, but it does not necessarily occur to the same degree in both directions.
- **Use of Students' inherited learning culture:** educators should encourage students to mobilise strategies from their previous learning experiences while exploring new ones.
- **Provision of opportunities and spaces to socialise:** make friends, and practice language skills in informal settings; Students' Associations can be influential in this.
- **Strategic choices and strategies:** students make choices to adapt (or not) to their new environment, based on their considerations of potential outcomes.
- **Social networks and strategic choices:** some international students actively choose to remain in/join a co-national student group for potential and actual benefits.
- **A welcoming environment:** where international students feel valued and which offers **differentiated and timely support** (those practices cited in Section 3).

In conclusion, international students can face a range of challenges in transitioning into Scottish HE through socio-cultural integration, difficulties with English, and misalignment in academic cultures and conventions. It is difficult to determine whether or not they are less successful than host students. There is some evidence which suggests that some international students perform better than host students. However, it could be the case that particular types of international students, for the reasons already mentioned, do not. Even when they are successful, this is probably due to their active choices and strategies in compensation of those challenges, particularly in the realms of motivation, self-determination and effort. However, what this does mask is the degree of effort, difficulties encountered and sacrifices made, in order to achieve academic, if not personal, success.

HEIs are not in a position to manage the liminal space that international students might inhabit during adaptation, but can, with differentiated and timely support, provide an encouraging and supportive environment to foster engagement and empower the student to achieve the best outcomes possible.

4.8 How welcoming is Scottish HE?

It is clear that all HEIs in Scotland strive to make international students feel welcome in their institutions and offer a range of services to facilitate and support their transitions with many examples of good practice in doing so. However, there is also evidence to suggest that more could be done to facilitate smoother transitions, which could potentially enhance international students' experience.

4.8.1 Areas for Development

Socio-cultural Integration

Pre-arrival information and activity: has been identified as a practice in supporting international students' transitions, and while there is demonstrable good practice in this area, more could probably be done in engaging the student at this early stage in order to connect them to different facets of university life, to initiate a sense of belonging and to prepare them for the realities of study in their institution. Clear and explicit practical advice and support can be delivered pre-arrival, via videos and so on, but this needs to be reinforced upon arrival and throughout the student's first semester. This process is particularly effective if existing students/alumni are involved.

Induction: is offered to all international students, either with or separate from home students, either centrally and or through faculty/school/department inductions. Extended induction would seem to be the exception; there are examples of repeated inductions in relation to students starting at non-standard points in the academic year, but little evidence of phased induction for students. Given the importance of welcome and arrival to international students, if not all students, this is an area which could merit development.

Student services/support uptake: it was outwith the parameters of this study to conduct a comprehensive assessment of how engaged international students are with student support services, or to examine levels of service uptake. From the preliminary enquiry it appears variable and perhaps this is not surprising, given individual needs and circumstances; yet there is some evidence from both the HEI staff and the literature, that, while there may be need, this does not necessarily translate into enquiry or use. Initial impressions as to the reasons for this suggest a whole complex set of individual factors, including self-belief, cultural attitude to support, and (in some cases) ignorance as to the existence and purpose of such services.

Buddy/peer mentoring schemes: there are many examples of good practice in this area, particularly from those schemes run by student associations. However, these do tend to operate on a relatively small scale, limited to either particular years of study or subjects or both. Given their potential to support international (and all) students, it would be worthwhile developing such schemes on a larger scale.

English Language Support

There are many good practices in place, in terms of both pre-sessional and in-sessional English language classes to support international students in social and cultural activities, in addition to academic ones. Yet the findings (supported by the literature) reveal that many non-native speakers struggle to function effectively in a range of academic and social

situations, despite meeting or exceeding institutional English language requirements.

Academic Expectations and Integration

Pre-arrival academic preparation: is offered by some Scottish institutions, but not all. It is also difficult to tell the extent to which it is monitored or followed-up upon arrival. This would seem to be an area worthy of some consideration, particularly in terms of the misconceptions or misalignments of staff and student expectations.

Academic Integration and Support: the main challenge presented here is in integrating some international students into the academic culture, conventions and learning environments of the receiving institutions, due to the perceived incompatibility between their preferred learning styles and strategies incompatibility with prevalent independent learning and critical thinking approaches. This is an area which deserves further attention and discussion.

