

Staying on course: factors affecting first year international students' decisions to persist or withdraw from degrees in a post-1992 UK university

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Abstract

International student retention is an increasing issue across the UK and English speaking higher education sectors. This article focuses on research at one English post-1992 university, where withdrawal rates of first year international students has become a concern. This study comprising a mixed methods approach explored first year international student experiences and identified factors that influence student persistence or proposed withdrawal from degree courses. The research incorporated two stages of in-depth interviews with first year international students studying business subjects, followed by a university wide survey. In this article the term international students refers to undergraduates within and outside the EU. The aim was to better understand the complexities of first year international students' experiences, and make recommendations to enhance their support and engagement. The findings suggest that stress induced by difficulties of studying in English, combined with: adjustment to UK higher education expectations; experiences of learning, teaching, assessment; working relationships; and emotional and academic support can influence international students' decisions to withdraw. Moreover, key periods in the academic year are a significant factor.

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Introduction

Across the UK, and international English speaking HE (Higher Education) sector, first year international student retention has become an increasing concern (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Our research is contextualised within a post-1992 university where evidence suggests recent relatively high non-continuation rates of first year international students.

During the current recession, the UK government has exhorted universities to prioritise the quality of education and support for international students (UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2009). The proposed study is also relevant in light of the UK Border Control Agency's requirement that international students report regularly on progress, and recently introduced stricter regulations (UK Border Control Agency, 2012). In the UK, these measures further increase pressure on international students and universities. In order to enhance international student retention, the English speaking HE sector must raise and standardise the quality of learning, teaching and support provided for international students, who are increasingly vital to their economies. The need for English speaking universities to remain internationally competitive in this context is now particularly urgent since a growing number of international students are choosing to study in developing countries (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010).

The findings of this research will help inform policy and good practice regarding learning, teaching, assessment and support for international students; thus increasing international student engagement and retention across the HE sector. In addition, the research will contribute to knowledge in the field of international student retention research and will help to fulfil the HE sector's commitment to internationalisation, which has now become a priority in the UK (BIS, 2009; BIS, 2011) and other English speaking countries.

Previous research

Higher Education Academy (HEA) research (Yorke and Longden, 2008) suggests that undergraduates leave university during their first year because they are unprepared for higher education (HE), and have chosen the wrong degree course. In addition, Yorke and Longden (2008) identified other factors which may influence students' decisions to persist or withdraw, relating to quality and processes of:

- Learning, teaching and assessment
- Working relationships and communication between students and academic staff
- Peer support and friendship

Learning, teaching and assessment

In relation to learning, teaching and assessment, the HEA research found that first year students' decisions to leave their courses may be influenced by their transition into higher education where new experiences and styles of teaching may be different to students' previous experiences. Students' difficulties in adjusting to HE teaching in this context can demotivate students (Yorke & Longden, 2008, p47).

For international students adjusting to UK HE, particularly for those outside the EU, transition in this respect may be especially difficult (Lee, 2010). Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel (2005), suggest that some international students experience extreme stress in this context, previously described as '*learning shock*' or '*academic culture shock*', which can also contribute to a decision to drop out (p. 275). This academic culture shock can occur when international students' previous culturally inflected experiences of education in their home country contrast strongly with new experiences of UK or English speaking higher education (Andrade, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Wisker, 2004). Such differences in educational cultural traditions are sometimes described as '*Socratic*' or '*Individualist*' (mainly practised in EU, UK and English speaking countries) as opposed to '*Confucian*' or '*Collectivist*' (mainly practised in countries outside the EU) (Kingston & Forland, 2008, p204). Elements of these different traditions are summarised as follows in table 1.

Table 1. Socratic/Confucian Educational Cultural Traditions
(Kingston & Forland, 2008, p. 207)

	Socratic/Individualist	Confucian/Collectivist
'Culture (Hofstede)	<i>Low power distance</i>	<i>High power distance</i>
Attitude to knowledge	<i>Extending/Speculative</i>	<i>Conserving</i>
Academic approach	<i>Transforming</i>	<i>Reproducing</i>
Learning styles for success	<i>Divergent</i>	<i>Convergent</i>
	<i>Deep</i>	<i>Rote/Superficial'</i>

Previous research suggests that international students, whose prior educational experience relates to the Confucian or collectivist approach to teaching and learning, may find it particularly difficult to adapt to the new Socratic or individualist academic tradition practised in most English speaking universities (Lee, 2010; Li et al., 2009). Hellstén (2008) also reported international students' difficulties with academic language, critical thinking, and participating and communicating effectively in group activities.

The importance of friends and peers

Friends and peers can support first year (including international) students, who feel isolated while adjusting to a new life at university (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gould, 2005); and '*difficulties of making friends*' may influence first year student withdrawal (Wilcox et al., 2005, p 714). Hence, emotional support can be another significant factor in students' successful first year transition, affecting their decision to persist or withdraw (Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Zepke & Leach, 2005). International students' problems in adjusting to UK or English speaking HE, and new experiences of learning, teaching and assessment, may be exacerbated by such difficulties in making friends, and resulting isolation (Wilcox et al. 2005). Schutz and Richards (2003) reported that international graduate students in Canada found it difficult to make friends due to weak spoken English skills, and their national seclusions increased their loneliness. Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2009) found that this generated '*feelings of 'powerlessness' and 'lack of a sense of belonging' and half of the respondents indicated that they were unhappy with their social life and almost a third reported that they often felt lonely while studying in the UK.*' (p14). As an intervention to reduce stress induced by such factors, Law and Guo (2010) introduced a year-long orientation programme for Chinese students in the US including eight stages of adjusting to cultural, emotional and social changes of studying

abroad. Other difficulties international students may face in English speaking universities are '*perceived discrimination, quality of campus services and financial difficulties*' (Lee, 2010, p.77). Hence, Montgomery (2009) stressed the importance of developing an international community of practice with social and academic interactions between international and UK students.

