Securing good marks

A guide for international students and their tutors

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Contents

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Ian Pownall

1 Introduction and Learning Context

TARGET READER – The international student and the tutor of the international student

This is a book for you.

This is a book written not just for international students who come to the UK and want to get a good grade. It is also aimed at tutors working with international students who want to help their international students to be successful. The aim of this book is to help international students to learn from the experiences of other students and tutors, as well as some underpinning theory. The authors have used their extensive experience of teaching in universities in the UK and also working overseas to inform this book. There are many study skills books that are available to students and this book does not follow the conventional pattern of these books. It is not a 'how to' book but rather a resource that you may use to learn from and reflect on your own experiences.

Being an international student studying in the UK is not easy. It is a difficult but we believe a very rewarding option you have chosen. There are many difficulties for you – the first and as we see in the book, perhaps most important of which – is language. For this core reason, although this book does contain some complex language, we have also sought to produce simple clear sections for your to reflect upon.

Anyone who travels to a different country to study is brave, determined and aware that they will different challenges at their destination. These challenges include adapting to living in a new culture (shopping, travel, food and, of course, the weather), studying in a university or college where the approaches to learning, teaching and assessment may be different to the ones you have previously experienced. In addition, although all international students have achieved the English language requirements of their course, living and studying in a different language is different from studying it in the classroom. This means that you will have to learn to deal with different English accents, different speeds of speaking as well as learning your subject of study.

Being a tutor of international students studying in the UK is not easy, your preparation and teaching methods need to consider different learning styles, motivations and attitudes from those you may be familiar with.

So, our prime objectives in this book are to help:

- international students studying in the UK
- tutors and others who are supporting international students

The aim of this book is to provide international students and their tutors with information and practical advice so that they understand what is required when studying for a degree in the UK. We have designed this book to provide clear and helpful guidance, and this is often supported by brief summaries of (potentially complex) relevant theories and also references. This will enable you to follow up different ideas at your leisure. Our belief is that the more anyone understands about their own approaches to learning and teaching, and also the context in which they are studying then the easier they will find it too be successful.

Within this book, we have written specific chapters aimed at students or tutors and this is made clear in the chapter title and also the start of each chapter and in the contents page. This is denoted by the **'Target Reader'** reference. The chapters also contain glossaries of key words used, useful tips and key phrases (highlighted in **bold),** chapter references and action lists and plans. Each chapter commences with a statement of aims.

Chapters 2 and 4 are for the International Student

Chapter 3 is for the tutor of the International Student

Chapters 1, 5 and 6 are relevant for both the international student and the tutor of the international student

Learning is a messy business and specific topics may be inter-connected. This means you will find that rather than read the book from beginning to end, some people may want to jump about and follow specific ideas or areas of interest. The chapter headings and index will help you do this

Commencing any journey requires a map – even if it is simply to say 'I'm going to go in this direction'. So, here is our map of what we think is important for you the student and you the tutor.

The map of the book:

1. Understanding who is the international student
2. Joining and understanding the undergraduate (first degree) Higher Education (HE) learning environment in the UK
3. Joining and understanding the taught postgraduate (second degree) Higher Education (HE) learning environment in the UK
4. Joining and understanding the research postgraduate (third degree) Higher Education (HE) learning environment in the UK
5. Understanding the international student tutor
6. Strategies for improving marks for international students
7. Strategies for improving marks for international student tutors

1.1 The International student in the UK

You – the international student in the UK – are not alone! Data for 2010–2011 indicated that there were 435, 230 international students studying in the UK (HESA, 2012). This number included 14% of ALL students studying for their undergraduate degree, 69% of ALL full time postgraduate students studying for their second degree and 48% of ALL postgraduate research students (studying for a research degree).

In terms of the origins of international students studying the UK on varying higher education awards, from this very large number of international students, nearly 20% were from the People's Republic of China (PRC), 7% from India, 4% from Nigeria, 4% from Pakistan and 2% from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And what were they (you?) studying?

The study of Business and Administrative studies (at all levels of study, from first degree to third degree) accounted for 36% of all international students in the UK (2010–2011). This was followed by Engineering (which accounted for 32%), Law (which accounted for 22%) and Computer Science (which accounted for 22%) (HESA, 2012). The experience of the authors reflects a dominant understanding of learning and teaching from a Business and Administrative studies perspective, but we hope that if you are studying another topic, you will find something helpful in this text too.

1.2 Do you know why you want to study for a degree in the UK?

International students typically come to the UK for a number of different reasons including:

- Gaining a 'good' degree from a reputable university
- Learning about life and culture in the UK
- Developing a network of international friends and potential colleagues

Naturally there are many important topics to be discussed when looking at how you can improve your grades, not least the quality of learning and teaching, how this is adapted to suit your cultural needs (if at all), what teaching and learning styles are important and many more; however, if you do not wish to improve then there is little point in continuing. Therefore, the starting point has to be your desire to improve. Of course, your desire can be influenced by how much you understand of your learning and teaching environment – which is after all – an aim of this book. Some writers on this topic argue that the more you are told about how you will learn, the more motivated your will be to learn (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). Of course, this assumes that you understand what you are told about how you will learn – which is not necessarily true!

So let's start to understand something about WHY you are reading this book, by using a simple example (or an analogy) of an overweight person who needs to lose 10kg. This desire is mainly wanted because of health reasons but also, that person may wish to feel more aesthetically pleasing. So what will drive this person to lose the weight?

So, here comes the first 'academic' reference. This is an interesting one and well worth thinking about in different contexts, even if it is not followed up in any great detail in this book.

Azjen (1991) The theory of planned behaviour – Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision.

Icek Azjen, a psychologist, proposed this famous understanding of motivation in people, as a development of an earlier 1975 proposal between Icek and Martin Fishbein, to understand people's actions. Put simply, Azjen suggests that there is a basic approach to human actions, that says we do what we plan to do. This statement can be further considered as requiring you (and me) this can be broken down as follows:

- *How much does a person want to achieve something?*
- *How much pressure is there from outside sources (family/peers/social/culture/etc.) to achieve this goal?*
- *How easy is this goal to achieve? (how much control do you have to achieve the intention?)*

Think of the above then in terms of the getting fit for a marathon run – the desire to complete the run, who you want to run for and how easy and how much control you have over your fitness. So for example, your intention to improve your grades can come from your attitude towards this aim, the views of family and friends, the abilities you have to focus and study in your work and the effort you can expend to achieve this goal. There are many examples which could then be considered and to which these 3 questions would be equally appropriate.

In our experience of working with international students, you will have many potential factors that influence what you achieve and why in your studies in the UK. You may wish to read more about this approach to understanding your intentions and motivations as perhaps you have not considered it before. You may find it easier to consider these questions as independent from each other when you look at them in terms of a your desire to achieve academically. It is something we will reflect on in parts of this text with you.

1.3   How people learn

There has been much consideration over a long period of time as to why and how people learn. What does it mean to learn? A simple definition is that through learning, you enjoy a change in your behaviour. You do something different. In your studies, this could mean you get a better grade for work by understanding more of your topic – but it could also mean other outcomes are achieved. That you for example interact with others differently by developing skills through interaction with your fellow students that you engage with you tutors differently or that you see more of the UK in your travels by understanding how the rail network operates. So learning is changed behaviour in you.

Of equal importance to us in writing this book and for you reading it, is that here are also barriers or difficulties that weaken your learning. We have already mentioned one of these, as language. There would be little point in you reading this book, expecting through your efforts to improve your grades, if you found this book difficult to understand and read. It must be written simply to avoid this. As you are (we hope) still reading this book (and understanding it), that barrier to your learning has been overcome. As you are reading this then you are reading with the intention of improving your grades and therefore you have taken the first step in achieving it – you are looking for help. You have the correct attitude.

An international student tutor may also find this more practical 'back to basics' approach useful because it tears back the layers of jargon and 'technical research' speak in order to focus on the person who really matters in the L&T process – the learner. However, we are keen in this book to recognise the importance of the two people: of you the learner and student and of you the international student tutor. You are part of a team and *construct* knowledge and understanding together.

This approach to overcoming barriers to learning is called **Constructivist Teaching.** It is a method of learning that encourages you to challenge your own ideas and prior thinking in order to construct your knowledge and where you create knowledge as you understand your experiences (Driscoll, 2002). Learning and teaching is not a one way street; the international student tutor does not transmit while learner receives. Instead, you and your tutors 'blend' learning, through many different methods to form part of the same team. This approach challenges a traditional view of how you work with your tutors, where the power lies firmly with the teacher is challenged and replaced by a more democratic and empowering experience for you. You are then – along with your tutor – autonomous and intellectual co-constructors of your meaning and understanding. This is an integral approach for this book and one we explore in more detail in chapters 4 and 5 in particular.

1.3.1   Learning Styles and Effective Learning

It is such a simple statement – if you are motivated, you are an effective learner – but to a large extent, it is true. If you value your learning and what you are trying to achieve then you are more likely to achieve your goal. This is because you are more likely to make the required effort. So how is an environment created where you can value your learning and is it your responsibility or is it that of your teacher/tutor to create it? The answer is both, but for now we will concentrate on what you can do to ensure you have the best learning experience possible.

There are many studies which look at various learning styles and we will discuss some of those in this book (see chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion). There are many different approaches to learning styles and it is a topic that is widely debated. However, developing an understanding about learning styles will enable you to reflect and learn from your own approaches to learning. This is considered in chapter 4 and 5.

Your language competence will shape your learning style in important ways (discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5). Not only do you have the task of trying to achieve a degree in a foreign country, but you may be trying to do it in a second language and where the lesson material is provided in English. Your spoken English may be stronger than your written English or vice versa and/or you may have trouble reading books and understanding it in context. Doing so in a timely manner is also a frequently observed difficulty of international students.

Add to this you may be used to a learning environment that is more formal with less independent learning and so managing the independent study time of a UK Higher Education degree may prove a challenge. Indeed, sometimes the more flexible scope of UK based assessments can cause difficulty for international students who may be more accustomed to prescriptive assessment tasks.

So there are many variables to consider which contribute to how you engage with your studies and the grades you achieve. Regardless of the country of origin a learner, you can still identify and embrace the '*type*' of learner and thinker you are. This is helpful for your learning but also can help your tutor to know *how* to prepare for and teach effective lessons that will appeal to the way you learn.

Summary

This brief introduction to our book has sought to raise with you a number of key factors which we feel you need to think about, to understand how you might improve your grades whilst studying in the UK as an international student. This book is not intended to be a study guide, nor an academic textbook on theories and concepts (although we will consider and present them where we feel they might help you to understand an action or advice better). We want this book to raise reflective considerations of your approach to your learning. We want it to help you determine a strategy – a series of actions – which will help and contribute to good and improved grade achievements. We also want this book to be similarly help tutors reflect on appropriate learning environments for international students.

As outlined in this introduction, our broad framework for the book suggests we focus upon how you learn (by a focus upon approaches to learning), your motivation to engage with your studies and what constitutes effective teaching in a global educational marketplace. We might visualise this as:
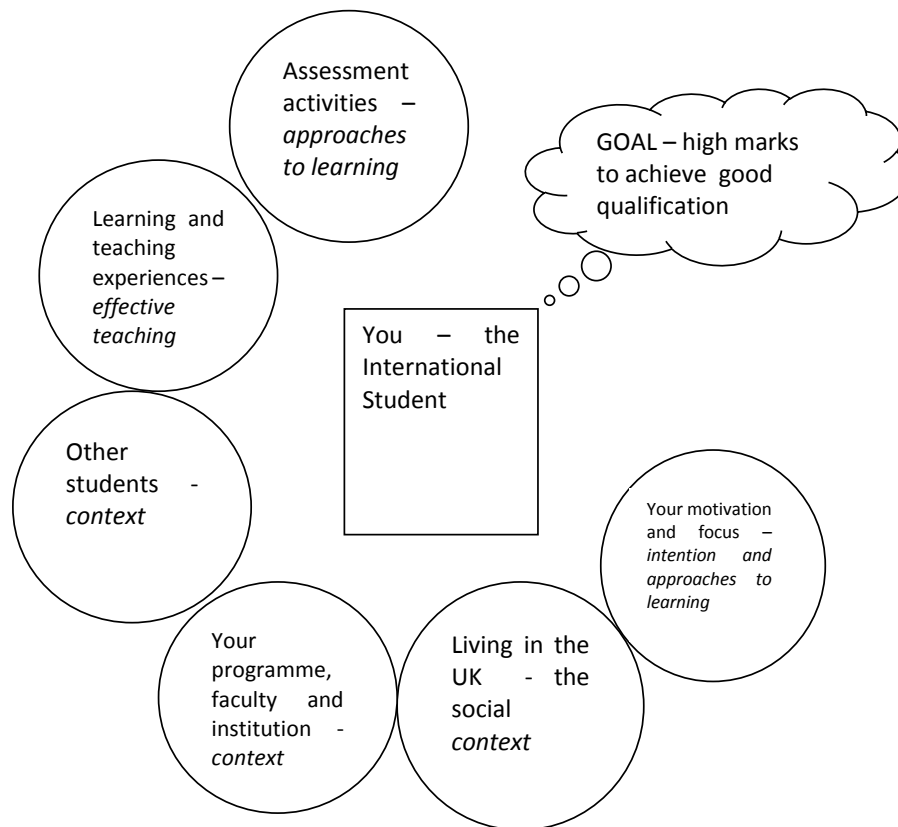
Figure 1.1: A broad thematic outline of the key learning and teaching factors in this book

Glossary

Constructivist Teaching – is a form of teaching reliant upon the development of a dialogue between the tutor to the student so as to construct mutual understanding.

Chapter References

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2 Preparing for, travelling to and basic study questions about the UK

TARGET READER: The international student

2.1 Pre-arrival and Travelling to the UK

The process of joining a degree programme (or other higher education programme) in the UK can be quite complex but your institution will guide you through this process. It is important to follow advice you receive from them and their guidance. Always allow yourself plenty of time to follow the necessary steps to secure your admission and all necessary travel documents to support your travel and study in your institution. Our concern here is to support your understanding about joining your academic programme.

In general, international students join a degree programme by either:

1. Travelling from their home country after completing the previous schooling period to commence new studies directly
2. Travelling from their home country after completing the previous schooling period to commence a preparatory language and/or skills programme prior to starting new degree studies. In this case you will have received two offers from the University and/or college providing language instruction, to support your visa. You must follow the requirements of the UK Border Agency as you may be required to return to your home country to apply for your visa to join your degree programme (after your language course has concluded.
3. Already in the host country, typically having completed a prior course of study or language programme. To pursue your programme of study you may need to extend your visa. Again, please refer to specific advice on this issue with the UK Border Agency. European Union (EU), European Economic Area (EEA) and Swiss National students do not require visas to study for degrees in the UK (although you will still need to prove your have an offer of a place and show your passport/identity card upon entering the UK).

It is helpful at this time, to clarify some important language that is used to describe UK higher education studies.

- You join a degree programme (or programme of studies)
- Your degree programme will be managed by a tutor (sometimes called a programme or course leader)
- Your degree programme will be constituted from a number of separate short courses (sometimes called modules or units). These modules/units are managed and delivered by your tutors.
- Your degree programme will be structured and delivered over a number of semesters or terms.

The majority of UK universities and colleges operate Induction and Welcome Weeks (for International and Home (UK) students), which are specific periods of orientation time used to allow you to become familiar with your new learning environment and ensure you have both understood some of the basics of your programme (e.g. where the rooms are, your timetable) and have had time to organise your own personal affects (accommodation, banking etc). It is important *you give yourself time* to do this. Arriving late to join a programme of study, will add difficulty to both your adjustment and to the University seeking to integrate you into your programme of study. We present an overview of a typical induction programme in chapter 5.

Before you leave for the UK, you will receive a 'pre departure guide' from your host university. This details information about travelling to your university and whether any pre-arranged pick-ups are scheduled from airports for example. This can be very helpful when you arrive new to the UK and many universities arrange for these pick-ups to be staffed by student ambassadors. This means that you will immediately be able to talk to an experienced student who will be willing to answer your questions. The University will also ask you to let them know of how and when you intend to travel to the UK. ***Ensure you inform the University of your travel arrangements***.

The advice from your host university (they are your 'sponsor' in the UK), will also inform you of the paperwork you need to bring with you. It is important to bring all of this paperwork otherwise you may not be permitted to enrol on your programme of study. This typically will include the following paperwork (but check with *YOUR* university/HEI for specifics):

- Passport – which should indicate your immigration status and your period of leave to remain in the UK.
- UK Biometric Card – for students who have applied for a Tier 4 visa
- The Original documentation of your qualifications (NOT photocopies) which were used to generate the offer for you when you applied to your university. This will be further detailed in your Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) statement (e.g. references, certificates and transcripts).
- Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) certificate –for postgraduate students and this may or may not be required (depending upon the subject you intend to study), check the specifics with your university.

- Any medical evidence that evidences your health (this is required from some countries where there is a risk of infectious disease). Contact your university for further details.
- Evidence of any tuition payments you may have already made. Most UK universities allow online tuition fee payment and part payment/instalment payment. Check with your university. Your fee status should have been determined prior to your arrival in the UK.
- Evidence of any university scholarships or other awards you have been allocated.

There are a number of other items to consider that would help you prior to your travel to the UK:

- It is also advisable that you bring with you sufficient British Currency to allow you to organise your immediate needs, whilst banking requirements are organised and implemented. Lancaster University for example recommends £300. Bringing into the UK currency (in whatever form) that exceeds £10000 has to be declared at the point of entry to the UK (to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)).
- Bring spare passport photos – they are useful when joining organisations and as spares if required.
- If you are from the EEA/Swiss National – don't forget to apply for a European Health Insurance Card.
- Bring suitable clothing! The weather in the UK follows a well defined seasonal pattern. You will need warm clothes in the Winter and early Spring. UK weather can be very wet with snow showers during Winter.

If you feel you need specific immigration advice upon arrival at your university, ask to speak to the immigration officer / adviser. The only advice you should accept is that from staff specifically trained in this area of law.

2.2   Helping you settle in the UK

As well as organising your academic study in the UK, your university or college will help you find somewhere to live, become familiar with your living environment and also help you to meet other new students to make friends. We discuss the importance of your social network in chapter 4 of the book for your learning. Again, your university will be able to help with the following:

- Your accommodation – this could be university owned or managed. You may also wish to seek accommodation in the private sector. The University's Accommodation Office will be able to help on both issues. Ideally this should have been organised (at least on a temporary basis prior to your arrival in the UK as it is a particularly stressful problem faced by international student arrivals (Webster, 2011).
- Orientation information – such as help with bank registration, joining a health clinic, how to contact home upon your arrival, how and under what circumstances paid employment may be possible (check your visa for particular details on this), local transportation around your university (bus and rail information), local cost of living information and how to obtain a TV licence (which is required in the UK for any viewing of public broadcasts).
- Insurance – for your belongings and health.
- Student services available at your university – including student health/well being, careers, disability, financial supports and advice and student counselling.
- Information on faith service available in the University and in the local social environment.
- Information on immigration services and who to speak to in the University to give you appropriate legal advice.
- Some universities initiate contact with international students prior to their arrival, so if this includes you ensure you have full contact information for this individual(s). They can be very effective and help in supporting your academic transition.
- Consider that in general, electronic forms of communication are faster, more focused and able to be more reactive than traditional hard copy forms of communication. Both the University and the international student should seek to exploit this wherever possible.

Overall, you will receive a great deal of additional information from University and other important sources upon your arrival at the University. We don't expect you to know all of this immediately as the staff know that for new entry students from overseas, progressing your studies can be both, a challenging and a very rewarding activity. One important piece of advice to remember is that – if you are ever in doubt about your studies or your assessments, *always* ask a tutor.

We discuss in chapter 4, the importance to your learning of developing a social network of friends. It is important therefore that you do participate in organised social events as you will benefit during your programme.

2.3   Your typical first two weeks at University

Typically, in all cases you will be invited and expected at the following:

1) An International Welcome Week: This normally occurs in mid/late September each year and lasts one week. This is the preferred time for new international students to arrive at a University. The week has a range of very important immigration tasks for you to complete as well as educational and social activities to enjoy, which are designed to help you settle. You are normally invited to arrive in the UK for these events and will receive further information from the University.

2) Your school or faculty's 'Induction and Welcome', typically follows the IWW, and is a welcome for all new and returning students. This week is very important as it will outline to you how the faculty works and provide you with a range of important information. A number of events are organised in this week, specifically for new direct entrants – these are particularly important to attend.

When you have finished the induction events (discussed earlier), you will then join your classes for your studies. Make sure that you receive a copy of the **module handbook or equivalent** for every module you study. These are **very important documents** as they will tell you where to be, when to be there, what to do before you arrive in class and what your assessment will be for those modules. These may be in hardcopy or in electronic copy, available from the university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

If you are going to be (or expect to be) arriving late to the University, make sure you go to the International Office of your university or college in the first instance. You may also find it helpful to locate and visit your faculty's Undergraduate Office in the first instance. From there you will be able to collect the information you have missed during induction and you will then be directed to your classes. Always introduce yourself to the module leaders in your classes and ask them for a copy of the module handbook (or access to them) and any missed information as soon as possible.

By the end of these two preparation and orientation weeks, you should have:

1. Organised your accommodation (for new arrivals to the UK)
2. The International Office Welcome Pack
3. A Faculty Welcome Pack
4. Your timetable for your studies
5. A guide to the Regulations of the Faculty

6. A guide to Study Skills in the Faculty
7. Information about who your personal supervisor is
8. Information about who your programme leader is
9. Have registered with the University which then gives you:
    1. Access to the Virtual Learning Environment
    2. Your University email address
    3. Your library passwords
    4. Your student identity card

2.4 Studying structure and information

Joining your programme means you will be in class studying for a number of hours per week – this will be made up of time in lectures, seminars and workshops / tutorials. In general, most undergraduate degrees in the UK are structured along similar principles. In the UK, degree programmes are loosely based upon a common structure appropriate to that discipline. For a majority of your degree choices, you will study in two semesters (the first running from late September to early January and the second from February to early May typically). Some universities operate three semester years and a majority include examination weeks at the end of these semesters. Hence a useful tip to note here is:

USEFUL TIP – Always check the dates of the examination weeks each year and *do not* book flights home in those weeks.

