

Facilitating International Master Students Transition to UK Higher Education

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Contents

1	Background	4
2	Introduction	4
3	Project aim and objectives	5
3.1	Project aim	5
3.2	Project objectives	5
4	Research methods	5
4.1	Focus group	5
4.2	Induction Project	5
5	Research findings and outputs	7
5.1	Research findings	7
5.2	Research outputs	10
6	Reference list	12

1 Background

The UK is one of the most popular study abroad destinations for international students. With a diverse student population come the challenges of how higher education institutions (HEIs) can better understand and facilitate their transition to the new learning and teaching environment. Despite the importance of international students' transition, there is limited research on students' experiences at the postgraduate taught level. These students face time-related pressure as their study period is usually just one year. Understanding their transitional experiences and needs becomes pivotal for informed planning of support.

The research uses Induction Project at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, the University of Sheffield, as a case study to examine a departmental-level initiative to facilitate international students' transition to study in the UK. Focus groups were conducted to collect students' first-hand experiences of the Induction Project. Key findings include students' expectations of studying a master's degree in the UK, their worries before departure, their reviews of the Induction Project, and finally the academic cultural shocks identified in the process. Overall, the participants regard the Induction Project as a positive learning experience, a way to get to know their course mates, learn more about the discipline via group work and acquire transferable skills for the forthcoming study.

The strengths of, and potential improvements to, the Induction Project were identified. The research provides insights into international master students' transitional support at the departmental level, which could be adapted by other Higher Education institutions. The findings were presented in the Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference 2020.

2 Introduction

In the UK international students count for nearly 20% of the total student number, rising to 36% at postgraduate level in 2017/2018 (UUKi, 2019). The growing overseas student enrolment creates a multicultural environment that benefits all learners, however, there are challenges in adapting to the new academic practice and everyday life (Tsevi, 2018; Xiong and Zhou, 2018). The need for transition is particularly intense at postgraduate taught level as most of the programmes last only for one year. Furthermore, international students' engagement with study will potentially affect other learners' experience such as group work and seminars. International master students' transition becomes pivotal for their academic success and overall satisfaction of studying abroad.

Although there is research on international students' transition experience, the main focus was at undergraduate level. The significance of international master students' transitional needs has not yet been fully recognised and researched (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). This project aims to bridge the current knowledge gap by using the module 'Induction Project' at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, the University of Sheffield as an empirical case study to explore the advantages and impact of an intervention coordinated at departmental level. The research will benefit academics and professional services staff who are involved in teaching and supporting international students and internationalisation policy and strategy.

3 Project aim and objectives

3.1 Project aim

The research project aims to understand the transitional experiences and needs of international master students using Induction Project as an empirical case study.

3.2 Project objectives

- 1 identifying international master students' expectations of studying in the UK
- 2 understanding international master students' induction and orientation experience using Induction Project as case study
- 3 co-design innovative transitional support with international students
- 4 disseminating the research findings via publication.

4 Research methods

4.1 Focus group

The project adopts focus groups as a qualitative research method, for their strength in stimulating interactions between participants and garnering rich descriptions from their perspectives (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Twelve participants were recruited, and the focus groups were divided into Chinese and non-Chinese student groups, with six participants in each group. The meetings were conducted via Google Hangout and each lasted for 90 minutes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for coding analysis, key themes of transitional experience and needs were identified.

4.2 Induction Project

Incoming students at the University of Sheffield are invited to join the university-wide orientation activities, which are organised to take place before the academic year starts. These activities provide students with generic information and guidance to settle in to their new life, including course information and registration, campus environment, student services and support, student communities and social events. Orientation week activities are mostly voluntary.

The Induction Project is a compulsory module for postgraduate taught students at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. The module takes place during the first week of autumn semester. Since it was introduced in 2015/2016, the Department has seen a steady growth in Master students across six programmes, from 150 to 260 in 2019/2020. Over 79% are international students and over 57% are Chinese. The Induction Project gives students the opportunity to work in small groups to complete discipline-based research, along with key study skills sessions such as group work strategy. It also introduces the online learning environment including how to submit assessments and how to check the online timetable.

The benefits of delivering this training within the Induction Project is to ensure students participate and interact, giving them opportunity to ask questions. They can practice these transferable skills in the group project before their formal studies commence. Programme directors and PhD facilitators provide support and formative feedback throughout the Project.