Staff transitions: while the aforementioned areas for development have mainly focused on institutional approaches and practices to facilitating or supporting international students' transitions, the study findings point to the necessity of mutual adjustment by both students and staff in promoting successful transitions. This is a key feature of international students' academic transitions. However, staff themselves may be experiencing similar transitions in terms of teaching students whose educational backgrounds and experiences seem at odds with concepts of independent learning, critical thinking or contemporary academic conventions. Similarly, they might not be familiar with teaching multi-cultural groups or in the development of intercultural competences. Those staff also require support, and given that this is potentially a challenge for most HEIs in Scotland, it is worthy of sector level attention.

Internationalisation strategies

Most of the respondents in Section 2 referred, to the 'structural' aspects of their institutions' internationalisation strategy. This is perhaps unsurprising given the very broad range of individuals' areas of responsibility and whichever stage their institution is at in the internationalisation trajectory.

Current thinking would suggest that structural internationalisation is not synonymous with an integrated community; having significant numbers of international students on campus does not automatically lead to meaningful interaction or the development of intercultural competences or the global skills employers will seek in future employees. Institutions might want to give more consideration to internationalising the curriculum and the ways in which intercultural competences may be developed for both home and international students. This could be progressed by informed cross-sector discussion.

4.9 Recommendations

The challenges faced by international students in their transitions into Scottish HE, and the type and nature of support available for successful transitions, are not the domain of any single institution, but common to most HEIs. There is demonstrable good practice in each institution and many of the following recommendations reflect that, in addition to practices identified through desk-based investigation. However, many of the staff responses indicated that there were ongoing issues for transitioning international students and that more could be done to support them. They were keen to explore ways in which they could cooperate or collaborate with other staff across the sector, and this enthusiasm is incorporated in the recommendations.

At Policy Level

- **Establish a Scottish International Transitions forum or network** to discuss areas of mutual interest; this could include policy discourse, relevant research, international scoping, findings of successful policy and practice and internationalising the curriculum.
- **Sharing good practice in transitions support for international students** with a view to producing an International Students' Transitions Framework or guidelines for those transitions, including transitions pedagogy, recognising the personal nature of transitions and the importance of autonomy and choice, while reflecting the point of entry and the level of study of particular sub-groups of students.
- **Use cross-sectoral data to inform an International Transitions Framework** to conduct evaluation and to feed into policy and practice.
- **Share good practice in integrative approaches to course design and delivery**, for example, discipline degree programmes, with embedded language support and academic literacies/skills development.
- **Share ideas** for social and personal support to facilitate social networks (for students), including use of IT.
- **Produce and share market intelligence:** key country briefings of main overseas markets, including information on educational systems and comparability of academic grading in those countries.
- **Cross-sector professional development:** cultural awareness briefings for all staff and pedagogic guides/workshops for academic staff teaching international students.
- **Engender a sector-wide discussion on curriculum content/programme structures in HE** (and associated learning, teaching and assessment strategies), to ensure accessibility for *all* transitioning students, but particularly those entering first year, with an emphasis on learner-centred approaches rather than content-centred ones. This could be linked to a Transitions Framework through personal gateways and pedagogic threshold concepts.

At Practice Level

- **Institutional policies on, and commitment to, welcoming international students** using a coordinated approach by academic and professional services staff, supported by senior management and visibly reinforced in the physical learning environment (for example, the Library at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS)¹⁸ uses its public space to celebrate different cultures and hosts particular resources for Chinese students).
- **Increased use of pre-arrival engagement activity**, both social and academic, to reduce the misalignment in expectations of living and studying in Scotland. Institutions could set up private social media groups for incoming students from the same region/country. These could be facilitated by an (e-) buddy or mentor student/alumni (for example, the UTS has a dedicated Facebook page with engagement activities for incoming international students).¹⁹

