Coping with stress: the perspective of international students

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Abstract

This study explores how stress is experienced by international students in the creative arts at the University of the Arts, London. 141 students from six geographical areas were interviewed in their own language by social science postgraduates from various institutions within the University of London. The findings are in line with those of much current work on international students generally, though some are specific to the creative arts. While problems connected with language are the most widespread cause of stress, other less obvious issues are also important. Alongside the well-known phenomenon of 'culture shock' is what has been called 'academic shock' or 'study shock' – the difficulties of transition to a different system of teaching and learning, and of integration with peers and communication with tutors (which might also be described as 'social shock'). The problems experienced by international students are not all peculiar or specific to them, but such students, a long way from their own cultural, social and linguistic environment, are more likely to feel the cumulative nature of the potential difficulties to which they are exposing themselves by studying abroad.

Keywords

stress
international students
creative arts

This contribution explores the impact of stress on teaching and learning among first-year BA and foundation degree international students in the creative arts at the University of the Arts, London. It is based on the findings of a project on 'The Experience of First-Year International Students at UAL', commissioned by the Creative Learning in Practice Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CLIP CETL). The aims of the project were:

- to assess the extent to which international students integrate and adapt to a different teaching and learning environment
- to identify the causes of obstacles to such integration and adaptation
- to propose ways in which these can be remedied.

141 students from six geographical areas were interviewed in their native languages, along with a benchmark group of 21 home students. The participants ranged across the whole spectrum of creative arts disciplines taught at the six constituent colleges of the University.

The research context
The study took place within the framework of a rich literature on international students, much of which has drawn on research into the psychological effects of cross-cultural migration. In this context, a first point to be emphasized

concerns the dangers of stereotyping. The students involved in this project came from a range of different backgrounds and different educational histories. While their responses show that they have many experiences in common, they are not so homogenous as to allow grand generalizations across the spectrum. It would be equally mistaken to attempt firm conclusions by nation or regional grouping (Kember and Gow 1991; Watkins, Reghi and Astilla 1991; Chalmers and Volet 1997). For example, much cross-cultural research, on emotions as on so many other subjects, has assumed a dichotomy between cultures that emphasize individualism and those that emphasize collectivism. This has rightly been challenged by more recent work, which has shown the dangers of attempting to view these individuals as representatives of homogenous, stereotyped groups (Shore 1996; Lazarus 1991 and 1999).

A good explanation of why this should be is found in the literature on stress. The notion, put forward especially by cultural psychologists and anthropologists, that people within specific cultures share the same values, beliefs etc., and therefore feel and react in the same way when it comes to emotions and stress, has been challenged by Lazarus (1997 and 1999). He argues that the evidence on which these concepts are based is insufficient, and that data

> have been interpreted with too much sanguinity by the protagonists of cultural differences in emotion. Most of the data seems to restate the cultural values of countries and ethnic groups. Much of it is based on reports by people who may be just restating their culture's formal values rather than portraying the actual dynamics of their stressful and emotional transactions.
>
> (Lazarus 1999, p. 65)

Various studies have already demonstrated that the experiences of stress should not be perceived as something that is 'culturally specific', but, on the contrary, stress is felt on an individual basis: 'each person sees the world "through stress-coloured glasses"' (Sarros and Densten 1989, p. 48, quoting Veninga and Spradley 1981, p. 29). Coping strategies for dealing with stress thus vary from person to person; what one student treats as a challenge, another might see as a threat (Sarros and Densten 1989). Burns states that 'stress occurs when the individual believes that they cannot meet the demand being made on them by the environment, i.e. it is a subjective self evaluation of not being able to cope, of feeling overwhelmed to some degree' (1991, p. 67).

Burns's description of stress follows the classic definition by Lazarus and Folkman, which is the one adopted here. They defined psychological stress as 'a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being' (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 19). International students are subjected to many stresses during their time at university. Although it is common knowledge that there are many factors that cause stress, this topic is relatively unexplored when it comes to international students, especially those studying creative arts.