In a typical week therefore, you may expect to be with a tutor in a class for a range of time (from 10–12 hours for a social science discipline up to perhaps 30 hours for a science discipline). It is important to note, that some faculties you join may have a strong 'student centred' learning approach which means there is an expectation on students to positively engage with their work.

Where this is the case the UK HE environment is constructed so that for other times in the week, you should be studying outside of class on that topic. This is a common approach in many HEI faculties in the UK where a 20 credit module is taught as needing approximately 200 hours of study over a semester and/or year (again depending upon the programme structure). So if your module has a requirement for 40 hours of teaching in a class with a lecturer, then an additional 160 hours of private study are expected for successful completion of that module.

It is increasingly common that Universities offer smaller and larger credits for a module so expect variations on the teaching in class hours and private study hours. In the majority of undergraduate programmes, you will study 120 credits in a given year. UK undergraduate degree programmes that are 3 years duration (the standard length of time) – teach you 360 credits of topics/units/modules through varying combinations. A small number of undergraduate degrees may have a higher credit summation, typically for those with integrated master awards or where an additional year is added to the programme (for example with a year working in industry). In those cases, you may see a total credit count of 480 for the programme of study.

For a taught postgraduate award, a similar credit structure typically applies but it is taught over one calendar year (from September to August) with 180 credit count. Variations can be expected for the different kinds of postgraduate award – Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Masters by Research (MRes).

Joining in the second or final Year of an undergraduate degree programme, brings different challenges for international students and we discuss some of these in chapters 4 and 5 in detail.

2.5   The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Universities use varying VLEs – which provide key academic information to support your studies. These are electronic resources which contain information about your modules and can also be used to assess your work. You will gain access to this VLE upon registration with the University and will then have access to your units/modules and a range of general support information. It is important that you check your access as soon as you are able, after registration.

If you experience difficulty in accessing the VLE for your modules, please first consult your degree programme handbook before seeking help from your tutors.

2.6   Using your University email address

Universities have a general preference for you to use the assigned university email after you have registered on your programme. This does not mean that personal email addresses are not used, but that your university email account is the formal and official mechanism to advise you of programme relevant information. As a result **all** registered students should check their University email address on a regular basis. You may wish to set up an email rule to allow forwarding of university communication to your personal email address.

You should not expect that any prior communication methods with staff (pre-arrival) will be used again, once you have joined your university. If you fail to check that email address, you may miss out on important information and then fail to act upon that information.

2.7   Progressing your studies

Lectures are: Formal learning environments whereby your tutor presents to you – typically in 40/50 minute sections information concerning a given topic or theme. The purpose of the lecture is to present and identify to you the key information as signposts of what you need to understand. Sometimes the 40/50 minute sections are added together with breaks. A lecture tends to be a monologue by the tutor with little option or possibility for your participation.

Seminars are: Informal learning environments, whereby you typically work with a smaller group drawn from your class with the tutor on issues identified in the preceding lecture. This tends to be an opportunity to engage in a conversation with your tutors, to address shortcomings in your understanding or skill development.

Workshops (or **tutorials**) are: Informal, very small group (or individual) meetings with your tutor. They are normally focused upon a particular aspect of learning or activity that requires a smaller group to engage effectively with.

University staff know that sometimes overseas students find difficulty with new words and phrases heard in class and it is always better to ask for clarification and explanation of anything new or unfamiliar to you, later in the seminar. Students joining at advanced entry (into year 2 or year 3) are expected to have a good grounding in basic fundamentals of your degree already and be able to discuss those with staff. This expectation is problematic though for you and we explore how you can engage better with higher levels of entry in Chapter 5. Sometimes, students find the step between Year 1 (level 4) and Year 2 (Level 5) quite challenging, so be prepared for this. If you find yourself struggling, always ask your tutor for help.

USEFUL TIP – **It is common that in Universities for advanced entry students, your grades will begin to contribute towards your final degree classification. The exact percentage will vary by programme and university.**

When you meet your programme leader, he or she will explain this to you.

For UK Universities, your class attendance is really important. We will expect you to attend all timetabled sessions for your programme of study. It really is in your benefit to attend as there is plenty of evidence (see later chapters) that good attendance is correlated to good performance. If you cannot attend a class for a good reason (e.g. you are ill) then you can usually advise your faculty and they will note you are not expected to attend.

USEFUL TIP – **students that attend regularly receive better grades for their work** – **if you do not attend your classes then you will miss important information and the opportunity to develop your understanding of the topic to help you do well in your assessment activities.**

If you are joining your programme of study at the final year, there are particular additional concerns to consider – and which are discussed shortly (see Chapter 5).

2.8 How UK Universities test your learning and understanding

The broad forms of assessment you may experience are listed below (this is not an exhaustive listing however).

- Examinations (open book and closed book and oral)
- Essays
- Reports
- Oral presentations
- Poster presentations and displays
- Reflective learning journals
- Computer based assessment
- Multiple choice assessments
- Practical demonstrations
- Group work (and in varying forms)

As a very basic rule you should follow, if some of these methods may be new and/or challenging for you and you are uncertain as to what is required or how to prepare for them, speak with your module tutor concerned.

Information about your assessments (assignments and/or examinations) will be available in your module handbooks which you receive in the first week of teaching. If you arrive late to your faculty then ensure you collect or have access to, the module handbooks from your module tutor as soon as you are able. Sometimes, the assessments will be made available later in the module, if that is important to how that module operates. You will also receive general information about assessments during induction and there are periodic support sessions throughout the year which you can attend, to refresh your study and assessment skills.

Where group work is required for an assessment, this can be particularly challenging for all students especially new international students who may not know current students or may find it initially difficult to express themselves in this new environment (again we will discuss this issue of learning shortly in Chapter 2 and 3). However, it is important to ensure you try to join in quickly into this way of learning and begin to accept collective responsibility and ownership for any work produced as part of that group.

In the UK, you can only normally **attempt each assessment only once**. It is therefore very important to ensure you know what to do for the assessments and achieve the best you can in those activities. Many tutors provide guidance on assessed work as part of the module teaching programme. If you are unclear about what is expected of you then ask your tutor for guidance **before** you submit work for assessment. This is particularly important for Year 3 (top up) direct entrants. Where you receive a low grade for an assessment, always ensure you understand if this causes a difficulty or is below a passing grade at your university. In such cases, speak with your personal tutor about your grades and studies, so you can be correctly advised.

2.9 Feedback and good practice

Feedback about your work and progress is very important in your studies. It provides you with both information about how you are performing in your studies at present, but also about how to improve your grades for future modules and studies. It is therefore important to ensure you recognise feedback as being discussions with tutors about your studies as well as the traditional written feedback received when you submit work for assessment. Do not just rely on your received grades and marks as indicators of your progress in your programme, always ensure you know why you have received your grade. Speak with your tutor about this.

USEFUL TIP – Always know why and how you have received a grade for a piece of work.

In the UK it is expected that students will take responsibility for their academic work and not to use Unfair Means e.g. to avoid plagiarism and correctly reference all your sources, and to follow the normal assessment and examination practices. Universities and your faculty, will be able to provide a referencing guide that will allow you to submit work that follows appropriate academic conventions and uses the correct academic register.

2.10 Word Count

For written submissions, you should expect your faculty to have a specific policy on how many words you can use in your work. The penalties for exceeding this can be significant, so again, ensure you understand what these are. The reason why UK universities adopt this view is to ensure you develop skills in being focused and concise in your discussion of professional issues.
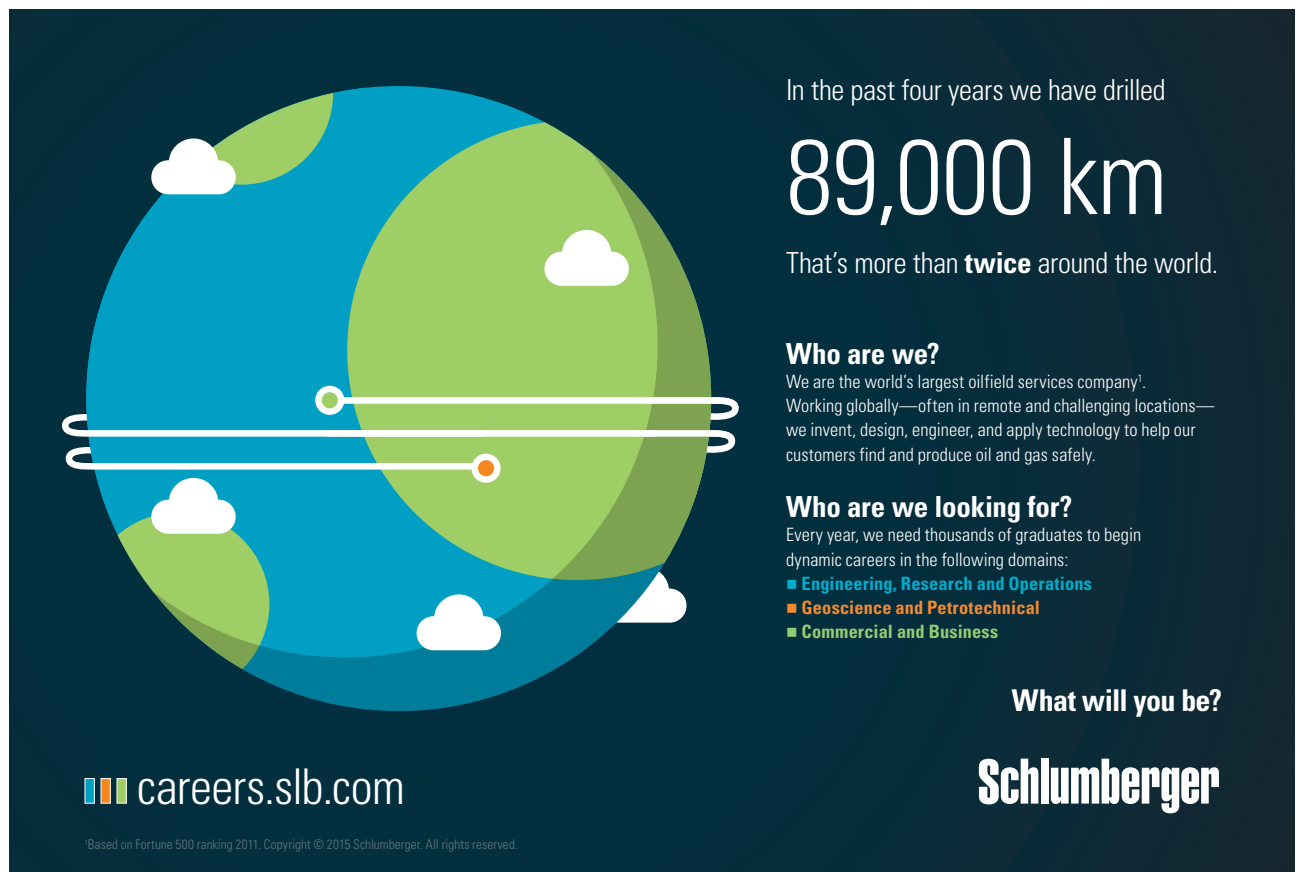
2.11 Grades and how your degree is classified

For many international students, understanding the UK grading system can be something new and complex. A brief summary of this follows. Honours degrees achieved from the UK are graded by 'class' – this means your final overall average grade is converted into a 'class' award:

- Achieving 70% or better at the end of your Final Year (Year 3 – level 6) studies with us means you will be awarded a 'first class' degree. This is very difficult in the UK to do. Only approximately 5–15% of students will gain this award in a given year. Some institutions will have further categories within the first class grade range (70%–100%) – such as 'exemplary first class'.
- Achieving between 60% and 69% at the end of your Final Year (Year 3 – level 6) studies with us means you will be awarded an 'upper second class' degree. This is a very good award in the UK and approximately 30% of students will gain this award.

- Achieving between 50% and 59% at the end of your Final Year (Year 3 – level 6) studies with us means you will be awarded a 'lower second class' degree. This is a good award in the UK and approximately 40% of students will gain this award
- Achieving between 40% and 49% at the end of your Final Year (Year 3 – level 6) studies with us means you will be awarded a 'third class' degree. This means you have reached the standard required for a UK degree. Approximately 10–15% of students will gain this award

These grades are also typically written onto your work with feedback, when you submit for assessment. Sometimes international students, who are not familiar with UK marking, are worried by receiving a mark for a piece of work they think looks 'bad'. It has become increasing practice that UK universities are being encouraged to adopt a full marking range (from 0 to 100%) – see chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the issues surrounding the marking range for degree programmes. So achieving a grade greater than 70% in UK Higher Education, means your work has been regarded as **excellent** by your tutor in comparison with all the other work they have assessed and the standard expected in that discipline at that level of study. Your faculty and your tutors ensure the quality of your education and degree, by taking great care therefore, in how grades are determined and by requiring the use of an external examiner (a staff member from a different higher education institution) to oversee all grades awarded to all students. It is a strength of studying for a UK degree.

Wherever possible and practicable, in the UK, all work is graded anonymously. Different systems exist with for example, one of the author's home institution using a bar code and student number system, whereby you will receive a unique bar code and number that identifies your work, but is not known to teaching staff. The only exceptions to this are during assessed presentations.

2.12   The structure of UK degrees

Undergraduate Honours degrees follow a clear structure in the UK. Typically, your first degree will be either a BA (Hons) award or a BSc (Hons) award, depending upon your programme (although variants also exist such as BSc (Econ)). These degrees are awarded by class (as above). Generally you need to obtain an upper second class degree to progress to a typical Masters Degree (MA or MSc) in the UK (although this is hard to generalise and you are advised to call a particular University of interest, to confirm their current postgraduate admissions policy). Masters degrees last for one full calendar year. Depending upon their research ability and strengths, some students can then progress onto a doctorate degree (which can last between 3 and 6 years).

2.13   Managing your studies

It is very likely that your timetable with your university will be different from the one you are familiar with in your current University or College. Classes can start at 9:15 am in the morning and can finish at 6.00pm or later, from Monday through to Friday. You need to ensure you arrive for your classes at least 5 minutes before they begin. Ensure you know the location of your classrooms in advance.

You need to ensure that you **prepare** for all your sessions, including scheduled lectures and seminars (again we look at this in more detail shortly). This also means managing your time so that you can attend your scheduled classes and effectively to complete your work. You can gain help in managing your time if this becomes a problem for you. A range of support services are usually available for you, to help you achieve this.

In short, you will need to develop effective study skills. Whilst this is an important topic in of itself, it is not the focus of this book. Consequently, you may find the following helpful if you wish specific advice on developing your study skills.

- Allan, B., (2009) Study Skills for Business and Management Students, Open University Press.
- Burns, T. and Sinfield S., (2008), '*Essential Study Skills: the complete guide to success at University*', Sage.
- Ely, C., (2007), '*Essential Study Skills*', Mosby.
- Wallace, M., (2004), '*Study skills in English: A course in reading skills for academic purposes*', Cambridge University Press.

2.14　Managing your language

Joining your programme in the UK brings many new and interesting challenges. One main problem for overseas students is language. You should expect that it may take some time for you to feel comfortable in your classes, both listening and speaking in English. Your faculty staff are aware that this can be an initial difficulty and are happy to revisit a new phrase or concept introduced in a lecture or during a seminar activity. The seminar discussions are also your opportunity to find out what is meant by a certain phrase or concept you have heard.

It is tempting to try to translate every new word you hear in a lecture, but this will take you time. It is often better to simply try to follow the main argument or discussion. This will give you a better overall understanding of that lecture. You can then after the lecture, check on new words or phrases in more detail. You may also find it helpful to review some of the English language support books listed below (some may be available from your home University / College / School library).

- Jordan, R.R., (1999), '*Academic Writing Course',* Longman.
- Bailey, R., (2003), '*Academic writing: A Practical guide for students*', Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.
- Cox, K and Hill, D., (2004), '*English for Academic Purposes* Melbourne Longman-Pearson.
- Wallace, M.J., (2004), '*Study skills in English*', (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

You will find that your language skills and abilities will develop faster if you try to work with other nationality students in your classes, as you will all be then using the English language. This is difficult to do, but it will help your studies and make you feel 'at home' more quickly. Try to not work in a same nationality group and use one person (the most confident speaker), to comment on the group's view on an issue. You must seek to gain your own voice. These observations are explored more fully in chapters 4 and 5.

2.15　Dealing with problems in your studies

This section lists a range of typical questions and answers you may find useful to refer to, once you joined your faculty and which provide the questions for key chapter in this book:

What to do if…you receive a poor grade?

Firstly – don't worry. Secondly, always make sure you speak with your tutor to know why you received a low grade and try to address those weaknesses you had in your next assessment. You may be encouraged to speak with the Study Advice Service and you should do so.

What to do if…you cannot attend a class?

Always let your department know if you are unable to attend a class (you will be introduced to staff from this office during the induction sessions). If you feel that you will not be able to attend several classes, speak with your personal tutor.

What to do if…you need to extend your visa?

You need to speak with staff from the International Office and/or professionally trained immigration advisers in the University.

What to do if…you want to complain?

Firstly speak with your tutors to try to resolve your problem. This is the best way to improve a problem. If that is not successful, then talk to the programme leader. If the problem has not been resolved then you can bring the issue to the attention of your faculty formally, by whatever mechanism is in place for this purpose.

What to do if…you are going to arrive late in the UK?

Let your faculty know.

What to do if…you need help choosing options in your programme?

Speak with your programme leader and/or personal supervisor and read the available guides (this will also be typically introduced during your induction sessions).

SELF-MANAGEMENT

A key feature of university education is self-management. In HUBS we expect ALL students to:

- Be on TIME for lectures, seminars, workshops and tutorials
- Be PREPARED e.g. by reading work set in your module handbook
- RESPECT other students and also teaching staff e.g. by not talking or disrupting the learning of others in lectures or other taught sessions, switching off mobile phones, not listening to each other.

To ensure that there is a constructive learning environment for ALL students, lecturers and tutors may:

- Exclude late arrivals
- Exclude students who are not prepared for their classes i.e. who have not read or worked on preparatory learning materials
- Ask students to leave lectures or other taught sessions if they are disrupting the learning experience of others. In extreme cases, the Business School may use the University disciplinary code to ensure that unruly students do not disrupt the learning experiences of others.

If there are good reasons for you not being able to engage with your studies then please contact your personal supervisor or module tutor(s).

Summary

This chapter has considered some of the practical activities you will need to address and do, in order to support your higher education experience in another country. This has ranged from a broad discussion of a typical University welcome and Induction periods through to the learning approaches employed within UK HEIs. Whilst it is difficult to offer specific advice about the structures in your UK learning environment because of the diversity of HEIs, we have outlined a common framework for assessment, attendance and engagement with your studies. If you read this prior to arrival at your HEI, it should help you to adjust more effectively. In chapters 4 and 5, we add additional observations to your 'pre departure' activities from an academic and learning perspective as well as explaining why we feel these activities will benefit your grade achievements.

In the next chapter we focus upon 'how you learn' generally which is an important exploration to undertake. This is narrowed in chapters 4 and 5, to one considering the specific situation of the international student and where and how 'you' can join a programme of higher study in the UK.

Chapter References

Webster, S., (2011) 'Improving the provision of pre-arrival information and support to international students via the use of online resources', Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education, 3, 1.

3   How you learn

TARGET READER – The tutor (although the keen international student will find it helpful!)

Aim of Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to primarily present the tutor with a concise and current understanding of the mechanisms through which individuals learn (where we view learning as described as a permanent change in the actions of the individual and which is not solely explained by the age of the individual and their cumulative experiences). These issues are then discussed in the context of the international student and their learning environment and history. Through this discussion, the practitioner will develop a cognitive understanding of more appropriate methods to deploy when working with international students in the UK. Chapters 4 and 5 add specific understanding from current research on this topic for both the tutor and the international student.

Theories of Learning

At the end of chapter 1, a broad outline of the key areas of, and barriers to, improving the grades of international students was presented (see **figure 1.1**). This structure is broadly based upon that of Illeris (2012) who articulates a 4 factor relationship shaping effective learning. Effective learning is understood therefore as:

- Identifying the basis of the learning theory employed in a given situation
- Identifying the internal conditions that directly shape subjective effectiveness of the learning process
- Identifying the external conditions in which the learner is seeking to learn
- Identify and select appropriate applications of learning methods and pedagogies

From **figure 1.1** therefore and combining this with the broad themes that comprise Illeris' approach to learning:

Illeris (2012)	Figure 1.1	Key comments
Basis of learning theory	Constructivist teaching and student activated teaching[1] by learning with the teacher.	In both interpretations, there is a focus upon the ontology of the learning theory and resultant epistemological and methodological arguments.
Internal conditions	The intention of the individual learner.	The learner's disposition, motivation, reward, stage of life and disposition towards the learning activity (see chapter 5).
External conditions	The context of the learner	The learning environment of the individual, their social pressures and situational needs (see chapter 4)
Application	Approaches to learning	The diversity of available pedagogical methods to fit with individual learners and their needs (see chapter 5)
Learning	Effective Teaching	Focuses upon the barriers to learning, learning types and structures (see chapter 4 and 5)

Table 3.1: Comparison of the Illeris (2012) model of learning and the key parts of this book[1]

Whilst a consideration of these initial frameworks is effective in bringing together the primary components of individual learning, the core argument – and one which as highlighted in chapter 1 as integral to this book – is that of grasping learning as an interaction between the external environment and the individual, which is effected by the manner in which learning is gained and incorporated into the individual. We see later how this can be described as the ***academic practice of*** your degree programme. Arguments of motivation and intention (in the sense of an individual's control of their learning environment), the ease (or difficulty) with which they are able to shape that environment, the importance of significant others in their learning activities and their attitude towards the learning process of the student learner from chapter 1 are important to understand from the practitioner/tutor perspective, especially in the sense of selecting appropriate applications of pedagogical methods. This latter issue has been significantly explored in key literature.