Working relationships and communication with academic staff

The HEA report suggests that '*staff support*' has become an increasingly important factor in first year student retention (Yorke & Longden, 2008, p40). Additional previous research suggests that continuing communication between teaching staff and first year students, both face to face and through other means, provides crucial motivation and encourages first year student confidence (Yorke,2004; Wilcox et al., 2005; Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Zepke & Leach, 2005). For first year international students, earlier work suggests that good working relationships with teaching staff are particularly important in supporting their successful transition to UK HE incorporating: regular positive communication, constructive feedback, encouragement, and face to face tutorials (Gu et al. 2009; Ramachandran, 2011).

The need for new research

Previous research, summarised above, identified factors that may influence first year and international student retention. However there was a need for new research to focus on the particular issue of first year international student retention within a post-1992 UK university. This research would, firstly, explore in greater depth first year international students' experiences of learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships, support (from staff and peers); and associated stress levels. Secondly, the study aimed to identify the influences of such factors on international student persistence and withdrawal in this context.

Building on the earlier work described above, our research proposed that first year international students' intentions to withdraw from, or persist in, their courses relate to:

1. Experiences of learning, teaching, assessment and working relationships with teaching staff (in a UK university)
2. Adjustment to:
 - a. living in the UK and the university environment
 - b. the UK university academic expectations
3. Academic and emotional support from:
 - a. friends and peers
 - b. lecturers and support staff
4. Stress levels relating to propositions 1-3b

(Wilcox et al., 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Yorke and Longden, 2008)

Aims and Objectives

The research aimed to identify:

1. factors that influence international students' decisions to persist, or withdraw from their courses during their first year at university
2. strategies that can inform university policy, to enhance learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships and support practice for international students during their first year, in order to increase their engagement, success and well-being

Participants and Methodology

Our mixed methods approach incorporated: qualitative methods in order to gain rich insights into the complex factors that are associated with international students' culturally inflected experiences of HE (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003; Lewis, 2003); and quantitative methods to explore associations between variables on a broader scale across the University.

First, paired and individual interviews were conducted with 11 first year (EU/non EU) international students studying business disciplines at two 'key' stages, December 2010

and February 2011. Business was an appropriate broad subject group for our interview participants since there are a large number of international students studying business disciplines at the university. The research sample comprised 7 male students and 4 female students ranging from 18 - 25 years in age. Participants' regions of origin included the Far East, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Northern Europe, and did not include students with English as a first language. A two stage approach was relevant in order to identify how participants' experiences changed before and after the assessment period in Semester 1. This was informed by previous research such as the orientation and cultural adjustment cycles after students have settled physically (Law & Guo, 2010; Lee, 2010).

Appreciative Inquiry interviewing techniques (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2006; Bushe, 2007) helped gain insights into the complex factors associated with students' experiences during their first year at a post-1992 university. This approach encouraged reflection on beneficial experiences, allowing participants to also discuss difficulties they encountered, and ways in which problems could be addressed, leading to suggestions of ways in which the university could develop strategies to enhance and inform policies and practice in learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships and support for international students. Cross-sectional content analysis methods were adopted to analyse the data, applying pre and open coding (Spencer, Ritchie & O'Connor, 2003). Building on the themes emerging from the qualitative findings, a survey was designed.

All first year international students at the university were invited to complete this online survey in May 2011. This allowed to survey a larger cohort by gaining a comprehensive picture of international students in the institution and aimed to highlight variations between groups such as EU/non EU. The response rate was 17.2% (N=134). Survey data was statistically analysed including Chi Square tests to discern group variations.

Validity

The quantitative findings are statistically representative of first year international students at the university, and of EU and non-EU first year international students.

Ethics

The research proposal was scrutinised and approved by the university ethical review process and the research abides by the **UK Data Protection Act (HMSO, 1998)**.

Key Findings

Supporting our propositions based on the earlier research described above (Wilcox et al., 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Lee, 2010), the findings suggest that the following factors contributed to first year international students' stress levels, and thoughts of leaving their course:

- negative experiences of learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships with staff and feedback
- difficulties in adjusting to change in this context
- insufficient emotional and academic support

Standards of: teaching, working relationships, feedback and support for international students appeared inconsistent. In addition, difficulties in studying in specialised degree level English contributed to participants' low self-esteem, and thoughts of giving up.