It is widely accepted that the transition of students from one country to another is accompanied by various emotions, positive and negative. Many

aspects of the process of adaptation that students have to experience – cultural, social and academic – have a significant impact on their achievements. Students are confronted with many stressful situations, of which 'culture shock' is just one. Oberg, who coined the term, describes culture shock as 'precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (Oberg 1960). He proposed four stages of this phenomenon: honeymoon, crisis, recovery and adjustment. Studies have questioned the construct of culture shock. Searle and Ward argued that it

> has been utilized both as a descriptive and an explanatory term … As a descriptor, however, it is largely inadequate to define the nature of the psychological and emotional difficulties or the adjustment demands faced by sojourners, and as an explanatory concept it becomes tautological and constrains the worthwhile investigation of variables that predict adaptation during the transition process.
>
> (Searle and Ward 1990, p. 450 and cf. Ward and Kennedy 1993, p. 221)

In their alternative view, these scholars placed greater emphasis on two types of adjustment during cross-cultural transition: psychological adjustment, which is 'primarily affected by personality, life changes, and social support variables', and sociocultural adaptation, which is 'primarily affected by amount of time spent in a new culture, cultural similarity-dissimilarity, host-guest relations, and acculturation strategies' (Ward and Kennedy 1993, p. 241).

Culture shock is certainly not dead. Lago and Shipton (1994) proposed a model of culture shock specifically for international students, in which they identified five transitional stages. These are: a honeymoon period; disorientation; reintegration; autonomy and independence; and finally, a 'bicultural competence' phase which enables students to absorb both cultures. When students go through these phases their sense of identity is of critical importance; students often feel that they have lost their identity, or that their 'normal' identity has been disrupted and replaced by another due to study abroad. In his study of the relationship between identity and stress, Burke argued that this disruption can cause lower self-esteem, causing stress and even depression (Burke 1991). Perrucci and Hu believe that the focus of research should not be placed on students' capacity for adaptation but rather on 'their feelings of satisfaction with their academic program, their academic appointment, and their social and community relations'. They proposed a 'general theoretical model of satisfaction among graduate international students' (Perrucci and Hu 1995, p. 497).

Student transition involves separation and loss, leaving their family, relatives and other social support networks behind (Walton 1990, p. 509; Werkman 1980). It is also closely associated with the influential attachment theory advanced by Bowlby (1973). He and others argued that a child's separation from its mother results in anxiety, and that this experience can be observed later in the adult's life. Many studies have demonstrated that the influences of maternal attachment on individuals are closely related to the later development of teacher-child relationships and remain, throughout the course of life, able to be unconsciously re-awakened in any new situations that remind them of their past experience. Klein (1959) called this phenomenon

1. http://www.ukcosa.
org.uk/about/statistic
s_he.php.

2. http://www.hesa.ac.
uk/index.php/content/
view/600/239/.

3. Or in English, if they
preferred. Only a few
bilingual students
took up this option.

'memory in feeling'. Recent research has also suggested that gender and different ethnic backgrounds influence the quality of the teacher-child relationship: 'ethnic differences between teachers and child may be an issue if the cultural norms of each are in conflict' (Kesner 2000, p. 136; and cf. 139). International students invariably encounter several new situations by coming to study in the United Kingdom, and in comparison with home students they face additional problems which relate to unfamiliar ways of thinking and behaving. The interaction with their tutors evokes many emotions that relate to their infantile hopes and fears. Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry and Osborne (1983) argued that the teacher can play an essential role in the mental and emotional life of students, managing their expectations and relationships, and in due course enabling them to succeed. With temporary support right from the beginning, the student will achieve an easy transition into university life and avoid further disappointments which might easily turn into anger and other negative emotions.

Looking at these issues specifically in arts and design, Austerlitz and Aravot explored the complex set of emotions in tutor-student relationship in the architectural design studio (Austerlitz and Aravot 2006, 2007). Communication between student and tutor is 'a central vehicle for education as it includes more than transference of professional knowledge'. They found that all participants, but students in particular, 'may experience a high level of cognitive stress and a tendency to emotionality' (Austerlitz and Aravot 2007). The relationship between emotions and educational processes is perhaps even more complex when dealing with international students, who bring with them their own sets of values and norms. Memories of their previous experiences with tutors, communication difficulties, and their past learning experience can build up into a stronger set of emotions than were experienced by those who have never attempted such a transition.