¹⁸ www.lib.uts.edu.au/help/support-students/international-students

¹⁹ www.facebook.com/UTSInternationalstudents/

- **Roll-out peer support: such schemes are important in facilitating informal learning and social integration for international students**, therefore institutions should consider scaling them up, which would benefit all students. One such example from the University of Guelph, Canada, illustrates their **PEER HELPER Programme**,²⁰ which has been running for 32 years.
- **Produce video suites**, covering: living and studying in Scotland, the live learning and teaching environment and accommodation tours.
- **Personal development activities**, including those on self-management of expectations, self-efficacy, and self-reflection. Completion of online learner profiles, for example, self-assessment of competences/skills, academic and personal goals and expectations of university study.
- **Manage academic expectations**. This process should start pre-entry and be reinforced by extended induction, clarifying the relationship between students and teaching staff and ensuring the ongoing reinforcement of academic objective setting and review of goals, with academic advisers.
- **Induction should be designed and delivered as a process**, tailored to the individual type of student, level of study, and point of (re)entry within a Transitions Framework. It should also be extended or longitudinal, available at different points in the academic year, and phased according to the needs and requirements of individual students.
- **Student services should actively manage aspects of the campus to encourage socio-cultural-academic integration**; for example, many North American universities match their students who live in university accommodation. Queen's University Canada use student assistants to communicate proactively with students about learning styles and strategies, within the residences.
- **Some student support services should consider rebranding** to provide more focus on proactive student development and growth, rather than what is sometimes perceived as a deficit model of support.
- **Provide additional and different types of English language support. This could also be considered at sectoral level, in terms of resource development** and could include: pre-arrival guides/videos/online resources; physical spaces for informal conversational learning and peer support in language development.
- **Institutions should give more consideration to whole person learning**, facilitated through blended learning and the involvement of specialist teaching teams including academics and learning specialists. This would allow time for such teams to work with (co/multicultural groups) in the classroom and online.
- **Institutions should collect and collate more data**, both quantitative and qualitative, on international students' engagement with support services, particularly in their first year, for the purposes of evaluation.

²⁰ <https://studentlife.uoguelph.ca/cegc/peer-helper-program/about-program>. The PHP coordinates the selection and general training of students to work side by side with professionals to offer a diverse range of support programs and services for students, particularly on transitions

Students' Associations

- **Facilitate a Student Network** for students across cities for students to meet other International Students studying in the same city but not necessarily the same University.
- **Use the How International is your Students' Association audit tool** to review and enhance provision.

International students choose to study in Scotland, mainly due to the quality of the education system and the programmes on offer. It is therefore incumbent upon HEIs to maintain that interest and quality of provision. However, it should be recognised that this may also require a cultural shift on the part of the individual institution, if those students are to maximise their potential. There should be a move away from the expectation that they need to fully adapt or adjust to fit into the prevailing academic culture and a demonstrable willingness to be better informed about their educational backgrounds, academic expectations, socio-cultural concerns and individual needs. One element of providing a 'welcoming environment' and helping international students' transition or make adjustments to a new culture, is to be aware of our own cultural biases, norms and values and how we may, or may not, project those personally and professionally. Staff and students collaborating as a sector to enrich international students' transitions experiences should be greater than the sum of the parts and result in a more welcoming and responsive Scottish HE environment for those student sojourners.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Scoping Study Method

Design, Administration and Approach

Preliminary desk-based investigation was undertaken to identify the main theoretical constructs and concepts underpinning the subject area, selecting appropriate studies, extracting data and framing consultation questions. Further desk-based investigation on individual HEIs was used to identify practice not identified in responses. The findings were then synthesised for thematic analysis and reporting key findings and recommendations for practice and policy. The preliminary desk-based investigation was used to frame a small number of open questions for both consultation with staff and students, (through the Students' Associations, SA), in all 19 HEIs in Scotland. A third set of questions was also developed for two student organisations; NUS Scotland and sparqs.

Consultation questions were framed around: the challenges faced by international students; effective mechanisms/examples of support; engagement with HEI support systems; and resonance of internationalisation strategies for international student transition experiences. A reflective question was added for staff to consider how welcoming and responsive they thought their institution was to transitioning international students. A free text field was also included.

The Student Transitions' institutional Theme Leaders were asked to identify key individuals in their institutions who might be able (and willing) to participate. The author identified appropriate individuals in the SA, from their websites, who might be willing to contribute. Those were, in the main, members of the executive teams, who had particular responsibilities for international students or education.

The questions were distributed and administered via email with a link to one of the appropriate three online forms (depending on the recipient), which allowed for summation of the responses and exporting them to a spreadsheet for content analysis. All the form links were incorporated into an explanatory message, explaining the purpose of the study, intended outcome and contact details.

Responses

66 staff members (on average 3-4 staff in each institution) were sent emails with links to the online form inviting them to answer the questions. They were asked to complete it within 10 days, (subsequently extended to 20 days). 27 responses were received from 12 HEIs, representing a 41% individual response rate from 63% of the institutions. (Participants were asked to answer as many questions as they could from six, (based on their area of responsibility). The questions were framed in such a way that all participants should have been able to answer at least three questions. (The majority answered most of the questions).

48 students in the SA, (on average two or three in the executive teams, including every President), and two individuals from the student/student facing organisations, were sent emails with links to the form inviting them to answer the questions. They were asked to complete it within 11 days (subsequently extended to 21 days). Five responses were received from students in four SA and one response from the student organisations, representing a 10% individual response rate from 21% of the SA. (Follow up telephone calls were made and reminder emails were also sent). All consultations took place in May 2016.