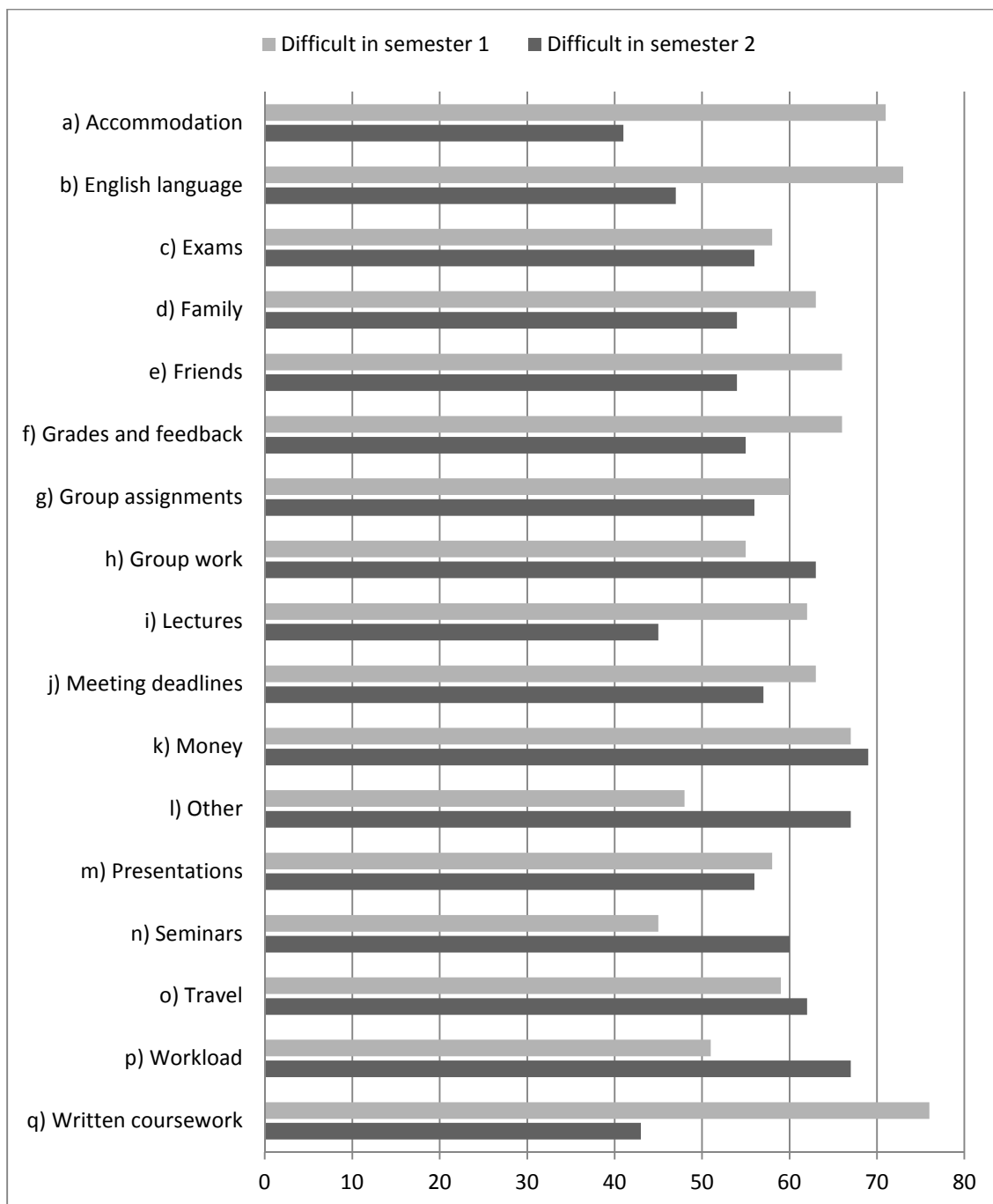
You feel trapped, you try to reach somewhere, and actually it's quite difficult. I was considered very able in my country and I don't like it that here I am not as good. It is really affecting me that sometimes I am losing motivation because it doesn't matter how good I do, I will never be the best here because it is not my language. When they look at the language they will say 'it's not as clear as they should be' and I say to myself 'just forget it.

(Interview Stage 1, Paired Interview 2)

Although interview participants did not discuss money problems, financial issues were found by the survey to be a significant issue for international students, adding to their stress. The survey shows that non-EU international students experienced higher stress levels than EU students. 37% of non-EU respondents stated a high stress level, while only 15% of EU students stated high stress levels. This result was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.017$, $df=2$, $p=0.03$). Our research found timing is significant regarding varied

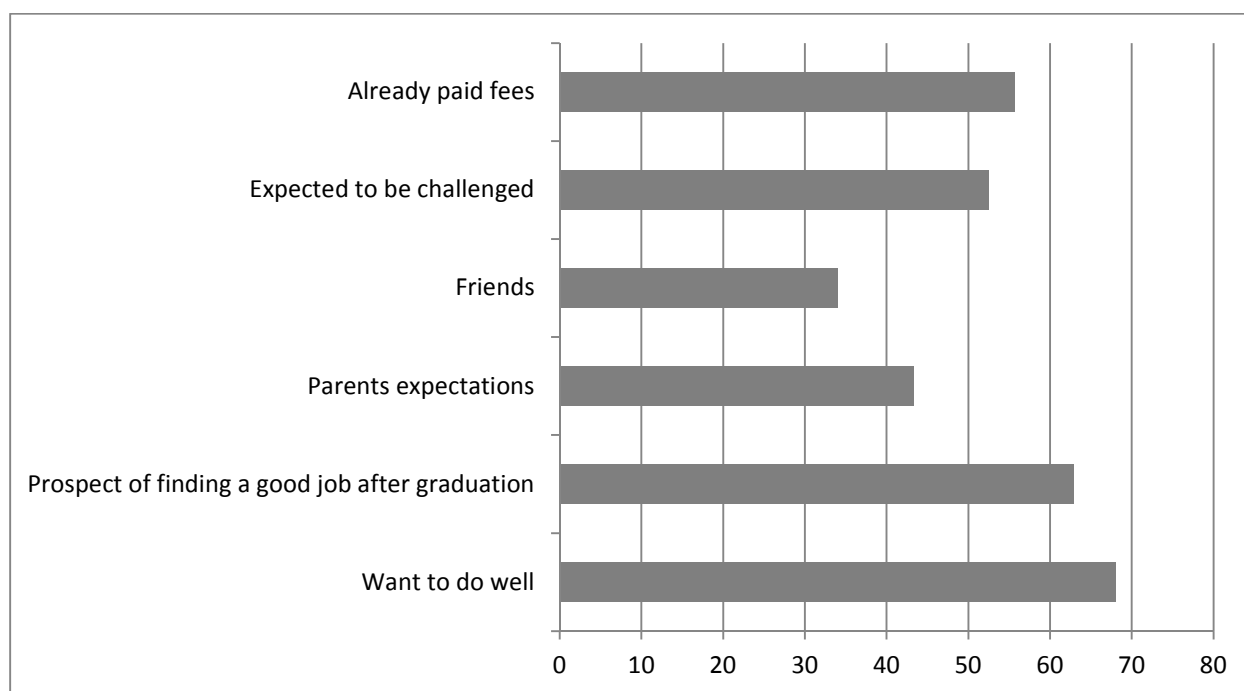
stress inducing factors. The survey shows that in Semester One, the four most frequently mentioned difficult factors related to: written coursework (q), English language (b), accommodation (a) and money. In Semester Two the four most frequently described problems were money (k), workload (p), group work (h) and travel (o) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of aspects students find difficult in semester 1 and semester 2 (multiple answers, n=98)



