

ISSUE 17 DECEMBER 2017

# *InForm*

A JOURNAL FOR INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION PROGRAMME PROFESSIONALS

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Disengagement and  
Early Intervention

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Enhancing IFP  
students' engagement  
through pronunciation  
peer practice

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Evaluating student  
engagement with  
Independent  
Learning materials  
on International  
Foundation and  
Pre-master's  
programmes:  
A qualitative study  
of the student  
perspective

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Implementing  
continuous summative  
assessments for  
enhanced student  
engagement: benefits  
and challenges at  
The University of  
Edinburgh

This issue:

**Innovative ideas for enhanced  
student engagement**



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# **InForm** **Conference 2018**



## **TRANSITION INTO UNIVERSITY: PROVIDING THE TOOLS FOR SUCCESS**

We are pleased to announce that the ninth annual InForm conference will take place at the University of Birmingham.

The event will include presentations and posters on themes related to international foundation and pathway programmes (IFP) and provide an opportunity for interaction and sharing of practice with colleagues from the IFP community.

**Saturday 30 June 2018**

Edgebaston Campus, University of Birmingham.

**Conference fee: £65**

### **Registration:**

Please check our website for details: [www.reading.ac.uk/inform](http://www.reading.ac.uk/inform) or email: [inform-2018@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:inform-2018@contacts.bham.ac.uk)

### **Speaker Proposals:**

Speaker proposals are invited from professionals involved in the delivery of International Foundation and Pathway programmes. As usual, the focus should be on issues associated with teaching and learning in this sector and address the conference theme. Sessions need to appeal to tutors and course managers across the curriculum.

The deadline for speaker proposals is **30 April 2018**.



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**Mark Peace**

Chair of the InForm Editorial Board

WELCOME

## From the Editorial Board...

Issue 17 of InForm takes on the theme of the 2017 InForm Conference *Inovative ideas for enhanced student engagement*, which was hosted by the University of Reading and for the first time included a parallel overseas event at the University of Reading Malaysia Campus. Both events were video linked for Reading's opening keynote speaker Professor Colin Bryson. Keynote speaker Clare Nukui started the afternoon in Reading and in total we had 22 sessions with 90 delegates, making it an excellent day. Slides for all the sessions are accessible from [www.reading.ac.uk/inform](http://www.reading.ac.uk/inform).

Jane Sjoberg from the University of Birmingham has kindly defined student engagement for us stating that "engagement involves both motivation and action on the part of the learner. Engagement is also facilitated by agency, which is present when learners are empowered to actively control and direct the learning process in some way". This resonates with a number of articles in this issue where innovative approaches are taken by teachers to motivate and empower students into taking greater action in their learning. Attending classes is one such action and our first article by Peter Sturman from the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, gives a fascinating insight into the challenges of enhancing attendance on an overseas foundation programme with 1700 students. In our second article, Rina Fokel de Vries and Veronica Raffin share their findings on enhancing engagement through peer pronunciation where the benefits go beyond pronunciation. Caroline Fletcher then reports on the engagement of students with independent learning material made available online and shares some very useful tips for enhancing its use. Kathryn Redpath goes on to demonstrate how effective continuous summative assessment can be, in terms of enhancing student engagement, while also giving a refreshing discussion of the cost in teachers' time. Encouraging healthy competition through gamification is the approach Meiko Murayama has taken with her Business students and she shows how this has resulted in more participation.

Study or academic skills modules often use themes from subject modules to keep them relevant to the students' academic area. Adam Stewart takes this further in combining components of the assessment of a study skills module with that of a subject module, resulting in a positive effect on engagement. Mike Groves then presents the use of structured tutorials to encourage independence and agency in developing the skills needed for undergraduate study and this is followed by Jane Sjoberg who discusses agency further when presenting the benefits

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of a student led magazine. Then Helen Grinsell share a new approach to assessing speaking in seminars, that promotes greater engagement in subject content and use of appropriate language. Away from teaching and learning Chloe Courtenay considers student recruitment and engagement of international foundation students with the UK as a place to study. In our *InFormal* section Jacky Murphy gives a valuable insight into the very different transition experiences of two students going from foundation to undergraduate study. Lastly Marion O'Hara and Gerald Dampier report on the inclusion of student service-learning placement volunteering work in their course and the opportunities for engagement this generates.

We now look forward to the InForm Conference 2018 at the University of Birmingham on June 30 themed *Transition to University: providing the tools for success*, and encourage you to send in speaker proposals and to register. To submit an article or letter for the next Issue of InForm or with any query email [inform@reading.ac.uk](mailto:inform@reading.ac.uk). Further details on p31.



# Disengagement and Early Intervention

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*Higher rates of absences are associated with higher failure rates and lower grades. A two-year study at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China firstly established that this is also true for preliminary year students in China. This was used to justify the introduction of an early intervention programme. While there was a significant reduction in absences by the end of the second year of the study, it is presumptuous to assume a causal relationship. The study did, however, provide information about why students miss classes and highlighted issues with the collection and recording of attendance data. This information will be used to improve university policies and procedures.*

## Introduction

Students at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) should attend all classes. Many don't. Attendance is monitored and late attendance and absences are noted on an attendance register. Regular or habitual absence often reflects disengagement and personal and psychological problems and a system of intervention exists for students with high levels of absenteeism. This is stepped according to the number of absences but can ultimately lead to students being withdrawn from the examination register, or encouraged to apply for Voluntary Interruption of Studies. This article examines the reasons for changing the established procedures, examines some of the reasons given by students for absences and discusses the success of the scheme. It also includes and responds to critical comments made at the InForm Malaysia conference (2017) where the paper was presented.

## Why Change Anything?

The system was becoming unworkable with the increasing number of preliminary year students (1700 in the second year of the study). At the same time, tutors and students were questioning the need for attendance to be compulsory. Retaking students, in particular, were not attending classes and more and more time was being taken up trying to track down missing students, and to get them to attend meetings in which the consequences of non-attendance could be explained. The whole issue was compounded by confusion about responsibility for missing students, reflecting both differing expectations among tutors and a lack of clear understanding of the processes. It was also becoming clear that attendance records were not always being accurately recorded or maintained.

The following study was done over the course of two years. In the first year of the study, attendance rates were compared with course failure rates and grades. This was then used to justify a new early intervention programme for students missing classes. This policy was introduced in the second year of the study. Absences in the first year were then compared with absences at the end of the second year to examine the effectiveness of the policy.

## Is attendance important?

Increased rates of attendance are associated with higher grades and higher success rates in different countries and types of institution, at all levels of education, in all disciplines and subjects, even in the absence of a compulsory attendance policy (Craig, 1990; Khan *et al.*, n.d; Silvestri, 2003; LeBlanc, 2005). Although this had not previously been tested in an institution like UNNC where 97% of the preliminary year students are domestic (mainland) Chinese students, there was little reason to expect any difference. Indeed, the relationship between absences and test scores was confirmed for our preliminary year students for the year 2015-16 and significant differences were found in the number of absences between students who passed and students who failed courses. Moreover, students with a greater number of absences were more likely to have lower grades in end-of-semester examinations.

## Early Intervention and Data Collection

The early intervention programme not only meant that students were seen by their personal tutor after fewer absences, but in the meeting, information about why they were absent could be collected. At between four and six absences, the School Office emails both the student and the personal tutor. They

meet and the tutor reminds the student of university policy, procedures to follow when absent, the value of class attendance and, when necessary, encourages the student to look for extra support. The student explains his or her reasons for being absent. The meeting demonstrates that the University takes attendance seriously, though the meetings are supposed to be supportive, encouraging and positive. Fifty-six such meetings took place.

## Why are students absent?

In open-ended responses, students reported that their main issue was actually punctuality (44%) even when they had initially indicated that the reason was illness. In terms of importance, this was followed by problems both understanding and following university procedures (24%). Also, many students reported that their absences were 'unavoidable' and that they had made a personal decision to miss classes even though they were aware of university policy (23%). It is clear that time management is an issue for students and most people would probably not be surprised to learn that 18-year olds sometimes prefer to stay in bed than go to lectures. At the same time, students – or parents – are paying a lot of money to come to UNNC and this is clearly not the best use of that money.

## Does Early Intervention Work?

The impact of the early intervention programme was based on a comparison of the actual number of absences at the end of year 2 of the programme with the predicted number based on the number from the year before. The difference between the two was tested statistically and this showed that there were significantly fewer absences in the second year. It is tempting to suggest that this proves the success of the programme and that this reduction in absences was caused by the early intervention programme; however, other explanations also work. Unusually high rates of absences in the first year, or unusually low rates in the second would also explain the results.

## Critical Comments

### 1. Teaching Quality: absence as 'voting with your feet'?

It is naive to think that all teachers are wonderful and teach interesting engaging classes. However, although some students have stated that they felt they could learn better without attending classes, no students in this study directly attributed their absences to poor teaching.

### 2. Student self-image

The meetings with the personal tutor were supposed to be supportive and non-judgemental. The students, however, are fully aware that their lack of attendance triggered the meeting and are on the defensive. Students are more likely to use an explanatory framework that makes them look as positive as possible, for example, by claiming illness than admitting to laziness. A few students have even submitted false documents from 'clinics' that cannot be easily traced, hoping that no-one will actually check. Fortunately, such cases are rare. It is possible, therefore that the data is unreliable.

### 3. Reliability of Data Collected

A further issue is that attendance is not consistently measured in lecture-based courses. The university has not yet invested in the appropriate technology. It is likely that there is considerable under-reporting of absences. We are now experimenting with using QR codes and Moodle Signup Sheets which seems to work as long as students don't use the QR scanner on WeChat.

It is also unfortunately true that some tutors do not record attendance accurately. Any data that had inaccuracies or dubious data (such as 100% attendance) was excluded from the study.

## Tutor Response

The programme was not universally popular. Personal tutors were critical of the additional burden of having to pursue students, arrange times to meet, and book rooms. The programme was seen as adding considerably to workload and difficult to administer. They requested that students be made more familiar with university policies and procedures. This has been incorporated into the most recent version of the programme.

## Conclusion

There is evidence to suggest that this early intervention programme has been successful; however, perhaps the main value of this study has been to highlight areas of university practice that can be changed and improved and which, once done, might make such early intervention less necessary. The study highlights the need to investigate the many related issues that emerged in the study: methods of recording absences, communication with students, procedures for room booking, student reluctance to read emails, and student preference for explanatory frames that maintain positive self-image.