As noted in **table 3.1** a critical assumption in these frameworks is that individuals cognitively construct new meaning and understanding. It has long been recognised by psychologists that the brain is a highly effective pattern matching organism and individuals maintain mental schemata (both general and specific) that allow them to act in a given situation, even one which is new to their understanding and experience. Much work has been conducted on this view of the brain (see for example Schmidt, 1995:2011). As Illeris (2012) illustrates, learning occurs then when new observations from the environment, suitably enabled by an internal predisposition to that stimulus, shape/modify/extend the existing mental schemata. This is the heart of Piaget's[2] concept of learning. Clearly then there will be different mechanisms through which a schemata is changed or developed and this will not always been the same for all members of a class under instruction. We can therefore state that this is the first important practitioner observation:

Note 1: International students will present varying a priori mental schemata constructs that may be quite different from home (UK) students.

It may also be observed from Piaget's original conception of learning that:

Note 2: The traditionally dominant assimilative learning process may be far more fragmented for international students that for home (UK) students when following a UK derived curriculum.

Note 3: Illeris (2012) notes that desired *transformative learning* can be experienced by individuals in certain situations but that this may be particularly difficult for international students.

This approach to learning (transformative) describes an extensive and far reaching revision of many schemata of pre-existing learning skills and knowledge, by new ones – and which challenge and revise the very nature of the individual and 'self'. This clearly would be demanding and stressful for individuals concerned as it is profound and extensive. This may, for some international students, be their experience of learning in the UK and echoes comments observed in Cadman's (1997) and Brown's (2009) work of the importance of these changes. Both authors examined the meaning of identity and self for international students studying in new learning environments, which challenged the core of their pre-existing schemata and frameworks for learning, knowledge development and skill acquisition. Indeed as discussed in chapters 4 and 5, self-identity and how much you feel your 'belongingness' to your programme is an important focus for understanding your effective international student engagement and grade achievements.

Overall, Illeris (2012) presents four types of learning : cumulative, assimilative, accommodative and transformative – where assimilation and accommodative are the two most frequently employed learning approaches for individuals. It is the argument of this chapter however, that assimilative learning is more likely to be fragmented for international students due to ill fitting a priori schemata for learning and potentially, for some international students, the learning process in a UK learning environment, will necessarily be transformative – in other words you will change how your understand yourself, your values can change as can your actions.

Recent research on both **notes (1 and 2)** above illustrate these two concerns clearly. Jang et al (2009), Cadman (1997) and Sloan & Porter (2010) for example, present analyses that are all concerned with these two observations but from different audience perspectives. Jang et al (2009) are concerned with how an international learner reflects on the abilities of their teacher to meet their learning needs. In other words, they are concerned with the Illeris (2012) condition under which individuals *acquire* new understanding and learning by focusing upon the perceptions of the learner towards the tutor.

The Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) of tutors is a measurement instrument developed to provide a student centred view of the acquisition of understanding by the student. Sloan & Porter (2010) subsequently developed a behavioural and structural understanding of the situational context in which learning is enabled for international students (through the Contextualisation – Embedding – Mapping model (CEM)). This is a framework that blends the internal – external conditions from the Illeris (2012) model of learning by considering how to integrate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules of study within degree programmes. Finally Cadman (1997) offers a reflective analysis of experiences working with doctoral international students and relates to how international students develop a self identity when learning in an international (to them) environment. This is an important and interesting issue we need to understand as it will help the international student and the tutor for international students, understand why engagement in a learning environment may be very different from familiar home environments.

The development of an individual identity (and the self) is argued by psychologists to have both an individual and a social input (Terry *et al.* 1999; Tsoukas, 1996: Anderson & Warren 2005). Thus how international students are acculturated to their learning environment and how this process is managed both by the student and by tutors involved in that learning process, also suggests that the tutor must consider the origins and starting point for the learning process of each individual learner. This could be a focus upon the subjective situation of the learner (Illeris' Internal Conditions) and learning barriers. The acculturation of the international student learner and the impact upon effective learning, is a particular focus for Zhang & Goodson (2011). Chapter 5 further explores these ideas.

From a tutor perspective a number of considerations emerge from this discussion.

USEFUL TIP – Know the student learner.

Effective teaching depends both upon the tutor's competence in a given subject knowledge but also on knowing the student's prior knowledge and anticipated learning difficulties. Jang et al (2009) present a succinct argument of this, that effective teaching requires a competent understanding of both subject knowledge and pedagogical options, so as to be able to implement an appropriate and fitting communication process with the student. This combination of competences and subsequent judgement, has been identified as the Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) of the tutor introduced earlier.

Jang et al (2009) in research examining PCK tested to what extent the four categories of input into PCK explained the perception by students of what an effective teacher was[3]. The four hypothesised categories were:

- Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) – the demonstration of subject matter comprehension by the tutor
- Instructional Representation Strategies (IRS) – the demonstration of linguistic techniques to illustrate issues to aid understanding by the tutor
- Instructional Objects and Context (IOC) – the demonstration of knowledge of the aims of education, classroom management and instruction by the tutor
- Knowledge of Student's understanding (KSU) – the demonstration of an evaluation of current student understanding, before and during teaching by the tutor

Their analysis highlighted good levels of competence (SMK) but weak levels of KSU shaping student perception of what was a good tutor. There was insufficient evidence offered by tutors to generate positive perceptions in the students, of the teachers KSU. Indeed their results stressed that most tutors were "…insensible to students' learning difficulties and their prior knowledge." (Jang et al, 2009:603). Key causes of this perception were the adoption by tutors of a subjective view of student progression and understanding in class, the explanatory competence evidenced in class and progressing too quickly through the curriculum in class.

USEFUL TIP – **as a tutor do not assume you know how your international students value good teaching and how they approach learning.**

PCK has its roots in the constructivist argument of learning because of the importance of understanding previous experience and knowledge of both the teacher and the international student. This is called a dialogic view of learning which then emphasises – knowing the student through –

- Being competent in a variety of pedagogical methods. **Question** – *how would you describe your breadth of skills and understanding of different pedagogical methods? Is it time to refresh them?*
- Considering how the student can progress through the subject matter (the order and structure of learning materials). **Question** – *notwithstanding the QAA Subject benchmarks, HE teachers have considerable flexibility in what parts of the subject matter knowledge are included in a given modular focus. How often do you consider whether your preference for the knowledge focused upon in a module is appropriate for the learner?*
- Gaining an understanding of the international student's previous knowledge of the subject matter. **Question** – *how often (if at all) do you consider the pre-existing knowledge and skills that a learner brings to your classes? Are you aware of gaps in that knowledge? Are you aware of strengths in the abilities of learners in your class?*
- Ensuring attention is directed to being aware of initial and progressing student understanding in a class. **Question** – *do you have any information on the make-up of your classes? Initial student qualifications and experience, their international entry profile? How often do you ensure students are following and understanding your instruction during your classes?*
- Using appropriate assessment strategies to evaluate student achievement in learning the subject knowledge. **Question** – *Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) if used (or paradigmatic skills and knowledge) can be assessed in a number of different ways. How often do you think about whether the assessment strategy selected to evaluate learner achievements, is appropriate for the diversity of student learners in a class? Can different strategies be employed concurrently in a given class, that then give a greater measurement of the actual achievements of a given student learner?* [4]

3.1   Structuring the learning process

Sloan & Porter (2010) considered the difficulties experienced by international student learners in their engagement and achievement in undergraduate business degrees. Of particular focus was the need to consider not only the development of English (typically described as English for Academic Purposes (EAP)) competence skills and understanding by international students upon joining their degree programmes, but also an explicit consideration of when and to what extent, these are aligned with subject matter requirements as the learner progresses through their programme of study. The tendency for EAP programmes to be run in parallel to their disciplinary studies and to be perceived by the student learner as then separate from that discipline, weakens their effectiveness and the achievement of the learner. The learner perceives their EAP studies to be separate from and less important than, their subject matter studies. The importance of language competence is returned to again in chapter 4 but we can note here from Sloan & Porter (2010) that by changing how EAP was viewed and managed, the *effective structure of the learning process* was enhanced. This was addressed by:

- Assigning specific EAP staff to faculties with International Students. **Question** – *as a subject matter specialist working with international students – what contact do you have with EAP staff?*
- Identifying subject champions who could focus upon modules where the transferability of skills from the EAP studies was particularly weak – yet important for student achievement. **Question** – *do you know where international students experience particular difficulties in units/modules? Do you know what aspect of learning is a particular barrier for the international student in those modules?*

- Revisions to both the EAP syllabus and the timing of EAP skills development to align with faculty subject knowledge requirements. **Question** – *in the delivery of your subject knowledge, have you ensured that where particular new skills and understanding are being introduced to the international student learner, that you have confidence that the learner will have the appropriate abilities at the right time?*
- Changing the traditional view of EAP by faculty from one of being external and additional, to internal and integral helps to generate successful achievements by the international student learner. This included prioritizing EAP work within faculty timetables (and making that visible to the international student). **Question** – *what is the perception of EAP in your faculty or department? Are you confident that sufficient importance is accorded to EAP faculty staff?*

These observations formed the Contextualisation – Embedding – Mapping (CEM) model of learning for the international student.

3.2   Prioritizing the evidence of originality in international student achievement over achievement in mastering academic conventions.

It was noted earlier that individuals develop a sense of self from two environmental inputs – the external environment (notably significant others) and the internal environment (attitudes, dispositions and situations). This is a strong fit with the framework presented in this chapter for effective learning. It is perhaps then no surprise, that international students exhibit anxiety, stress and concern when commencing studies in a new international learning environment as they may feel their sense of self and identity is no longer secure or perhaps even valid or valued in that new environment (see also chapter 5 for a detailed exploration of this issue) (Cadman, 1997). Indeed, in the ethnographic work by Brown (2009) of the development of friendships between international students (see also **chapter 4**), some student comments noted the immersion into a new learning environment as 'alienating'. This argument is again supportive of the constructivist approach to learning (where meanings are developed in conjunction with experiences), although here a clear dissonance can be experienced by international students, between prior experiences and values (perhaps highly rewarded ones too) and these new experiences.

At the heart of this difficulty for the international student is a different set of rewards and values for an alternate learning style. International students cannot be expected to share the same epistemological orientation found in the UK culture (Connor, 1996). International students no longer feel 'at home' (Brown, 2009) and indeed as presented in **Note 3 Section 3.1.1**, are potentially exposed to a transformative learning environment (which can be rejected or resented by the learner (see **chapter 5** and the discussion of **Information Processing Styles (IPS)**). Bruner (2012) argues that learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon using cultural resources. This is the *culturalist* view of learning and is concerned with "…how humans in cultural communities create and transform meaning." (Bruner, 2012: 161). It is therefore focused upon how humans construct realities and meanings of the world around them.

We can imagine some of the difficulties an international student might experience when immersed for the first time into the UK HE learning environment by recognising that learning is now presupposed without an appropriate prior cultural context. As Bruner (2012) succinctly illustrates, whilst it might be possible to define and translate every English word into the language of the international student, it is impossible to translate any cultural context that is giving or taking meaning to/from that word. We lack a universal 'contexticon'. The task would be analogous to asking you, the HE tutor, to present an interpretation of the history of the Shandong province of China using Tai Chi! We simply lack both the tools, a priori schemata and understanding to achieve this aim.

It is perhaps then of limited surprise that originality of thought, criticality of engagement with problems, literature and methodologies become primary areas of difficulty for evidencing competence and for reward in the UK learning environment for the international student. Indeed the concept of 'critical thinking' itself is contested, particularly for the modern student living in an information rich world. Why do the critical thinking yourself when it is likely someone else has already done it for you? …and that you can easily find that answer through modern search engines and databases? (Wallace, 2014). Wallace (2014) further argues that with students opting for this as a *form* of critical thinking, their own rational abilities are diminished and there can be an increased use of "…irrational, emotional, or non-sequitur responses because that is what their current ability and motivation levels promote." What can the international student do, to address this?

Wallace (2014) suggests increasing the ability for critical thought as skill development in the identification and evaluation of determined evidence, although this will vary student to student. Achievement in this area should also be transparently evaluated (i.e. explored in a constructivist manner with the international student). Secondly, developing skills in identifying who to ask and what to ask about, would also ensure the development of critical thinking skills in the individual concerned.

With this problem also typically comes difficulties with presenting acceptable forms of expression of those competences through use of an academic register and academic referencing conventions. Yet, it is in the experience of the authors, often the case that a student's ability to articulate a response to a set assessment task in a manner in which that discipline accepts can be more important (and achieve a higher grade as a result) than the actual originality of arguments encompassed in that response.

For example, in a recent review of a University's module in Entrepreneurship (where one of the authors was the external examiner) and which encompassed both home and international students in their final year of study, the assessment criteria focused upon many aspects of the 'quality' of the work –for example, the financial forecasts in the business plan, the marketing research and data underpinning the idea, operational resource management needs, human resource management needs for example – however, there was no criteria for judging the *originality* of the idea for the business. In other words, the functional and to a certain extent, the mechanistic performance of the proposed organisation was prioritized in assessment, over the idea for the business. This is not to say that those functional activities of a new organisation are not important, but they can be addressed, learned, taught (or even hired) from the marketplace in practice. Possessing a distinctive vision of the organisation though adds value to the venture and arguably, will underpin longevity of the resultant organisation. So why was it missing in the original assessment structure of the assignment?

Cadman (1997) proposes a similar argument in her reflections of working with international postgraduate students, that HE tutors often present to international students barriers to learning that focus upon the mechanistic achievements over the (preferred) aim of criticality and originality in assessed work. These can be in conflict with the development of a secure sense of self in the new learning environment (see also Block (2007) and **chapter 5**).

Hence questions for the tutor to consider in working with international students would be as follows:

- Reviewing how the assessment criteria are presented and understood by the learner. **Question** – *what is the fundamental evidence sought to warrant a grade allocation to an assessed submission? Does that evidence allow the learner to gain a 'voice' (using Cadman's terminology). Are you prioritising academic register and conventions above evidence of criticality and originality?*
- Work with international students on their assessment tasks in a supportive formative manner. **Question** – *do you review intended submissions from international students. Can you identify the student voice in that work? Can you guide the student to value that voice, to help build their identity in this new learning environment? See chapter 5 and the discussion of student identity processing systems and in particular mode 1 and 2).*
- As noted in **1** – **section 3.1.1** above – the articulation of a valued assessed response in the UK learning environment for the international student, should be able to be captured by an appropriate assessment strategy. **Question** – *have you considered in your assessment strategies, whether they are UK/Euro centric in their application? Do they consider the variety of international students in a given class who may find their self-expression difficult in some forms of assessment?*
- Should rigorous adherence to the academic convention of writing in the third or neutral person be deployed at the expense of evidence of originality and criticality? **Question** – *Cadman (1997) raises this interesting point that the widespread disuse and punishment for using the first person 'I' in assessed UK HE submissions (which has sound professional aims of objectifying that discussion) may also erect learning barriers for the international student. Do you need to be impersonal in assessing submitted work? Or can you be accommodating of the use of 'I' in that work? Cadman citing Flowers (1981) and Ivanic & Simpson (1992) clearly articulates that returning to the use of 'I' does foster academic enquiry in international students. By doing this, the international student is allowed to define themselves in their work, helping to secure a renewed sense of identity in this new learning environment and to relate directly and personally to literature and argument. See also **chapter 5** and mode 2 and 3 of the IPS.*

The idea of transformative learning[5] has been noted in this chapter as providing some parallels to the experience of the learning process for international students studying in the UK. Mezirow (2012) explains that transformative learning is focused upon the difficulties experienced through what Habermas termed as communicative learning, where as noted, international students are akin to Mezirow's adult returning learners to education and are (likely) to lack a suitable contexticon. Communicative learning is an abductive learning process, which is a process of both inductive and deductive analysis. This approach to learning seeks to generate socially useful understanding that is derived from "…gaps in the solutions to concrete problems more than gaps in the literature" (Visconti (2010) citing Van Maanen (2007)) (see also Feilzer, 2012). It appeals to the learner as it encourages a critical engagement with the subject matter when engaged with an effective teacher. The weakness of this approach to learning is the dependency upon a skilled subject specialist, who as we have noted, is also competent in appropriate pedagogical methods (see the earlier PCK discussion).

International students studying in the UK therefore need to develop an appropriate *frame of reference* to support effective learning (Mezirow, 2012). This includes two cognitive elements –

1) A habit of mind (which are the individual, social and life experiences that allow interpretative schemata to be developed – such as moral ethical values, sociolinguistic norms, religious and aesthetic values).

2) Resultant points of view, which are the articulation of habits of mind. This might for example be illustrated by the way in international students view non culturally similar individuals in a class as outsiders and then do not seek help or support from engaging with them. It is an issue we return to in chapter 5 when considering how international students build cultural friendships and socially embed themselves into the UK learning environment.

If we consider what Mezirow (2012) presents as the processes involved in transformative learning, we begin to appreciate some of the scale of difficulties encountered by the international student in the UK HE learning environment.

The transformative learning processes include:

- Being able to critically reflect on the source and nature of the individual's assumption and those of others
- Being able to deploy empirical research methods (instrumental learning)
- Being able to arrive at justified beliefs and arguments by participating in an informed discourse
- Being able to act upon the transformed learning by being able to apply it to new evidence presented[6]

So now with this discussion, we can add a further point of reflection for the tutor of international students:

- **Question** – with revisions to habits of the mind and resultant points of view, frequent formative engagement with the international learner is required. *How often do you undertake this with your international students on required / assessment tasks – where you particularly focus upon missed assumptions in the views of students[7]? Various pedagogical methods are offered by Mezirow (2012) to achieve this such as; metaphor analysis, critical incidents, journal writing, conceptual mapping etc.*

3.3   Acculturation of the International Student

The discussion above in **3.3** highlighted difficulties for international students in *gaining a sense of self and identity* in a new international learning environment. This concern has also been explored through international student *acculturation*. Acculturation is the process through which individuals having different cultures interact and generate changes in those original cultural patterns. This can either be through changes in the home (UK) or host culture in the international learning environment. Berry et al (1997) propose five acculturation strategies along these two axes:-

- Integration – a sense of identity and self emerges from adjustments to both the host and home cultures. This bicultural adjustment generates the lowest form of acculturation stress for the individual (Brown citing Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999)).
- Assimilation – a sense of identity and self emerges from embracing the host culture. Although this must be tempered as it would not generate a multicultural learning environment (indeed the host culture risks being viewed as chauvinist). See also **chapter 5** and mode 2 and 3 of IPS.
- Separation – a sense of identity and self is reinforced by rejecting the host culture. The international student remains monocultural. See **chapter 5** and mode 3 of IPS.
- Marginalization – a sense of identity and self is separated from both the host and home cultures. See **chapter 5** and mode 3 of IPS.
- Multiculturalisation – a sense of developing multiple integration adjustment strategies.

For Zhang & Goodson (2011) the integration acculturation strategy is the most effective for the well-being of international students[8] and considers both psychological (the available stress and coping frameworks available to international students) and sociological adjustment (the fitting in of the international student) and conflict reconciliation in international students and their tutors. The value of social connection and embeddedness from this bi-linear perspective emphasises both interaction with host nationals but also values conational interaction between culturally similar international students (Brown, 2009) (i.e. that UK students also benefit from this interaction). There is significant literature on the benefits of acculturation integration strategies (see Zhang & Goodson (2011) and Brown (2009) for a detailed listing and discussion) and which tend to cite – reduced prejudice, equality, support for pursuit of common goals, recognition of differences in communication patterns, mutual respect for prevailing policies and opportunities for friendships to develop.

- **Question** – *to what extent are activities by international student associations promoted and supported by faculty?*
- **Question** – *are there visible elements of social connectedness through host culture integration for international students? (dietary preferences, language supports, familial recognition, worship facilities, recognition of (different) national holidays for example).*
- **Question** – *are 'buddy' or pairing schemes operational in the faculty? (where these could be friendship or academically oriented).*

In considering the nature of the learning process for the international student and their acculturational process, the chapter has posed a number of reflective questions for the tutor of international students. These questions are particularly acute now for UK HE institutions, as the market for international students is highly competitive and the 'international student offer' becomes a more visible aspect of the faculty's portfolio.

An operational difficulty arises however in structuring the learning environment for international students so that the benefits of acculturalisation are experienced but not at the expense of negating the supportive framework offered by conational friendships of similar cultural students (Brown, 2009). These friendships are recognised as important in decreasing the likelihood of loneliness and stress in international students. Moreover, for the international student these friendships are critical at the initial stage of the enrolment of the international student to their programme and faculty. This can extend to both academic and non-academic areas of international student life. Even where those international students who form class and study groups also recognise the limitations of that conational support framework, the linguistic ease of same indigenous language friendships is a significant attractor for the formation of these friendships but stress can also be induced as the international student realizes that practising English with non-native speakers may actually be to the detriment of their own language proficiencies (Brown, 2009). The strength of this conational framework can vary culturally, so the HE tutor needs to be able to recognise the importance and strengths of this framework from international student class members.

- **Question** – *Do you seek to micro manage group activities and group assessments in your classes? If so, do not neglect or negate (especially in early sessions of a module for new international students) the benefits of supporting and engaging same culture working groups.*
- **Question** – *Do you seek and solve problems presented by international students – it is important that when an issue is raised by an individual/collective cultural group to a faculty member that it is addressed (and does not reinforce a cultural belief that the only effective support comes from within the cultural group).*

With the development of cultural groups, will also come the risks of group conformity and groupthink, in the actions and decisions taken by members of that group. It is therefore a difficult task to determine and balance the benefits of an early conational support framework but also seek to support acculturation integration of the international student. Yet it is one that the HE tutor must address.

3.4   Addressing barriers to learning

What has become clear in the preceding discussions, is that learning is not a linear process for any individual – it is not a simple matter of knowledge and skill transmission. It is a complex series of interdependencies between groups of factors, only over some of which the tutor has influence. To this difficulty, we can add a fifth consideration, that of barriers to learning. It was noted above (**section 3.1.1 and section 3.3**) that if we view the learning process for international students as being transformative, then potential barriers to that learning may become more acute.

All individuals living in today's contemporary society, operate learning barriers to help them identify and filter what information and understanding is perceived as relevant and important (Illeris, 2012). A simple example would be the work noted earlier from Jang et al (2009) that focused upon the perceptions from Chinese College Students of their teachers PCK. Teachers needed to demonstrate a range of skills and knowledge bases, to allow those students to perceive the value of the materials and delivery from those teachers and hence to overcome any resistance (and to negate the dismissing of the learning being 'offered' by those teachers).