The survey indicates that more than 20% of respondents considered leaving during the first semester in Year One. By May, in the final semester, this percentage had dropped to below 10%, suggesting that most first year international students who consider leaving do so before May. The main reasons given for students' persistence on their course are the desire to do well and the prospect of professional success (Figure 2). These research themes will now be discussed in greater depth below.

Figure 2. What made students stay on the course? Multiple answers (n=97)



Experiences of Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Working Relationships

Lectures and seminars

During Stage 1, which refers to the first stage of interviews in December, participants commonly mentioned that good teaching included frequent examples, detailed explanations, and time for questions, which increased students' understanding and motivation.

The lecturer explained and then the seminar tutor explained it again and then I sent an email and he answered as well – a very long proper email explaining how I can improve and everything. Then

I met with my seminar tutor when I finished. I just brought him my work to look through, to give me feedback, and he gave me feedback so it was very helpful.

(Interview stage 1, Paired Interview 1)

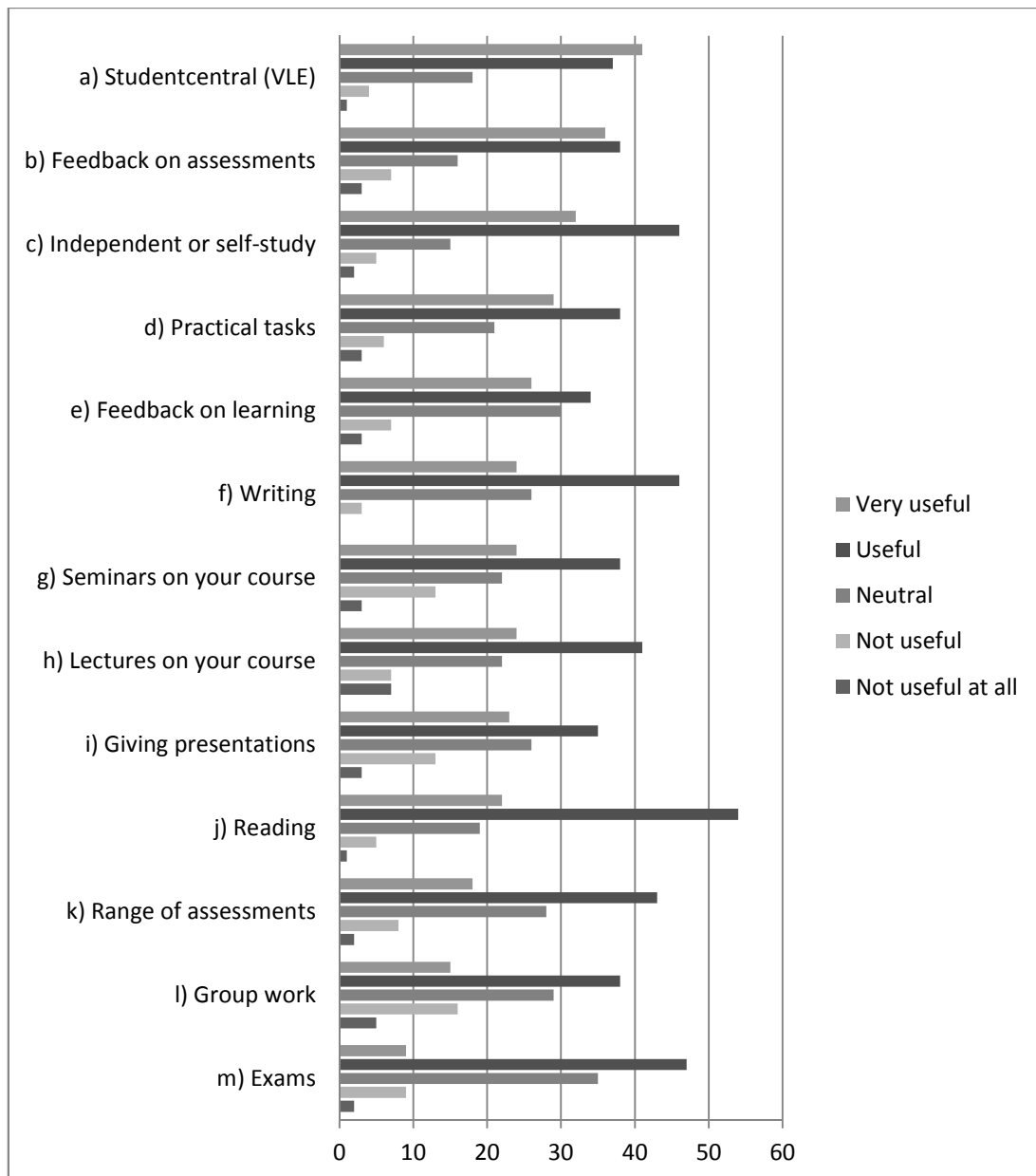
This quote highlights that positive working relationships with teaching staff including continuous communication and feedback is important for international students. Gu et al. (2009) similarly reports that 75% of students who need an English language qualification as an entry requirement rated teaching staff feedback on student work as important, compared to 56% of students who do not require an English language certificate.