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# Enhancing IFP students' engagement through pronunciation peer practice

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*Building on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of collaborative and interactive learning, this paper describes how IFP students can practise pronunciation together. Phonological competence not only enhances non-native speaker intelligibility, it can also build confidence and improve listening skills. The study results show that students find peer practice stimulating, motivating and engaging. This promising feedback suggests that peer-assisted learning can also be applied to other aspects of language learning.*

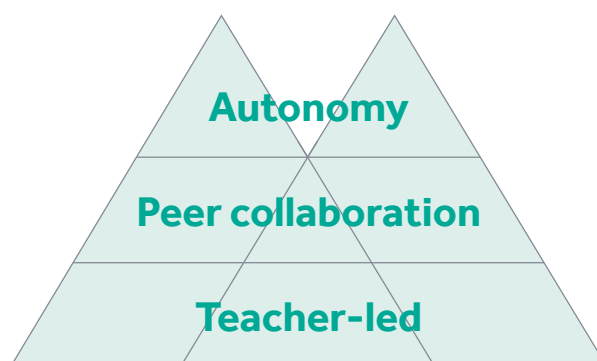
## Introduction

The Academic English module in the International Foundation Programme (IFP) is likely to be the last English course international students take at university. As such, it should promote autonomy, self-assessment and study competence, as it is vital for EAP students to learn how to continue acquiring the language and content of their disciplines independently (Alexander, Argent and Spencer, 2008, pp.211-213) after their foundation year. To be able to do this, students have to develop the necessary academic skills and need to be engaged in their own learning.

To promote IFP student engagement, the researchers conducted a pilot study on pronunciation following Vygotsky's (1978) proposition that learning should be a collaborative and interactive effort. Lave and Wenger (1991) also stress the importance of communities of learning, in which participants support each other in the learning process. Stated differently, in order to start the path towards autonomy, students need to work collaboratively, scaffolding each other in a

context in which the teacher merely acts as facilitator, setting meaningful tasks and motivating students who support each other in their journey towards autonomous learning (see Figure 1). This approach to learning in which students take a pivotal role in their own and their partners' learning is key to engage students with the learning process (Turuk, 2008).

The focus of our pilot study was on pronunciation, in particular, word stress, stress patterns and stress shift in verb/noun homographs; a more detailed description of the study design can be found in De Vries and Raffin (forthcoming). Pronunciation is an essential aspect of language learning, as knowledge of phonological features not only heightens non-native speaker intelligibility, but also enhances speakers' confidence and improves listening skills (Reed and Michaud, 2011). However, there is often little targeted pronunciation instruction and practice in language teaching (Baker and Burri, 2016), which also applies to the EAP component of IFP. This aspect of language learning is therefore particularly suitable for peer-assisted learning.



**Figure 1:**  
**Scaffolding students from teacher-led to autonomous learning**

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Singles	Pairs
Practising with a partner would be more fun/enjoyable	Practising with a partner was fun/enjoyable

**Figure 2:**

**Example of parallel questions for Singles and Pairs**

## Pilot Study: Combining Pronunciation and Peer Practice

The main aim of our pilot study was to answer two research questions: 1. Is peer practice useful (i.e., do students actually improve their pronunciation due to peer practice)?; and 2. How do students perceive peer practice (i.e., do they find it useful and motivating)? This article will focus on the latter, describing whether peer practice leads to stronger student engagement.

The pilot was carried out with 46 IFP students at the University of Birmingham, who volunteered by responding to an announcement on the IFP interactive virtual learning environment (iVLE). Seven participants were removed from the database because their tasks were incomplete or invalid. The remaining 39 students were divided in two groups: Pairs (18 students) and Singles (21 students).

To answer the first research question, we applied a pre- and post-test design similar to that used by Pattanpichet (2011) in his research on speaking achievements. The pilot's pre- and post-tests consisted of 50 words from the Academic Word List (AWL); 30 words were presented in isolation and 20 were embedded in short sentences. Students were asked to record the tests as single items and upload these recordings to the iVLE. After submitting the first recording (pre-test), the students attended a workshop involving input and practice on word stress, stress patterns and stress shift. Because of time constraints, students could be given only a week to practise using materials provided during the workshop and via the iVLE. The Pairs had to practise with a partner and the Singles had to practise on their own. After the practice week, the participants had to submit the post-test recording.

To answer the second research question regarding the students' perception of peer practice, the participants were asked to complete and submit a Google Form survey, distributed via the iVLE. Singles and Pairs were asked to complete different surveys (as their experience was different at the practice stage), although both surveys had parallel structures and questions (see Figure 2 for an example). For these surveys, we followed the categories used by Brown (2008) to learn about academic and social benefits, generic skills and negative aspects of working with a partner.

## Results

The results of the pre- and post-tests did not show the hoped-for progress in pronunciation (see Figure 3). Both groups scored higher than anticipated in the pre-test; however, based on these average results the Singles (with an average of 37 correctly stressed words) were stronger than the Pairs (with 35). The post-test results showed very little improvement for the Singles and a small decline in the Pairs. Various other issues were also evident in the recordings; inaccurate phonological and segmental decoding and insufficient lexical knowledge to recognise the target words were some of the most noticeable problems. As it turned out, students' issues with pronunciation involved more than just problems with word stress and having one week to address all these problems (with or without a partner) was clearly not enough.

Despite this lack of progress, the survey showed that the Pairs had perceived the experience of practising with a peer as valuable in terms of engagement and motivation. Moreover, the students in the Singles group expressed that they thought they would have benefitted greatly from practising with a partner.

Average Score (out of 50 items)	Singles (N = 21)	Pairs (N = 18)
Pre-Test	37	35
Post-Test	38	32

**Figure 3:**

**Average Pre-Test and Post-Test scores for Singles and Pairs**

When asked about their perceived improvement in pronunciation, 67% of the Singles stated they had been able to make enough improvement on their own. However, around 94% believed that practising with a partner would have helped them improve more. Similarly, in the Pairs group, almost 43% believed it was not really necessary for them to work with a partner to improve, yet more than 90% stated they felt their pronunciation had improved because they had been working with a partner.

As to motivation and engagement, the great majority of both Pairs and Singles expressed that working with a partner motivated/would have motivated them to practise more often (almost 80% of Pairs and 90% of Singles) and be more active (almost 90% of Pairs and 100% of Singles). More than 85% of the Pairs and almost 90% of the Singles stated that working with a partner was/would have been more fun and enjoyable.

Students in the Pairs group (90.5%) also mentioned that working with a partner encouraged them to cooperate. The same percentage of students stated they had been able to give their partners useful feedback during their practice sessions; even more students (95.2%) stated their partners had been able to give useful feedback in turn. More than 95% of these students also agreed that working with a partner made them feel more responsible (for themselves and their partners). These responses suggest that pair work can indeed be fruitful. However, the time constraints and the fact that we could not create mixed-ability or mixed L1 pairs may have prevented these positive effects from being measurable.

## Conclusion

Despite a lack of actual improvement in pronunciation in the short span (one week) allocated to practise, the students in this pilot study benefitted from peer practice and collaborative learning in terms of engagement with their own and their partners' learning. Even after recognising that there were some difficulties when working with a partner (e.g., 57% of the Pairs mentioned having difficulties in organising meetings), the advantages clearly outweighed the disadvantages. Peer practice not only motivated and engaged the participants, it also promoted responsibility, criticality (through peer feedback), and study competence. For these students, this meant a significant step towards autonomy.

For this approach to be more effective in improving students' pronunciation, some changes need to be made. For students to be able to gain from this experience, the one-week period they were allowed for practice needs to be extended; the researchers would now like to expand this pilot study by setting up a long-term buddy system for peer pronunciation practice. Such a scheme would mean that IFP students support each other during a whole term, which will allow them to meet less frequently, while fostering recycling and the consolidation of the knowledge gained.

Although initially set to focus only on pronunciation, the positive survey results suggest that promoting the peer practice approach could also be applied to other areas of IFP language learning. Working collaboratively will allow students to engage more and assume responsibility for their own learning, promoting autonomy and effectively supporting them in their transition to their undergraduate programmes.

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# Evaluating student engagement with Independent Learning materials on International Foundation and Pre-master's programmes: A qualitative study of the student perspective.

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*This small-scale study conducted focus groups with students on International Foundation and Pre-Master's programmes at the University of Sheffield International College to understand more about their engagement with self-access materials integrated into an EAP module. It found a number of reasons which may have led to low student engagement with the materials, including technical frustrations, lack of support mechanisms and a narrow design tendency for the materials. However, the study also revealed an overall positive attitude towards online learning, and appreciation by some students of the learner independence that self-access materials necessitate.*

## Introduction

UK universities are increasingly emphasising self-directed study, expecting students to take greater ownership of their learning. Accordingly, in their role to prepare international students for progression to university, International Foundation and Pre-master's programmes are increasingly employing learning and teaching strategies to develop learner autonomy. One example of this is the integration of Independent Learning (IL) materials into taught modules at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC). However, since their introduction two years ago, overall student engagement with IL materials has been low. This study therefore sought to understand more about why students may not be engaging with the materials.

## Context

The study focussed on IL materials used during the second term of a three-term English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. The term ran for ten weeks, and involved five hours of taught class time, plus five hours of self-study per week. This self-study component included the set of IL materials under investigation: these were nineteen tasks, each designed to take between twenty minutes and one hour of student time, and each allocated to a specific taught lesson of the course. The materials were presented on the VLE as either PDFs or online interactive tasks, and were designed for students to use independently of their tutor and classroom.

Evaluation Criteria	Context specific considerations
Academic skills focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent do the materials provide practice of academic skills?</li> <li>Are there sufficient opportunities for outcome feedback?</li> </ul>
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is what is being taught perceived by learners as useful and relevant?</li> <li>Does the language in the materials correspond to the language students are exposed to at university?</li> </ul>
Language learning potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent do the materials focus learners on grammar?</li> <li>To what extent do the materials focus learners on vocabulary?</li> </ul>
Learner fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do the materials take into account that learners differ in learning styles?</li> <li>Are the learners satisfied with the level of challenge of the materials?</li> </ul>
Positive impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent do learners feel positive towards and motivated by the materials?</li> <li>To what extent to the materials foster learner autonomy?</li> </ul>
Practicality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent do learners find the materials usable?</li> <li>Are there sufficient support resources?</li> </ul>

**Figure 1:**

**Evaluation framework (Adapted from Jamieson & Chapelle, 2010, p.359)**

## The Study

The materials were evaluated using the framework shown in Figure 1, which takes into account the EAP and self-access nature of the materials.

Post-use focus groups were conducted with students to collect qualitative data about their experiences and opinions of the materials. Forty-four students were involved, accounting for 10% of the students on the course. The resulting data was coded using the above evaluation criteria, plus the emergent themes of Likes, Dislikes and Improvement Suggestions. Figure 2 illustrates the number of Likes, Dislikes and Improvement Suggestions for each evaluation criterion. The criteria of Practicality, Positive Impact and Learner Fit received the most references and will form the focus of the following section.

## Key Findings

As the largest number of all coded comments relate to the criterion of Practicality, and most of these comments are Dislikes or Improvement Suggestions, it could be concluded that issues of a practical nature posed the greatest problem for students in the study. For example, students disliked the PDF format because it did not allow for editing on laptops. Furthermore, there were complaints that the interactive tasks did not allow navigation at students' discretion, and that these tasks did not always work on Apple Mac computers or in certain browsers.