For an international student studying the UK however, this everyday barrier to learning is amplified when transformative learning is required. A new and previously unexperienced learning environment now demands that the international student must change – perhaps radically – how they learn and acquire skills and knowledge to secure appropriate evidence of learning and competence. Illeris (2012) labels this barrier to learning as an *identity defence*. These learners may also exhibit *ambivalence* towards their learning and progression as they are unwilling to relinquish the learning schemata that had previously been developed and served effectively in their home learning environment. One interesting observation from this discussion is to contrast it with other literature that highlights conflict and cognitive dissonance as a source of individual creativity and originality (see for example Gilson & Shalley, 2004). In other words, whilst working with international students experiencing transformative learning may require the teacher to address significant learning barriers, overcoming these difficulties can result in major learning developments and progressions for the individuals concerned.

- **Question** – *are you aware of which international student learners in your classes may have the most difficulty in adapting to the UK learning environment – and which as a result, may experience the most resistance to learning?*

Summary

This chapter has sought to present a broad conceptual framework of how we learn (in particular **sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3**) with subsequent thought then given to how this might be problematic for the international student learner in the UK. A conceptual argument was presented that the international student learner experiences learning difficulties because of cultural, contextual and pedagogical differences in their transformative learning. These problems were presented in five broad **considerations** with a number of **reflective questions** (or as we present shortly, actions) that the HE tutor can reflect upon, in seeking to improve the learning environment for these individuals.

The considerations:

1) Know the international student learner
2) Structure the micro and macro learning process
3) Prioritize the evidence of originality in international student assessments over achievement in academic conventions
4) Encourage the sense of self and identity development
5) Address barriers to learning

Emergent questions that arise from exploring these considerations and hence actions that the HE teacher could pursue to address these considerations are:

From **3.1.1**:

1) Do you have sufficient breadth of knowledge and skills in a variety of different pedagogical methods?
2) Have you considered the structure and order of your subject matter materials from the viewpoint of the student?
3) Do you have an understanding of what skills and knowledge students bring to your classes already?
4) Are you aware of strengths or weaknesses in that student knowledge – or know where gaps are (or likely to be)?
5) Are you aware of the qualifications and attainment of students in your class – so you know where they are beginning their learning from?
6) How often do you check understanding by your students in your class?
7) Have you considered the appropriateness of the assessment strategy to meet ILOs?
8) Can you offer more flexibility in how ILOs are evidenced by student achievement in your classes?

From **3.2**:

1) What contact (formally and informally) do you have with EAP (English Language) staff in integrating both subject matter delivery and discussion of the learning process?

2) Have you identified with EAP staff which parts of the programme of study have/will be most difficult for the international student learner? And what barrier needs to be addressed?

3) Have you ensured that where particular new skills and understanding are being introduced to the international student learner, that you have confidence that learner will have the appropriate abilities at the right time? (through prior collaboration with EAP staff)

4) Is the perception of EAP staff in your faculty or department weak? If so, how could this be improved?

From **3.3**:

1) What is the fundamental evidence sought to warrant a grade allocation to an assessed submission? Are you actually looking at or for, the 'voice' of the student?

2) In your assessment strategies, are you prioritising academic register and conventions above evidence of criticality and originality?

3) Do you review intended submissions from international students?

4) Can you integrate formative learning points in your module where you guide the student to value their voice, to help build their identity in this new learning environment?

5) Have you considered in your assessment strategies, whether they are UK/Euro centric in their application? Do they consider the variety of international students in a given class who may find their self-expression difficult in some forms of assessment?

6) Can you support the use of the first person ('I') in assessed work to encourage originality and critical engagement with assessment tasks?

7) How often do you undertake formative discussions with your international students – where you particularly focus upon missed assumptions in the views of students?

From **3.4**:

1) To what extent are activities by international student associations promoted and supported by faculty?

2. Are there visible elements of social connectedness through host culture integration for international students?

3. Do you have 'buddy' or pairing schemes operational in the faculty?

4. Encourage (initially)the benefits of supporting and engaging same culture working groups in your classes

5) Seek and solve problems presented by international students early and ensure this is visible to that community.

From **3.5**:

1) Are you aware of which international student learners in your classes may have the most
   difficulty in adapting to the UK learning environment – and which as a result, may experience
   the most resistance to learning?

To close this chapter, we present below an indicative template that reflects on the 25 emergent questions
above and shows how a HE tutor might consider and structure a class with a high international student
make up.

1. Identification of the objective of the class – aligned with the aim of the module and its function
   and contribution to the programme of study.
2. Express and focus upon any 'big ideas' for the class which may reflect an aspect of important
   threshold knowledge and learning. These will follow from the objective of the class.
3. Reflect on the audience in the class and their learning needs.
4. Are there particular language needs or preparation requirements for your class? Does this need
   to be advised to EAP staff and/or integrated into those sessions?
5. Think about how to structure your class – working in blocks of 20 minute periods.
6. Pace the delivery of materials – do not rush.
7. Ensure you are able to explain further what you have presented.

8. Within those 20 minute periods – identify what parts of knowledge and skills you can focus upon but which will continue to contribute to the objective of that block and of the class as a whole.

9. Try to ensure each opening block period of time is engaging and captures the attention of the class.

10. Try to ensure each closing action of each block period of time – revisits the key objective(s) of the block.

11. Have you checked the understanding of students in your class as you deliver your materials?

12. What activities/engagement can you undertake to try to develop the student 'voice' in your class?

13. Are your examples /cases etc cited in class – international?

Glossary:

Academic Practice – Is the manner in which the primary components of individual learning are brought together. It is the managed interaction between the external environment and the individual, which is effected by the manner in which learning is gained and incorporated by the individual.

Mental Schemata – are cognitive frameworks acquired through familial and societal constructs that shape our interpretation and meaning of information and the world around us.

Assimilative Learning – is the integration of new information into existing knowledge or cognitive structures (mental schemata) without restructuring the current schema.

Transformative Learning – is changed behaviour that arises through psychological changes, revisions of values and belief systems and changes in lifestyle and behaviour in individuals.

Cumulative Learning – is changed behaviour that accrues over a period of time.

Accommodative Learning – are those who learn through interaction and hands-on practice. They often prefer acting on instinct using other people's analysis and interpretation and are often found working in team settings. Trial-and-error methods of learning are common.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) – This is a framework developed to account for the student perception of tutor engagement and competence in education. It has four inputs: The tutors Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK), the tutor's abilities in linguistic instruction (IRS), the awareness of the tutor of the aims of education and classroom management (IOC) and the scope to which the tutor understand the initial student understanding and that at the end of the sessions (KSU).

Epistemology – the study of knowledge and beliefs.

Culturalist Learning – The interaction of peers (students) in a classroom that facilitates learning.

Abductive Learning – occurs where learning outcomes result from the employment of abductive reasoning – which is undertaken from incomplete set of observations and then proceeds to the likeliest possible explanation for the set.

Acculturation – the process of cultural change that result from the interaction between two or more dissimilar cultural contexts.

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4   How you learn and are assessed

TARGET READER – The international student

Aim of Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to present you, the student, with a guide as to how you will be assessed in your academic work in the UK, to identify and manage differences in your previous experience of education with that you will find in the UK and to give you strategies and actions to achieve appropriate grades in your work. In doing this, this chapter as outlined in the narrative of the book, is not proposing to be a skills guide or self-study aid, although these are important aspects of your learning. We instead aim to give you an understanding of what your tutors do when they prepare, lecture and then accept your work for assessment, in a variety of forms.

Chapters 2 and **3** presented a framework to understand the most important topics that can influence the grades you receive for your work. In short, this was how you think and how this relates to how you learn, the motivation you have to learn, the environments in which you are asked to think, learn and on occasion, be assessed within and the effectiveness of the learning structure chosen by your tutors in your studies. These parts of the framework for securing good grades in this book, continue to structure this chapter but we want to present to you also within this discussion, personal observations and reflections from working with international students for nearly 20 years of how your tutors engage with your assessment process.

This chapter will start with a discussion of the assessment environment for your tutors, rather than you. In doing this, we hope to give you some understanding of the pressures currently existing within UK higher education, which will – either directly or indirectly, shape how you learn (the learning structure) and the grades your receive.

4.1   The UK Higher Education Learning Environment

You may be unaware that over the last 5 years (since 2011 in particular), there have been significant changes both in UK Higher Education but also in Higher Education generally as a human activity. The changes in the former are strongly influence by the changes in the latter, although each country offering higher education to its citizens and international students, chooses to manage this relationship differently. For this particular discussion we can note that the UK is at present the ***third most expensive global destination*** for an international student wishing to study for an undergraduate degree (THES, 2013)[9].

Country	Annual fees (USD)	Annual cost of living (USD)	Annual total (USD)
Australia	25, 375	13, 140	38, 516
United States	25, 226	10, 479	35, 705
United Kingdom	19, 291	11, 034	30, 325
United Arab Emirates	21, 371	6, 004	27, 375
Canada	18, 474	7, 537	26, 01

Table 4.1: Comparative Global Higher Education Costs (Top 5)

Whilst this in of itself is perhaps of limited concern to you, given as an international student fees for study would have been considered in your planning for your studies, what you may be less aware of is that for home students (those born in the UK), they are also now being required to pay a similar fee for their higher education study. UK Government reforms (HEA Act (2004) and the Willets (2010, 2012) papers on HE Sustainability) of the Higher Education sector in 2012 resulted in more flexibility from Universities to raise their fees for UK students to a maximum of £9000, which in most cases is very close to the fee you are asked to pay for your undergraduate studies.

In the space of 5 years, UK students saw the listed price for their studies for home students rise by almost 400%. The main difference in the payment of these fees from UK students to their universities compared to you, is that they are able to secure low interest loans from the UK Student Loan Company (SLC) and repayment is not required until the graduate achieves a salary in excess of £21, 000 per annum (for students starting a programme since September 2012). Nonetheless, these developments created a significant amount of change in the UK Higher Education Sector. In short, the delivery of higher education began to operate more as a market, where better universities were able to recruit students who were willing to invest their loaned monies in the expectation of securing a valuable post degree income. This marketization of Higher Education has a number of outcomes of direct relevance to you and is part of a much wider development in the global education markets. Perhaps the main consequences being observed in UK Universities at this time, because of these changes are:

- An enhanced focus upon employability within the programme structures of your study
- An enhanced focus upon your university either being research driven – with the expectation that this will improve your programme of study OR for your university to have an enhanced focus upon learning and teaching (as discussed in **chapter 3**).

Of relevance to international students (you) as well are two additional changes: firstly that in order to secure applications and student enrolments to UK Universities, where possible significant investment into the learning environments by UK higher education institutions has been undertaken (although the UK in general still has major policy concerns regarding how to fund higher education[10]) and secondly, that in order to be visible in the market place of a bustling 120 or so UK Higher Education institutions, league tables were created. More recently Key Information Statistics (**KIS data**)[11] have become available to allow potential applicants to see which University and faculty therein is 'better' than another on certain reported indicators and this can help make a more informed decision regarding where you would like to study.

We now arrive at the most important part of this discussion for you. League tables of UK HE institutions combine a variety of measurements to generate a ranking. Some of the measurements are relatively slow to change or use indicators that your tutors who teach you in class, will have little influence over (such as the staff to student ratio (SSR) or the employability of graduates) – other measures however can be directly influenced by your tutors. The most important of these for you and the focus of this book – is grading. As a small but important aside, Huang (2013) has undertaken a detailed literature review of what is known about international students and your career intentions and employability. He finds this to be a relatively under researched area despite the important contribution of international students to both the institution, host economy and potential benefits to the home country.

4.2   Will you be graded fairly?

This is a very simple question, but with a very complex answer.

A recent debate on grading and marking between External Examiners in the UK identified the broad problems your tutors will face in assessing you. This debate is important for you to understand as it will directly impact on how you prepare and submit your work for assessment, in what **discipline** and against what **criteria of assessment**.

For your information again, discipline here refers to broadly whether you are studying an arts degree or a science degree as there are long established patterns of grading in both broad discipline areas. In the former (arts based degrees) – grading rarely in practice uses the full 0–100% marking range (for work graded on this scale) whilst science based degrees tend to have a greater use of the full 0–100% marking range. Whilst there are reasons for this practice, it is important for you to manage your expectations based upon the broad discipline you are studying. The second point noted above is that of your **assessment criteria**. Not all university systems in the world (or even across the UK) employ **assessment criteria**. For those that do you need to know that **assessment criteria are the priority areas of knowledge, skills, understanding and professional development that you tutor is looking for in your work**. You will be informed of these criteria in your taught classes (probably via some sort of module/unit handbook or guide) and perhaps represented by a **table of descriptors** against which the assessment criteria are matched to % achievement, or perhaps through broad % threshold categories (some examples will be presented shortly). For some of you, your module tutors may hold the belief that your work is 'excellent' for its level of submission (undergraduate) and should be awarded a high grade (>90%) whilst other tutors will note that work can always be improved and will grade it high, but less than 90%. You must therefore be prepared and aware that **marking in UK universities, remains a subjective activity** and that by joining such institutions, you have agreed to this **peer marking system**.

A summary of the key issues raised by external examiners during a recent online conversation (April 2014) on this issue and by a recent HEA publication (Brown, 2004) that specifically explored this area[12] are noted below. These comments are of direct interest to you and how you will be graded. We urge you to note the outcome statements.

- Marking in arts based degree tends to 'cluster' in a range of 30–70% which can arise for a number of reasons such as historical patterns, previous practice and the more discursive and subjective nature of the disciplines. For you to note – **It can be harder to secure a higher grade in a social science than a pure science.**
- Clustering of marks can be made worse by assessment submissions that contribute relatively small % to the overall grade for a module/unit studied. This disaggregation of marks is popular for example in many first year skills based modules. **If you study modules with lots of small assessments – it can be harder to gain a higher grade.**

- Graded submissions (perhaps like people in general)- tend to perform in a narrow range of outcomes making differentiation between abilities and evidenced achievements difficult to capture. **Most people perform averagely generating average grades.**

- There is the need for more distinctive differentiation between the classification thresholds (e.g. 60–69% and 50–59%) – but there can then be difficulties in differentiating between grade allocations **in** a threshold. Grading in a threshold (following from the preceding point) can be skewed by a **symbolic comparison bias** (i.e. it is easier to allocate a 69% than a 62%, as the unit digits (9 and 2) are more easily differentiable than say a 68% and a 67% by the human mind). Crisp (2008) has also identified that markers may also evidence other heuristics during the assessment process. One such heuristic is an 'affect heuristic' whereby an emotional response to a submission for assessment can bias the awarded grade to that work or the 'availability heuristic' which influence a grade allocation by the marker not finding the information required completely to make a judgement on a grade, but being able to identify it elsewhere in a response. In short you should – **Expect variations of grades within classification thresholds between your friends because your tutors find it harder to grade between thresholds.**

- Some universities employ specific marking grades in their assessments to mitigate the risks of symbolic comparison bias discussed above. For example the following values – 8, 18, 28, 35, 42 45 48 52 55 58 62 65 68 74 78 82 86 94 can be the allocated % grades. **Your tutor and programme may follow a similar marking structure and system – if you do not know then ask your tutors.**

- It is relatively easy for a module tutor grading your work to say 'Could your work be better?' – clearly the answer will almost always be a yes, but a better question is to ask – given the level at which work is being submitted – has the work met the **learning outcomes** of the task in a manner that has fulfilled all levels of study expectations? If so, the work should gain an excellent mark (perhaps 100%). **When you receive details of your assessment tasks, ensure you understand the assessment criteria and what your tutor wants to see in your submitted work.**

- Differences between the written feedback for a submission and the subsequently allocated grade for that work can occur. As external examiners, the authors have experience of reviewing work of colleagues which is wholly positive in its views of a submission outlining no faults or areas of improvement. Yet, the grade allocated was then less than 100%. **When you read your feedback does it always align with your allocated grade?**

- The allocation of a measured % grade award to a submission introduces potential tension and resistance by the marking tutor. This has been labelled as a "kind of cultural resistance to absolutes in an arts context" (HEA, Part 2) or "…where the implicit absolutism of the percentage scale *(of the sciences)* is at odds with the inherent relativism" of the arts based disciplines" (HEA, Part 4). **Always look at the grade you are given and the written feedback – do you understand why you have received both?**

- The historic academic development of the module tutor and how they approach the marking process may itself have established poor and/or unprofessional patterns of behaviour that are perpetuated by that module tutor. This may also arise through custom and practice in an institution. Whilst this can be difficult to address in your work, **expect to see differences in how your tutors mark and grade you** (Hand & Clewes, 2000).

- The impact of word count limits can significantly skew the quality of a submission as work can be written down to the word count limit. **Expect different practices in how your university and your tutors use a maximum word count for an assessed submission. It is important that you understand any potential penalties that a submission that has too many words could receive but also that you use the word count you have available.**

- Awarding high grades for a submission, can result in the inflation of a student's overall performance (i.e. where the student has not been perceived to have performed 'as well' in other studied areas). As a result, the student exits with an award that does not fully represent their 'average' performance and which also generate in an incorrect perception of ability and performance in the relevant employment sector. **Try to aim to gain high and consistent grades. Often there are common weaknesses (discussed in Chapter 5) in submissions from international students that result in them maintaining a lower average performance. Identify those weaknesses and improve them.**

- Criterion based marking can help to mitigate the effects of the bunching of grades, but it is not adopted by all universities (in the Palatine HEA working paper for example, 73% of surveyed UK respondents cited they used such criteria). Instead, assessed achievement based on the expectations of a subject expert for what 'should' be an assessment worth 40% or 50% or 60% etc can also be a common marking environment in which you will be judged. **If it is not clear to you, how you grade has been determined, always ask your tutor for an explanation.**

- There is evidence (see the Brown (2004) HEA Palatine report) that the third class degree (and awarded cumulative grade profile) is disappearing in UK HE education for the reasons cited in the preceding text and in this commentary. There is commensurately a growth in the awarding of upper second class and first degree awards. **Your tutors are likely to be under pressure to ensure that their class performances are good and support the allocation of grades typically >60%.**

- There may well rules and regulations (sometimes called **output algorithms**) in your university that determine how your grades are added together to generate your final degree classification. **If you do not know if this applies, ask your tutors for this information and guidance.**

Further relevant observations of the online debate between external examiners noted that the effective awarding of higher grades (in the 75–90% range in particular) should not be undertaken without a clear re-organisation of the other degree classification bands for a submission, to help manage the tendency for grade inflation to result. What this means is that overall, it can be very difficult to compare the award of degree classifications between institutions – but this as noted before, is a major input into the generation of comparative league tables of UK HEIs.

Clearly marking and grading your work is not an easy or simple task. As well as the points noted above, we need to also consider the following potential issues that may also shape the marking practices of your faculty staff when marking your work. These are:

- The measured 'quality' of incoming students to programmes of study (such as the published and actual input tariff) and the perception of the quality of students by faculty staff. In other words, if staff expect students to submit quality work as they entered University with very good grades, this can influence how well or not, they grade that subsequent work. **Your selection of your university and programme is important and you need to think about how you compare with the advertised student entry profile (tariff points or school and college grades).**

- The volume of contact time with a student. **How often are you actually in a class, with your tutor per week per module/course of study? How does this figure differ between universities and programmes?**

- The scope of that contact time – in other words HOW is the time used between you and your teachers? **Is that time mainly lectures (your tutors talk to you)? Is that time mainly seminars or workshops (where you talk to your tutors)?**

- As noted earlier, a significant factor impacting upon your achieved grades must also include your attendance and motivation (which can vary by class content and/or the tutor concerned).

- The type and validity of selected second marking practices. It is common practice in Universities that a small sample of the work from your classes is also looked at and read by another staff member. This is usually a **moderation process** – i.e. the second marker or moderator is focusing upon whether the first marker (your tutor) has been consistent in how a grade has been allocated across the sample considered. **Different universities have different methods of second marking – be clear you understand the process for your studies.**

- Differences between individual staff on what quality is in an assessed submission (whether by criterion or norm / gatekeeping / or achievement assessment). **You need to be aware that every staff member will have different views on what 'quality' is (for a detailed discussion see the work of Barnes *et al*, 2001: Allen, 2005).**

- The historic impact upon you of receiving low and/or high marks[13]. **In other words, individuals vary in the extent to which they attribute their success (or failure) to their own abilities or their environment.**

- The extent of supportive training and development for staff of the marking process.

- The actual length and duration of the process of assessment for a typical staff member. **Your tutors may have a limited amount of time to grade each received submission. This can place your tutor under significant pressure to maintain both speed and quality of feedback to you.**

- The order within which work is assessed by a staff member – **in other words would you get a better mark if you work was read earlier in the assessment process or later? Or if your work was being graded after a number of prior good/bad submissions?**

- The history and legacy of how your teachers, when they were students, were assessed contributes significantly to their view of the quality of your submissions (Allen 2005).

- The allocation of a grade from your tutor may also have the strategic aim of trying to develop you by encouraging you (and giving you a generous mark) or by encouraging you (by giving you a low mark).

HE institutions remain a primary vehicle for the development of higher cognitive, practical and transferable skills and have received post 2008, a greater spotlight of public attention on them due to their financial requirements and the expectations of innovative and creative outputs in terms of individuals, products and processes for multiple stakeholder interests (if you want to read more about this see Yiannaki & Savvides (2012)). **In short, society is expecting more from Universities by producing better, more employable and skilled graduates.** Your tutors are tasked with generating a good output from you, so that you achieve good grades and that overall, the faculty and University is then reported as being a good place to study. Clearly, this can be achieved through considering those issues introduced in the introduction to this chapter but also it can result in pressures upon your tutors to mark generously when perhaps in a different external environment, they would not have done so. This is called **grade inflation** (for a detailed discussion see Hand & Clewes, 2000: Oleinik, 2009).

