

## Managing Transitions into UK Higher Education: experiences of international students from a pre-sessional English course

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### Introduction

International students constitute a significant proportion of the student body in UK higher education (HE). In 2010-11 there were 428,225 international students, a 6% increase on the previous year, representing 13% of all first degree students and 46% of all taught postgraduates (Higher Education Statistics Agency, cited in UKCISA, no date). Although the body of literature on the internationalisation of UK Higher education is growing, there are still relatively few accounts of the first-hand experiences of these international students – particularly on the question of transition into UK HE. All face the challenge of making the transition into the UK academic culture and its modes of teaching, and the demands of HE study in their chosen disciplines.

This study seeks to examine individual accounts of a small number of international students at London Metropolitan University who had completed a pre-sessional Academic English course before their disciplinary studies. The aim was to find out how effectively they felt that the Pre-sessional course had prepared them for those studies, and to help inform the future development of the course, as well as gaining wider insight into the support needs of international students.

Our pre-sessional Academic English course is a full-time language and academic skills programme lasting 4, 8 or 12 weeks, designed for international students whose first language is not English. It is a multi-disciplinary course. The majority of participants are required to successfully complete it as a condition of entry to degree or postgraduate programmes, as their current level of English is below the mainstream course entry requirement. Hence, a further aim was to investigate how international students arriving with lower levels of English language proficiency are supported before and during their studies.

## Literature Review

The 'international student lifecycle' identifies the stages which incoming international students experience, from the pre-arrival and pre-sessional stage to employability on completion of university studies (The Higher Education Academy, no date). Negotiating this transition to English-medium university education can present challenges to international entrants. Terraschke and Wahid (2011) describe struggles with participation in interactive classrooms, academic writing, vocabulary, reading and critical thinking. Dooley (2002) also highlights the need for students not just to improve language proficiency, but also to get to grips with academic conventions and expectations and to show initiative in order to feel socially integrated. This is echoed by Skyrme (2010) who sees international students as engaged in forging new identities as they get to grips with the 'being and doing' (Gee, 2004, cited in Skyrme, 2010: 212) of a university student. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) highlight the complexities facing international students in attempting to become members of academic communities of practice and acquire academic literacies.

Ridley's 2010 survey of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessional provision found a range of formats to such courses across the UK H.E sector, but a common belief among providers of the benefits of their courses in preparing students. From a student viewpoint, Terraschke and Wahid's 2011 study found students who had attended such a course to have more realistic expectations, a more positive experience and greater awareness of learning strategies, particularly for reading, writing and assessments, although not better overall results. Dooley's (2010) study concluded that pre-sessional courses help participants with valuable skills which other international students may have to develop on their own. Focussing on the LondonMet pre-sessional course, Scandrett (2011) noted student satisfaction with the course and Bradshaw (2004) highlighted increased student confidence, but both called for further research on the course alumni once they have embarked on tertiary studies.

## Methodology

This study was based on semi-structured interviews with four volunteer students who had been required to complete the LondonMet pre-sessional course in 2010 or 2011 and were at least 8 weeks into their first semester of undergraduate or postgraduate studies. Interviews focussed on their current disciplinary study experiences and retrospective evaluation of the pre-sessional course. The students came from Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan and the Ukraine. Two students were studying in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, one in the Faculty of Law and the other in the Business School, indicative of the range of pre-sessional student pathways. It happened that all 4 volunteers were female, whilst there is usually a 50:50 male to female ratio on the course as a whole. To maintain anonymity, no

more specific demographic details are given and names have been changed. Whilst attempt was made to interview a reasonably representative sample of students from the course, the main criteria for selection was willingness to share their personal accounts of their study experiences.

Interviews were recorded and key sections transcribed and grouped according to recurring themes. Students also gave permission for the reflective writing they had previously completed at the end of the pre-sessional course to be analysed.

## **Findings and discussion**

The following themes stood out in terms of the issues students were facing and their reflections on the pre-sessional.

### **Reading**

Unsurprisingly, all four students identified reading as a challenge. The overwhelming volume of reading was mentioned, and the difficulties in finding and identifying the most relevant work:

*They [international students] don't know how to find the information from the electronic or e-resource, it's a lot of information so they don't know how to find it, or good information or relevant to their subject. They need to [be] train[ed] [in] it. Decide if it's relevant to their subject. (Mai, Vietnam)*

Students highlighted the helpfulness of subject tutor guidance on prioritising what to read. In the words of the Law student:

*Our tutors understand us and if it is very significant case, they tell us, you have to read [it]. Highlighted material it is very helpful, because it is impossible to read all the cases because every other book has 1000 pages.*

The students suggested that the pre-sessional had made them more confident with reading and ways to approach it:

*Beginning of the course, I took too long time to read for one journal [article], because I tried to understand word by word, so it takes maybe 2 days for one journal, but the end of the course I changed my way to read. So I think it makes my reading quicker. (Ayumi, Japan)...*

### **Written assignments and writing in the disciplines**

Due to the timing of the interviews, only one student had received any written assignment marks. This student reported good success and attributed this in part to having been well prepared through the pre-sessional course.