This leads to another problematic area, which was support. It was stated by some of the students that there was "nobody I can ask"

regarding technical or content-related issues, and that there was not enough "explanation" of the materials. As self-access materials are used without the presence of a teacher, they necessitate independent forms of support. This could be visual clues, prompts or help buttons within the materials, or online helpdesks and supported discussion forums for students. Studies have shown that complex self-access tasks without sufficient support mechanisms may overwhelm learners or lead to low levels of motivation (Reinders & White, 2010). Thus, lack of sufficient support may also be a contributing factor to the low engagement levels with this set of materials.

Regarding the design of the materials, there were significantly more Dislikes than Likes. The materials were referred to as "boring", "lacking life" and employing "passive learning". These sentiments correspond with arguments presented in the literature that the traditional design of self-access materials lacks broad appeal to students. Due to the need for learner independence and the challenges of providing effective support, self-access tasks frequently employ controlled practice activities which can easily be marked with answer keys. Thus, an analytical learning style is often favoured, with less provision for other learning styles (Tomlinson, 2011).

Proposed solutions to these restrictive design issues are for self-access materials to become more open-ended, for example by using commentaries rather than answer keys (Lynch, 2001), and stimulating right-brain as well as left-brain activities (Tomlinson, 2011). Such suggestions would need to be carefully implemented and their effects monitored in

order to determine their success in enhancing student engagement. Certainly, some form of learner training would need to accompany introduction of more open-ended materials.

Another factor affecting motivation was the belief that the IL tasks were "not compulsory", and for some students this meant they were low on their list of priorities. Although the IL tasks are officially a compulsory part of the course, they are not formally assessed. Thus, students lacking intrinsic motivation to improve their skills through use of the materials did not have the benefit of extrinsic factors, such as the work forming part of an assessment, to motivate them.

In all focus groups, students commented that the individual tasks were hard to find on the VLE because they were spread across different lesson folders. There were requests for a "separate IL folder" and a "content(s) table". Whilst this may represent an issue of practicality, it does also suggest that, for some, the materials do not go far enough in enabling them to work independently. Perhaps some students would prefer more freedom in their use of the materials and it may be beneficial to move the materials out of the current lesson-led structure.

Intriguingly, despite the low levels of engagement in practice, there were numerous comments indicating a positive attitude towards learner autonomy. Students expressed Likes for using the materials outside of class to "remind ourselves of what we studied" or "find more information", and the notion that the materials may go some way towards encouraging students to work

independently of the teacher was expressed in the comment: "If we can't ask the teacher, we can use the materials in the IL".

A final encouraging trend was the overall positive attitude towards the use of laptops and mobile devices as a means of accessing materials, with the words "convenient" and "accessible" frequently being used to describe the materials as a whole.

## Conclusion

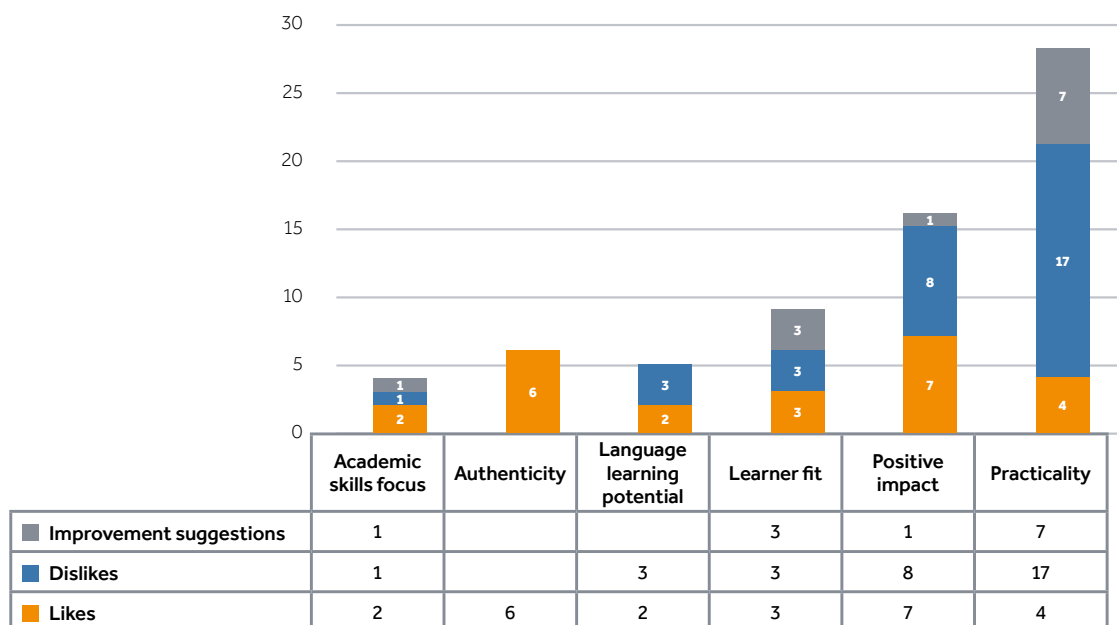
The findings of this small-scale study indicate a number of steps that could be taken to counter some of the challenges contributing to low student engagement with independent learning materials. Firstly, it is paramount to build effective support mechanisms into the materials, and to ensure that students have a point of contact for queries, problems and technical support. Secondly, the materials should be organised in a manner that makes them easy to navigate without external guidance from teachers or course books. Thirdly, the materials may have broader appeal if designed to cater for a variety of learning styles. This could, for example, also include use of collaborative tasks. Finally, it is worth considering making engagement with

the materials form a small part of the overall assessment for the module. Changes to the materials and approach towards Independent Learning for the EAP course discussed in this project are currently being considered.

Whilst this study has indicated many potential reasons for low student engagement with the materials, it has also discovered some positive trends in the students' overall perceptions of online and autonomous learning. Students praised the convenience of online materials, and many appreciated having a source of learning and information that was not dependent on the teacher or the classroom. Indeed, numerous suggestions were made to organise the materials in such a way as to enable students to more independently find and choose tasks helpful for them. This demonstrates a positive desire for more autonomy on the part of some students, which is an encouraging insight in light of the current move towards more self-directed learning in Higher Education.

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**Figure 2:**  
Number of coded references per evaluation criterion

### EVALUATION CRITERIA

■ Likes
 ■ Dislikes
 ■ Improvement suggestions

# Implementing continuous summative assessments for enhanced student engagement: benefits and challenges at The University of Edinburgh

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*We implemented a series of continuous summative assessments (CSAs) on our Foundation English for Academic Purposes course in 2016-2017 in order to enhance student engagement. 100% of our 28 students that year reported that they found them useful. There were, however, some challenges in terms of design and these challenges and their solutions will be explored. There will also be a discussion on the nature of student engagement: what it means and its implications for students, teachers and institutions.*

This article focuses on our experience of implementing five continuous summative assessments (CSAs) on the Foundation English for Academic Purposes course at the University of Edinburgh in 2016-2017. Worth 25% of students' summative marks for term one and 15% in term 2, the new CSAs (5 in each term) formalised small tasks that students would be doing in any case, focusing on paraphrasing and summarising, cohesion, referencing and critical writing in term one and writing sections of a comparative critical review in term two.

The new CSAs were initially implemented in part to help alleviate pressure on students at the end of each term. The main impetus, however, was to allow IFP colleagues to monitor whether students were engaging with the course throughout the term. In terms of 'engagement' then, the main driver felt rather more like a neo-liberal, new managerialist effort to monitor students than to provide them with an enhanced learning environment (MacFarlane and Tomlinson (2017)).

However, continuous summative assessment can have a powerful impact on student motivation and achievement (Cauley and McMillan, 2010) and with 100% of our 28 students reporting in end of term feedback that they liked the CSAs and found them useful in term 1, it did seem that they had provided an enhanced learning experience. One student said "The CSAs were very useful because each of them covered only one point, so it was easy to follow and it really helped to understand each". Another said "I was able to see my

progress over the weeks", while another said the CSAs "helped me pay more attention to the mistakes I didn't know I was making".

While student feedback was very positive, there were also some challenges in terms of the design of the CSAs. First, students were given a mark simply for completion of the CSAs, and some found this demotivating; they felt that they had put a lot of time and effort into their work and wanted a mark for performance. Related to this, all students completed all CSAs and so effectively all achieved 100% in each, while the formative feedback they were receiving often suggested areas requiring improvement. Some students found this disconnect between marks and feedback confusing.

Also, while students felt the feedback received on the CSAs was useful, some wanted it to be more detailed, and indeed some asked if they could do more CSAs. However teachers were already overburdened with administration and marking associated with the CSAs. Further, some teachers expressed doubts whether the CSAs should be both formative – i.e. providing formative feedback – and summative – i.e. counting towards their final mark. They felt that formative work should be just that – formative – and should not count towards students' final grades. Harlen and James (1997) argue that the important distinctions in function and characteristics between formative and summative assessment have become blurred, that there is little genuinely formative assessment left.



Based on this feedback, we made a few key changes to the CSAs for term 2. First, we asked teachers to provide feedback using *GradeMark*® rather than via a separate feedback sheet. It was hoped that the use of this technology would give teachers the opportunity to provide more detailed feedback for students and that fewer electronic and paper documents would be required, making the provision of feedback less onerous and time-consuming. Second, students were given marks for performance on the CSAs. This also helped teachers to conceptualise the CSAs as summative in nature, but with provision of formative feedback after each.

Finally, as the CSAs in term two involved writing sections of a formative comparative critical review and were directly mapped to the marking criteria for summative critical review, they were by default more 'integrated' with the course content and the final assignment than the CSAs in term 1. This improvement was strongly reflected in the student feedback in term 2. For instance, one student noted that "CSAs are useful to write final essay as we already know how to format the structure and which concepts are needed". Notably, two students used the word 'engage' in their comments, suggesting that "[CSAs are] a good practice to keep students engaged in the content and develop writing skills" and "... CSAs make students engage with the subject and practice for the final essay". Again, with 100% of our students reporting they found the CSAs useful in term 2, student feedback was extremely positive, with comments revealing that the improvements we had made had had an impact.

The issue of the onerous marking and administration load for teachers was not resolved, however. Whilst some preferred using *GradeMark*®, teachers continued to struggle to find enough time to mark and provide feedback for all the CSAs. Trotter (2006) admits that continuous summative assessment requires extra administration and marking from teachers but she argues that the benefits for students are such that the extra time and effort required from teachers and the resource required from institutions is warranted. At the University of Edinburgh, for the moment, extra time has been allocated, but this is not necessarily sustainable in the long term.

## Conclusion

The CSAs proved popular with the students, improving their engagement on a number of levels. This came at a cost, however, with teachers struggling to cope with the increased workload involved. Trowler (2010, p.3) states that 'Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution'. While this is laudable, we found that in practice it is difficult to achieve this balance.

Looking to the future, we are considering more widely the role of EAP in the Edinburgh IFP, including who it is for and its purpose. For the moment the programme is still relatively small in comparison to other IFPs, and as such all students undertake the same EAP course, regardless of English level. This is likely to change for 2018-2019 however, as the programme grows and with the students enrolling on the programme becoming more polarised in terms of their academic English skills and levels of English language proficiency at entry. A concern for student engagement will be at the heart of our planning for our new courses.