The one-week, non-credit-bearing, discipline-specific Induction Project was designed and coordinated at a departmental level with the following pedagogical innovations:

- 1 **Academically**, it provides the opportunity for all students to familiarise themselves with the subject and pedagogical methods in Sheffield in a relaxed atmosphere. The assessment also serves as an early warning (Tinto, 2017) to allow international students to identify their learning support needs and engage with continuous intercultural and academic skills training.
- 2 **Information consistency** is increased by the coordination at department level with embedded orientation and induction information in the project design and student-facing module documents.
- 3 **Culturally and socially**, students conduct the Induction Project within a small programme-specific group, where students are able to develop peer support networks across cultures and backgrounds. It also allows early interaction with programme directors, teaching staff and professional services staff to foster an intrinsic motivation in students at a very early stage of their study (Biggs and Tang, 2011).
- 4 **Geographically**, using Sheffield City centre as the study area, students get to know the city, university campus and the department through fieldwork and facilitated walks.
- 5 **Institutional mindfulness in practice**. The Department begins preparations in early summer with academic staff, professional services staff and technologists, it is a joint effort to give students coherent information and the best induction experience.

The Induction Project has had a crucial impact on teaching planning at postgraduate level. From the student evaluation after the Project, the average rating for the module has improved year on year from 3.87 out of 5 in 2015/2016 to 4.26 in 2019/2020. Students gave positive ratings, with 85% of them agreeing that “the project-based module is interesting and engaging”; “the module has given them an early opportunity to develop peer support across cultures”; “the module has helped them get to know the Department, the University and the City”; and “they have received the help and support they need to complete the Project”. The early assessment helps to identify key learning support needs in areas such as discipline- specific vocabulary, software skills, presentation skills, and integration with home students. The Department was able to draw on wider resources such as the English Language centre for tailored support. With improved awareness, student engagement with Departmental language sessions increased and over 92% of international students successfully graduated in 2019. As an innovative intervention, Induction Project was chosen as a good practice case study across the University for supporting international students.

5 Research findings and outputs

5.1 Research findings

Identifying international master students' expectations of studying in the UK (objective 1).

- + interactive teaching style
- + meeting people and making friends from around the world
- + collaborate with people from different cultures
- + learning to be independent
- + experiencing life in the UK
- + travelling in the UK and Europe
- + good job prospects when they return home.

"Are people here like those
in British dramas?"

"I want to visit where
Sherlock Holmes
was filmed."

"I want to learn to be
independent and make friends
from all over the world."

Identifying international master students' worries about studying in the UK (objective 1).

- + ability to pass the course in one year
- + language proficiency
- + independent learning
- + independent living
- + weather will be very cold
- + availability of daily necessities
- + adaptation to local food
- + being able to make friends.

"I worried about living by myself
and whether I can handle it.
I've never cooked before."

"I packed a lot of instant
noodles in my luggage."

"Can I buy all the things
I need; do I need to ship
them from China?"

"I worried about language
because I only just passed
the IELTS requirements."

Understanding international master students' induction and orientation experience using Induction Project as case study (objective 2).

+ Establishing early friendship.

"I met my first friend in the Project. We still hang out together for shopping and meals."

"It was nice, we were really friendly with each other."

+ Academic forecast.

"It gave a good impression on what's to come for the rest of the year."

"I think it's a good way to get introduced to the degree and the profession itself."

+ Getting to know the city.

"It's an opportunity for us to know the city, and we got to walk around the city. It's a good experience."

"The Induction Project helped me know the city. I wouldn't walk these routes and understand the city if it wasn't because of the Induction Project."

+ Learning groupwork skills.

"It's a good opportunity for us to learn how to collaborate with others. We did not have much groupwork or similar training in China."

+ Language challenges.

"I had to ask my groupmates to repeat like over and over because of their accent."

"I'm not used to communicate in English, sometimes I don't know how to use the right words to express my ideas."

"The difficulties communicating with native speakers are...sometimes I don't quite get their jokes...what are they laughing at?"

Understanding culture differences in teaching and learning (objective 2).