Descriptions of inadequate teaching included sessions that were rushed, with insufficient explanations, examples, or time for questions, leading to students' misunderstanding and confusion.

She said ask all the questions to your seminar tutor. We came to the seminar tutor and she said I don't have time sorry. I am in a hurry, if you have any questions you can send me an email, but then she said I'm not going to answer all of your questions, only general questions as well. So I was very confused because I have never studied xxx before and for me it was very difficult to do that assignment.

(Interview Stage 1, Paired Interview 1)

By Stage 2, which refers to the second stage of interviews conducted in February, when teaching was good participants appeared more engaged and confident. Further examples of good teaching included: extra revision, provision of interesting examples, and interactive or challenging activities. When participants were unhappy with teaching, reasons were the same as in Stage 1. This resulted in non-attendance, which detrimentally affected progress. However, the survey, which refers to the university wide survey of first year international students in May, confirmed that most respondents had positive experiences of teaching. 64.3% of respondents rated lectures (h), and 62.8% rated seminars (g), as useful or very useful for their progress; whereas less than 20% confirmed that lectures (h) and seminars (g) were not useful (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Usefulness in helping make progression the course (n=123)

Assessment and feedback

Participants' experiences of assessment and feedback also varied. In Stage 1, most interviewees expressed concerns over exams, which were perceived as stressful, since reading and understanding exam questions were time consuming, leaving insufficient time to write answers. Participants often preferred assignments because time was less restricted.

..... I don't really like exams because it is just a short time usually. You are stressed and sometimes you can know everything but you can write nothing on the paper because it is such a

short time and you are just worrying and you can't put everything together so when you have an assignment you have loads of time to prepare, to research and to discuss.

(Interview Stage 1, Participant 5)

These findings raise questions regarding flexibility and types of assessment, particularly for international students. Understanding UK academic requirements, and assessment criteria, was also perceived as challenging. Insufficient constructive feedback left some participants feeling unsure of how to improve, which de-motivated even more able students. This again confirms the need to enhance working relationships and communication between international students and some lecturers.

If you don't put a line somewhere, they deduct points, or stuff that isn't that important, like with referencing. I'm not saying referencing is not important, but they can't deduct points for not putting a comma – that's actually ridiculous.

(Interview Stage 1, Paired Interview 2)

However, in general, the survey found feedback on assessments (74%, b) and practical tasks (70.5%, d) as very useful or useful for international students' progress (See Figure 3). Exams (m) were perceived as less useful (55.9%), corroborating the qualitative findings.

The research findings confirm our proposition that international students' challenges in adjusting to UK academic expectations contribute to stress and thoughts of withdrawal. By Stage 2, however, most business students had overcome their doubts, and were feeling more confident, as they had received positive results in assessments, and constructive feedback. Such students were more certain of success in end of year assessments. Conversely, a minority of participants were demoralised by disappointing results, and feeling unconfident. Such students needed good grades for acceptance on work placements, vital for their future employment. They realised that their academic difficulties mainly related to insufficient levels in English. The difficulties that international students experience in English will be discussed at length later in this article.

When I realised that I am quite interested in placement in the second year, I tried to do as best as I could to obtain the highest marks for my Year 1 to proceed to the placement, but I think for

international students the language problem is quite obvious, and it's really difficult to get a good mark. The chance of getting a work placement is low so I feel really depressed.

(Stage 2, Interview 6)

Group work: formal assignments and informal study groups

In Stage 1, some participants enjoyed working collaboratively, and some found group work difficult. There were some complaints that one or more group members did not contribute sufficiently, which affected participants' progress, and caused them anxiety. In Stage 2, several participants described similar group assignment challenges. Sometimes there was a perceived difference between students from different cultural backgrounds and attitudes towards working in a group. Griffiths et al. (2005) also suggests that such cultural differences can contribute to international students' thoughts of leaving their course, and to stress.

My team members were not putting an effort in. I think it's the culture really because they just like to have fun and always do things at the last minute because it's in their language they can do it. It's terrible, especially if you're in a group and you bust your ass and someone else doesn't do anything. It's just a waste of time and it's your mark that goes down as well.

(Interview Stage 2, Participant 8)

Our findings are also supported by Gu et al. (2009), who suggest that language differences and dissimilar cultural values makes it difficult for international students to mix and work with UK students. Our survey results show that, in addition to finances (k, Figure 1), 'group assignments' (h, Figure 1 and l, Figure 3) are one of the most challenging aspects of university life since the beginning of the course, confirming that international students need greater support.