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# In Class Group Competition: an exploratory game approach for enhanced student participation

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*This article shares the preliminary findings of the exploratory introduction of game features in a summative group work project. The aim was to enhance student engagement in a business studies module. The main data is derived from observation of students and subsequent feedback. Further study is needed to generate more rigorous findings; however, this article explains how introducing simple game features was well received by students and appears to have generated positives for the learning experience.*

## Introduction

The idea of using game features to enhance learning has gained increased attention and many research studies have been conducted using gamification in educational environments, with a view to enhancing student engagement (Faiella and Ricciardi, 2005). The idea of play/game as part of learning has a longer history in education; however, gamification is a new term (Deterding et al., 2011; Turan et al., 2016). Deterding et al. (2011) define it as the 'use of design, elements and characteristics for games in non-gaming contexts'. Kapp (2012) looks for a more demanding parameter, stating that gamification should enhance and deepen the learning experiences offered. Often this perspective will result in a more multi-dimensional set of game features being included in the learning process. This article discusses how elements of gamification were introduced to enhance learning, including peer assessment and blended learning.

This paper firstly explains the group project focused on here and describes the 'game rules', which include the specific activities and the criteria applied for groups to score points. Then the response of the students and main findings from the implementation of the features are explained. Finally, brief conclusions and recommendations are drawn.

## Market Research Project with Group Competition Points

Introduction to Business and Management is one of the key modules for students wishing to progress on a business pathway at the University of Reading. The market research project is designed to enhance various skills needed for study at undergraduate level.

Teamwork was needed during the project but the assessment was on an individual report basis. This report was based on data largely collected by the group members. The project consists of five learning stages: Stage 1 - Independent study (involving home study to prepare for the classroom sessions); Stage 2 - Classroom sessions involving studying marketing theories (group members working together); Stage 3 - Collection of marketing data in the field as a group; Stage 4 - Presentation of data and video clips as a group; and Stage 5 - Writing-up the individual marketing report.

In order to encourage active participation in learning, and to incubate a positive team work spirit, as well as provide a 'fun factor', game features including: rules, points, rewards ('trophy' points), a leaderboard, a 'race', and instant feedback (using online learning software Socrative) were all employed as gamification features. The students were divided into groups of three or four and the 'trophy' points idea was introduced at the beginning of the project. It was explained that the groups would be rewarded with trophy points added to their individual report depending on performance. The extra marks awarded would depend on the number of competition points earned, and were to be judged against criteria / stages as follows:

1. Attendance (as part of weekly rankings);
2. Completion of home study;
3. Contribution to classroom discussion;
4. Presentation (content and visual creativity);
5. Video clip (creativity);
6. Team work (cohesion and delegation);
7. Team name (creativity).

From these the total points and final ranking was calculated and this was then converted to the trophy points awarded. The policy of the University of Reading does not however allow attendance and peer assessment to be added to a marking scheme. These were not therefore used in the final marks, but only as part of the weekly ranking and as such were useful tools. The criteria of 'creativity' and 'team work' were peer-assessed by students using a seven-point scale. Introducing peer assessment also gives the students a novel way of learning and as these criteria are non-academic – except for one criterion (i.e. content of presentation) – the students are more likely to think their peers are competent to assess their work against those measures (see Topping, 2009). The total points that each group earned were then weighted to account for the number of people in each group. Then finally the groups were ranked based on their total points earned in each category. The highest extra marks a group could gain was 5 and the lowest was 2 marks.

## Main Findings and the Student Response

The weekly group points were revealed at the beginning of each session and there was a tangible sense of excitement in the classroom each week. Students responded positively in general to the points system and enjoyed the sense of the 'game' and its competitive features. One of the students commented that: *'this competition is exciting and encouraging to complete homework, as the tutor checks it and gives points. Often homework does not contribute to marks.'* As the weeks progressed, it was observed that some students' completion of homework improved, but still some had not finished it, so it appears that a positive motivating factor here was limited to some students. Students commented about how the game features: *'encouraged me to read more about the topic', 'made us more motivated as we want to get higher points than other groups'* and *'made me more enthusiastic'*. Furthermore, they enjoyed the fun element and noted that the novel approach *'made it more fun', 'interesting', 'entertaining'* and that they *'enjoy learning'* as a result. Using Socrative may have influenced these comments. However, there were two negative comments about the competitive nature of the interaction, such that when *'making it competitive – other groups don't help'* and this *'made group members stress'*.

It was not possible to measure with certainty if attendance rates improved as a result of the points system as there was no control measure, yet attendance was strong. As for contribution during the session, this approach seemed to encourage more students to participate in group discussions than in other instances. Some normally quieter students were surprisingly proactive and participated to challenge for trophy points. Among all the competition activities, the third element (classroom discussion) was significantly facilitated and active engagement was stimulated, as many students were keen to gain points. Furthermore, the term 'contribution point!' was often uttered by students outside the gamified situation when a student did something good, showing how the approach appeared to have been absorbed positively by the class.

As for assessing creativity in the groups, this was largely assessed through the use of creative IT skills i.e. making a short video clip, a visual presentation and inventing a group name. Students were motivated to do this and were very interested in watching the video clips of other groups and the visual presentations. The skill set required for this element of the project is non-academic and simple criteria enabled assessment of peer work. The assessment of creativity can be subjective and the reliability and validity of peer assessment may be regarded as acceptable in this instance (Orsmond, 2004; Topping, 2009). It was obvious that the quality of video clips exceeded the previous years' projects (when points were not introduced) and the gaming elements appear to have induced extra effort.

## Conclusions and recommendations

More data is clearly needed and a more robust methodology for evaluation needs to be applied for a more scientific measurement of student engagement using this approach. Many students seemed to enjoy the game features and it was clear that students were more actively participating and this resulted in enhanced student engagement with the learning content. The actual management of data i.e. recording the data did become time-consuming and so there is a time burden here for the tutor which should be acknowledged and factored in by those wishing to replicate this type of enhancement and monitoring.

Recommendations for further implementation relate to attendance as there is a close correlation between attendance and pass rates (Hughes, 2009). Further game features could be applied to encourage attendance. Using multiple methods for points awards is a facilitatory element for students with a variety of skill sets and dispositions. The use of a simple set of game features shows how a fun element can enhance student engagement, although the negative impacts of competitive environments does also need to be acknowledged and managed. It is important to keep a balance and not create an overly competitive environment. Tutors can adopt their own unique gamification in their modules and, depending on tutors' interests, skills and strengths, a more sophisticated set of game features could be used including further digital innovation.

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# Synoptic Assessment on the Foundation Certificate for Art, Design and Media

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*This article discusses the use of synoptic assessment on the International Foundation Certificate for Art, Design and Media. Students on the course take Skills for Study, and Language for Study modules and the college aims to increase student engagement by creating clear links between them. To enhance these connections, we introduced a synoptic assessment element in Skills for Study One and Historical, Cultural & Contemporary Practice in Art, Design & Media. This presentation will explain the rationale for using synoptic assessment as well as analysing the module results and feedback from students and staff on this explicit linking of modules.*

## Introduction

This article outlines the introduction of synoptic assessment on the Foundation Certificate in Art, Design and Media at the University of Brighton International College (UBIC). This involved a presentation being taught and assessed across two modules; the subject module Historical and Contemporary Culture and Practice (HCCP) and the Skills for Study 1 (SS1) module. The first section of the article is a summary of synoptic assessment and why it was implemented at the college. The second section gives more details about the changes to the assessment strategy and some of the benefits and drawbacks of the new assessments. The next part then looks at the module results and feedback from tutors and students before the conclusion introduces the next steps in this project.

## Synoptic Assessment and the Art, Design and Media Foundation Certificate

Synoptic Assessment is a form of assessment that tests different parts of a programme of study. It is designed to test: "connections between different elements of the subject" (Patrick, 2005). Using this type of assessment: "may help students to make connections between modules, may increase the level of student engagement..." (Gorra et al., 2008). As well as highlighting these connections Synoptic Assessment is one way of making assessment more programme focused rather than highlighting individual modules (McDowell, 2012).

At UBIC, students on the Foundation Programme for Art, Design and Media (ADM) study ADM modules as well as Language and Study Skills modules. The college's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies includes an aim to develop connections between

these different parts of the course. The idea is: "to build greater and more explicit links for students between Skills for Study (SS), Language for Study (LS) modules and subject modules" (UBIC 2017). This goal was motivated by feedback from staff that students were not using content from the skills modules such as referencing and citations in their subject work. There was also feedback from students that they found coursework that was not connected to their subject de-motivating, and that having the workload at the end of term was too heavy. Taking into account the college's strategy as well as student and staff feedback gave three key aims for the synoptic assessment:

1. To improve student engagement by including subject materials in Skills for Study modules
2. To improve integration between modules and make assessment more programme focused
3. To make workload more manageable for students

SS1 and HCCP were chosen as the modules to be assessed synoptically due to an overlap in assessment strategy as well as in module learning outcomes. Both modules had a presentation as part of their assessment strategy in the first term; this meant that a synoptic assessment could be introduced without drastically altering the existing assessment strategies. These modules are also both non-credit bearing in the first term (HCCP has credits attached but not until later in the programme). This was also seen as a benefit as it meant the pilot would be low risk. There is also considerable overlap in the SS1 module learning outcomes and the generic learning outcomes from HCCP which meant it was possible to follow the principles of constructive alignment while designing an assessment (Biggs and Tang, 2011).



The content for the presentation was delivered in HCCP while SS1 focused on preparation and skills for the presentation. The texts that formed the basis of the HCCP module were also used in SS1 to focus on research skills. The presentation topic was 'In Arts, Design and Media is it more important to preserve the past or embrace the future?'. This was the existing question from HCCP and was designed to focus students on how different artistic movements viewed Arts relationship to history. The final presentations were watched by subject and skills tutors. Separate marks were given as the two modules have different marking criteria and so tutors were not standardised on both modules. However, to ensure consistency these marks were compared informally. Although in theory it would be possible to achieve a much higher score in one module, in practice the criteria assess similar things and all marks were close to each other. The pilot of this synoptic assessment was implemented in the Autumn term of 2016. There were 45 students on the Foundation Programme divided into 3 groups and all of these completed the synoptic assessment.

## Modules Scores and Feedback on the Pilot

Looking at the marks for the module there was a slight decrease in the average score from the previous year. However, this difference was small and the average score remained above the score necessary for progression (50).

Staff feedback was conducted using a focus group of all the tutors involved in teaching on these modules. The positives identified were that the teaching teams were working closer together to identify student needs. Both teams also felt that students were better prepared for the assessment due to the additional time to prepare in skills classes. There was also a sense that students were using the skills taught in SS1 in their assignments.