The timing of the consultation is likely to have impacted on the student response rate,

given that it was undertaken during the examination period for most HEIs. However, the staff responses, while not intended to represent the individual institutions, nor provide the in-depth views of a full-scale research investigation, have provided considered and, in many cases, valuable insights into practice.

Appendix 2

Examples of Internationalisation Strategies in Scottish HE

Heriot Watt University's global ethos is embedded in the institutional culture and operational processes, with a considered approach to creating an international experience for all students and staff. The Heriot-Watt Global Student Programme covers all aspects of mobility, including the ERASMUS exchange programme.

The University of the West of Scotland's emphasis is on internationalising the curriculum as part of the University's Global Reach Enabling Plan, and the University intends to increase opportunities for students to engage with modules to support the development of global citizenship, to provide curriculum design that is inclusive and accessible to a wide range of students, and to increase opportunities for student mobility.

Glasgow Caledonian University has a Global Perspectives Project, which is a strategic change initiative for internationalisation of the curriculum. This project supports academic staff in embedding international and intercultural aspects in all programmes.

The University of Aberdeen opened their new International Centre in 2015 to further raise the profile of the University's international activity and as such encourage greater involvement in international activity by all students. They have also opened up their international exchange programme allowing students to study for not just one academic year but also for a single semester.

The University of Glasgow's Strategy to Create International Experiences for Students (SCIES) includes a new marketing strategy for promotion of globalisation/mobility at UG level, along with new procedures for grade conversion and grade mapping and new support and recognition for mobility coordinators. It is also developing a bespoke survey tool to gain feedback from international students.

Appendix 3

Web welcome and information

All HEIs in Scotland have **information for prospective international students** on their web sites; some include reference to 'international' or 'international students' on their home pages, while others have it a few clicks or pages further on. Such pages generally cover all the anticipated or expected practical information on how to apply, visas and immigration, finance and funding, accommodation, and student services, etc. Some hold the headline information on one page, such as **Robert Gordon University (RGU)** and the **University of the West of Scotland**. Others have the information incorporated under student services in general and/or specific service pages.

Some institutional websites have **detailed information on country/regional visits**, with contact details of who to contact if potential students wish to attend on specific dates. Some, including the **University of Aberdeen** offer the possibility of Skype chats and have additional information on academic staff (in the receiving Scottish HEIs), from those countries/regions. Similarly **Robert Gordon University** offers the possibility of **web chats or off line chats** to prospective international students. Similarly, all the web sites **contain information about Exchanges and ERASMUS** - information for incoming and outgoing students, funding opportunities, regulations, and summer schools.

All institutions have **handbooks, guides and leaflets** for prospective international students, ranging in length from two to 50 pages. The **University of St Andrews (UoStA)** has a specific Orientation Guide and a guidance document which explores the differences between UK and North American learning environments (written by students) for their joint degree programme students. Some institutions, such as the **University of Abertay**, provide information depending on whether the student is from inside or outside the EU. Other institutions delineate the information by market, for example, Chinese Handbooks (**the University of Aberdeen**) and a guide for applicants from Africa. **University of St Andrew** offers definitive guides to potential American, Canadian, Indian and South African students. Some also include **guides for international students' parents**, for example, **the Glasgow School of Art (GSA)**.

Some HEIs organise their first point of contact for international students through a team/office, including the Recruitment and International Liaison Office (RILO) at Queen Margaret University (QMU), the UHI World Team at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UoHI) and the University of Stirling, (UoStr). These are often in relation to recruitment, admissions and exchanges. Those and others often also organise their student services into a hub or centre to deal with all student service enquires (including those from international students), for example, the University of Glasgow (UoG), the University of Edinburgh (UoE) and Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU).

Some make use of **short videos or podcasts** made by students (often international) and staff to introduce student services, **specific student projects/schemes** for example, the Buddy System at the **University of the West of Scotland**, or living and working in Scotland from **Glasgow School of Art**. Most make mention of **welcoming international students**, especially through international student welcome (events), orientation programmes and links to clubs and societies. These are often through the Students' Associations' social and cultural event calendars for example, at the **University of Abertay**. There is also support for the families of international students for example, the **University of Dundee's (UoD)** weekly international family's club and International Families and Partners network at the **University of Edinburgh**.