Independent study

In Stage 1, although independent study was perceived as beneficial, some participants found time management difficult. Extra time was spent reading texts repeatedly, or looking up specialist terminology. Participants felt demoralised when their extra efforts were not recognised, and when they received lower marks than UK students. Extra pressure and lack of support in this context, sometimes contributed to thoughts of giving up.

P1: *You think you are trying more than everyone else and getting less results.*

P2: *Then one day you think I just give up - I'm not coming anymore. What is the point especially when I was successful in my country and here I am not.*

(Interview Stage 1, Paired Interview 2)

By Stage 2, participants often mentioned difficulties in juggling their work-life balance. The need for good organisation was often mentioned, because of additional time needed to read and understand important theories. The survey shows that 78% of respondents rated independent learning as useful or very useful in positively influencing their progress. However, 35% of respondents indicated, as the qualitative findings suggest, that they needed extra time to read required material. 72% indicated that they spent on average 1.8 extra hours per week looking up terminology in order to understand reading material.

I spend a lot of my revision time looking for new words in the dictionary and it's time consuming. I find it difficult with some Law issues, there are some basic theories but I can't understand them because of language problems and I find that I spend a lot of time memorising the words – and what they mean. If it's a Chinese name, I can memorise this easily, but if it's English then no.

(Interview Stage 2, Participant 6)

Developing English skills and English classes

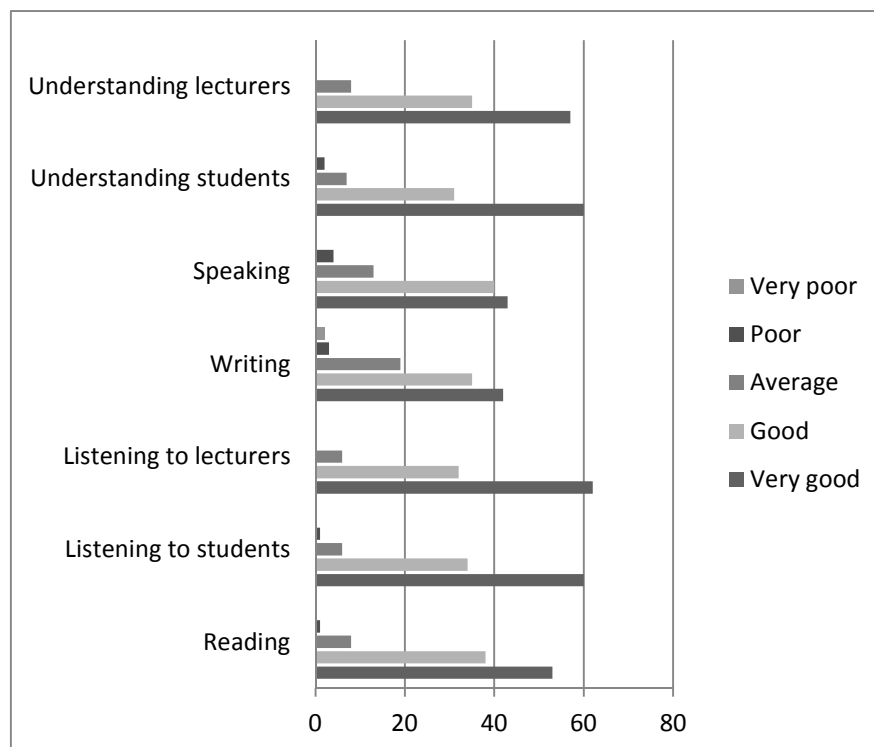
When participants experienced stress and disengagement in the context of the themes described, difficulties in English were a common factor. In Stage 1, some participants were experiencing challenges in written English, in addition to needing extra time to complete work. Difficulties in coursework (q) and English language (b, Figure 1) in Semester 1 are also shown to be significant in the survey. By Stage 2, while many participants had developed their English, particularly in speaking, a minority of participants were still unconfident in their English overall. This resulted in poor attendance, with an adverse effect on progress and self-esteem. The survey results indicate that difficulties in English were a problem for a minority of international students towards the end of the academic year (Figure 4). 5% did not believe their English was good enough to pass the end of year assessment. Supporting our findings, Li et al. (2010) found that written English is a key predictor for explaining academic performance in Chinese and other international students. Evidently, international students who

struggle in English should attend English support. However, in our research most survey respondents (95%) and interview participants confirmed that they were not attending English support sessions because they found the classes too basic or inconvenient.

I think English every Wednesday it doesn't work because students are busy. You need to have time. We don't have time to do that, especially for international students. We spend our time on the coursework and we need to hand it in. We've got three assignments to hand in by this month so we don't have time to spend on that.

(Interview Stage 2, Paired Interview 1)

Figure 4. English skills in terms of meeting the English requirements for the course (n=111)



Additional support

In Phase 1, participants often said that the additional support provided for international students was a strength of the university, and confirmed that academic study skills sessions and international student tutorials were beneficial. At this stage, some participants found pastoral support from international student tutors helpful.

My international student tutor is helpful. Even if I don't go to her, she will chase after me, and ask how is everything? Is everything alright? Do you need help? And this is something I like – I feel that she cares about me. So that's good actually.