The issues that came up over the term were that students focused on the technology aspect of the question rather than the intended focus of modernism's relation to

	Autumn-15	Autumn-16
HCCP	44 Students	45 Students
Average	59	55
Presentation	61	57
SS1	44 Students	45 Students
Average	62	56
Presentation	63.4	60

history. This could have come about because of the necessity to structure the presentation around an argument to meet the skills learning outcomes. There was also a mismatch in terms of appropriate texts. The idea was for skills tutors to exploit texts supplied by the subject teachers. However students often found these texts themselves difficult to access, while when they were used in subject classes, lecturers could provide glosses for the key concepts. Overall, it was felt these drawbacks could be addressed by changing the question and agreeing texts to use in advance and that the benefits of this connection meant keeping the synoptic assessment would be advantageous.

Students were given a questionnaire on how they felt about synoptic assessment. This was sent at the end of their programme so they could compare with other modules. However, this had the drawback of meaning many students had left the college and as such the response rate was low (8 students out of 45). The responses are summarised in figure 2.

These results suggest that students viewed the synoptic assessment positively and the comments received reflected this; they showed that students viewed the reduce workload as allowing them to prepare better and valued the connection between modules. They also responded positively to focusing on Art, Design and Media topics in their skills modules. Overall, despite the slight drop in grades, the pilot achieved the three key aims of introducing synoptic assessment.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Overall, the pilot achieved the aims of enhancing links between modules and reducing student workload. The fact that the module

**Figure 1:**  
Module and presentation results for Autumn 2015 and Autumn 2016

average dropped is something to be addressed in future iterations but it has been decided to continue exploring synoptic assessment.

The next steps will be to refine the links between modules by adjusting the question and agreeing on sources between departments. There will also be an exploration of expanding the synoptic assessment to a written component in the second term and of combining marking criteria across modules. This would improve consistency whilst enhancing the quality assurance within the college as assessment could be second marked by tutors in different departments.

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**Figure 2:**  
Student Questionnaire Results

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Agree	Disagree
The connection between modules was clear	5	3	0	0
I used HCCP contents in SS1	5	2	0	1
I used skills from SS1 in HCCP assessments	4	3	0	1
The workload in term 2 was higher than in term 1	5	1	2	0
I would be happy with more synoptic assessments	3	3	2	0
I would prefer 1 assessment to be used in 2 modules	6	1	0	1

# Increasing Engagement Through Structured Tutorials

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*This article describes an attempt to bridge the “engagement gap” through the use of structured and focussed tutorial tasks. After providing some theoretical background, it describes a project which used reading texts and reflective tasks followed by focussed tutorials. The results of a questionnaire given to students about their reactions to these tasks are then described. The implications of these results are analysed and future directions for the project laid out.*

Although the precise definition of “student engagement” varies, it would seem axiomatic that it is a key determiner of a student’s ability to successfully transition into an undergraduate course in a new country, culture and, usually, language. However, it is also clear that this transition does not always take place effectively enough to allow the students full adaptation to the demands of their new study environment. One potential approach to mitigating this issue of an “engagement gap” is the use of structured and targeted tutorials. The aim of this article is to describe a project undertaken in a large and diverse foundation academy focussed on such an approach, and to describe the results of a student questionnaire.

## Theoretical Background

Dornyei (2009) describes his “Ideal L2 self system”. This suggests that if students have an image of their ideal future self, and this is a self that is proficient in the language, they are more likely to be motivated to learn the language. Also included in the conditions for this to succeed are effective strategies, and also an idea of the negative consequences of not striving toward this ideal. This is complemented by the ideas of Carol Dweck. She discusses how there is a difference between students who see their intellectual capacity as fixed and unmalleable and those who regard it as something to be nurtured and developed. Thus, she argues, successful students are those with a “growth mindset” - those who train their skills and intellectual abilities (Dweck and Master, 2009). Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2010) discuss how spaces where cultures interact are often not a part of either culture, but in fact a space that comes into existence away from, but connected

to, both. If left undefined, this can easily fall prey to the temptations of stereotyping and othering. Together, these three theoretical viewpoints suggest that engagement is not a given in a programme such as an International Foundation - it is something that needs to be carefully nurtured in the student population.

## Approach

The approach had a number of main aims. These included helping students develop a sense of autonomy for their learning, and inculcating a sense that they can take agency of their own academic development, and see their learning through the lens of a growth mindset that can be developed. To this end, students need to be aware of the areas of learning and development that require the most attention. In addition, the approach aims to help define the space that the learners occupy, by explicitly explaining and discussing the academic expectations the course has of the students.

In order to achieve this, a series of advisory texts was developed. These texts discussed aspects of self study, such as vocabulary and development of time management. There was one text per week, except for very busy periods. They were around 1000 words in length each, and each one was accompanied by a reflective task in which students were encouraged to think about their own strengths and needs and how to develop strategies to develop in key areas. These were then discussed in an individual tutorial, which the students have every two weeks.

The themes were chosen in pairs. One of them was language based, such as vocabulary or reading. The other was more to do with wider academic development and included

themes such as time management and dealing with cultural differences. Tutors were able to choose which of the themes to discuss with individual students. The texts are available at <http://goo.gl/SyJa2e>

## Questionnaire

At the end of the academic year a questionnaire was sent to the students. This consisted of 7 multi item Likert scales (similar questions asking the same thing). The first group was designed to examine the students' attitude to the tutorial tasks themselves, while the second group of questions was intended to test the students' wider attitude to learning, and their foundation year. In addition, data on pathway, nationality, age and gender were collected. This was done in line with the questionnaire design protocol outlined in Dornyei (2007).

## Results

The results of the questionnaire are as follows. The Cronbach's alpha is a statistical measure that indicates that the students are answering questions consistently. Generally, a score of 0.7 and above is regarded as usable. The mean result shows the level of positivity on a scale of one to five. It is important to note that 29 out of a cohort of around 190 students filled in the questionnaire. In addition, this is a self-selecting sample.

Further statistical tests were run to include the demographic data, but no statistically significant results were found. In addition, Pearson Correlation tests were run between the scales. It is unsurprising that there were some strong correlations, for example the students who found the tutorials useful were also likely to believe that they helped them develop ( $r=0.547$ ,  $p=0.00$ ,  $n=29$ ). However, there were no strong correlations between scales that investigated the students' attitude to the tutorials and their learning more widely. There were no effects found related to age, nationality, gender or pathway.

## Discussion

The results of the questionnaire show that these tutorial documents were generally well received by students, but not overwhelmingly so. Students seemed to understand the value of this approach to a limited extent, and it is important to note that the scales with the highest scores were not the ones that addressed the students' overall orientation, nor their reaction to these tasks. In addition, the lack of correlation between the scales would suggest that the use of the tutorials didn't interact at an obvious level with the attributes identified by Dornyei for L2 motivation.

It is also unclear whether the relative lack of engagement was due to the specific content and style of the tasks. In other words, did the questionnaire reflect the attitude of the students to the individual tasks delivered on this programme, or to the wider approach of systematic reflective tasks unrelated to specific course content? It would therefore be an interesting further development to compare different strategies using the same approach with similar cohorts of students.

However, this is not to suggest that these tutorials are without value. There is clearly a positive overall reaction from the students who answered the questionnaire. This, then, suggests that the need for this type of development activity is supported by both the theoretical background and the empirical data. However, the strength of this conclusion does need to be tempered by a recognition of the small sample size, and the limited richness of data captured by such questionnaires.

## Future Directions

During the year that this project ran, it became clear that there were a number of competing demands on the time that has been put aside for these tutorials. This led to a lack of enthusiasm for the tasks, which then started to resemble a burden rather than a resource. Therefore, a change in the delivery method of these tasks has been planned. In order to promote a greater sense of buy-in, there will be three channels for the discussion of these tasks. While the overarching approach of a reading text followed by a task will remain the same, the mode of follow up discussion will be more flexible. This could be in class time as a group discussion, online as discussion on the VLE or in tutorials. Teachers will be able to mix these approaches as they see fit. It is hoped that this flexibility will cultivate greater enthusiasm for the tasks from all key stakeholders.

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	Cronbach's alpha	Scale title	Mean (1-5)
1	.717	I found the tutorials useful	3.01
2	.735	I took part in the tutorial tasks	3.39
3	.855	The tutorial tasks helped me develop	3.46
4	.858	The tasks helped me become a more reflective learner	3.43
5	.739	I am intrinsically motivated	3.74
6	.727	I have a strong future self idea	3.74
7	.814	I enjoyed the foundation course overall	3.99

# Engaging Foundation Learners with a Student-led Magazine – the Experience of the BIA, University of Birmingham

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*This paper outlines the way in which a student-led, tutor supported magazine has promoted learner engagement at the Birmingham International Academy (University of Birmingham). The article describes how a magazine project can be a way of fostering agency and motivation, two essential components in engagement. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the project is presented as supporting three strands of learner engagement described by Fredricks et al. (2004, p.60): behavioural, emotional and cognitive. The paper also outlines how the magazine project proceeds each year.*

The role of agency, i.e. learner empowerment through active participation and control in the learning process, is widely acknowledged in successful learning, particularly in the field of language learning (e.g. Huang, 2011; Mercer, 2012). Creating opportunities for agency at foundation level can, however, be challenging, given the younger age and experience of the learners who are transitioning from the more structured and familiar learning context of high school to a tertiary education system which aims to foster autonomy and independence (HEA, 2014). This seems particularly important in the case of international students who, as noted throughout the literature (see Lillyman & Bennett, 2014), are often learning to adapt to a completely new learning culture.

Since 2012, the Foundation Pathways programme at the Birmingham International Academy (BIA, University of Birmingham) has fostered opportunities for learner agency through a student-led magazine project (current issue: <https://tinyurl.com/yccw87ua>) in which the students are at the heart of the creative and decision-making process. As indicated in comments from recently participating students (Civinini, 2017), the project provides opportunities for developing academically, but more importantly is a valuable source of experience and skills.

The magazine project can be viewed as supporting three strands of learner engagement described by Fredricks et al. (2004, p.60): behavioural, emotional and

cognitive. This paper will briefly explore each of these strands in turn while outlining how the project proceeds each year.

The BIA foundation magazine project is generally supported by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors and begins at the start of the academic year with a recruitment drive to enlist students who are interested in participating. Much of this revolves around showing previous issues of the magazine (which is available online and may also be given to newly arriving students in print form during Welcome Week) and asking teachers to promote the project in their classes. Once interest has been generated, students then sign up to an initial meeting to decide together how the project should proceed and to create an editorial team with the aim of producing the annual edition of the magazine by the end of Term 2 before the assessment period begins.

During project meetings (usually every two or three weeks as decided by the project team members), students are supported in establishing the roles they wish to cover and the content of the magazine. Depending on interests and language competence, some may be involved in the writing process while others take on roles in proofreading, design and promotion. Students making up the core magazine project team decide the topics and focus of articles, which usually include interviews with staff and alumni, reviews, travelogues and fieldtrip diaries, and topics of general and local interest. In some years, it



has been possible to apply for funding as part of the wider university's support of student-led projects (in itself a useful experience for students who then work on drawing up a project proposal). In most years, however, the cost of publishing is met internally by the BIA. The magazine may then be used for marketing purposes as well as being circulated to students. Copies are given to all contributors and a digital version is also generated (e.g. using free online applications such as *Youblisher*).