Methodology

The University of the Arts, London, has a high proportion of international students. According to the UK Council for Overseas Student Affairs (UKCOSA) the University of the Arts was ranked fifteenth in the list of recruiters of international students in the United Kingdom for 2005–6;[1] international students were 17 per cent of the total students. If undergraduates from European Union are included the proportions are even higher – 32 per cent.[2] The research focused on six geographical areas which supply high numbers of students: Japan; South Korea; Hong Kong; Taiwan; India and the United States of America. Some UK students were also included for comparative purposes. A key feature of the project was that the students were interviewed in their own language, by their co-nationals.[3] Fourteen social science postgraduates were hired from outside the University of the Arts, mainly from the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics and the Institute of Education. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed/translated.

Before being interviewed, students filled in a short written questionnaire giving basic details about their educational background, time spent in England before studying at UAL, some demographic information, how they heard of the institution etc. Interviews were semi-structured, consisting of

sixteen questions. The questions covered topics such as reasons for study-ing abroad, expectations, cultural and educational differences in arts and design, friendship, gender issues, stress, support services etc. The inter-viewers were consulted during the process of finalizing the questions, to ensure that there were no ambiguities or culturally inappropriate questions. The interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. 141 international students were interviewed. 21 home students were also interviewed, for purposes of comparison, by a native English speaker. The approach of the analysis was both qualitative and quantitative. NVivo and Excel were used as the main tools for analysis, together permitting connections to be made between the interviews and the written questionnaires.

The decision to conduct interviews in the students' own language had both positive and negative implications. The interviews provided rich insights pre-cisely because the language barrier had been eliminated; students could express their thoughts more easily in their native language, and to their co-nationals. The fact that the interviewers were international students themselves also helped; many of them reported that the interviewees saw them as an 'older brother or sister'. The danger, of course, was that a high degree of empathy between interviewer and interviewee might lead to unconscious distortions. Moreover, having such a large multinational team of interviewers also brought with it problems. There were some differences in their interviewing techniques, especially at the beginning, and for most of them English was not their first language. Students' views were thus filtered by the translation process, and some information may have been either misinterpreted or 'lost in translation'. The fact that the interviewers were not creative artists may also have affected the outcome of the exercise, as they may have been less instinctively insightful of the subject. (On the other hand, they might also have been less likely to lead their interviewees in this respect.) To an extent these potential problems were dealt with by intensive management of the interviewing process. Weaknesses remain, but have to an extent been offset by the scale of the response which went well over the original target of 60–100 interviews. This was a conscious decision; given the nature of the responses it was felt that volume should be prioritized. If it is not always possible to be sure exactly what a student meant by a particular remark, the frequent recurrence of the same points over a substantial number of inter-views allow some clear conclusions to be drawn.

One of the sixteen questions put to the students at the interview was specifically on stress. It asked 'What, if anything, do you find stressful on this course?' Unsurprisingly, however, stress featured prominently in answers to almost all the questions. Since all the data was extensively coded, it was pos-sible to evaluate what students said on the subject in a wide range of con-texts (and of course to relate this to the data they supplied on their gender, age, nationality and linguistic competence).

Findings

Of the many findings of this survey, the following will focus mainly on those which related to academic issues. The problems students experience with lan-guage, adaptation to the English academic system, relationships to tutors, classroom participation, group work and assessment are all foregrounded in their responses. A focus on academic issues suggests that it might be useful

to consider not just culture shock – the features of which are well known – but actually also 'academic shock', which is composed of some less obvious elements. Some of these might also be considered as 'social shock'.

The range and extent of stress which international students experience depend on a number of factors, including linguistic proficiency, degree of familiarity with the system, and the length of time they have spent in the United Kingdom before enrolling. There are some less obvious factors as well. One is gender; it appears that, while the great majority of the international students who were interviewed said that they had experienced stress, female students tended to deal with it better than male students, either talking about it to their friends or using the counselling services.[4] Another is the age of the students:

> The students are generally very young. I am 24. I feel like an idiot in front of younger people. Well … I don't know what they think about me.
>
> *South Korean student*

The ages of these students, and their previous educational backgrounds, are of profound significance. Many international students already have degrees from their home country and are slightly older than home students; many also have previous work experience. The analysis suggests that it is precisely these students who experience greater levels of anxiety and stress, because they come from different teaching and learning environments, and thus have, in many respects, a more fixed set of expectations.