(Interview stage 1, Paired Interview 2)

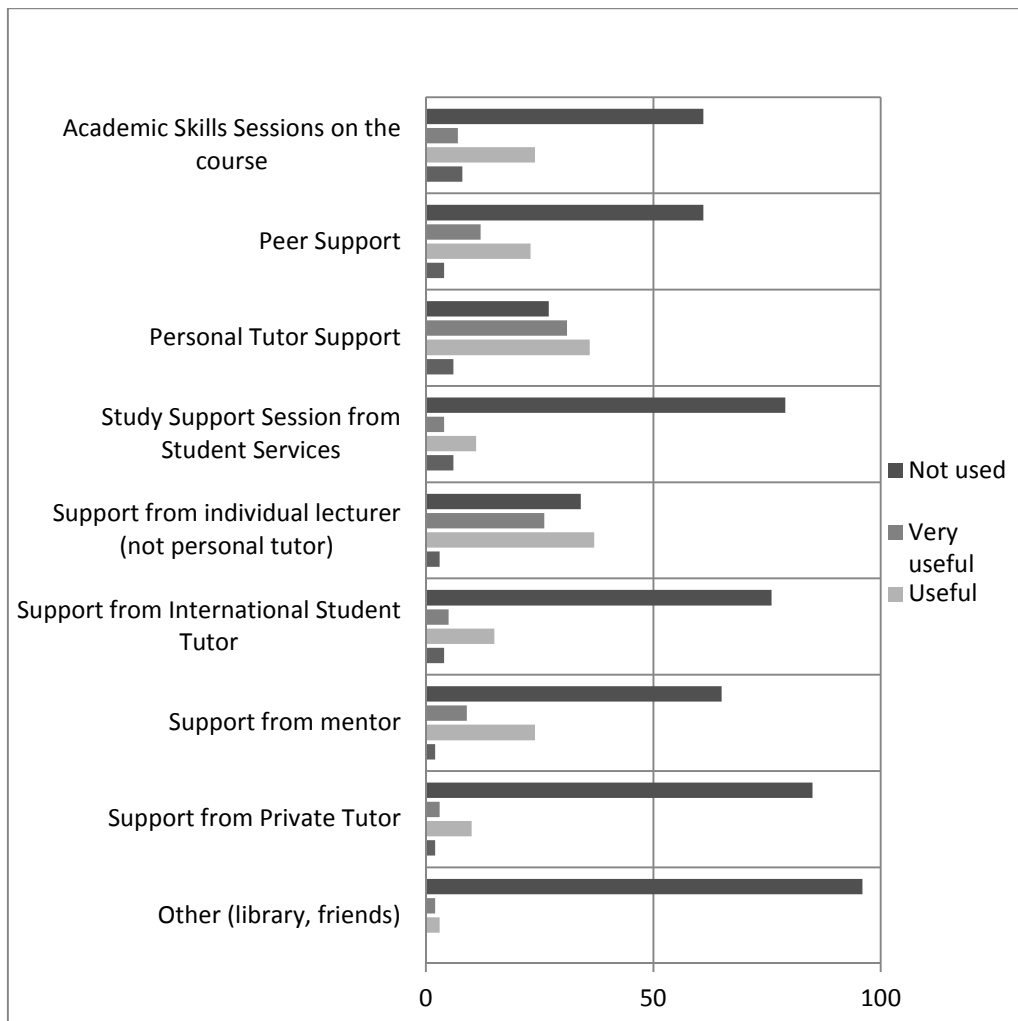
Most participants, however, were not taking advantage of more general university support services available to international students, including student services support. Participants generally found meetings with student mentors helpful, but infrequent.

In Phase 2, most participants still described the support provided in international student tutorials and the academic skills sessions as very helpful. Such sessions provided specific advice and practice relating to finding jobs and working in professional business contexts, helping to build students' confidence.

Now I do the job search portfolio, the CV, and covering letter, we should find a job. We also practise filling in the application form, researching of the company, having interview, so everything helps us for the future, so we already will be prepared for that. I think it's really useful and also our teacher she is really nice, she helped us with presentation skills, interview skills, how we should behave, everything to support us, I think it's a useful class.

(Interview Stage 2, Paired Interview 1)

However, one participant found the academic skills sessions insufficiently challenging. Another participant also described the group international student tutorials as an inappropriate forum for sharing personal and emotional problems, which would be better discussed on a one to one basis, or with a good friend that they felt comfortable with. Although international student tutorial support and academic skills were often found to be useful support for survey respondents, the types of university support that were most frequently rated as useful or very useful in the survey were personal tutor support and support from individual lecturers (see Figure 5). These findings again confirm the importance of extra help provided by, and good working relationships with teaching staff.

Figure 5. Percentage of usefulness of support received (n=96)

In addition, moral support from friends was vital in helping some participants to overcome difficult periods in their course, when they felt like giving up. Explanations of how friends supported them included:

- Offering explanations of learning material
- Providing constructive feedback
- Sharing their own work as an example
- Sharing experiences and ways of tackling problems
- Working collaboratively, and discussing ideas
- Providing moral support and motivation
- Editing or proofreading each other's work
- Learning together

The importance of making friends is reflected by the survey results, indicating that most respondents (65%) receive support from friends. These findings confirm our propositions and earlier research, suggesting that friendship and good working relationships with peers are important factors in student retention (Wilcox et al., 2005).

Implications and Recommendations

What makes international students contemplate leaving their course?