The size and make-up of the magazine project team varies from year to year. For the purposes of this paper, seven representative ex-foundation students (four female and three male) of different nationalities (China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Peru, Hungary and Rwanda), levels of English competence (IELTS 5.5 – 8.0) and years of project involvement (from 2012/13 to 2015-16) were video-interviewed (4) or audio-interviewed (3) for qualitative data regarding their magazine experience. Quantitative data from a small-scale online feedback survey (11 respondents) following the magazine's debut year (2012-13) were also drawn upon. Though interviews and survey data refer to a limited number of students, it is proposed that they adequately represent the foundation magazine experience overall.

Relating to *behavioural engagement*, which Fredricks et al. (ibid.) relate to participation, a magazine project appears to support younger students who may find it daunting to join university clubs (or who may even be prevented from doing so due to age restrictions) by providing a scaffolded activity within a restricted specifically foundation-level context. This seemed particularly important for students with lower levels of language competence. One 5.5 IELTS level student reported, for example that she felt 'less shy' speaking to others working on the magazine even when they were not members of her class or pathway, but 'scary' (sic) of speaking to people she did not know outside the foundation context. Many of the students interviewed reported that their experience encouraged them to look into joining broader university-wide clubs following their foundation year. Some students also felt confident taking part in more public writing, as can be seen in the example of one of the founder editors (2012-13) of the magazine, Xiaoyu Song, who went on to write a piece for the *Guardian* (Song, 2014) or Rashad (magazine designer 2014-15) who contributed to his departmental

website (Borbely, 2017). Small-scale student-led projects such as this therefore appear to be a useful way both to build confidence during the foundation year and promote future extra-curricular engagement as students progress onto their chosen degree courses.

In terms of *emotional engagement*, the magazine project appears to foster positive affective attitudes towards both teachers and peers. Over 80% of students surveyed stated that they joined the magazine project to make friends, while the social aspect of the meetings (which are usually very informal and accompanied by refreshments) also featured consistently in the video interviews. 60% of those surveyed reported that the magazine project created a sense of 'belonging' within the foundation community, with one student reporting that she enjoyed the 'contact between pathways' as the magazine attracts students intending to progress to all five colleges within the university. Teachers involved in the project have also reported that they enjoy meeting and socialising with students in a less formal setting outside the classroom.

Where *cognitive engagement* is concerned, the magazine develops transferable skills and improves learners' interpersonal/intercultural communication alongside more formal academic skills (e.g. awareness of genre, time management, peer review and group-work). Many of the students interviewed stated that the magazine experience helped them to develop their soft skills and provided excellent opportunities for their CV when applying for part-time work or internships. Two of those interviewed reported joining the magazine specifically with this in mind. Interestingly, though not writing within an academic genre, many students reported gaining more confidence with their writing skills overall or with proofreading and checking skills (just under 56% and 36% of those surveyed, respectively). Anecdotally, teachers also reported seeing students grow in awareness of different genres as they began to grasp the need for an appropriate style of writing in different contexts. Students also made frequent reference to how the experience developed their groupwork and speaking skills (45% and 54% of those surveyed, respectively), and during her interview, one student even related how the project helped her to negotiate a difficult relationship with another group member, which then led to them becoming firm friends.

**Figure 1:**  
The Key magazine  
front cover 2016 issue.



There are, of course, challenges when engaging in a project of this kind. Several students interviewed were quick to identify the challenge of maintaining motivation and stressed the importance of regular meeting attendance as a way to keep up momentum. The differing language competence of members of the project team also presented communication challenges. While two higher level students interviewed noted how the experience actually helped them to communicate better orally with people from different countries, they also pointed out that it was at times challenging to get those less proficient in spoken English to participate fully in discussions. The role of the EAP tutor is important here as he/she can support students who may struggle to express themselves and ensure that their voice is heard.

This paper has provided a snapshot of the way in which a student-led magazine can enrich the foundation year experience and promote student engagement. There are many other ways in which the magazine project has both enabled students to make a positive contribution to their foundation programme and has itself contributed to the learners' academic and personal achievements. More information on how to set up a similar project can be found in Civinini (op cit.). The author is happy to answer questions by email or pass on queries from students to the current year's magazine team who are keen to explore the possibility of future collaboration with other institutions.

Previous issues of the magazine can be viewed online here:

<http://tinyurl.com/hm3smuy> (2012-13)

<http://tinyurl.com/nz2xrca> (2013-14)

<http://tinyurl.com/jxzo9ba> (2014-15)

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# 'Making it real': A practitioner approach to innovation in EAP seminar speaking assessment

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*The article charts the development of a new speaking assessment to increase the intellectual challenge of the test topics and elicit greater contributions from the stronger students. The process highlighted the difficulties international students, of any ability level, have with seminar interaction and performance. The aim, therefore, was to identify how speaking assessment can be a meaningful experience, add value to 'using English' but not disadvantage weaker students. Initial findings indicate more natural interaction is occurring. This has necessitated investigation into how the seminars are assessed, suitability of current assessment criteria and backwash effects on semester two seminar activities.*

The following article documents changes to the final EAP speaking assessment on our preparatory International Year One – Business programme. The programme teaches the first-year Newcastle University Business School modules to international students with an additional EAP module and, upon successful completion of this first year, students progress to the second year at the Business School. The changes were in response to external examiners' recommendations in 2014/15 to explore how the intellectual challenge of the topics assigned for the semester 2 speaking test could be increased, especially to facilitate greater contributions from the stronger students.

## Background

Previous assessment involved consensus-reaching tasks in groups of 3-4 students, with ability measured in three key areas: task fulfilment and interaction; grammar and vocabulary; and fluency, coherence and pronunciation. Four key issues arose from this: First, student perception of the assessment was "just say something". They often produced monologic responses; in some instances, just repeating the task background. Second, there was little genuine interaction among the student groups. Third, there was limited engagement with the assessment task or construction of a developed argument. Finally, the over-emphasis on use of English and speech meant that students prioritised their language over the seminar task and interaction.

This highlighted the difficulties that international students of different linguistic ability can have with peer interaction in a seminar setting. The objectives for 2015-16 were, therefore, to identify how speaking assessment could happen:

1. to make the assessment task meaningful (useful) to the students;
2. to add value to using English (in preparation for the challenge of Year 2 seminar discussions);
3. to not disadvantage students with lower language ability.

## New Speaking Assessment

We developed a new test over the year with the following considerations. The interactive nature of small-group assessment was retained but consensus reaching was replaced with a discursive task typical of an undergraduate seminar environment. Seminar discussion would initiate from an unseen prompt question, based on a prepared journal article, to minimise the opportunity for a "rehearsed" initial response. Students would bring their annotated copies of the article to the assessment and there were further unseen prompts to facilitate discussion if needed. These consisted of broad questions involving evaluation, implication (cause/effect) and comparison/contrast and specific questions responding to quotations from the journal article. The Marketing module is a core first-year module and popular with the students so for 2015-2016, the topic of Social Media was chosen.

Journal articles were taken from a source familiar to students (Business Horizons) and used in subject module seminars and for background reading, using the following rationale: Current articles allow scope for differentiation. The content offers good background on the topics and explains key terms clearly so lower-level students are not disadvantaged. Mid- and high-level students can research more up-to-date resources to

support or refute the claims made. The content includes business suggestions for higher-level students to critique and examples which can be elaborated on (mid-level) or researched further (high-level). The reference list allows mid- and high-level students to search for additional sources. Three weeks' preparation time would help to alleviate test anxiety and stimulate interest in the assessment task itself so that discussion is as natural as possible and the test has the potential to be "challenging, [but] instructive and even an enjoyable experience" (Underhill (2004: 6).

## The Pilot Test

We conducted the pilot test in March 2016 with International Foundation Programme students of Business (i.e. pre-year one students). They had a range of IELTS speaking test scores of between 6.0 and 7.5 which was broadly comparable to the International Year One students, which gave us a more accurate sense of test validity despite their younger age, immaturity and only one-week preparation time. Nine participants provided us with three test groups. We allowed them to choose their own test groups, which fell into gender specific groups of friends. Each group sat around a table, facing two assessors with a camera facing each test group diagonally to minimise obtrusiveness. This set up was familiar to the students from their end of semester 1 speaking test assessment in December/January of the same year.

We identified seven key observable elements for the pilot test. Clare, who had researched the texts and developed the seminar questions and unseen prompts, observed student response to the seminar question and ability to remain on task as well as reference to and citation of the article and any further research conducted by the students. As EAP Module Leader, I observed how students listened and responded to each other's contributions and how they used these contributions to shape the seminar discussion as well as to what extent the language they used was appropriate and effective for an academic seminar speaking environment.

## Observations

**Group 1:** *The students settled quickly. They used clarification questions, examples and additional points and reference back to previous points and natural interruption occurred. All students referred to the text, used subject-specific vocabulary confidently and their own knowledge to further the discussion, including examples and other ideas. This was a good indicator of high-level student performance - fluent, natural-sounding discussion of the subject with evidence*

*of further research and natural interaction. The students realised that they had not really focussed on the question; an interesting point.*

**Group 2:** *Discussion began slowly but with good eye contact between the students, good responses to the points made, with reference to the text and good interaction as the discussion developed. Student 3 started well but her contributions became infrequent and interaction limited. She was encouraged to participate with targeted questions from the other students, showing evidence of teamwork and peer support. As this group were not as strong as group 1, the teamwork exhibited highlighted the importance of the group make-up to encourage interaction.*

**Group 3:** *One expected participant did not attend so a member of Group 1 stepped in to replace him. The slow responses from Student 9 suggested he had not prepared the text so he relied on his own subject knowledge and examples. Student 8 largely facilitated the discussion. Subject-specific vocabulary was in evidence and relevant ideas were employed to develop discussion. One prompt question was used but responses were brief. The group had not prepared or practised together. Despite the strong language ability demonstrated, these students would have scored poorly overall for interaction and discussion.*

## Findings

**2015/16:** The results from the pilot test were positive and suggested it would be a suitable assessment for the Year One students. Longer preparation time would allow them further research and reading opportunities and seminar skills practice in and outside class would build competency and confidence in seminar discussion.

Seminar skills were therefore introduced into the semester 2 syllabus for students to recognise and practise key areas of seminar discussion pertinent to both academic seminar discussion and to the expectation of an assessed seminar (Bygate, 2011). These included reporting on a text and verbal citation; preparing background reading and annotating a text; reading critically and preparing further research; discussion (and verbal citation); unseen questions and a practice test with feedback.

Focus on language was noticeably more implicit within communicative effectiveness, necessitating a rethink on the validity of discrete grammar/vocabulary and fluency/pronunciation scores, given that value judgements of grammar/vocabulary are traditionally based on written, not spoken, grammar and fluency/coherence tend to be judged against native-speaker standards of speaking (Bygate, 2011; Luoma, 2004; Paran, 2012).