A better term that is perhaps more accurate of the difficulty your tutors face when grading you, is that of 'grade integrity' (a term developed by Sadler, 2009). This describes the ways in which faculty staff are able to reach a satisfactory determination on the **quality of an assessed submission**. The perceived integrity is the extent to which staff are able to have confidence in their decisions is shaped by **other stakeholders** in that marking process for example. Crisp (2008) has explored some of the psychology of marking, from the markers perspective for University entry examinations (A levels in the UK). Whilst not of direct relevance to your studies it is interesting to note some of the findings of that work as they could illustrate further the complexity of the marking process you are participating within. In summarising the existing research on the marking process, differences were noted in the use of criteria and norm/ achievement based assessments (discussed earlier) but also markers were observed to undertake a process of 'self control focus' whereby they consider the situation of writing and the writer so as to establish a personal view of the qualities of the work being considered.

This observation is particularly important because of one key reason for you as an international student, that it is likely your language competence will not be as strong as a native domestic student in your classes. Thus your written and oral submissions for assessment will (likely) lack some of the linguistical clarity of your peers. The importance of language competence for your academic achievements is discussed in chapter 5, but here we can consider how will your marker view your language competence? Should a submission that is high in terms of originality and concept, receive a low grade because of poor language presentation? Or be restricted from achieving a first class grade (>70%) because of spelling or grammatical errors? Although the research of Crisp(2008) is not derived from marking in a HEI context, it does offer the interesting insight that markers did – to an extent- try to reconstruct the intended meaning of a submission for assessment and saw that as an important part of the assessment process. However, it was also observed that not all markers in that research undertook that reconstruction with the same breadth or thoroughness.

Hence, the **extent of accommodation of variations in language competence within assessed work is dependent primarily upon the marker and the discourse (knowledge base) they belong to (we shortly discuss the marking range given the discourse of your given degree programme).** Adherence to institutional guidelines tend to be vague on this issue.

However, what is clear at present is that an overall increase in the grades you achieve has benefits both for you, but also for the faculty, the institution and to a more limited extent, the wider community.

In other words, your assessments are not only subject to the stated assessment criteria but one of potentially many, none stated and implicit assessment criteria. You need to be aware of this and maximise your chances of securing a good grade through knowledge of these pressures.

Whilst it may not be a universally agreed statement, the experience of the authors of this text strongly suggests that there can be variation in why **YOU** achieve the grades you do as:

- There is NO best way to assess you.
- There is NO guarantee that the grade achieved for a submission would receive the same grade if marked by another tutor.
- That the tutor marking your work will use a mix of marking and grading methodologies (so if you study a science you will be assessed by more examinations and by more numerical activities than if you study a social science (this is discussed further shortly)). Whilst this may seem obvious the result is as discussed previously, marking in the sciences refers to an absolute scale – there IS a right answer to find. Marking in the social sciences is more relativist scale – **YOU must make your answer seem a possible right answer.**
- The experience of the tutors who assess you (in knowing how to assess students – especially international students) will NOT be the same.
- Tutors will have different perceptions of what quality is in your submissions. Indeed observation of how tutors mark clearly shows very different method and styles. Once you know how a tutor will mark you, you will have guidance in what you can do to try to ensure you meet their expectations of what a quality submission looks like (for a detailed discussion of this issue in particular see the work of Bloxham & Boyd, 2011).
- The institution where you are studying WILL have a particular set of policies about how to determine your final degree classification once all your assessments have been marked. These **output algorithms** and they are not the same across institutions.

There is evidence that also clearly shows there is a wide variation in mark achievements and method of assessment by faculty and by institution (Yorke *et al* (2000: 2002)) and supported by the data analysis from the SACWG (Student Assessment and Classification Working Group of Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC)). This difference has been called **adaptation level theory** (Barnes *et al*, 2001) where in different academic disciplines students (and staff) that are less academically competitive migrate to those degrees that are perceived as less demanding in order to secure higher exit awards. **Students can therefore move to programmes that are perceived to offer a better chance of a better degree award.** So, a student might gain an excellent grade in one discipline but would not have done so well in another discipline, even with the same effort, engagement and commitment of time. Two questions for you to consider therefore are:

1) **WHY do you want to study your degree?**
2) **WHICH is more important – the degree topic area OR the degree grade?**

4.3 Assessment criteria and norm / achievement grading–your difficulties

There is evidence from observing marking practice, that the scope of what is assessed to construct the awarded mark for your work is typically not sufficient nor clearly articulated in that mark construction. This makes communication to the student or other stakeholders sometimes unclear (Kelly, 2008: Allen, 2005). **In other words, the grade/mark you receive may itself not be clearly explained to you.** Allen (2005) and Bloxham & Boyd (2011) argue that because of these difficulties, staff can generate outcome marks which do not seem to follow a given marking methodology or practice, as they seek to justify an awarded mark and reward those students who live up to the staff member's expectation of what a 'good' student is. **It can be helpful therefore to try to be an active participant in the learning environment, say the classroom, not only as it will contribute to the construction of your understanding, skills and knowledge, but it will also increase your visibility as an active (and 'good') participant to the tutor of your class**.

It was noted earlier that you may be assessed generally according to either criterion based assessment (Frame of Reference) or assessment based on a (subjective) sense of student achievement (sometimes called gatekeeping, norm assessment or achievement assessment) compared with the achievement of a given cohort. One research exploration of how tutors view and deploy these two approaches to grading identified that where your module and tutor is more focused upon analytical skill and time management development, then 'gatekeeping' or norm grading was more commonly used (Barnes *et al*, 2001). **In other words, tutors were more likely to grade you according to a perception of effort and engagement of you and the cohort, in those taught areas emphasising analytical skill development.** Similarly, where the tutors in your course are concerned with how much you understand (your knowledge base) – gatekeeping grading was more likely to be used than criterion based grading. **Criterion based grading tended to be used in personal skills development areas** – typically for example of first and second year skills modules in Business Schools.

A deeper concern in this difficulty for your tutors is the question of what the achievement of a grade means – both to you but also to important external stakeholders (such as actual or potential employers). Some HE Institutions reflect upon this problem by also developing Personal Development Planning (PDP) achievements in parallel with grade achievement. In terms of what type of approach to marking your work you can expect, the following **table 4.2** – adapted from Barnes et al (2001) and drawing upon the disciplinary classification work of Biglan (1973) – outlines what marking and grading priorities might be argued to exist and to which you may be exposed.

Biglan's 'Soft' and 'Hard' labels denote the discursive vs non discursive nature of the discipline which is also reflected in Barnes et al (2001) work of preparadigmatic vs paradigmatic study respectively. In the latter, there is a clear and largely consistent and agreed body of knowledge to know, understand and utilize, whereas in the former, this is more open to change, discussion and challenge. In paradigmatic disciplines, marking and grading is made against an absolute scale (thus more likely to operationalise the full 0–100% marking range) and in doing so control access of students to the professional discipline. In preparadigmatic disciplines the marking scale is more likely to be relativist and criterion based. In **table 4.2** these labels have been used loosely where a discipline can be argued to be more or less paradigmatic or preparadigmatic.

	SOFT		HARD	
	Pure	**Applied**	**Pure**	**Applied**
Life	**Geography Political Science Psychology Sociology**	**Architecture Art Education Fine Arts Music Dance & Theatre**	**Biology Botany Ecology Environmental Science Physiology Zoology**	**Agriculture Forestry Fisheries**
Expected marking range	30–70% Marking range	30–70% Marking range	0–100% Marking range	0–100% Marking range
Paradigmatic?	Less	Less	More	More
Expected marking philosophy	Criterion and relativist	Criterion and relativist	Gatekeeping and absolutist	Gatekeeping and absolutist
Non life	**Classics English Foreign Languages History Philosophy Religion**	**Accounting Economics Finance Business Management Marketing**	**Chemistry Geology Mathematics Physics**	**Atmospheric Science Computer Science Engineering**
Expected marking range	30–70% Marking range	30–70% Marking range	0–100% Marking range	0–100% Marking range
Paradigmatic?	Less	Less	More	More
Expected marking philosophy	Criterion and relativist	Criterion and relativist	Gatekeeping and absolutist	Gatekeeping and absolutist

See Barnes et al (2001) – for a further discussion of this proposed summary disciplinary table.

Table 4.2 – The expected marking and grading strategies by broad disciplinary area of study.

4.4   What you need to know about how you will be graded

In the preceding discussion, a range of issues were identified that impact upon the tutors' marking process. By being aware of these issues, you will be able to consider how to engage with the assessment process most effectively, so as to be able to maximise the opportunity for a better grade.

Issue	What you can do
You are studying in the 3rd most expensive country for higher education	You are important to your university. Your success in your grades is an increasingly important factor in your faculty's success. Ensure you: • Speak with your tutors regularly • Work with your tutors on your work Your concerns and pressures are relevant.
Think about your degree – are you studying a 'soft' or 'hard' discipline?	Understand that your grade will typically be within traditional ranges and that these operate across the discipline in all universities. It is harder to gain a higher grade in a social science than a science in general.
Understand what method of marking will produce your grades – is it criterion based?	Most universities in the UK use criterion based assessment. Always ensure you understand the criteria against which you are being judged- if in doubt – ask. Always ensure your grade and feedback is clearly related and derived from these criteria. If this is not clear – ask. Always ensure your written feedback complements your allocated grade. If you feel it does not – ask.
Understand what method of marking will produce your grades – is it norm or gatekeeping based?	Your grade will be generated by consideration of how much knowledge you have understood and evidenced in your answer and by how you compare with the average submission for that assessment.
Are your modules/courses/units of study made of many small assessment activities?	If yes – it is harder to gain an overall good grade in these modules/courses/units. It is easier to gain a good grade in a module/course/unit that has few assessments.
Tutors find it harder to grade lots of work within a degree threshold	Don't be surprised if – after working with your friends on similar submissions, you all achieve similar grades.
Different tutors will engage in the assessment process differently. There is no external standard against which UK assessment is presently judged.	It is very difficult to compare marking between tutors and you will not find much faculty support to investigate when you find tutors marking very differently. Study how your tutor will mark you and maximise your opportunities to be 'visible' for those tutors – e.g. attending classes and contributing, clear preparation before class, asking questions in class etc.
Check if your submissions are word count limited	Ask your tutors how they implement any word count system – it is possible that any words after the limit for example would not be read at all by your tutor?
Consistency in your grade achievements helps establish an expected norm of behaviour.	Although many Universities operate an anonymous marking policy – this is in practice very difficult to achieve. Tutors get to know you, your student ID and in some assessments will know who you are during your assessments (such as presentations and closely support research work). Establishing a clear consistent grade performance helps to establish an expected norm for you for future assessments.
Your grades achieved will not always clearly indicate your degree class achieved	Many universities operate 'output algorithms' – where your grades from your modules and different years of study (if applicable) are combined to generate your final degree class. Ensure you understand this process, so you know exactly what the impact of a grade will be for you and what you may need to achieve, to secure the overall degree class you want.

The selection of a university and programme of study will shape your grades achieved.	Your entry to a programme in a given faculty in a given university, generates an expectation of a particular level of performance and achievement. In selecting your programme consider how well or not you match the general profile for admission. If you are significantly below that profile, you may struggle achieve good grades.
How much of your success or failure is because of you?	The grades you will achieve are influenced by the grades you have achieved and to what extent you feel your success (or failure) is attributable to you or to your learning environment. If you believe it is more because of the learning environment, then see the next point.
Consider how you learn and your preferred learning environment.	Universities can differ in how much 'contact time' (or the time staff are working with you in an activity) they offer on their programmes. Ensure you know what this amount of time is and how it is used, in your programme.
Consider how you engage with your tutors in the undertaking of research projects – typically completed in the final year of undergraduate study.	Even where explicit criterion based assessment is evident, the grading of final year research projects can tend to exhibit individual norm based bias marking. To mitigate this, being visible, active and speaking with your tutor(s) regularly becomes particularly important to support a higher grade achievement.

After having considered in detail, some of the difficulties your tutors will experience in marking and grading your work, in the next chapter we look at research to help understand your learning process and resultant actions that can help the international student (YOU) achieve and sustain higher grades.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted a range of grading issues and practices that influence how your tutors will assess work you submit. The issues for you to be aware of in the assessment types you will be required to undertake is presented and discussed in the next chapter. It is important though for you to identify and recognise the external environment in which your work will be assessed and where appropriate and necessary ensure your work is viewed as positively as possible.

To achieve this, you must appreciate that you are a valuable asset for any faculty and university. Both your financial and cultural contribution to your faculty and in your programme is welcomed. More than previously perhaps, this is an active consideration in shaping academic and personal support for your studies. Against this background of a changing higher educational environment in the UK, you need to be aware of the pedagogical and epistemological boundaries of your topic for degree study. Studying a social science degree will tend to result in a different marking scale (relativist) and different range of likely % grades being made available than if you are studying a science based degree. Within your study area, you should expect variations of tutor practice in how they both assess you (**Chapter 5**) and in how you are consequently graded in those assessments.

Where criteria based assessments are used, ensure you are fully aware of what those criteria are and how they are to be applied to your work. Where you are being assessed by a norm or gatekeeping framework, it is important to evidence your understanding of your own discipline as well as be a visible member of your classes to show the expected professionalism for your degree area. The chapter concluded by highlighting a number of key areas that you should consider and focus upon to ensure your work has maximum opportunity to secure a high grade.

In the next chapter we consider the breadth of assessment methods that you will be exposed to and some of the key issues to note (and avoid) so as to maximise your grade opportunities.

Glossary

Key Information Sets (KIS) – This is the collection of data that describes the performance of a programme or set of programmes against a range of criteria (such as staff student ratio, % achievement of quality degrees, graduate employability and so forth).

Criteria of Assessment (and Criterion Based Assessment) – these are typically descriptors of what tutors expect from a submission of work so as to evidence the achievement of a given learning outcome for a module or course of study.

Peer marking – a system of assessment where you defer to other individuals as qualified to comment knowledgably upon a topic of interest.

Symbolic Comparison Bias – a heuristic (i.e. mental activity) whereby your tutors find marking within a classification threshold (say 50–59%) more difficult than marking across thresholds (say allocating a 58% rather than a 62%).

Moderation Process – the (typically internal) process whereby a sample of assessed work is reviewed by a colleague to ensure marking has been consistent and where criteria are used, that they have been applied equally fairly to all the sampled scripts. This process does not usually result however in changes to any grades allocated.

Grade inflation – this is the phenomenon arguably experienced across multiple educational levels of study, where both internal and external pressure for improved class, programme (award) and institutional performance, can influence the allocation of higher grades to student submissions.

Output algorithm – this is the (usually statistical) process whereby Universities determine the final awarded class for a degree. The process can vary between Universities significantly.

Adaptation level theory – this is the observed tendency for students to select areas of study that are more likely to generate a higher output award than other areas of study.

Paradigmatic knowledge (and preparadigmatic knowledge) – this is the body of knowledge argued to be fundamental to a competence in a given area of study.

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See also https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/making-the-higher-education-system-more-efficient-and-diverse

5   Managing Assessment – identifying actions to improve your grades

TARGET READER – The international student and the tutor of the international student

Aim of Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to present you with both an overview of how you can understand your engagement with your learning and with your assessments. This will include consideration of the different assessment methods you will be expected to undertake during your studies but also propose how you can manage these assessments so as to gain the highest grade you can achieve. In developing your 'grade strategy' the chapter will consider current evidence of how you, the international student, can adapt to different learning environments and why and where in particular, difficulties in that adaptation can impact upon achievements. Recommendations to manage these difficulties will be outlined.

5.1   Your entry to UK HE

In joining your programme of study, it is likely that you will be entering a different learning environment from the one you are familiar with, which places upon you different expectations of your abilities and how they will develop as well as different expectations of how you will engage with your studies and in your assessments. Your faculty and the programme you are joining will be comprised of students potentially from a large variety of learning environments, some of which have also been subject to assessments under external pressures for grade inflation to ensure appropriate ranking and league table positioning of HEIs (Friedl et al, 2010 and see **chapter 4**). There is the likelihood therefore that student enrolments into your programme of study, will have varying abilities and it is not uncommon that if you join the first year (or Foundation Year) of your programme, there will be a number of basic skill and knowledge based courses and modules in your studies to ensure common levels of skill and understanding. To clarify, you can join a degree programme at a number of possible entry points and these are labelled below:

Position in your programme of study	Entry point description
Year 0 – Foundation Year	This is a year of study (sometimes called pre-certificate) that is offered to UK/EU students with perhaps insufficient grades to join Year 1 and/or other students (such as International students) who have not completed sufficient equivalent years of study as a UK student would have at the end of compulsory education

These programmes tend to be a blend of skill and knowledge based activities, with often language support and development for international students whose first language is not English. |
Year 1 – First year	This is the entry point for most UK/EU students to a first degree programme. Typically the study is focused upon a mix of important introductory skill and knowledge bases as well as supporting the expected different levels of abilities and understanding associated with an eclectic intake of students.
Year 2 – Second Year	Entry to this year of study – sometimes called advanced entry – is feasible for applicants who have already studied either a higher qualification post School/College or have studied at least one year at an equivalent institution on a sufficiently similar programme.
Year 3 – Third (Final) Year	Entry to this year of study – sometimes called advanced entry – is feasible for applicants who have already studied either a higher qualification post School/College or have studied at least two years at an equivalent institution on a sufficiently similar programme.

Table 5.1 – Entry points to UK HE programmes

Particular learning and grade achievement difficulties arise for '**advanced entry international students**' who join their UK undergraduate degree programme in the second or third year and these are considered later in this chapter. All international students are typically expected to manage the rigours of academic study without the benefit typically of the local support mechanisms afforded to home students (such as a family and an accessible pre university friend network). For advanced entry students, this challenge is especially difficult even when compared to an international student joining at Year 0 or year 1, as those students will have developed at least a partial friend/support network in place by the time they progress to higher levels of study.

5.2   Developing a strategy for achieving and sustaining high grades

In considering developing your grade strategy – we need to identify a reasonable aim and appropriate methods of achieving that aim, cogniscent of the factors which impact upon your effective learning (as outlined in chapter 3). To begin to explore this further, we will explore some recent insights into these issues.

Yang et al (2006) in their study of the cultural adjustment of international students from collectivist cultures such as China, studying in Canada (when compared with Canadian students) identified a number of key influences upon expected grade achievement and personal growth at University that are worth noting here. This research identified that **your cultural adjustment depends both upon your individual self-esteem but also your language self confidence** in contributing to a higher psychological adjustment to your new learning environment. Barron et al (2007) undertook research focused upon the expectations of international postgraduate students about to commence their studies, noting that **language competence was also identified by the cohort as a likely learning barrier to address**. Certainly the experience of the authors working with International students (particularly those from collectivist cultures such as China, Japan and other Far Eastern countries) is that there is a tendency for this language adjustment to be 'managed by outsourcing' whereby the same mono-ethnic or mono-cultural study groups are formed, with an informally nominated 'speaker' for that small student body. This makes it very difficult both for the tutor to engage all students in a given class, as some are shielded by their compatriots, but also difficult for those students to gain the confidence to subsequently develop personal self-esteem. **Your effective adjustment to your learning environment requires both that you develop language confidence as well as knowledge confidence**. Achieving increases in both areas supports effective adjustment in your new studies.

You can expect in your university, that there will be language support classes (either as part of your curriculum or as after class support for example). These are typically identified as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. These are therefore offered to address both your confidence and your language competency. You are **strongly advised to participate in these classes** even where you may not be required to and where it may not be clear to you how they fit with your programme of studies. As we present shortly, the stress you feel when adjusting to your new learning environment, the availability (or otherwise) of social support and your language proficiency – all contribute to your weakened psychological adjustment and weakened grade achievements (Yang et al, 2006) and an EAP course can provide you with the linguistic tools and confidence to address this adjustment.

Your cross cultural adaptation to your new learning environment comes from two personal outcomes – your **emotional and affective adjustment** to your learning environment and your **behavioural adjustment** to that learning environment *(we take these two adjustments (emotional/affective and behavioural adjustment) – to define 'cultural adjustment' in this chapter)*. Your 'grade strategy' therefore needs to consider how you will manage both of these adjustments (behavioural and cultural). Critically whilst your language confidence is related to both these adjustments in a complex manner (called **self construals** by Yang et al (2006)) it is an important aspect for you to focus upon and **not to ignore**. We will also consider further what your 'adjustment' is and could be and what you can do to improve it in this chapter.

Glass & Westmount (2013) have explored the relationship between academic success and cultural adjustment of international students, in their research work in the US. They focused upon the sense of **belonging** a student maintains with their learning environment, particularly in the areas of: their student support network and the balance between student challenge and academic support. Their research was relatively large in scale and scope (>1200 students, a third of which being a non-domestic stratified multinational sample) and considered a variety of study programmes. Significant evidence was offered that **developing a sense of belongingness**, which is *more* than just intercultural interaction, **had a significant impact upon grade achievement for international students** (see also the study of Seabi & Payne, 2012 and the commentary of O'Keefe, 2013).

Glass & Westmount (2013) further identified that cultural events, leadership programmes and community service activities that are typically offered as part of your university experience, all seek to enhance a sense of belonging and impacted upon grade achievements. **These activities also helped to mitigate negative aspects of cultural adjustment such as racism.** Developing programmes to support intercultural integration across a variety of social and academic issues, that steadily increase in depth of engagement over a programme of study, were identified as being effective in increasing intercultural adjustment and interaction**,** but seem to be of limited support for developing a sense of belonging (for a detailed narrative see Glass & Westmount(2013). O'Keefe (2013) also comments on **the importance of a sense of belonging for both first year students and postgraduate research students.** In particular he cites that Universities must themselves take care to not exacerbate any disconnection and thus weakened student performance, through increasing reliance upon larger classes, poor staff : student ratios and online materials – in the hope of managing budgetary problems.

In an interesting perspective that allows us to consider further the cultural adjustment concept defined earlier, Seabi & Payne (2012) explored the personality constructs of first year students to seek to identify if there were preferred types that supported the transition to University. In short, their focus was on whether there are preferred personalities that are more likely to support a sense of belonging in a degree programme and thus then support higher grade achievement. This can be particularly important in trying to identify if you maintain a supportive (or not) **identity processing style (IPS)** that will support your progression to University. If not, then seeking support to address this (**your IPS**) is argued to help with your experience, studies and finally grades.