*I think I pick up quickly compared to the students who didn't do the pre-session course, especially for referencing and research skills and how to write essays and reports, I think that helps a lot. (Jenny, Taiwan)*

The others also saw a clear connection between the pre-session written work and what they were currently facing.

*In the EAP course, we have [become] familiar with how to write a report, how to do the essay, even we have to do the mini research, so we know how to write the assignment... Even though it is a mini research, but the format and the way we did it, it's the same. It is the same format with the dissertation. (Mai, Vietnam)*

Some felt that without the pre-session guidance, they would have struggled more, which might imply all international students could benefit from some such preparation.

*It was really useful, because if we don't learn about that in EAP course, I can't write [an] essay [or] anything. Because some of us don't know how to write [an] essay, so I feel I was lucky. (Ayumi, Japan)*

One student noted the value of academic skills sessions from her department. Others indicated valued support from individual tutors, rather than formalised departmental support.

Students mentioned their ongoing use of handouts from the pre-session course to help with current written tasks. This saved time later, they reported, as did the familiarity they had gained with the university and its structures.

Whilst this is encouraging, it does also raise possible issues of transferability of writing guidelines from a generic pre-session course into disciplinary writing. Students did not express dissatisfaction with the multi-disciplinary nature of the pre-session course, but showed awareness that their discipline had its own expectations and conventions in written assignments. The students studying Business and Law also suggested opportunity for some subject-specific groups would be a welcome addition.

## **Lectures**

Students mentioned the challenges of understanding lectures, particularly at the start of the semester, and in contrast to the pace they had been used to on the pre-session course:

*For me in the early bit of semester, in the lecture it is hard for me to understand ... but then when I talk with the tutor, they help me [with] how to study in London and even how to get knowledge from the lecture. So it's good and it's easier to follow the lecture. (Mai, Vietnam)*

It is encouraging that the student took the initiative to speak to the tutor. As Skyrme (2010) indicates, this is a high-stakes social practice and requires personal agency. Students highlighted other coping strategies for lectures which had been facilitated by tutors:

*Before the lecture... Before the beginning of the course... provide us a handbook every week what do we do, so before the lecture I can study about the topic, so it makes it easier to understand (Ayumi, Japan)*

Two of the students pointed out, however, that they were not always familiar with the subject of the lectures even in their own language.

Aside from the perceived change of pace, students indicated that the pre-sessional course guest lectures had been useful.

*It's good practice to taking lectures to note taking... how do they provide the lectures or something, so I think it was good experience, it was really useful. (Ayumi, Japan)*

### **Contributing to seminars**

All four students identified speaking out in seminars as a significant challenge. Students highlighted the usefulness of being a listener before building the confidence to speak, perhaps an example of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, cited in Skyrme, 2010). In particular the speed of discussions and lack of vocabulary were initial stumbling blocks.

*First time I cannot say anything because my English was not so [good]. I understand the course of discussion, the movement of thoughts, but I cannot answer so quickly, that's why it was useful for me to listen the discussion between other people. After one month I became a participant of these discussions because I can already tell what I want to say. (Elena, Ukraine)*

Some students felt that the pre-sessional course had increased their awareness of the expectation to speak out and their confidence to do so. Others, however, felt that a stronger focus on developing speaking and listening could have been included.

### **Social and cultural integration**

The students noted the challenges of adapting to a new environment, such as handling homesickness, the weather and bureaucracy. It was notable how much students focused on their situated interactions with others, supporting Dooley's (2010) identification of 'the overwhelming desire to integrate and belong and to feel valued as members of a group' (p.196). Several highlighted the helpfulness of small, familiar and supportive cohorts:

*If my course, I think is very small course, we always the same members in each module, is like a family, so tutors are very helpful to us, also colleagues are really kind, so I'm really happy (Ayumi, Japan)*

Rather than seeing international students as one homogenous group, some interviewees seemed to see themselves, as new arrivals in the UK, as facing greater communicative challenges:

*We have some stars in our group. They are not native speakers, but their English is perfect because they live in England for 5/10 years, that's why it's fluent, but there are some people who come to study only 3 or 2 months ago. That's why we have our small group, it is 5 or 6 person. (Elena, Ukraine)*

Dooley (2010) noted the pros and cons of the clustering of international students or particular nationality groups. This was borne out in this study. Some spoke of ongoing pre-sessional friendship groups as support networks, while others felt that this was a barrier to integration which needed explicit counter-action.