However, high language ability students continue to rely on competent listenership, language and speech to assure them of stronger scores thereby neglecting the key area of task fulfilment and interaction and peer practice. Lower language ability students often compensated for lower scores in language and speech by practising much more with their peers, thereby performing more strongly than expected in listenership, task fulfilment and interaction.

**2016/17:** Improvements to the marking criteria this year reflected the broader range of seminar skills demonstrated. These were: Interaction (listening to other group members); Interaction (responding to the other group members); Discussion (managing the points under discussion); Discussion (addressing the task); Communicative Effectiveness (language) and Communicative Effectiveness (speech).

Findings this year suggested more interaction is happening, more naturally in most cases. Student talk is becoming more content responsible and students are coming away with new insights into the content and more understanding of effective seminar behaviour.

## Conclusions

We feel a significant move has been made towards truly assessing students' ability to fully participate in academic seminars. Students now need to use subject content and demonstrate understanding of it and how it relates to other reading. They must relate to and build on the contributions of other students to collectively build an argument and construct their understanding of the seminar topic. Students also need to use language in situationally appropriate ways, which will call for further work on how "communicative effectiveness" is assessed.

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## Managing student expectations to enhance international student recruitment

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*Stricter UKVI controls appear negative and there are fears that this will deter international students from applying to UK universities. However, this paper will demonstrate that IFP student expectations of the UK appear to be largely positive because of long-standing UK country of origin (COO) effects and strong pull factors. From the research it is clear that IFP students do not feel that the UK is unwelcoming. Since the positive COO effects still actively attract these students it is important to continue promoting UK universities within the context of the country of origin.*

### Introduction

Two marketing concepts that help explain international student recruitment are Country of Origin Effects (COO) (Aichner, 2014) and push-pull factors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). COO effects can be defined as the perceived effect on the value of a product due to its country of origin. The UK has historically enjoyed both a positive COO effect and strong pull factors, placing it as a highly attractive destination for overseas study because of educational prestige and wide acceptance of UK qualifications. It could be assumed that this positive COO effect would ensure engagement. However, increasingly stringent UKVI restrictions, alongside the increasing attractiveness of competing destinations would appear to negate the UK COO effect (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

The research identified pull factors that entice students to study abroad and push factors that influence students' decisions not to study at home. It was hypothesised that recent government policies tightening immigration rules that make applying for visas costlier, slower and more restrictive would affect international students' perceptions of the UK negatively thus negating some positive COO pull factors.

Research methodology: 11 (2 male, 9 female) international students from the University of Kent's International Foundation Programme (IFP) volunteered to take part in a focus group. Nine different nationalities were represented. Their responses informed the questionnaire which was distributed to the whole IFP cohort.

63 responses were analysed (35 nationalities, 31 female, 32 male). The survey included 10 questions (both open and closed). Simple descriptive statistics were used to identify factors students considered most important in their choices and decision making.

### Findings: The findings are grouped as responses to the four research questions.

#### **Q1: Does the current immigration policy in the UK create a perceived unwelcome environment for international students?**

1.1. *Universities UK (2013) raised concerns about the impression that the UK Government's immigration policy is having on international students studying in the UK. The starkest evidence provided by the National Union of Students" states that over 50% of international students already in the UK "believe the UK government is not welcoming towards international students, and 19% would not recommend the UK as a place to study to a friend or relative." (NUS, 2014).*

1.2. *However, the responses revealed that students did not find the UK visa application process particularly restrictive. Out of 62 respondents, 54 felt the UK was welcoming and only 5 felt the UK was actually unwelcoming. Some even compared the UK favourably with the USA in terms of ease of application. There are a number of factors that could influence this finding. Students may have had help when applying for their visa. The only complaint was that the process could be slow. Age could also*

be an important factor as their application process may well be simpler than for research postgraduates, and they are less likely to want to work or stay in the UK post course completion. The majority are around 18-20 years old and many have come to the UK on the advice of their parents. They may not have been particularly involved in the visa application process as many in the focus group observed that they were unaware of the visa application process. Many are from wealthy backgrounds and so again possibly neither need nor want to work, so work restrictions are less likely to affect them.

1.3. One participant commented that she had had to travel from Mexico to Columbia to get a UK visa involving extra time and expense. The House of Lords Select Committee have raised this as a concern in the context of students from African countries who "have to spend over £1000 to travel to another country to buy a visa to the UK." (House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence, 2014: p.109).

### **Q2: Is the positive COO factor becoming undermined by immigration policy to the extent that it should be downplayed in university marketing strategies?**

2.1 Evidence from the research indicated that COO factors were not being undermined by immigration policy in the case of IFP students. Generally, Britain has maintained a favourable reputation.

### **Q3: What push/ pull factors influence students' choices. E.g. pull such as relatives living in the UK, or push factors such as parents educated in the UK, perceiving the UK as a superior provider of quality education for their children compared to that provided locally.**

3.1 Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002: p.83) "push factors" include: level of economic wealth, degree of involvement in the world economy and priority placed on education by the government of the home nation, and the availability of educational opportunities in the student's home country. Push factors identified in the survey are as follows: low standard of education in home country; limited choice of courses; qualifications not recognised widely outside of the home country. These tally with Mazzarol and Soutar's findings. Other reasons identified were: safety considerations; students wanting a change of environment; an opportunity to become more independent; recommendations from parents; family being pro-British; wanting the chance to travel.

3.2 Mazzarol and Soutar (2002: p.83) identified the following pull factors that influence potential students' decisions about either destination country or institution: knowledge and awareness of the host country and personal recommendation(s) and environment. The

findings from the survey largely agreed with this list. An important additional pull-factor was English being the second language of the student, therefore making the UK an attractive choice.

### **Q4: Why have the current cohort of students chosen the UK ahead of other countries?**

4.1 Pull factors were decisive and included the experience of parents and siblings studying/ who had studied in the UK. Students studying Law chose the UK because of similarities in the legal system between their home country and the UK. The students themselves valued the cultural experience in the UK. Interestingly the UK scored higher than the USA because of not having so diverse a range of courses. Students like the focus of UK degree programmes, and not being expected to do courses that they consider irrelevant to their main programme or career aims.

The main research finding was a balance between reported push and pull factors. Unexpectedly, government policies did not appear to make the UK unwelcoming to the participants. However, this may be attributable to the characteristics of the sample surveyed. Government restrictions seem to have less impact on IFP students who are mostly young, from a wealthy background, and who have not yet determined what they want to do post-graduation.

## **Limitations**

The findings are not generalizable, because of sample size, and because the sample was confined to IFP students rather than the wider student body. Obviously, the results cannot represent all international students in the UK. Other research findings in both academic and professional publications point heavily towards a dissatisfied international student body in the UK and perceive the UK as losing market share and garnering negative feedback (English UK, 2013. Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002: p.148).

## **Conclusions**

COO factors are important and push/pull factors provided a useful research framework for this study. There was little evidence to support the assumption that the UK immigration policy would result in a dilution of positive COO factors (as revealed in the survey) but it would be unwise to ignore it in recruiting post-IFP students.

The findings generally show the UK and the application process in a positive light. Universities should continue to promote IFP courses since they meet the needs of students who appear to remain immune to the negative visa developments. Furthermore, the IFP is important as it is a heavy load-bearing

course - IFP students generally go onto degree programmes of 3-4 years and could also move onto postgraduate study. UK universities can therefore continue to trade on the positive COO factors for IFP students, whereas for Stage 1 and above they should modify their marketing strategy to ameliorate the negative COO effects of government migration policy.

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# From Agency to Participation: the transition from International Foundation Programme to undergraduate study

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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*This article reports on two international students' use of personal agency in their transition from foundation to undergraduate studies. The findings show that the students used personal agency in three key areas: seeking to become independent learners; engaging support from family and friends; attempting to gain participation in their Community of Practice. Despite both passing the examinations at the end of the first semester, the marked contrast in the experiences of the two students strongly suggests that personal agency alone is insufficient. Recommendations are made for areas where institutions could enhance international students' integration into the university environment.*

The study was undertaken as part of PhD studies.

## Introduction

The two Chinese students who feature in this article took part in a longitudinal study of international students' transition experiences. Ethical approval was obtained to follow them through a one-year International Foundation programme (IFP) in Business (2015/16) at a Russell Group University and the first semester of undergraduate study (2016/17). These two students remained at the same university for their undergraduate study, unlike the other students in the study who transferred to different universities. They therefore had fewer adjustments to make as some elements of their environment remained stable.

Yeong is now studying on an Accountancy course, delivered in collaboration with PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC), and Shuang's degree course is Economics with Chinese studies. This article compares the two students' use of personal agency to navigate the transition to undergraduate study and participate in their new Community of Practice (CoP).

## Background to the study

McGhie (2016) identifies factors which have a major influence on students in their first year of Higher Education study. Their expectations on arrival are key, as are the challenges they face in the transitional period and the strategies they

use to overcome those challenges. McGhie found that the more successful students had 'correct' expectations and took responsibility for their own learning. They also harnessed the support of family and friends and made strategic or smart choices.

Expectations of Higher Education study are shaped by prior educational experience but the way individuals face challenges also depends on their use of personal agency. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.". A key term here is 'socioculturally' because it indicates that agency is always context-sensitive. Bandura (2001) describes agency as emergent because it develops over a period of time, especially in a situation where participants have crossed geographical and sociocultural boundaries. He also highlights that individuals' belief in their power to influence events is crucial to withstand the stresses of a new environment and develop resilience.

A narrative inquiry approach was used to allow the researcher access to an insider or emic perspective. In-depth interviews (seven in total) at regular intervals helped to focus on the process of change and development. The initial interview focussed on two key questions:

**What are your hopes for this year?**

**What do you think your greatest challenges will be this year?**

Subsequent interviews focussed on following up issues raised by the students.

## Preparation for British academic culture

IFPs prepare students for undergraduate study but Straker (2016) believes there tends to be a deficit discourse regarding the educational culture of Chinese students. However, the experience of Yeong and Shuang shows they both finished their Foundation programme with a well-developed understanding of the need to regulate their own learning and the ability to harness the best of both educational systems. This is shown by Yeong's comment at the end of the IFP.

The first step is to try to understand, second thing is to memorise some information that you can use in the exam, and then the third thing is your skills.

## Engaging support from family and friends

The transition to undergraduate study was accompanied by a marked change in both students' support networks, even though they continued at the same university. Yeong has grown in independence and no longer seeks family support or feels the need to have friends to 'gossip' with. Her accommodation is university owned with several students sharing a kitchen which gives her an opportunity for social interaction with home students.