Your identity is a cognitive construct shaped by both an individual and interpersonal context (see Trafimo et al, 2002 for a more detailed discussion). In a given class of students it is reasonable to expect there to be a wide variety of identity constructs. As a construct, identity is open to change and influence indeed, the use of the phrase '**identity processing style (IPS)'** (Berzonsky (1990) cited by Seabi & Payne (2012)), refers to the strategies you use to engage with or avoid the tasks of maintaining your sense of identity within your learning environment. Three processing style styles outlined by Berzonsky (1989) in Seabi & Payne (2012)[14] were described as:

- *Informational – If you are a student with this IPS you would be confident in seeking information relevant to progressing your work and not overly concerned with if/how this tests your self identity. Possessing this IPS supports self exploration which is valued in a University setting and such students maintain a higher sense of belonging to their programme and faculty, supporting higher grade achievements. Tick this box if you think this describes you:* ☐

- *Normative – If you are a student with this IPS you prefer to manage conflicts with your sense of belonging and your environment through internalised reflection so as to be able to meet the expectations of your tutors and significant others, rather than as a series of external explorations of that environment (such as with the informational IPS). One observed outcome of this IPS is whilst you can progress to university – in order to meet the pressures and expectations placed upon you – your adjustment and development of a sense of belonging in that environment can manifest as a lack of external engagement, an intolerance of ambiguity and the emergent perception of differences in values causing the internalised conflict to be threatening. Tick this box if you think this describes you:* ☐

- *Diffuse avoidant – If you are a student with this IPS – you lack internal direction and are more likely to respond to external pressures upon you (e.g. deadlines). Thus you will be more likely to neglect your studies until required to and you will seek to avoid problems and dealing with them. You may also maintain a negative view of your academic success and progress. Tick this box if you think this describes you:* ☐

It can be argued from the discussion so far that your achievements will be derived from your cognitive function (how you perceive, act and understand – e.g. the IPS discussion above) that generates your intrinsic motivation for study (a sense of mastery of your understanding for normative and informational IPS and for diffuse avoidant IPS there will be a preference for grade achievement shaped by extrinsic motivation (Remedios & Lieberman, 2008)) and the non-cognitive attributes of your environment (the teaching style, structure and focus in your learning environment). One explored area of this relationship is that of trait theory.

Trait theory was an early research focus in many human activity areas trying to understand if personality traits are positively or negatively associated with a given behaviour (e.g. the need for control trait with entrepreneurship and leadership). It is a somewhat controversial area of study because of its reliance upon individuals being able to self-report their own behaviour accurately, that the focus tends to be upon describing rather than predicting behaviour and being limited in clarifying why that behaviour has happened. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that aspects of your personality, just as with the IPS discussion above, do affect your grade achievements. For example, Geramian et al (2012) examined which personality traits were positively correlated to the academic achievements of 146 international postgraduate students studying at a Malaysian University. Their work followed that of Mathiasen (1984), Mouw & Khana (1993) and Teachman (1996) (– all of which were cited by Geramian et al (2012)) where **positive correlations were found between openness and agreeableness traits and with grade achievement**. In their study in Malaysia, **positive correlations were identified for conscientiousness and openness with grade achievement (in this case cumulative grade point average (CGPA)) and certainly conscientiousness and openness traits fit well with the informational IPS discussed earlier.**

It is not suggested though that you or any given student is or should operationalise one IPS, as these are indicative concepts – but they are helpful in identifying how and why you may find difficulty in your new learning environment. It is more likely that you will operationalise hybrids of these concepts. Nonetheless, we can apply some broad cultural criteria to them to provide some guidance on where to focus energies to support the development of a strategy that could maximise your grades. For example, for students **from a collectivist culture, a normative IPS could perhaps be more expected** as influential in shaping the engagement and sense of belonging felt by the student, with the consequent impact upon grades. This is also presented shortly as a form of 'deep learning'. A faculty could then look to address the individual tensions and concerns raised by a normative IPS so as to be able to support the potential for improved grade achievement. In other words, the **expectation of student centred learning, student self-study and student directed learning can be in conflict with the engagement and approach to learning and belonging maintained by students with a normative IPS.** Universities could develop an audit or **screening tool** for new arriving international students to complete so as to be able to identify varying IPS, which could be a very helpful and informative method of identifying and targeting student achievement needs and ensuring that teaching styles accommodate those identified preferences.

In reference to the learning discussion in **chapter 2**, we can see clearly that your effective learning then requires both the internal and external conditions of you, the learner to be considered (Illeris, 2012). An IPS acts therefore as the interface between these two conditions. It is we hope clear, that your academic success cannot be divorced from your social experience nor your learning environment presented during your studies. This context is very important, arguably more so that an historic cultural preference towards a learning style. Your **belongingness to your programme and studies is a concept that describes how much you feel part of your 'campus community'.** It has also been described as a drive to form and maintain lasting and positive interpersonal relationships. There is also evidence that the genders experience this sense differently – with men pursuing this through group activities and women through dyadic relationships – i.e. relationships of many one-to-ones (see Baumeister & Sommer (1997) cited by Glass & Westmount(2013)). Anecdotally, this may also impact upon learning activities such as classroom attendance where Pownall (2012) identified a gender difference as a contributing factor shaping attendance at a large Business School in the UK.

Belongingness is the one of the most frequently cited factors shaping academic success for international students studying in a new learning environment (Hausman et al, 2007; O'Keefe, 2013) and has emerged as a parallel area of interest for universities accepting international students, alongside the more typically accepted **resilience based models of intercultural adjustment**[15]. Resilience is best understood as describing individuals who are compassionate, flexible and in touch with their environment so that when facing difficulties or set backs, they can continue to move forward (Van Breda, 2001). It is "the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors" (Kaplan, Turner, Norman, & Stillson, 1996: 158 cited by Van Breda, 2001: 5).

Resilience models of cultural adjustment emphasise identifying protective and supportive factors in a learning and social environment that aid and secure your resilience, as an international student (Pan, 2011). Cultural identity and ways of living, working and interpreting your environment have been identified as important aspects of resilient individuals – but it is not always clear how a University can manage or support this (see McCubbin et al. (1998) cited by Van Breda, 2001). Wang (2003)[16] undertook a detailed analysis of the cultural adjustment of international students in American Universities identifying that **important resilient characteristics were gender, your father's education, country of origin and how you thought about yourself in these environments (see the earlier discussion on IPS above).** The outcomes of Wang's (2003) work were addressed to both the (US) University and to the international student – you. We reproduce (summarised) accounts of those findings below:

Recommendations to Universities were made as:

- Provide training for staff who work with international students, on resilience.
- Ask international students to complete resilience questionnaires to help them identify their strong and weak resilience characteristics[17].
- Offer lectures on resilience and provide professional advice to international students on how to enhance resilience.
- Identify existing resilient international students at the institution and ask them to tell of their experiences to other international students.
- Focus on groups which tend to have more adjustment problems. Statistical analyses from Wang (2003) indicated that:
    - Asian students tend to have lower resilience scores than students from other continents.
    - Middle Eastern students tend to have more difficulties in English language competency and Student Inter-Activity;
    - Asian students tend to have difficulty in English language competency;
    - African students tend to have problems in Living and Dining in the new learning environment.
- Offer international students special preparation on the general culture of the country and the academic culture at the university.

Recommendations to you, the international student were (again from Wang, 2003):

- Start the adjustment process well before ever arriving in your host country.
- Your adjustment is a process – not an event. It will take time, effort and focus.
- Ask yourself what you feel are your strengths and weaknesses are going to be in studying in a new learning environment.

- Maintain an open mind in that by joining a new culture of learning you will need to appreciate different ways of viewing an issue or problem that could be very different from those of your home country.
- Seek out opportunities to work with other international students particularly those who might view their new learning environment in a more positive manner than yourself.
- Try to establish social networks to ask for help to overcome difficulties but be wary if those networks are only constituted from other international students of your nationality.
- Look for opportunities to engage with the local community (through for example volunteering at events or for charities) or in the UK through the HOST scheme (whereby international students can live with a UK family at a subsidised rate).

You will probably encounter some of the above identified university actions during your welcome week/induction process to your university and degree programme (the key points of which were outlined in **chapter 2)**. It is a common practice amongst Universities in the UK to offer a series of activities, usually spread out over a couple of weeks at the start of your programme if you are new entrant. It is less common that you will encounter considerations and support for cultural adjustment along the recommendations in the second list above that focus upon the sense of belonging discussed in **chapter 4**.

As an example of the university actions supporting cultural adjustment, here is the scope of the international induction programme from the institution of one of the authors:

Resilient Factor (Wang, 2003)	Activity for new international students
Training for staff	Full engagement – For staff who have regular interaction with international students receive cultural diversity training.
Questionnaires/screening tools	Limited engagement at present – Scenario questionnaires concerning University regulations are used to screen understanding.
Sessions to support resilient development in international students	Full engagement – a series of cultural workshops, academic adjustment sessions and orientation activities.
Identifying resilient international students to speak with new international students	Full engagement – international students from higher levels participate fully in the induction process as well as delivering specific sessions on their 'adjustment'.
Focusing upon specific international cluster needs	Limited engagement – some language competence assessment is identified and targeted.
General cultural orientation	Full engagement – a series of cultural workshops, academic adjustment sessions and orientation activities.

Table 5.1: Resilience Factors for International Students

Whilst the above (in practice) resilient framework for cultural adjustment is quite common for UK universities, it is **less common for UK universities to address international student belongingness** – with as noted an effective social programme of engagement and support out of the classroom and not associated with any particular assessment or learning activity. You should ask if this is available at your institution, how it functions and how you can engage with it. At the institution of one of the authors, international buddy schemes have been implemented where for example, you are paired with a higher level international student to offer social support and guidance during your studies. **Your grades will improve as a result if you participate in these activities.**

Lebcir & Bond (2008) have also explored the academic achievements of international students in UK universities, albeit in the narrower sense of those studying project management. In their research and reading, they highlight that often UK learning professionals view you, the international student, as typically deficient in some area(s) – hence the predominance of resilience based orientation activities for new international students to address your perceived strengths and weaknesses. A viewpoint that maintains you as being deficient, is then articulated in practice as a problem needing to be addressed for this group of students – rather than asking a more fundamental question of what is a good learning and teaching strategy for you (and others) in this learning context (Burns & Foo, 2013)? **In particular, consideration of how to adapt learning and teaching styles – outlined in chapter 2 – to suit the learner and their learning environment is less considered and this is an important consideration for you**.

Remedios & Lieberman (2008) offered an interesting analysis of the influences upon grades in general for university students, where teaching style and resultant stimulation of your interest was the most important factor in whether you (the student) enjoyed the module – not the final awarded grade nor the workload of the module upon you the student. What is apparent from emergent evidence from **chapter 2 and 3** is that **your grade success is a mix of internal and external factors but moreover, this is a complex interaction of personal, cultural and environmental factors requiring both institutional engagement but also your commitment and recognition of the need to consider your learning style and whether it is sufficient to support your achievements now – in the UK.**

If we were to try to summarise the areas of attention that you need to consider as important in shaping your effective learning style as well as the resultant teaching style of your tutors, we could present the following (Wang, 2003: Remedios & Lieberman, 2008: Lebcir & Bond, 2008: Saebi & Payne, 2012):

- Language competence (both written and oral) for assessment in particular – **LANGUAGE**
- Language competence in the four skills areas (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in general – **LANGUAGE**
- Sense of belonging to your programme and campus/university – **LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION & BELONGING**
- Level of entry and entry qualifications and profile of you and the university that you have joined (some aspects of which were discussed in **chapter 4**) – **PRIOR STUDIES**
- The pedagogy of marking your work by your tutors (the focus of discussion in **chapter 4**) – **ASSESSMENT**
- Finding methods to communicate across cultures – student to student and student to tutor – **LANGUAGE & BELONGING**
- Developing competence and comfort in the academic discourse of your study (language and concepts) – which is a particular concern for advanced entry international students. – **LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION**
- The extent to which the student identifies and acknowledges their cultural adjustment to their learning environment – **LANGUAGE, COMUNICATION and BELONGING**
- The extent to which the faculty recognises the different challenges that cultural adjustment can bring to international students and identifies bespoke support strategies (i.e. via IPS) – **PRIOR STUDIES**
- Study skills in general – especially note taking during taught sessions becomes problematic and a slower process for you, the international student – **PRIOR STUDIES & LANGUAGE**
- Lebcir & Bond (2008) offer evidence from De Vita that the method of assessment can also disadvantage you the international student, with examinations being identified as particularly problematic – **ASSESSMENT**
- The extent of personal interaction between the international student and tutor in a workshop/tutorial environment shapes your effective learning – **ASSESSMENT & BELONGING & COMMUNICATION**

In the above points, we have extended the proposed framework of Lebcir & Bond (2008) to identify in total (and following the discussion in **chapter 4**), 5 interdependent factors argued to shape your grade achievement (through influencing either the teaching style, your learning style or your learning environment). These are:

1. **Language.** Aside from the above issues, it was noted earlier in **chapter 3** that there is evidence the accuracy of expression of a concept / idea by an international student should be of more merit than the accuracy of that expression.

2. **Communication** – focusing upon cultural adjustment. The teaching style and pace are particularly important for international students. The structure of the session needs to be strong (clear opening/closing and content) and with effective use of the VLE to make materials accessible. For classes with a high proportion of international students, more effective engagement with the learning materials is facilitated by the tutor through presenting a significant volume of materials in a structured manner and extensive use of the VLE. There is a reliance upon this conduit of knowledge more so that books for that course/module. Effective perception of improved engagement with learning materials is also improved by your faculty offering tailored support to international students.

3. **Prior studies and profile of entry.**

4. **Assessment methodologies**. There is evidence of a strong bias towards mathematically oriented assessments (perhaps unsurprisingly) being favoured by international students.

This overall framework helps understand and explain international student grade outcomes follows from both the work of Lebcir & Bond (2008) but also Kettle (2011). In the case of the work of Kettle (2011:1) the concept of **academic practice** is outlined as a comprehensive discourse framework to explain "the interface between university academic requirements and international student learning and the crucial role that teaching has in facilitating the experience". In short, the scope of the concept –and the focus of much of this book for you – has been to recognise that your learning experience- and by implication the achievement of your grades within that learning environment – depend both upon structure (your programme, faculty and institutional frameworks) plus agency (your tutors, their teaching style and resources and your motivation (whether intrinsic or extrinsic)) and as such, it is their inter-relationships that we should focus upon.

One of the major implications of this perspective of the international student experience is to view the more traditional supportive learning environments (discussed previously as resilience models) that focus upon developing generic applied academic skills or cultural adjustment skills (such as writing, referencing, registering with a doctor or opening a bank account for example) as **incomplete and insufficient** as they are narrowly focused and lack scope through limited relevant inter-relationships with the international student's actual experience environment. **Academic practice** identifies the need to frame desired aims through multiple points of action and through participatory approaches. We have already spoken of the need for you, the international student, to be 'visible' during your classes – both to ensure your tutors can associate you with your performance but also to ensure your learning experience is developed, by 'inhabiting' the classroom, elaborating on the issue at hand and finishing your contribution (Kettle, 2011). By ensuring you undertake these actions for example you will have secured your voice in the class, worked within a controlled but supportive environment, and confidently explored your understanding (see the earlier discussion on informational and normative IPS). An example from one of the authors may help illustrate this important point.

> **A module on Strategy was a core module taught across a number of Business Degree programmes in the first semester of the final undergraduate degree year. It is a well established module, with developed materials and taught by an experienced staff member often receiving high internal and external praise. It was assessed by two coursework assessments: 1) a critical comparative essay on two (randomly selected) schools of thought on strategy and 2) an applied critical report evaluating the strategy of an organisation using a framework derived from the different schools of strategy introduced in the first assessment. For the selection of the organisation in (2) students were able to choose any organisation (with tutor validation) or choose from a selection of prepared case histories upon which to build an analysis.**

As a final year module of circa 100 students, approximately 25% are typically international students with a large majority of these students joining the module as advanced entry students (that is they join their programme as final year students only) after completing the equivalent of two years of university study elsewhere.

After work was received from the first assessment, it became clear to the markers that this year's group of advanced entry students was struggling to generate academic output that competently addressed the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. During oral feedback to all students, the tutor identified the assessment weaknesses to those students (all of them) and a programme of additional support to work with the students to address those weaknesses in this area of business skills and knowledge was developed. At this time of feedback, a majority of the students acknowledged the need for development in their work but later, once the support classes were organised – none were willing to commit the time to attend and address identified weaknesses.

One international student member grasped the initiative and volunteered as the de facto spokesperson for this group (although this student did not need that additional support). This student canvassed his peers to encourage them to attend the scheduled sessions, but still none were interested or willing to attend. The tutor was unable to understand why this was the case and students refused to accept the help that the tutor was willing to give additional time for.

Now in considering the above actual scenario, we might be able to understand why there was resistance to the offer of additional support – in that it was perceived in a narrow, disjointed manner by the students. This was supported by feedback from the student canvasser above:

- Students perceived the support classes as focused upon strategic management knowledge rather than more broadly in terms of other inter-relationships (which was the actual intent of the proposed support classes).
  - Where those relationships included language competence and that with competence comes the 'right to speak' in class.
- Student motivation was mixed, with some students reported as being intrinsically motivated (with information or normative IPS) but also some students being extrinsically motivated (by their grade achievement) and diffuse avoidant IPS.
- Students had not previously been encouraged to 'occupy the classroom' and now, by specific selection, they were and hence evidenced resistance.

The combination of these issues, which gives some insight into the concept of **academic practice**, may help explain why there was resistance to the offered programme of support. It strongly also suggests a need to review – especially as a final year module with a relatively high % of direct international student intake – the academic practice of that module. This can be proposed as a guideline for other modules in a similar situational context. Such actions for the international student tutor might constitute:

- Creating a safe class environment in which expression is valued and recognised and where weaker linguistic expression are not viewed negatively or punitively.
- Recognising that international students working in same nationality groups should not be immediately dismissed as inappropriate, but welcomed to help create the environment where confidence can be developed.
- A recognition of different motivations within a given group of international students and that these should be differently addressed – whether through the reward of grades or that of self-enlightenment.
- Scaffolding knowledge in a manner accessible to international students
- Maintaining consistency in the structure and delivery of materials to ensure this is habitualised in the module.
- Addressing potentially difficult aspects of the identity of the students – for example to think critically and develop with students, a sense of valued self (which can be different from being a good student).
- Ensuring that as required, the skills needed to 'learn how to learn' are available in the module's materials.
- Look to learn the names of international students and invite their participation in class activities to help gain 'voice'.

As with all students on a programme of higher education, we cannot view your experience in a narrow sense, but as one that necessarily is complex and interdependent with your social environment. Academic achievement is not one solely linked to language proficiency and nor solely the responsibility of the student (Kettle, 2011).

Overall, the aim of this discussion so far has been to identify to you aspects of your learning in an international environment that can help or hinder your success in that environment. Your University will probably offer varying mechanisms of support to enhance your cultural adjustment and perhaps (but less so) mechanisms of belonging to your programme and your faculty. However, as the international student, you need to also appreciate that whilst you need to avail yourself of these opportunities and participate, your success is also dependent upon how you recognise and address your weaknesses in that new learning environment. These twin foci need to be considered by you. Figure 5.1 overleaf presents a summary of the interdependency of factors shaping your effective learning and subsequent grade achievement, whilst table 5.2 identifies emergent actions for you to undertake or to determine their operation in your HEI. The factors in figure 5.1 can also become more acute if you join your new international university as an 'advanced entry student'. In the next section, some of the implications of where you join your programme of study are considered before the actual assessment methodologies are reviewed to identify how you can maximise your achievements.

Key factors influencing International Student Grade Success

Communication

Address **Language** Barrier to Learning?

Improve the confidence Of the international student

But control

To find

'class voice'

Support for early

Monoethnic groups

Participate in EAP

Continued Development of Language Competencies

Enhancement of Self Esteem

Effective Cultural Adjustment

Personality?

External threats/fears of failure

Informational IPS

Normative IPS

Diffuse IPS

AUDIT TOOL?

Learning Theory

External Activities

Internal IPS

Social

Academic

Developing a sense of **'Belonging'**

Emotional and Affective Adjustment

Behavioural Adjustment

Comprises:
1) Emotional and Affective Adjustment
2) Behavioural Adjustment

Resilience Response by HEIs

Offers initial induction period but remains focused upon student 'deficiency' driven support.

Effective Engagement Response by HEIs

That considers grade achievement depends upon

HEI str . . . . . nd

Academic Practice

Belonging

Figure 5.1: Interdependency of Factors shaping your learning

5.3   Joining your programme as a Foundation or First Year student

After considering the generic factors shaping your grade achievement (summarised in Figure 5.1), we now narrow our focus to particular concerns for groups of international students with firstly that for new year 1 or Foundation year students.

 Star & MacDonald (2007) presented a review of South Western Australia University's development of their first year experience. Their focus was on improving how to manage and work with a large diverse multinational cohort of students and much of what is outlined as good practice, you may experience in your first year at your host institution. As outlined in **chapter 4**, UK universities are operating in complex and changing environments and as a result, the diversity (in terms of nationality, ability and context) of the cohort in which you study will also be changing. The entry profile of the university and faculty you have joined is particularly important to consider as this will, as noted in **chapter 4**, contribute to the expectations of your tutors over the quality of your output for assessment. As a new international student, your tutors will tend to assume you possess:

1. Appropriate learning skills
2. Appropriate language and linguistic skills
3. Appropriate critical discourse skills
4. Appropriate information literacy skills
5. An awareness (and willingness to address) identified weaknesses in your skills and competences (see the earlier discussion on 'resilience' and belonging)

One area you will need to reflect on in your learning, is the tension between the extent to which your tutors provide information and deliver it to you as packaged knowledge (transmissive learning) and / or in a constructivist teaching style (see **chapter 2**), where you work with your peers to construct your understanding from your activities. This may be **very different** from your previous learning environment. It is also not necessarily the case that there will be a uniform approach to teaching and learning with all your tutors, although this is recommended from the work of Star & MacDonald (2007). For example, in the institution of the authors, constructivist learning is an emerging theme across all the levels through the use of simulations and practice-based learning situations addressed in particular through off campus residential activities, but it is not a common nor uniform practice.