Language

The most visible and obvious area of stress for the majority of international students is language. For those whose first language is not English this is usually singled out as the biggest obstacle to their adaptation to the educational setting at UAL. The study has identified the concern of international students that high IELTS (The International English Language Test System) test scores do not guarantee success with study. It is perceived that students
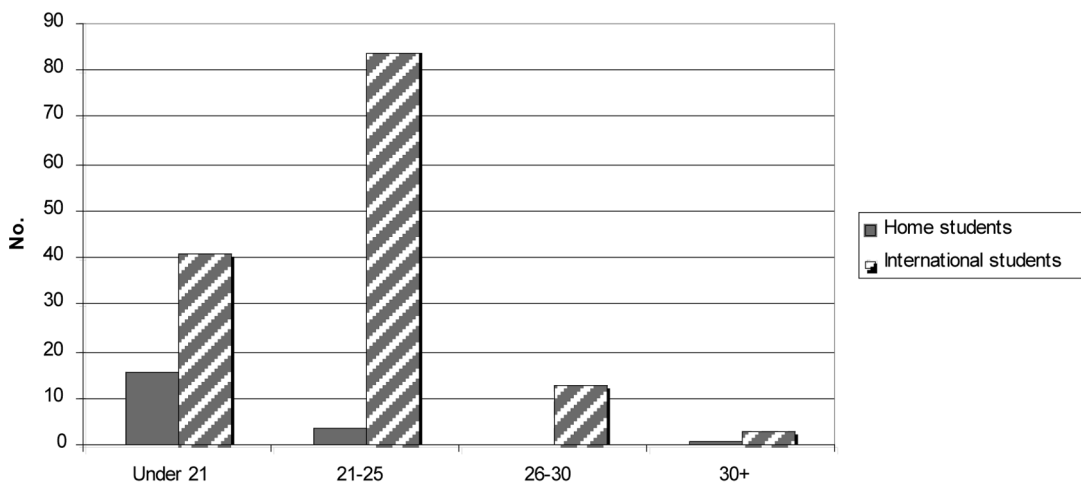

Figure 1: Age profile of first-year international and home students interviewed.

are taught 'how to pass the test' rather than how to understand and communicate in 'real life' situations with fast-talking native speakers. Many students acknowledge that they had never been exposed to anything like these situations before, and stated that they consequently found it extremely hard to understand what was expected of them in their new environment.

Although the basic problem of language can appear monolithic, it is in fact complex and can impinge on all aspects of teaching and learning. Some students say that they cannot speak, others that they cannot understand, or answer questions, or read at the speed required if they are to keep up with the coursework (and they consequently need a lot of time for essay-writing). Students who are technically qualified and even fluent in a non-UK version of English (Hong Kong, Indian and even American students) can also have significant problems with the demotic London version of the language, delivered at speed and without restraint, in class or outside it. An additional problem is tacit knowledge; much that is communicated to them appears to them to be indirect, so they often cannot understand what is expected of them. They can be left out if they feel that tutors do not explain concepts or references which local students would grasp immediately, while the speed at which native speakers talk leaves them further at a loss:

> When I give a presentation, other students ask me about my work and I have to answer immediately. But if I don't understand, I cannot answer properly. It's particularly difficult to understand young students who speak very fast. I cannot catch their accent. Then, I miss a lot for my study …
>
> Language is an obstacle not only for my learning but also for my social life. I'm really scared to speak to English students. I'm too shy …
>
> *South Korean students*

The English system of teaching and learning in arts and design

The distinctive system of teaching and learning in English universities, and specifically that of UAL, form the main element of academic shock which affects most international students, whatever their mother tongue. These students come with different expectations of what it is like to study at university, and neither descriptions of what it is going to be like nor experience of university in their home country prepare them adequately for the transition, which is a major cause of stress.

> The process that I have been through is: (1) I had high expectations about liberal teaching and learning approach in the UK; (2) I was shocked and lost; (3) I gradually learned to accommodate and to accept this approach, after doing so many projects. I can see my improvement, but it is a bit slow.
>
> *Taiwanese student*

The degree of emphasis on independent study, obviously well known to practitioners, has of course to be rediscovered by individual students for themselves:

> The system is very different here. In India, you are literally told what to do. Here you are on your own. You have to make your own decisions. In a way it is very

good that it makes you independent. But at times you are so lost because when you come here initially you want someone to tell you what to do…

Indian student

In the creative arts, there are additional differences. Many students did not expect the strong theoretical slant of their course, and were surprised that (as they saw it) skills are not valued more. Several were equally surprised that the process of creative design was given such importance relative to the product:

> …in Korea, you just have to turn in the final project and there is no emphasis on the process. But here in the UK, you have to put more emphasis on the process of the project which makes it more difficult and something I definitely had to adapt to.