Although Shuang is studying at the same university, she is on a different site and her closest friend during the IFP was a Chinese student who returned to China after the IFP. It has been difficult for Shuang to fill this gap even though she has been proactive in trying to engage with home students. Surprisingly, there are only a few Chinese students on her Economics degree course and although she has taken the initiative in introducing herself to home students, this has not led to any more than 'hi/bye' relationships. First year lectures have around 200 students so she says it is difficult to form friendships as people leave as soon as the lecture finishes. She hoped for more contact from seminars but this has been thwarted by irregular attendance of home students.

She had enjoyed groupwork on the Foundation programme but the first year of her undergraduate degree does not include any formal groupwork. In the Chinese Studies module, where she might be expected to be an 'expert', she found that, because of censorship in China, the home students know more about some aspects of China. The other area in

which she might come into contact with home students is her accommodation but this is an off-campus studio flat, with no communal areas in the building. However, she has started volunteer work teaching English and Mandarin once a week at the Chinese Welfare Association. This is a source of satisfaction because it brings her into contact with other student volunteers, although they are Hong Kong Chinese rather than home students.

## Participation in their Community of Practice: the university programme

One of the challenges in the transition period is gaining participation in the academic Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). In their undergraduate courses both Yeong and Shuang are proactive in seeking advice and feedback, although with contrasting results. Yeong is the only Chinese student on the Accountancy programme, which comprises 50 students, and finds it easy to seek advice and feedback from her subject tutor. In her Economics modules, Shuang is not experiencing significant difficulties, other than the anticipated need to spend longer reading and understanding vocabulary. She obtained 70% for her first assignment and contacted her seminar tutor for individual feedback. The tutor was a Chinese PhD student who spoke to her in Mandarin during her tutorial and whose feedback consisted solely of, "You got 70%, what do you expect? You did a good job".

## Discussion

Despite attempts to integrate in their new environment, the experiences of these two students in their first semester were very different. Yeong has become an ambassador for her course and is excited about her London work placement at the start of the second year. In contrast, Shuang remains on the margins of her CoP and has decided to go to China for her overseas placement rather than an English-speaking country. However, she has exercised personal agency to find herself a role in volunteer work.

This study shows that student transition experiences, even in the same university, can differ significantly. Both Yeong and Shuang exercised personal agency but the barriers to full participation need action at institutional as well as the individual level. The IFP was successful in preparing the students for the general academic culture of British universities but wide variations can be found at programme level. An example of this is the emphasis the IFP placed on groupwork but this skill is wasted if the first year of undergraduate study does

not include any groupwork. It also denies international students a valuable opportunity to engage in an activity where they have something in common with home students. As Shuang comments,

I don't think I am part of a community or family this year, because everyone works by their own to achieve different goals.

Ideally, there would be closer liaison between IFPs and undergraduate subject departments but there should also be more emphasis on the benefits of volunteer work or community activities to provide students with a sense of continuity which could help their transition. The students in this study had understandably focussed primarily on academic study during their IFP and had limited interaction outside their course.

More empirical studies are needed but it is hoped that these two case studies will resonate with readers and encourage initiatives to improve the experience of transition.

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# Developing Critical Engagement through Service-Learning

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*'Service-learning' occurs when students are engaged in an activity within the community which enables them to meet learning objectives on their study programme. Benefits can be considerable: Eyler et al (2001) note positive associations with themes including personal and cognitive development, academic learning and applying learning to the real world.*

*In adopting a service-learning task in an assessment on our Postgraduate Foundation year, main motivations were to improve student engagement, transition experiences and intercultural competence. This article points to such engagement with the host community as being transformative, and instrumental in a successful transition, although the impact academically is not yet quantifiable.*

## Background

Despite the many benefits brought to the institution by international students, the extent to which many of them choose to stay together, preferring not to interact with other students in class, and struggling to integrate in group work poses problems for many subject lecturers. Feedback from colleagues in the School of Management, where many students on our Pre-Masters Diploma for International Students take course units or progress to join PG programmes, suggested a particular need to address these kinds of issues during the Foundation year.

Like most Foundation programmes, the Pre-Masters is a nine-month programme which aims to provide a bridge to university study in the UK for international students who are non-native speakers of English and whose previous qualifications (academic and/or English language) did not meet Royal Holloway's entrance requirements for direct entry. However, Pre-Masters students already have an undergraduate qualification, and aim to enter a postgraduate taught (Masters), rather than an undergraduate programme. Students take one course unit in their discipline (in that department), and write an 8 000 to 10 000-word Independent Research project, as well as following a series of courses here at the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS), aimed at improving their academic English oral and written skills. Within the English language module, the Pre-Masters now includes a component, particularly aimed

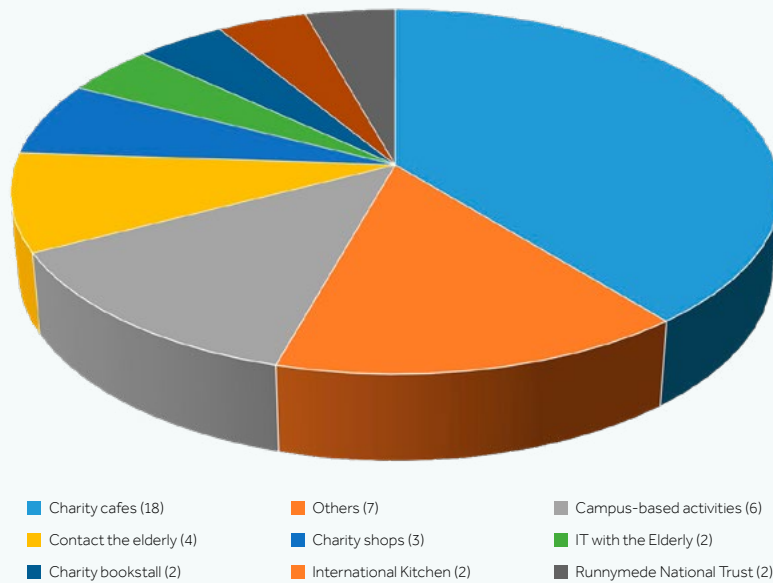
at helping students step out of the academic world and discover other aspects of their local environment. CeDAS experimented with different models (work placements, research-based projects), but encouraging integration was proving difficult.

## A Service-Learning placement

To this effect, the study programme introduced a 10-hour service-learning placement in a non-academic context (e.g. in a community café, a school, or a retirement home, see Figure 1 for more detail), followed by a summatively assessed critically-informed presentation. Seifer (1998) defines service learning as 'a structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection' (p.2), and notes that it 'enhances the curriculum by extending learning beyond the lecture hall' and 'provides opportunities for critical reflection' (ibid).

This particular placement offers students an opportunity to integrate culturally with students from various backgrounds, and with the wider local community. The hope is that this process of acculturation can help the students adopt a more distanced/critical approach to personal learning values and practices, thus not only facilitating multicultural/multidisciplinary group work but also developing critical engagement. The placement leads to an assessed presentation in which students can demonstrate these changes.

**Figure 1:**  
**Volunteer projects 2015-17**



Although little research has been carried out specifically into how such voluntary work in the local community might benefit international students in H.E. in the UK, motivations behind the design of this task are broadly supported by relevant literature. For example, Eyer et al. (2001) note a number of studies of students and faculty which report that 'service-learning has a positive impact on students' academic learning' (p.5), and that 'service-learning participation has an impact on such academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development' (p.6). Various other studies (Smith et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2001; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Darwen & Rannard, 2011) have shown that volunteering in the local community can contribute to improved engagement with programmes of study, to more successful transition experiences, to greater inter-cultural awareness, and to enhanced critical thinking skills (i.e. the ability to reflect critically on one's environment and experiences, and to apply this reflective approach more extensively).

## The Benefits of Service-Learning

Feedback from students shows that they value this experience particularly for the opportunities it presents for them to enhance their English language and communication skills, their personal and practical skills, and their understanding of British society.

The survey results of two student cohorts (2015/16 and 2016/17) – 46 students in total (see figure 1) – reveal that:

- Volunteering is a rich personal experience. Students report that they have a chance to develop personal/life skills such as team work and self-confidence, as well as strong personal relationships across generations.
- Students indicate that communicating, at both cultural and linguistic levels, remains the main challenge, but also the area where they notice the most progress. Once students were instructed to choose a challenging activity away from the security of a student-only environment, they seem to have benefitted on two fronts: student engagement in volunteering seemed higher (e.g. students are more enthusiastic in their work, and more willing to engage in meaningful social interaction), and reported cultural knowledge increased as well.

In addition, it is clear that the assessed presentations are an indicator of not only how a student has developed personally (e.g. in terms of self-confidence, or their ability to reflect critically on their experiences), but also to what extent s/he has engaged in, and accepted, the host culture's educational practices (e.g. by using primary and secondary research methods, or by offering a critical analysis of an organisation's performance).

## Critical engagement

While carrying out their volunteering work, students are required to research a particular aspect of the organisation and reflect critically on their experience. The resulting summatively assessed individual academic presentation is worth 10% of their overall English language mark for the Pre-Masters year.

Success in this task depends much on students' abilities to engage critically with the experience, and to transfer academic skills from different areas of the programme. They need to organise their thoughts and evidence logically, summarise information and experiences for an academic audience, and evaluate their experiences. Better students are able to do this with reference to relevant academic sources.

## Challenges

A recurring challenge has been to ensure that students carry out their placement in an environment that encourages sufficient interaction with the wider community. For example, picking litter on campus with other students will not offer nearly as many opportunities as interacting with customers in a charity shop, or serving sandwiches at a community cafe. Although students have not been prevented from choosing any particular project, recent cohorts have been strongly directed towards projects that will entail more interaction.

A particular obstacle for participation in some projects is the need to produce a valid Disclosure and Barring Scheme (DBS) document to work with children and other vulnerable parties. While this has limited the range of choice, it has not prevented successful alternative placements, and the programme team are working with other departments in the university to look for solutions to this for future iterations of the programme.

For students, linguistic and interpersonal communication are, as noted above, identified as their main challenges at the beginning of the year. This is probably unsurprising in students in the earliest stages of their Foundation year. However, it is gratifying to see that this is also the area where they report the most progress following completion of the placement. It also suggests that they could benefit from some minimal training in intercultural communication, especially concerning making first contact with the organisation.

### "A fantastic experience"

(Jingyu, Pre-Masters student 2016-17)

Overall, this task succeeds on a number of levels: many students produce insightful presentations, testimony both of a strong involvement and of critical reflection on their volunteering experience. Certainly among these two groups of students, it can be inferred therefore that this task was a particular factor in a successful transition not only between two different educational systems, but also between home and the host culture. As Moores and Popadiuk (2011) suggest, this process goes beyond mere adaptation: it appears in our context to have allowed Pre-Masters students to participate more in the life of the community and develop a sense of belonging, which in turn can facilitate and enhance interpersonal and intercultural communication. The experience is also often transformative, as students report personal growth (e.g. self-confidence, team-work and time management).

Although their engagement in the service-learning task, and related Pre-Masters assignment, is demonstrated, this study has not yet clearly identified whether skills such as the ability to work within an international team have been applied successfully in an academic context beyond Pre-Masters. This could be the subject of further study.

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