You should also expect pedagogical shifts in your learning environment which promote the earlier introduction and integration of research informed teaching and research oriented learning in class, although this may itself depend upon the institutional strategic focus (discussed shortly). **Scaffolding** of your learning and the use of **threshold concepts[18]** as important pedagogical practices are also becoming more prevalent. The once standard **transmissive pedagogy** of learning in universities (in other words, learning by listening to the presentation of the tutor) is losing its traditional pre-eminent position, as Universities and cohorts change their constitution and strategies.

One further consideration for you to think about in your programme of study is the mix of teaching and research staff in your classes – are there particular difficulties that you would need to be aware of when studying in an environment that is a blend of teaching and a research orientation? Wood (2009) examined this question and associated literature importantly stressing the following:

- Good researchers do not automatically make for good teachers. If you recall the point raised in **chapter 4** about the expected entry profile for students joining a university then in a research intensive university you may expect to be taught by active researchers and/or perhaps at lower levels of study, by advanced doctoral students.
- There is a limited evidence of a correlation between high staff research output and effective undergraduate teaching.
- The likely effective integration of research with teaching is one that follows a constructivist pedagogy where taught knowledge is viewed pluralistically and interpretively.

So **the expectations upon your skills and abilities differ between those types of universities you may
attend** (whether research or teaching focused). Wood (2009) citing Griffiths (2004) further offers a typology
of relationship between research and teaching in undergraduate programmes (and universities) as being:

- Research led teaching
- Research oriented teaching
- Research based teaching
- Research informed teaching

Hence as we move down the listing previously, the contribution of the research output of staff and their
engagement in their research process is lessened in the content of the materials taught, or in other
words, at the start of the listing there is strong focus upon the research process as a source of teaching
materials which then evolves to one where teaching is wholly student focused. Arguably these perspectives
somewhat simplify the relationship between research and teaching maintained by your tutors in your
studies, particularly if we view teaching as a process, rather than as an outcome or deliverable package
of knowledge. In other words, much of the difficulty for you will be how your programme and faculty
construct the learning environment in which taught and research constructs are examined – as discussed
in **chapter 4**. It seems clear that you need to be able to consider the statement of whether **you know
how your faculty and your institution view this relationship? Has it been identified and articulated?
How does it manifest in the taught programme you are commencing?**

Wood (2009) also presents an example of good first year practice (based on an undergraduate award in
Digital Media) in addressing this relationship from the University of South Australia. In that example,
the focus on the first year redesign was on the scholarship development of students in the areas of:

- Discovery
- Teaching and Learning
- Integration of concepts
- Application of concepts
- Reflective analysis – especially of professional practice
- Problem solving
- Team Working and communication

The intention in this scholarship approach was to create a learning community that involved you with the
need to understand paradigmatic knowledge (or key threshold and critical knowledge) of your discipline
but also to participate in research based assessments and reflective research practice with your peers. **The
most significant challenge for you if you join an institution with this focus will probably be the sense
of increased freedom and creativity that your assessments encourage as they move away from a set
task with narrow defined and prescribed parameters.** This may be very different and heighten your
anxiety if this is not what you had expected. It may also be very different from your previous learning
environment if you are joining your programme at an advanced level.

This tension you may feel and experience will also vary by the discipline you are studying at your institution. In other words there could be tension between the 'academic' aspects of your studies and the 'practical' aspects of your studies, shaped by the programme of study and your perceptions of what you expect that programme of study to be like (Wood, 2009).

5.4 Joining your programme as an Advanced Undergraduate student (Years 2 and 3)

The difficulties experienced by new foundation (Year 0) and first year students upon commencing a programme of HE study exist for advanced entry students as well but with additional assessment concerns to note. It is likely that as Transnational Education (TNE) and Cross Border Education (CBE) grow, there will be increased numbers of international direct entry students joining first degree programmes of study at advanced entry points in the UK. Securing an advanced entry point is dependent upon evidencing prior appropriate education and/or experience (which is then accredited against the learning outcomes of the programme). Expected skills and competences for this group of students will encompass the earlier listing given above then of:

1. Appropriate learning skills
2. Appropriate language and linguistic skills
3. Appropriate critical discourse skills
4. Appropriate information literacy skills
5. An awareness (and willingness to address) identified weaknesses in your skills and competences (see the earlier discussion on 'resilience' and belonging)

However, there may be assumptions on the part of the joined institution that the items (1–5) above are individually present, but we should note that progress will have arisen in a different cultural learning environment from UK HE (such as a further education college or International HEI). Thus items (1–5) may be weak and/or missing in individuals but such students may also have the comparative disadvantage of an under developed peer network or a secure understanding of the rules and regulations of the joined HEI as the social input into 'belongingness'. Brown and Holloway (2008) and Edwards et al (2010) in work cited by Lilleyman & Bennett (2014) identify that academic anxiety and stress are at their peak in the first 3 months of study for an international student generally, which then gradually reduces over the next 9 months. Clearly though, this only amplifies the difficulty faced by an advanced entry international student who may (if joining the final year of an undergraduate programme or a one year postgraduate programme) only just becoming comfortable working in a new learning culture, as they finish their programme! This area of advanced entry student learning is relatively under developed[19] (Barron & D'Annuzio-Green, 2009) but existing materials highlight some key concerns. In moving to a joined HEI from an FEI, cited student difficulties can include:

1. Perception of less approachable and accessible staff.

2. Stricter time frames for work and less flexibility.

3. Less familiarity with the variety of pedagogical techniques used. Quan et al (2013) highlighted that this was a primary first difficulty encountered by direct entry international students.

4. Higher expectations of the work asked for by HEI staff from international direct entry students.

5. Lower levels of independence and self-belief in the quality of produced work – which arguably follows from (3 and 4) and is a critical component of Figure 5.1.

6. An increased potential for you, the student to have additional familial concerns to manage

7. Feelings of isolation and worries over developing student relations (particularly problematic for international students). This seems to also apply within the international student cohort – so that international direct entry students struggle to integrate with existing international students (those who joined the HEI in a previous year) (Quan et al (2013)).

8. Language – the issue of language has been discussed as a significant learning barrier so far in this chapter – but for international direct entry students this brings additional concerns because of the speed at which the tutors talk often with unfamiliar accents can make engaging with that tutor difficult, but it is critical given the increased importance of higher years of study and reduced time to gain familiarity with those voices. Existing international students who joined previously, will have had time to become more familiar with those issues.

In response to these difficulties, HEIs can offer bridging sessions to ease the transition and other targeted support as well as monitoring the achievements of DE students and their feedback through their programme. However, HEI resources are constantly squeezed given the focus on the demands of the majority of new students, in other words, the new year 1 student body at the start of an academic year[20]. In summarizing the existing literature on this theme, Barron & D'Annuzio-Green (2009) refer to evidence **that if you are a member of this group of students you are potentially more likely to feel their identity challenged than other established year groups (those progressing from earlier years of study within the joined institution) and experience 'academic anxiety'** (Quan et al, 2013). This anxiety, as was noted in **chapter 3** and is discussed further in this chapter, can be a major barrier to effective learning by the individual. Indeed, if we reconsider the elements of effective learning outlined in Figure 3.1, for a direct entry international student – concerns for the engagement of that student with their learning can manifest in all five elements of: *the rationale and basis of learning as the student moves to a likely different learning culture at the joined institution, that there may be different internal motivations and very likely changed external conditions, that there are likely to be different pedagogical practices unfamiliar to the international direct entry student and therefore that learning will be a significant challenge that the international direct entry student will not be able to rise to.* As Quan et al (2013:417) referring to Zhou (2008) and Foster (2008) cite the,

> "…learning experience, cognition and habits Chinese students acquired in their home country have significant influences during the early stages of their stay at UK universities (Zhou 2008). The listening-driven teaching system in China is hugely different from a discussion-driven tutorial system in the UK, so the academic adjustment period is often protracted…"

HEIs have attempted to address some of these concerns for (international) direct entry students, through for example clear and distinctive induction and early support processes in place to meet mutual expectations (of both the students and HEI staff concerned) and that this ideally persists through the 'honeymoon' period to support an acceptance of the new learning environment by you, the student (Barron & D'Annuzio-Green, 2009).

Nonetheless, there remain significant concerns that the international advanced entry student does not understand why for example, a grade (especially when it is a failing grade) is given to them for a piece of assessment (Lilleyman & Bennett, 2014). This can be exacerbated by a 'fear of failure' too and a level of academic anxiety that whilst peaking at the start of your programme of study, may continue to both increase and decrease throughout your period of study (Brown and Holloway, 2008)[21]. Indeed, the 'fear of failing' can manifest as stress which exacerbates that same fear.

Zhou and Todman (2009) found a similar result in their interviews and questionnaire sampling for a group of Chinese international postgraduate students (IPG) joining a UK HEI, that **adjustment patterns and the management of academic anxiety varied across individuals to an extent that it was difficult to generalize**. However that work did identify that IPG students **arriving in groups rather than individually, managed the acculturation process more effectively**. It would seem important therefore that your pre-departure activities should ideally be managed by your new HEI so that you are ensconced early and with others, in your programme experience.

5.5   Joining your programme as an International Postgraduate Student

Moving on to consider the international postgraduate (IPG) student in more detail much of what has been identified in 5.3 and 5.4 will also be a concern shaping your effective learning. A focus upon the effective learning environment for an IPG student though is not as well understood as that for the international undergraduate student market (Gao, 2012). Important differences between the different levels of study of the programmes focus upon the additional costs of postgraduate study and the importance of independent research within those programmes. In the case of the former, the perception of programme cost upon student engagement perception is presented in key literature as a concern for the IPG student dependent upon who is paying rather than the price per se (Barnes, 2007 cited by Gao, 2012).

Brown and Holloway's (2008) research on a large group of new graduate students (at a Southern UK HEI) identified a number of issues regarding their HEI experience (many of which are again common for international students):

- The initial arrival and commencement of the programme evidenced IPG students with fear, anxiety, disorientation and depression – despite some evidence of excitement too. A period of significant upheaval was common with a primary goal of developing communication abilities quickly and effectively.
- The individual experience of international PG study was subsequently dependent upon:
    ○ Previous experience of international study and prior studies.
    ○ Pre-arrival preparation including linguistic (re)fresher courses and support for the journey to the UK.
    ○ Interaction strategy – with the initial activities of forming monoethnic groups to alleviate feelings of loneliness, but which then potentially hinders cultural learning and linguistic development when strategically managed by you.
    ○ Cultural similarity between host and home environment.

Whilst it may be that not all undergraduate and IPG students can endure the academic anxiety and personal pressures of international study, the marketability of the experience is increasingly recognised by organisations seeking individuals comfortable working across cultures who will have developed a more multicultural sense of self and identity (Brown and Holloway, 2008). This is certainly an area that can be developed further by UK HEIs.

Terraschke & Wahid (2011) also highlight that you as an IPG student, as with undergraduate international students, similarly benefit from undertaking English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at the start of (and during) your programme of study (when compared with those that did not undertake an EAP preparatory course) – both for the benefit of improved linguistic expression, but also as that improved expression supports you being able to state and more clearly understand how you learn, address assessment requirements (through for example more adept use of formal written language), feel more confident within your work and generally manage the demands of your programme of study more effectively. It is worth noting however, that assessments (particularly) examinations were cited by both IPG study groups (those having taken an EAP course and those that had not) as a major concern. In other words it seems that the EAP course did not address that form of assessment anxiety in you, the international postgraduate students.

Phakati (2008) similarly offers empirical evidence of the assessment value of undertaking an EAP preparatory course for IPG students, in an analysis of a group of Chinese postgraduate students (n=125) half way through an Australian postgraduate programme. In that work, language proficiency, reading efficiency and strategic reading of materials[22] are presented as accounting for 22% of the assessment achievement by the student[23]. Sun and Richardson (2012) examined the learning approaches of Chinese IPG students in particular and to what extent their learning reflects existing understanding of either:

1. A deep approach to understanding the meaning of materials – where you focus upon seeking meaning to materials, relating ideas and have an interest in both ideas and their use. We might identify this learning approach as the **Informational IPS** from chapter 3.

2. A surface approach aimed at memorising the materials – where you focus upon organising your study with care to maximise use of time, are clear on what assessment demands are and monitor your achievement against those demands. This description does not wholly reflect either of the three IPS presented in chapter 3. We might identify this as a partial engagement with the **Informational IPS** but with clear selective engagement.

3. A strategic approach aimed at obtaining the best marks – where you focus upon the relevance of your work, you seek to memorise materials that seem relevant but you have no clear association between them, your efforts focus upon received prescriptive guidance and are motivated by the risk of failing rather than by achievement. We might identify this learning approach as the **Diffuse Avoidant IPS** from chapter 3.

Phakati (2008) has suggested that strategic reading is a practice of Chinese IPG students and of course this text is seeking to identify how (3) can be addressed for you. Sun and Richardson (2012) identify that for their sample, the chosen learning approach was shaped by your perception of the quality of your course and its academic context. In terms of this last point, there was limited evidence of 'rote' learning evidenced by the Chinese postgraduate students when compared with non-Chinese postgraduate students**. It was the context of learning** – **and 'whatever works'** – **strategy that seemed to delineate between adopting deep, surface or strategic learning and potentially IPS**. Fitkov-Norris and Yeghiazarian (2013) reach a similar conclusion in a more general study of IPG students studying a general business management programme – that cultural and educational backgrounds are not a dominant feature of the realised learning strategy deployed – that learning choice is context dependent. They did however identify that kinaesthetic and auditory learning were commonly preferred learning styles for IPG students and that students benefit from a teaching style that used different methods to present learning materials.

The benefits to you of undertaking an EAP course are further evidence by Elder's (1993) research cited by Phakati (2008) on this topic (across a smaller sample but wider institutional basis than Phakati (2008)) suggests that the benefits of EAP accrue at the start of a programme of study, where those that have not undertaken the preparatory course require the first semester to acculturate and develop the skills and competencies that EAP otherwise seems to offer. As we have noted, this is also the suggestion from Brown and Holloway (2008) albeit shaped by a range of unpredictable personal factors.

Wright & Schartner (2013) suggest that of the additional factors shaping successful IPG student engagement, a critical one is that of intercultural engagement with indigenous students – yet this is arguably the most problematic to deliver from an institutional perspective – because of the perceived language competency of the IPG student. The creation of buddy and mentoring schemes can be implemented by HEIs to help address this weakness. A further comment by Wright and Schartner (2013) underlines that difficulties encountered by IPG students are similar to those of final year direct entry undergraduates, by virtue of having a very limited time in which to acculturate to the joined HEI learning environment.

Furthermore, Wright and Schartner (2013) argue that the lack of interactional engagement by IPG students results in limited interaction time and that *"…participants' expressions of external and internal barriers reflect a sense of being caught at a threshold, in conflict between their capacity and choice to interact. We suggest that in certain cases, such as intensive 1-year master's programmes in the UK, the combination of external and internal barriers, even for proficient and motivated students, may be just too high to cross without greater support"* Wright and Schartner (2013:125**). The reduction in academic anxiety is dependent to what extent your sense of 'success' in your studies and experience is attributed to external and internal factors of that experience** (Brown & Holloway, 2008). This makes it difficult to identify the postgraduate 'sojourn' as being typical at all.

Proposed actions to address this which could be evidenced in the HEI include:

- Greater on-going constructive support and training for you, the international student before and throughout your period of study, to help you manage as successfully as possible to cross the threshold to successful international study.
- Encouragement to take advantage of opportunities to speak with and interact with members of the local English-speaking community even before arrival for your academic sojourn.
- Construction of web-based communities (for example, using resources such as university pre-arrival online chat rooms, or recruiting a group of informal online mediators to engage with you pre and post arrival).
- Encourage a wider involvement for you within and beyond the academic programme, (e.g. mixed-language study groups for credit-bearing work, setting up native-speaker 'buddy' links with other international students, ensuring international students are actively engaged in university social or sporting programmes, or informally encouraging you to pair up with English-speaking roommates in order to boost much-needed opportunities for interaction in and outside the classroom. (Wright & Schartner, 2013: 126).

In terms of programme level outcomes, perhaps what might be the key distinguishing issue however between the IPG student from the undergraduate international student is the increased focus upon independent research through the dissertation (which is typically a significant final credit bearing part of most taught UK masters programmes). Indeed Nguzi and Kayode (2013) suggest that the (failure to complete the) dissertation is the single largest reason for non-completion of postgraduate programmes of study. Brown (2007) has explored some of the expected difficulties that IPG student dissertation supervision entails of[24]:

1. Time pressures
2. Language difficulties
3. Insufficient critical analysis in the written submission
4. Significantly more personal difficulties than those reported for Home PG students

Some of these concerns may be surprising to note, given that progression to the dissertation stage of a taught masters programme requires the successful completion of the preceding classroom based elements of learning and that a significant period of time will have elapsed from the commencement of the your programme. However, the dissertation tutor can indirectly unwittingly adopt the role of personal supervisor and through ongoing personal contact, develop an understanding of persistent issues and concerns affecting you which they may or may not feel competent to manage. The passage of time may also be a hinderance for your academic achievement as this may have allowed interactional patterns of behaviour such as mono-ethnic interaction, to have become dominant for you, inhibiting further oral and written English language competency development. Expectations by the superviser may also result in the need for significant amounts of time to be spent in addressing linguistic weaknesses which is not usually available or allocated to a PG supervisor and who may not be used to offering that level of support and prescriptive structure to learning. As a result both you and your supervisor may approach the dissertation process with different preconceptions of the role of each other through cognitive cultural dissonance. Brown (2007) and MacDonald (2014) suggests that tutors need to consider repoliticizing and deconstructing the supervisionary process to accommodate the diversity of learning styles you and other IPG students will exhibit.

It has been noted previously that the selection of an international HEI to attend, establishes preconceptions both about you, the international student with tutors of that institution but arguably also with you, about what you may expect education to be like at that institution. This is potentially important on two fronts – firstly as an IPG student you are more likely to be aware of HEI ranking both in country and internationally (Priporas, 2011) and secondly it places a requirement on HEIs to actively consider this aspect of their corporate marketing (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013). Priporas (2011) further clarifies that in his work examining Greek IPG students, University branding that stressed the following attributes constituted an appealing offer:

- Ranking
- Accreditation
- Employability and career aspects

Overall, whilst the framework in Figure 5.1 outlined the generic factors influencing grade achievement upon commencement of a degree programme, aspects of this figure are more or less emphasised depending upon your point of entry to your programme.

In the table below, strategic actions that you could undertake from this discussion and figure 5.1 can be summarised:

Influential factor	Recommended Action(s)
Prior studies	Expect different abilities of students within your programme and entry point.
Motional and Affective Adjustment and Communication	Development of social networks will take time – try to initiate these before you depart your home country – getting to know and work with others will make your cultural adjustment faster and easier in your host country and impact positively upon your studies.
Communication	View improving your English language as not a class or unnecessary activity – it will help both with your produced work for your studies but also your confidence and self esteem
Language and Communications and Behavioural adjustment	Working with culturally similar international students at the start of your studies is a good thing to do, but try to ensure this is not your only source of student interaction and that you broaden your cultural engagement with different ethnic students, as your studies progress.
Communication and IPS	You will not feel comfortable or even perhaps happy, until you develop a sense of belonging to your programme and institution. This means both engaging with your studies and with other activities that enrich your study experience. Make sure you look out for these.
Language and Communication and IPS	How you engage with your studies and seek to progress them – is influenced by your IPS and what you personally view as your motivation for your studies. Your IPS is also related to your approach to learning. Reflect on your motivations to identify how you can maximise your grades.
Prior studies and IPS	Being open and agreeable to developments and new experiences support better grade achievements.
Resilience and Belonging	Engage with your University's induction but be aware this is not sufficient alone for effective engagement with your programme and cultural adjustment.
Communication	Working in groups with other international students supports your learning and adjustment as well as encouraging you to approach your learning environment more positively.
Assessment and fear of failure	Modules you enjoy can be more important than how you are assessed within them – as the teaching style can match your learning style helping to achieve better grades.
Assessment and fear of failure	Think about your learning style and how you most effectively engage with and understand your studies.
Emotional and Behavioural adjustment and communication	The more you engage with home students in your courses, the more likely it is you will engage successfully with them and support the achievement of higher grades.
Voice and belonging	In all your classes – an important aim for you is to be visible and secure your voice in your classes but do not aim to do this too early in your classes. It may take probably a full semester before you acquire this confidence.
Communication	Look ahead to your classes on the local VLE and identify the structure of the materials you will be presented with.
Communication	You will encounter different teaching styles – some of which will be difficult for you to access. Ask your tutors for materials in other formats if possible.
Assessment	Identify those modules with qualitative assessments as these are those which you will struggle most within your assessment in general.

Influential factor	Recommended Action(s)
Communication and Assessment	Look out for your tutors to signpost key knowledge and understanding in your classes. Acquiring this understanding will be critical for you to grasp a fuller understanding of your courses.
Communication and Language	Look for opportunities in your courses to be visible and safely practise 'your voice'.
Assessments	The more research focused your courses is, the more you could expect variations in the uniformity of your tutors in the class room – this can result in less prescriptive guidance for your assessments.
Communications	Ask your tutors how research shapes your class materials.
Belonging and emotional motivation	Academic anxiety and the fear of failing can be significant barriers to securing higher grades.
Communications	Expect to adapt your learning style to find a 'whatever works' method.
Assessments	Reflect on whether you feel your academic success is because of your efforts or those of other factors.

Table 5.2: Summary of Factors shaping International Student grade achievement

5.6　　　Forms of assessment and International Student difficulties

It is important to realise for your own esteem, that whilst there may be a perception that you as the international student are deficient in some knowledge and skill areas by your tutors but we concur with the observation of Burns & Foo (2013) that a better view of your abilities is that the UK learning environment values those abilities less, than your home environment. To be studying in the UK as an International student implies that in your home country, you are a high achiever. A focus on self awareness and adjustment – as discussed in this and the preceding chapter – has hence been our focus. In our experience, common areas of your learning abilities that require attention for the UK HE environment tend to be:

1. Independent research
2. Extended academic writing
3. Research strategies for collection of materials
4. Critical evaluation of research materials

The ability to demonstrate competence in these areas is a key contribution towards an improved grade performance in your assessments. There are many texts on study skills you can find and review which will provide some support in your awareness and development of these areas, but we feel this is a necessary but insufficient approach to try to address grade performance. As we have argued in this book, the *academic practice* of your engagement and that of your tutors, needs to be the wider focus. The recent work of Burns & Foo (2013) explores this wider focus in their development of the Formative Feedback Intervention (FFI) for a key research module whereby a small part of the intended work for the assessment was reviewed and formal guidance offered to the student, prior to the actual submission of the work. In their research, they found this manner of engagement effective in giving confidence to you, the International student – especially for final year direct entry candidates who have little time to culturally adjust. *If this is not a practice in your programme area, approach your tutors and ask to see if they would engage in this formative style learning process*?