Appendix 4

Examples of Practice in Supporting International Students' Transitions

Socio-Cultural Integration	<p>Pre-Arrival</p> <p>Robert Gordon University has an online video resource ('RGU Ready') which was produced with the involvement of international students in order to address some of the transition challenges reported by their peers. The focus was on students transitioning from their pathway college, giving academic advice and reflecting on how to make a successful transition to Robert Gordon University. The students also speak to camera, reflecting on their experiences of making the transition and giving advice to those about to come to Robert Gordon University. This resource is placed on the University's Moodle page and is also now used as a preparatory teaching tool by the pathway provider before the students leave.</p>
	<p>Induction</p> <p>Glasgow Caledonian University's Students' Association International Students Welcome during Freshers' Week.</p>
	<p>Students' Associations</p> <p>The University of the West of Scotland Students' Association hold social events such as ceilidhs to be as inclusive as possible to international students and to highlight Scottish culture.</p> <p>Student's Associations also offer a range of support services, often run and staffed by students through advice hubs. Others can provide internship or volunteering opportunities.</p> <p>The University of St Andrews' Students' Association hosts an International Students' Reception along with events organised by student societies including the African and Caribbean Society and the Townsend Society (which supports commuter students).</p>
	<p>Some institutions have dedicated schemes for international students, sometimes managed through Foundation Programmes for example, University of Glasgow, (the mentors are Glasgow International College alumni in their 3rd or 4th year of study); subject area input from departmental lecturers; and Graduate Teaching Assistants (with the aim of giving students a taste of what study at the university will entail).</p> <p>Buddy schemes are also offered to visiting students at the University of St Andrews, in addition to other international students.</p>
English Language	<p>The University of Strathclyde's Naval Architecture, Ocean and Marine Engineering Department visit partner institutions to gain a better understanding of the personal and academic transitions of their articulating students.²¹ These visits are undertaken by students as well as staff, to also aid intercultural communications.</p>

²¹ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/case-studies/naome-student-transitions.pdf

Academic Integration	<p>Pre-Arrival</p> <p>The University of Edinburgh has a tailored and specific academic culture briefing session for visiting students at the start of each semester, which is an interactive session which all students are encouraged to attend. In addition it offers academic transition workshops - introduction to academic structure and standards in the UK and what is expected of the students.</p> <p>The University of St Andrews offers a range of academic preparation for international students which include 'Top Tips to Maximise Your Study Abroad Experience'.²²</p> <p>Heriot Watt University piloted four Skills4StudyCampus²³ modules during academic year 2015/16 (get ready for university; critical thinking skills; reading and note-making and academic writing).</p> <p>The following example from the University of Abertay: Supporting students in transition through the Abertay Associate Student Scheme²⁴ illustrates how it supports students from College and International Partner Institutions to University degree study.</p>
	<p>Support</p> <p>The University of Stirling's Learning Centre aims to help international students with language and study skills. Classes are specifically designed to introduce students to critical thinking, avoiding plagiarism etc. Academic subjects aim to provide a small, supportive environment for students to build their academic confidence and provide the scaffolding to help students to successfully transition. Weekly one-to-one tutor support also helps students to identify their own strengths and weakness and build on success.</p> <p>The University of Aberdeen offers additional support through subject/professional services integration, with subject specialists beginning to work with colleagues with expertise in team work, professional communication, intercultural communication and the like as a means of preparing students for substantive work.</p> <p>An example of practice at Edinburgh Napier University supports the international transitions of direct entry students from China through embedding key academic and information skills²⁵ in a financial management module.</p> <p>The Developing Your Academic Writing programme offered by the University of Glasgow is a series of non-credit-bearing short courses which is open to all PGT within the College of Social Sciences, including international and UK students. It covers academic literacies development in areas of specific relevance to students' disciplines. Students can attend weekly classes focusing on writing within their subject areas and have regular opportunities to submit and receive feedback on their written work. The focus is on key areas of transition into postgraduate study and writing in the discipline, as well as to academic study in the UK.</p> <p>The academic advising process at Glasgow Caledonian University supports students in developing personal, academic and professional skills at the University. The University uses the PPACT (Personal, Professional, Academically informed, Consolidated, Transitional) standard of academic advising. The model, introduced across the University in 2013, covers academic and social matters, and seeks to develop a strong sense of belonging in all students.</p>

²² www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/incomingstudents/academicinformation/maximiseyouracademicexperience/

²³ www.hw.ac.uk/is/skills-development/self-study-online-learning.htm

²⁴ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/case-studies/supporting-students-in-transition-through-the-abertay-associate-student-scheme.pdf?sfvrsn=2

²⁵ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/case-studies/embedding-transferable-academic-skills-in-a-financial-management-module.pdf?sfvrsn=2

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