- + diverse teaching methods compared to previous experience of lecture and teacher- centric teaching style
- + technology-enhanced learning environment
- + personalised support via tutorials and Q&A sessions
- + emphasis on group work and peer learning
- + demanding workload such as reading
- + assessment and feedback, eg numbers and timing of assessments
- + impressive university facilities and good atmosphere.

“Everything is uploaded online. If you don’t understand the contents, you can go back and review the recordings. This is a new experience for me.”

“I find the drop-in and Q&A sessions quite useful for me.”

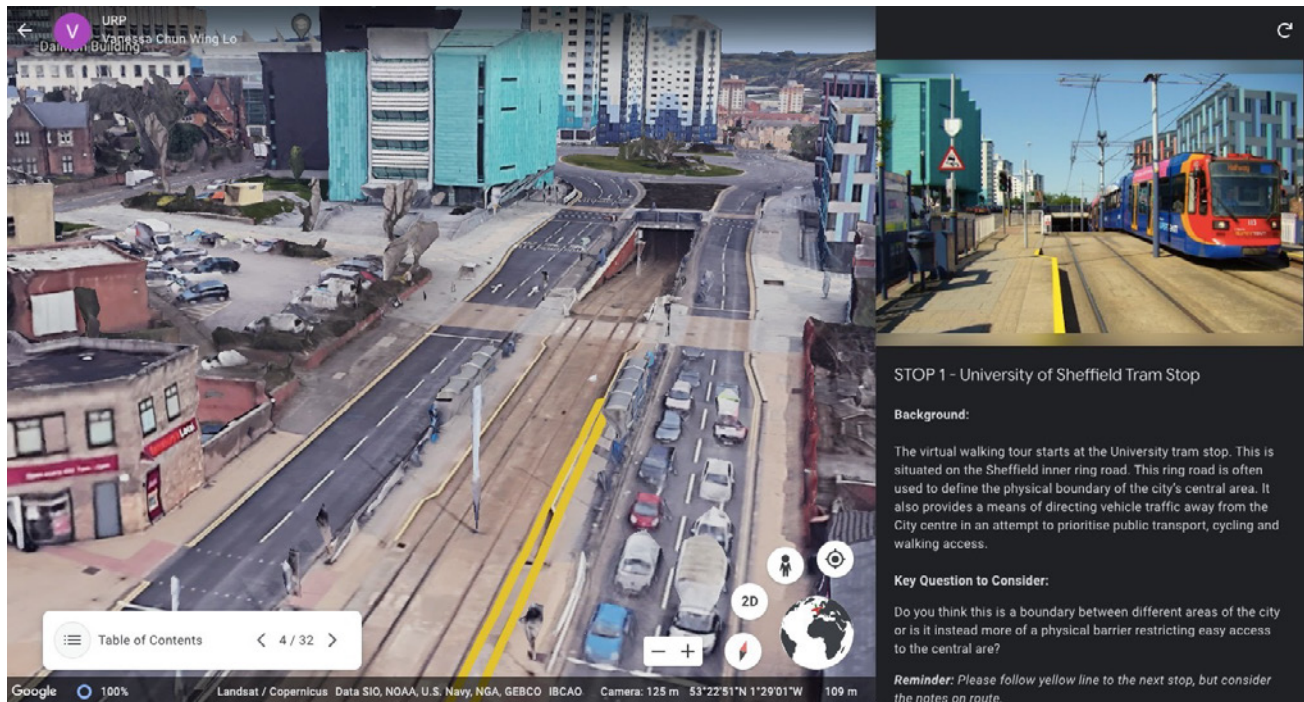
“I learnt a lot from our team leader. The group work is a pleasant experience, everyone worked towards a common goal.”

5.2 Research outputs

Co-design innovative transitional support with international students (objective 3).

Three virtual walking tours were created to facilitate PGT students’ transition to the new city and campus. These tours are discipline-based and are hosted by Google Earth for their availability for remote and attending students alike. Students were encouraged to use this walking tour app in their own time, following the routes and stops to reflect on the prompts and questions posted by their programme directors. Students were able to explore the city from the perspectives of their course of study and gain early knowledge of the discipline and terminology.

Figure 1 Example of one of the three discipline-based walking tours.



Disseminating the research findings via publication (objective 4).

The author presented the preliminary findings in the Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference 2020.

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