South Korean student

Others found that the emphasis on originality, and what they perceived as the constant demand to be original, were particular causes of stress, again because this was so different from what they were used to from home. Closely related to this is the difficulty referred to above, namely the students' feeling that it has not been made clear what is expected of them:

> I am not sure what (tutors') expectations are. So it stresses me; I don't know how can I work harder…

Indian student

The system of independent study also leads to stress over time management, the indispensable skill which students have to acquire in the English system. This affects all international students:

> In the States, I wouldn't stress this much about my work, because the teacher would be stressing for me, saying 'you have to get this done', and I'm like 'okay, okay!', but here I have no-one saying that to me, so I have to say it to myself. That's stressful!

American student

It places particular burdens on those students who have to contend with language problems as well:

> Of course English is stressful, as I told you. That is the most difficult thing… When I have a project, I cannot do anything else. The task is so tough, so I cannot spend my time on practice such as speaking English with others or watching TV to improve my English. I've got a deadline, and it's not easy to have an idea and finish the work in a good time.

South Korean student

The use of student support (in the form of an essay checking service) can undoubtedly help, but it also adds to the pressure on students who wish to use it, as they have to hand in their work well in advance of the coursework deadlines.

Interaction with teachers and students

All the stresses connected with comprehension and social integration come to the fore in the many situations in which students have to communicate and work together with teachers and with their peers. Many of the international students interviewed in this project stated that they were naturally shy, even before the stresses of difference, language and adaptation were factored in. Natural reluctance to speak, combined with the difficulty of doing so in another language in front of a mixed audience, usually with a predominance of native speakers, makes class discussions and group work immensely stressful situations:

> If the tutor points at me, I will speak. I will hide if nobody asks me to speak because my English is not good and I can't speak fluently. *I feel shame to speak in front of twenty, thirty something people* as they are local and their mother tongue is English.
>
> *Hong Kong student*

> Asian students are less likely to participate in this kind of discussion. UK students would not really give many chances to us to speak…
>
> *Taiwanese student*

> Also when there is a classroom discussion, if you don't know something about it, then you feel left out because since you are not born here or have not spent a lot of time here, you don't know a lot of things that have already happened… If I don't know that I feel like I am on the moon or something like that.
>
> *Indian student*

The overall consequence of such stresses is that it is all too easy to opt out of interaction. But the consequence of that is isolation, failure to form bonds or friendships with fellow students, and failure to establish a communicative relationship with teachers as well. Such isolation in turn makes progress with study even harder than before:

> Sometimes when I get really stuck on something and I can't talk to anyone, like talk to a tutor, that's the most stressful thing for me.
>
> *South Korean student*

Isolation, in the form of retreat into individual study, is ultimately not an option in the creative arts as taught in most courses at UAL. Participation is critical, be it in group projects or in formal presentations in class. Group work can be even more stressful because a silent student is effectively excluded, whether voluntarily or not. It is also something that many international students have not really encountered before. Students were eloquent to their compatriot interviewers about the dynamics involved:

> It was difficult for me. One of the reasons was my English, but another reason would be the characters of students in my group. My students have strong characters and they tend to be uncompromising to others so it was difficult to produce an outcome as a result of group work.
>
> *Japanese student*

Firstly, it is English. Secondly, UK students don't understand why Asian students spend so much time on thinking. And the ways that these two groups of students work are so different. Sometimes, some Asian students try to explain what they think. These UK students just are unwilling to listen. Third, these UK students believe that they are entitled to dominate and to lead where our discussion should go, simply [because] they are westerners.

Taiwanese student

Presentations in class entail similar stresses, again because they may be new to the student; because of language and differences of cultural perspective; and because in the creative arts, students are offering up so much of their own personality in the work that they do. Peer opinion is thus critical, and can be much feared:

To me, the stress comes from my peer group. When I see others work, it is a kind of competition … As a result, I need to push myself forward as well.

Taiwanese student

The 'presentation culture' can also appear alien:

I feel it stressful that the teachers value the presentations more than the work. I think that the practical skills are not respected enough, and it's more like philosophy than Fine Arts.