Building on earlier work (Wilcox et al., 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008), our findings indicate that several key factors regarding learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships and support, in conjunction with high stress levels, and low self-esteem, influence international students' thoughts of leaving their course during their first year. With regard to considering withdrawal, non native English speaking international students experience particular difficulties in English including:

- understanding fast paced lectures
- reading complex English including theories and terminology relating to particular disciplines such as business
- understanding exam questions, and writing answers under increased pressure
- writing academic English at the expected level

In relation to English, stress is also increased by the extra time which is needed to follow the course content.

In addition, this research shows that some international students struggle to adjust to UK HE academic expectations. For instance, strict marking, with insufficient explanation or preparation regarding assessment criteria, and little constructive feedback, may completely demoralise international students. International students may also perceive their efforts as unrewarded in the context of group assignments, which are shown by this research to be a highly stress inducing factor.

Stress levels experienced by international students during Year One are found to be highest for international students from outside the EU (from non English speaking countries). Similarly, recent US research confirmed that students from regions including Africa, Asia and Latin America found cultural and linguistic adjustment during their first year in US HE particularly difficult (Lee, 2010).

The research identifies particular times during the academic year when stress may be triggered by varied issues. Our research shows that stress caused by difficulties in English and written coursework are most frequently experienced by international students during Semester One. This is also suggested by recent US based research, which found that the earlier part of the academic year between October and March was particularly stressful for first year international students (Lee, 2010).

Finances are another major problem for international students, particularly towards the end of the academic year, which also exacerbates stress. In the UK, non-EU international students may also be under greater financial pressure than their EU counterparts, because of the higher tuition fees they pay (Ramachandran, 2011).

Our research indicates that the key difficulties specifically affecting first year international students (rather than UK students) are the challenges they face in:

- Studying and attaining the appropriate level in specialised English (if English is not their first language)
- Adapting to UK university academic expectations that vary across disciplines (particularly international students from outside the EU)
- Time management, since additional time is needed regarding English language and understanding academic requirements
- Cross-cultural group assignments including international and UK students
- Finances for non-EU international students (to a greater degree than UK or EU students)

The resulting stress levels associated with these factors are therefore likely to be higher for international students than for UK students.

Why do students continue with their course, even if they did consider leaving?

Survey respondents who considered leaving during Year One are in the minority (just under 10%). The research overall suggests that most international students enjoy their courses, are engaged in learning, and are confident even in the first semester. This confidence is generally found to increase after the first stage of exams and assignments, when students receive positive feedback. Most survey respondents agreed that the prospect of future academic and professional success is the main reason why they decided to continue with their degree courses even if they had considered leaving in the past.

It is recommended that the following suggestions to enhance learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships and support for international students should be initiated at an early stage of the first semester in Year One, in order to increase their engagement and confidence, reduce their stress levels and improve retention.

Teaching, learning, assessment and working relationships with staff

Good practice in teaching should include:

- detailed explanations of material
- plenty of interesting examples
- revision sessions
- time for questions

Sufficient early constructive feedback on assessment requirements in Semester One enables international students to understand their weaknesses, and ways in which they can improve. Constructive feedback should also emphasise strengths, as well as helpful advice on how the work can be improved, which is motivating. Early formative assessment should also be integrated in courses.

Additional academic support should include:

- sessions to explain in detail UK university academic requirements and expectations including assessment criteria relating to different disciplines
- academic skills sessions focused on discipline specific professional skills
- extra meetings and tutorial support from lecturers

Independent study and working relationships with peers and friends

The need to work independently is identified by this research as an important aspect of students' learning development at degree level. Study groups with friends, and mentoring support are also shown to be helpful in this context, confirming the findings of earlier work (Ramachandran, 2011; Wilcox et al. 2005). Group assignments may need tighter monitoring by lecturers, who can intervene when necessary. This could also be an opportunity for training students to work effectively in groups, which is a vital professional skill in many disciplines, particularly business. In addition, there needs to be greater awareness from academic staff and UK students of these additional pressures on international students.

English Support should be:

- streamed
- discipline specific
- focused on academic writing
- offered at varied times and in varied formats (e.g. online, in the evenings, holiday intensive courses)

Additional pastoral support should include:

- international student group tutorials
- personal tutorials
- financial advice and support

Professional success as a key motivator

Finding a good job in the future is found to motivate first year international students particularly in business disciplines. Motivation to succeed in this respect can help international students overcome doubts and remain successful throughout their degrees, and in their professional lives. Workplace skills should therefore be a key element of all learning, teaching, assessment and support in order to help engage and retain international students in their first year of UK higher education.

Conclusion, Research Limitations and Possibilities for Future Work

While our work has provided insights into international students' first year experience, particularly in business disciplines, many similar issues will also be experienced by UK students during their transition to university (Zepke & Leach, 2005). These include the students' challenges, described in this paper, relating to all aspects of learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships with staff and emotional and academic support from staff, friends and peers (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Moreover, academic written English, although a particular challenge for first year international students, can also be problematic for all first year students (Burke, 2008; Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson & Reddy, 2006). Our research shows that the stress experienced by first year international students, in particular, is significant. This is because the challenges they face are exacerbated by their greater difficulty in adjusting to UK HE culturally, linguistically and academically. Therefore, the recommendations suggested in this paper indicate that a much more robust pastoral and academic support system is needed in UK universities to support all first year students, including international students.

Further research would now be useful to discern between distinct groups, such as international and UK students, and disciplines. In addition, this research only focuses on the experiences of first year international students at one post-1992 UK university. Therefore, it would be useful to extend this research to include pre-1992 UK universities, and those in other English speaking countries.

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