*... very easily, Asian students will stick together. [But] it will help them adapt quickly if they be break up compulsory. They need to understand you need to understand other cultures now. (Jenny, Taiwan)*

Some students felt that more ongoing support was needed for international students, particularly in terms of cultural and social integration. One cited cases of students who, in her view, had not fully integrated over time:

*I spoke to quite a lot of students and classmates from the pre-sessional, because they were too shy, they didn't understand the culture here, they've kind of been left alone... Although it's been two years now, they still feel quite lonely. (Jenny, Taiwan)*

However, this student also pointed out that the challenges of adapting to university life are not a uniquely 'international' student issue:

*The shock of the first week, I think to everyone is the same, even the international students or local students. (Jenny, Taiwan)*

### **Ways of studying**

The students frequently commented positively about ways of studying which for them were new, such as independent learning and group work:

*Most importantly we have group work as well. Although it's been challenging, because we did a group presentation together in the pre-sessional, so it made me feel less scared about how to talk to different people. (Jenny, Taiwan)*

In line with Terraschke and Wahid's (2010) recommendation, our interviewees felt that other international students could benefit from the skills development and acculturation offered by the pre-sessional course, even if their language was already at entry level:

*Even though they have good language skills, but they don't have good study skills.*  
(Mai, Vietnam)

The students felt that the course had equipped them with awareness of the skills and practices they would need, but were still experiencing the challenges of acquiring these.

*I have two problems, first one is, we have to...I need to have critical thinking, is very weak point for me, because maybe I'm Japanese or maybe that is my personality, I don't know... but I think I need to train more critical thinking.*  
(Ayumi, Japan)

Arguably this training she mentions involves her in forging a new identity, as described by Skymes (2010), although it is not clear if she is persuaded of the value of critical thinking itself or is simply aware it is required. She also raises the point that whilst nationality or cultural background play a role, personality is also an important factor determining the unique experience of every student.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Whilst the students testified to the challenges likely to face new international entrants to UK Higher Education, they also gave positive accounts of wanting and starting to make tentative incursions into their target disciplinary communities. The timing of the interviews before students' assessment results limits how much the students could evaluate their success in terms of marks, yet perhaps this gave them more freedom to personally evaluate their experience. Further interviews with these students at a later stage in their studies would clearly be interesting, as would a look at a wider range of students, their study outcomes and also the views of their tutors.

Encouragingly, students' reflections on the pre-sessional were largely positive. Students' willingness to be interviewed seems to suggest some wish to report the benefits of the course. It was also encouraging that students mentioned the usefulness of some of the newer features of the course, such as the afternoon lectures and increased focus on reading and critical thinking. There were also useful suggestions on further enhancements to the course which we should seek to explore.

It was notable that students commented more on the skills and practices associated with their current studies than specific 'language' issues. The students wanted to be active participants within their course communities and to feel confident to interact and integrate, not simply to achieve high marks. Vocabulary was the main 'language' feature mentioned, but this was in the context of how vocabulary problems impeded them in doing what they needed, processing texts and contributing appropriately in seminars. This highlights the need for students to focus on developing vocabulary particularly in the context of their disciplinary area and practices. We should seek to

maximise opportunities for students to engage with their disciplinary discourse on the pre-sessional course, for example through flexible assignments, self-study tasks and perhaps the organisation of subject-based discussion groups.

Such discussion groups could also be a way to build students' confidence speaking and listening, something which we might give more focus to. We could give greater emphasis to transactional spoken language and adapting to UK life and culture more generally. We have started developing some online learning content and lectures focussing on aspects of life in Britain and we should seek to maintain our existing social programme.

More widely, students highlighted many useful ways in which they were facilitated in negotiating the challenges of their studies, such as advance notification of lecture topics, identification of key reading or through the cultivation of small, familiar and supportive course communities. Some spoke of the valuable extra support in place in their departments or given by individual tutors, although it was not clear if this was available uniformly across different courses. To some extent the student's individual initiative, confidence and personality was also determining whether they asked for and got additional help or felt integrated. As one of the students noted, perhaps not all students achieve this equally. This highlights the importance of pre-emptive, visible and accessible support, not just for international students making the transition from a pre-sessional course, but arguably for all international students and indeed 'home' students engaged in their own transitions.

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