Japanese student

I don't like that students often cover their poor job with their fluent presentation. Everybody does that. Presentation is considered the most important thing. I am not happy with that at all. However, I think this attitude is normal in the British art scene nowadays.

South Korean student

In the teaching of the creative arts, the student's confidence appears to be highly prized. Participation in class, giving presentations and working together in groups can all be immensely stressful for international students, and are often a completely new experience for them. Many Hong Kong students, whose English was very good, found it hard to adapt to these activities. Classroom situations are precisely where international students are at the greatest disadvantage – culturally, linguistically and socially. For many, these situations are exacerbated by the difficulty of transferring from a system in which standing out in class is not encouraged, to one in which self-confidence is everything. Many of the students whose overall verdict on their experience was positive said that this was the hardest part of adaptation, a stage that they had to pass through in order to progress.

An illustration of how stressful this could be was what was learned about the 'crit', where students offer their work up for discussion in a group critique. Students who commented on this practice do not appear to have enjoyed the experience:

We present [our work] in a group crit. If my work is not good, then people look at you differently. People may say, oh him, I saw his work, it's not that

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good. The stress comes from worrying that my image to others will be damaged.

Hong Kong student

In fact very few of the international students had anything to say about this (unlike the 'benchmark' home students, many of whom also found crits daunting). Yet a tutor who participated in the 'Unspoken Interactions' symposium at which these issues were aired pointed out that international students rarely came to crits, perhaps precisely because they found the exercise so stressful.[5]

Assessment

A final area to be discussed here is assessment. Almost by definition the UAL system will be different from those to which international students are accustomed. In addition to the by now familiar issues of adaptation and comprehension, international students get stressed about their grades for other reasons. Because the students interviewed tended to be older, and thus more aware of the effects of the march of time on their career prospects – and given the substantial fees they have paid in order to study at UAL – they are very anxious to achieve, and that anxiety is easily compounded if they are unclear about, or distrustful of, the grading system.

I feel stressed when I came all the way to UAL to study, and all I get is a Co. I want to get better grades. In Korea, there is a lot of emphasis on good grades and an impressive transcript.

South Korean student

Difficulties in understanding a new or foreign grading system are perhaps inevitable, and the solution is comparatively obvious. For the students interviewed, however, the problem is deeper. Many expressed frustration at not being able to understand how they could improve their grades. The feedback that they are given is often not perceived as helpful. Some students are upset by very negative comments; others find flattering remarks too superficial. What both groups have in common is a feeling that the feedback is insufficiently detailed and specific.[6] Yet again, the linguistic and cultural barriers between international students and their teachers appear to aggravate the problem, which is felt deeply by some students. The danger of misunderstandings is ever present, and some of the reasons for this are systemic. While the specific terminologies used in the creative arts can be an obstacle for all students, it is harder for non-native speakers to surmount. The widespread practice in these disciplines of giving verbal feedback disadvantages non-native speakers yet further (Blair 2004). Ultimately, assessment too is a cultural issue (MacKinnon and Manathunga 2003).

Conclusion

International students do not face a completely different set of problems from their 'home' student counterparts. Many of the most common causes of stress among students are experienced by home students as well. Group

5. Blair (2006: 88) points out that the crit is stressful even where tutors have gone to considerable lengths to provide a supportive environment for students, in smaller groups.

6. This echoes the findings of Blair (2006: 86).

work, presentations and the crit are singled out in particular by the benchmark group of UK students interviewed. Yet international students are more likely to be confronted by an accumulation of these problems, and at the same time have greater difficulty in dealing with them, precisely because lack of integration is one of them; they find it harder to develop social networks, to communicate effectively with their tutors and peers, and to articulate their concerns to the host community that is providing the support services – issues which the home students interviewed did not see as problematic. What can be done to mitigate these problems? There are no instant or magical solutions. One way of alleviating stress must be assisting with cross-cultural communication and integration, by increasing opportunities for social integration both inside and outside the classroom. The most important key to progress, however, can be summed up in a word: understanding. International students badly need to be given full initial and ongoing explanations of what is expected of them, how the system works, and where to get help (be it from tutors, peers or support staff). But such information and support can only be effective if, as well as being organized and sustained, it is based on better insight, by both staff and home students, into what international students are up against.

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