How you use the feedback you receive from your returned assessments (in whatever form that is), is a particularly important aspect of your learning, but one that is not as understood as perhaps it needs to be by both you and your tutors. Should you receive comments stating weakness in your work (such as any of the four areas identified previously for example), then ask yourself 'what does this mean?' To an extent, the comments from your tutors are 'easy' to provide but may mask far deeper *ontological and epistemological difficulties – i.e. how you see the work around you and how you give it meaning.* Indeed they should be developed in conversation between staff and student, to explore the nature of academic strengths and weaknesses and in so doing, construct mutual awareness and understanding of necessary knowledge and skills. If this is not undertaken and feedback remains transmissive only, this could be a significant barrier in securing higher grades for your work. It is one we try to reflect on shortly, in the assessment type discussion.

Perhaps two final comments to note are that whilst we are focusing upon the grade you achieve, we do not wish to negate the value of feedback and neither should you. There are ongoing academic discussions about the merit of marking criteria (see **chapter 4** for a more detailed discussion and Nichol & McFarlane-Dick (2006) cited by Burns & Foo (2013)) and the construction of a summative grade diverting attention from the messages in feedback or generating egos. The second point to note concerns the experience of one of the authors:

> **As part of a review of grade achievements, in one of the Business Schools of the authors, a survey of threshold students was undertaken. These were defined as students currently achieving mean grades just below the next classification of degree awards (so students achieving a mean grade of 48–49%, 58–59% and 68–69%).**

In discussions with the students achieving 68–69%, a reflection of feedback received identified a common concern of 'professional writing style weaknesses'. A formative feedback activity was undertaken whereby the students agreed to send to the author a paragraph from a recent submission which would be reviewed and rewritten by the tutor. The rewritten paragraph would then be reviewed with the student to identify differences between the two versions of the work. In a relatively short period of time, the students concerned were able to integrate the differences in style and subsequently consistently secured first class grades.

An effective constructivist approach to learning can be relatively efficient with appropriate identification of concerns from feedback received. In short, work with your tutors and do not ignore feedback or rely solely upon your grade as a measurement of your achievements or otherwise.

5.6.1   The examination

International student performance is generally higher in examinations than other forms of assessment (Fuchs & Wossman, 2008) primarily due to shifts in assessor expectations over research contributions, writing style fluency and accuracy and presentation of examination answers (especially in the 'soft' disciplines). In practice, examinations are in some capacity always timed assessments. They can possess different rubrics (their assessment rules) and with in some instances be like coursework assessments where you receive an assessment task before the examination. These are often labelled as **open examinations**. Similarly, you can be assessed through **closed examinations**, where you have no prior knowledge of the content of the examination prior to the assessment day and are not allowed to use any additional materials during the examination. In between these two forms of examination are a variety of other assessment rubrics:

Open Examinations – Type I – examination questions are pre-released (ahead of the examination date) and you are allowed to use your notes and books during the examination period.	Open Examinations – Type II – examination questions can be either pre-released (ahead of the examination date) and / or you are allowed to use your notes and books during the examination period.	Closed Examinations – are assessments where you are allowed no additional learning materials and you are unaware of the content of the examination paper.

The **examination rubric** will be determined by your tutors as to how they wish to structure the assessment so as to evaluate whether you can evidence the achievement of the expected learning aims for the module/course of study. Lewthwaite (1997) noted in a small survey of non-native English speaking postgraduate students in New Zealand that whilst undertaking examinations caused significant stress to international students, this was not as marked as that induced by coursework assessments. The latter stress being sourced from concerns with understanding coursework assessment directions, tutor language and guidance and fear of speaking in classes.

Summary

Following chapter 4's discussion of the grading process for you, this chapter has considered the barriers to learning you may expect as you undertake your studies internationally. This has been presented as a complex mix of factors from your internal and external environment. Your joined HEI can help to bridge the transition between your previous education and your new studies, but these activities are generally limited in their scope and effectiveness, so you must consider actively how to continue to progress your academic and social development so as to support effective grade achievements.

In this chapter, two foci emerged to consider the inter relationships between these internal and external factors – determined by the stage of entry to your programme of studies. By considering a range of literature and experiences, figure 5.1 was constructed to highlight the individual and grouping of factors that influence your grade achievement. Subsequent to this discussion, different points of entry to your programmes were considered – notably the advanced entry undergraduate student and the postgraduate student on a taught programme. For both these students the limited time to culturally adjust was an apparently critical factor but also the need to begin the adjustment process early i.e. before your departure to your host country and HEI. Table 5.2 listed the emergent actions that you can undertake to improve your opportunity of securing a higher grade.

In the final chapter next, we summarise the international student grade sojourn with the hope that you will find a number of activities to support both your international student experience but also the achievements in your experience.

Glossary

Cultural Adjustment – the process through which you secure self esteem and self confidence in your studies which is shaped by two considerations of your emotional and behavioural adjustment to your new learning environment.

Self construal – describes how confidence with your English language is related to your emotional and behavioural adjustment.

Belonging – is the process and affective behaviour that generates a sense of identity and engaged purpose with your programme and your learning environment.

Identity processing style – refers to the strategies you use to engage with or avoid the tasks of maintaining your sense of identity within your learning environment – this can be both positive and negative with regards to your grade achievements.

Resilience – describing individuals who are compassionate and flexible and who can continue to move forward under pressure from their internal and/or external environment.

Academic Practice – is a comprehensive discourse framework to explain the interface between university academic requirements and international student learning.

Scaffolding – refer to your learning and subsequent understanding being secured by building upon previous understanding.

Threshold learning – refer to those identified and important central concepts and practices, the understanding of which allows mastery of your course or module of study.

Transmissive pedagogy – is a form of teaching reliant upon oral instruction and that is primarily from the tutor to the student.

Constructivist pedagogy – is a form of teaching reliant upon the development of a dialogue between the tutor to the student.

Academic Anxiety – the stress experienced by (international) students upon commencing a programme of studies that arises from both social and academic weaknesses compared with established student learning practices for a given learning environment.

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6   Conclusion – studying in the UK?

TARGET READER: The International student and the tutor of the international student

Aim of chapter: To extract from the preceding discussion, an 'action' plan for the international student and the tutor of international students, which has the aim of helping to achieve higher grades achieved for the student and a more engaged and rewarding experience for the tutor.
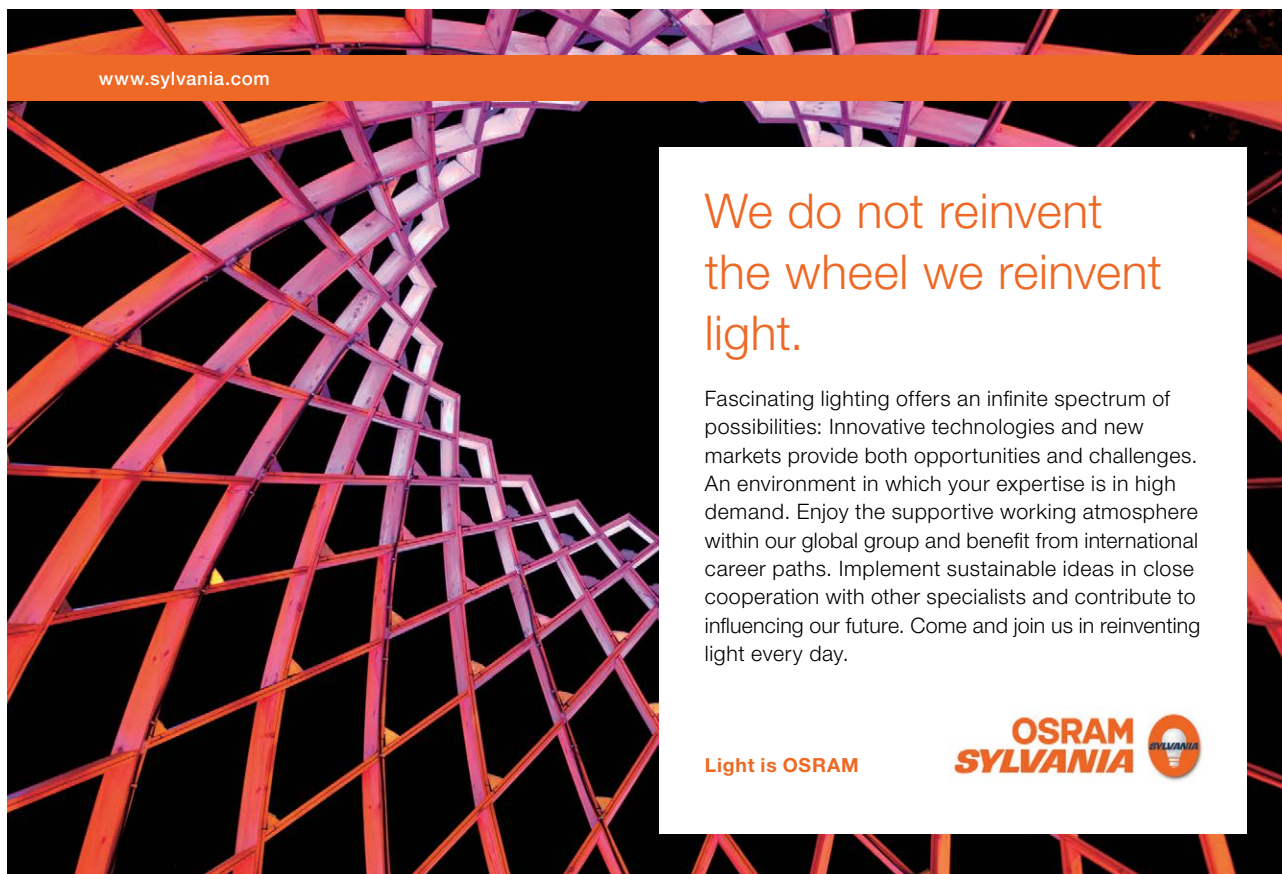
6.1   What have we learned?

The journey we have undertaken in this book has illustrated that effective learning – where it achieves permanent changes in the behaviour of individuals – is a multi-factor endeavour for the international student and their tutor within the learning environment. In chapter 1 we proposed that learning is a messy process, but that we can structure our understanding of this process by focusing upon a number of key areas which we identified and discussed in subsequent chapters. In undertaking this journey, we did not set out to construct a 'new theory' of learning for any given stakeholder, but we did want to address a weakness in UK Higher Education that we felt existed based upon our experiences of working with international students over a period of years. Fundamentally this weakness is not one per se of academic skills development, of which there are many excellent guides for you the international student, but one of providing a guide or map for effective acculturation (or developing a good 'fit') to UK HE and through that process also be able to achieve grades that reflect more accurately your potential as the international student. We feel this is needed for you and your tutors because of the resource and efficiency limits placed upon modern HEI provision and institutions which risk (your potentially very different) learning needs being less valued or recognised, than addressing the needs of the cultural homogeneity of the majority of students in a given class.

From chapter 1 (and expanded in chapter 3), we established a structure for the book and the areas we would explore using contemporary research and available evidence of the scope of effective learning. These included:

- A discussion of the typical pre departure and arrival experiences you might enjoy at the start of your learning experience
- A discussion of your motivation and its importance in your learning experience
- A discussion of how you are assessed and the factors that influence that tutor activity and how you engage with that activity
- A discussion of what effective teaching is for you, the international student
- A discussion on the importance of other students in your learning experience
- A discussion of how and why your HEI seeks to support you in your learning experience
- A discussion of the importance of recognising your social welfare on your learning experience
- A discussion of the importance of recognising your linguistic abilities are more than just competence development in that area but impact more widely upon your learning experience

We don't state this is an exhaustive listing of factors that shape your grade achievement in your studies, but drawing upon our experiences and established learning theory, these seemed to be appropriate areas to bring to your attention and from which, to establish an action plan that we hope will provide both you – the international student and you – the international student tutor- with opportunities and ideas to improve the learning experience.

Securing good marks: A guide for
international students and their tutors
Conclusion – studying in the UK?

6.2   Action Plan for the International Student

Before you arrive in the UK at your HEI	
Factor	**Action**
External learning conditions	Try to identify who else is travelling to your HEI and perhaps joining your classes. • Developing a support network of friends prior to departure will help your adjustment in the UK. • Ask your HEI/admissions tutor/agent for information Development of social networks will take time – try to initiate these before you depart your home country – getting to know and work with others will make your cultural adjustment faster and easier in your host country and impact positively upon your studies.
.	Your selection of institution and HEI is important as this will establish preconceptions in your tutors of your abilities.
External conditions	Advise your HEI/Agent of your travel arrangements to the UK.

Upon arrival in the UK at your HEI	
Factor	**Action**
Internal and External learning conditions	If your HEI/faculty/programme organises specific welcome events prior to the start of your studies, ensure you attend them. • Developing a support network of friends prior to departure will help your adjustment in the UK. Engage with your University's induction but be aware this is not sufficient alone for effective engagement with your programme and cultural adjustment.
	Early, at the start of your studies in the UK – ensure you have access to key study information – such as your module/courses guides and that you are aware of when assessment work will be required from you.
	Spend time in understanding the UK UG degree classification system.
	Are you joining your HEI and undergraduate degree programme at a higher level of admission/entry? If so, do you know if the grades from this level contribute to your final degree classification?
	Assessments are attempted once in UK HEI – get it as right as possible, first time.
	When you receive feedback – read it – if you do not understand it, ask your tutor / personal supervisor.
	View improving your English language as not a class or unnecessary activity – it will help both with your produced work for your studies but also your confidence and self esteem.

	Working with culturally similar international students at the start of your studies is a good thing to do, but try to ensure this is not your only source of student interaction and that you broaden your cultural engagement with different ethnic students, as your studies progress. Working in groups with other international students supports your learning and adjustment as well as encouraging you to approach your learning environment more positively.
External conditions	Give yourself time to organise your living arrangements when you arrive in the UK.
Assessment	Marking in HEIs is a subjective activity (everyone is different!).
	Think about the degree you are studying – is it 'hard' or 'soft'? It is more difficult to obtain a higher grade in a social science than a pure science and you need to moderate your views and expectations accordingly.
	Where your modules/courses involve smaller pieces of assessment to create an overall grade – it will be more difficult to obtain a higher resultant final grade in general.
.	Understand what method of marking will produce your grades – is it norm, criteria or gatekeeping based? Marking in a social science uses a more relativist scale – so you must make your answers seem possible and feasible however you decide to present them.
	Expect variations of grades within classification thresholds between your friends because your tutors find it harder to grade within thresholds *(i.e. it is easier to award a mark of 65% and 75% to two students than it is to award 65% and 63% to two students).*
	Expect to see differences in how your tutors mark and grade you.
	Securing consistent grades – preferably high grades – by looking for consistent weaknesses in your submitted work. Consistent grades also helps establish an expected norm of behaviour from you with the tutor and your work.
	Remember that your tutors are under pressure to award good class grades.
	Different HEIs have different methods of second marking – be sure you understand what this is for you.
	Being open and agreeable to developments and new experiences in your studies supports better grade achievements
	Modules you enjoy can be more important than how you are assessed within them – as the teaching style can match your learning style helping to achieve better grades.
	Identify those modules with qualitative assessments as these are those which you will struggle most within your assessment in general
Belonging and Engagement	It can be helpful for you to be an active participant in the learning environment, say the classroom, as not only will it contribute to the construction of your understanding, skills and knowledge, but it will also increase your visibility as an active (and 'good') participant to the tutor of your class. An important aim for you is to be visible and secure your voice in your classes but do not aim to do this too early in your classes. It may take probably a full semester before you acquire this confidence.
.	Tutors are more likely to grade you according to a perception of effort and engagement of you and your cohort, especially in those areas emphasising analytical skill development.

.	You will not feel comfortable or even perhaps happy, until you develop a sense of belonging to your programme and institution. This means both engaging with your studies and with other activities that enrich your study experience. Make sure you look out for these.
.	Academic anxiety and the fear of failing can be significant barriers to securing higher grades.
Internal	Consider what your Information Processing System (IPS) is.
	How you engage with your studies and seek to progress them – is influenced by your IPS and what you personally view as your motivation for your studies. Your IPS is also related to your approach to learning. Reflect on your motivations to identify how you can maximise your grades.
Your Prior Knowledge	Expect different abilities of students within your programme and entry point.

6.3 Action Plan for the International Student Tutor

As with the previous table listing those areas that have been identified as supporting improved grade achievement by the international student, the final table below lists those areas that have also been discussed as important for the tutor of the international student to support their grade achievement.

Factor	Action
Student Language	Do you have contact with EAP staff in your institution – specifically those who deliver classes to your international students? Are you aware of the scope and content of EAP classes and how to fit (or not) with the delivery of materials in your module/ course?
	What is the perception of EAP in your faculty or department? Are you confident that sufficient importance is accorded to EAP faculty staff? Can this profile be raised? Can EAP staff be integrated into developmental meetings of the programme staff?
	Do you know where international students experience particular difficulties in courses/modules? Do you know what aspect of learning is a particular barrier for the international student in those modules? If not – can you find out?
	Have you ensured that where particular new skills and understanding are being introduced to the international student learner, that you have confidence that the learner will have the appropriate abilities at the right time (through prior collaboration with EAP staff…)?
	Have you identified with EAP staff which parts of the programme of study have/will be most difficult for the international student learner? And what barrier needs to be addressed?
Student prior knowledge	Are you aware of the qualifications and attainment of new students in your class – so you know where they are beginning their learning from?
	How often do you check (formatively or summatively) the understanding of international students in your class?
	Do you have an understanding of what skills and knowledge students bring to your classes already?
	Are you aware of strengths or weaknesses in student knowledge – or know where gaps are (or likely to be)?

Assessment strategies	Have you considered the appropriateness of the assessment strategy to meet ILOs? Can you offer more flexibility in how ILOs are evidenced by student achievement in your classes?
	Supporting International students in their learning can be aided by encouraging their 'class voice' above the mechanics of requiring them to use the correct academic register – can you enable this in your classes and assessment tasks? Think about what the fundamental evidence sought to warrant a grade allocation is for your assessed submissions? Are you actually looking at or for, the 'voice' of the student?
	Do you operate any formative review/support sessions for (international) students prior to assessment submission?
	Have you considered in your assessment strategies, whether they are UK/Euro centric in their application? Do they consider the variety of international students in a given class who may find their self-expression difficult in some forms of assessment particularly where there is reference to named organisations and contexts they may also be unfamiliar with?
	Can you support the use of the first person ('I') in assessed work to encourage originality and critical engagement with assessment tasks?
	How often do you undertake formative discussions with your international students – where you particularly focus upon missed assumptions in the views of students?
International Student belonging	To what extent are activities by international student associations promoted and supported by faculty?
	Are there visible elements of social connectedness through host culture integration for international students?
	Do you have 'buddy' or pairing schemes operational in the faculty? If not, can one be established?
	Try to encourage (initially) the benefits of supporting and engaging same culture working groups in your classes
	Seek and solve problems presented by international students early and ensure this is visible to that community

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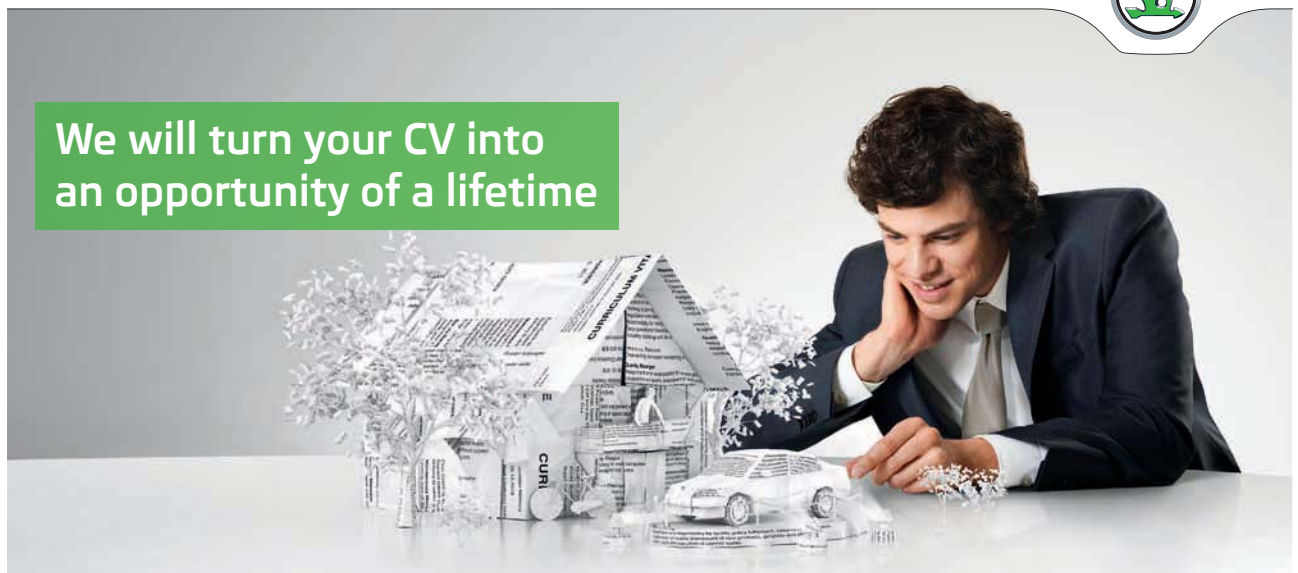
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Endnotes

1.   It is also important to recognise that for example in the dialogic process of learning, that the teacher is also an active element of the learning process as well as the learner. This is discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

2.   Jean Piaget was a famous psychologist who studied cognitive development, initially in children.

3.   This was tested with 182 Chinese college students, a small sample of novice teachers (15) and a series of rich interviews. Each of the four themed categories comprised a number of items per category.

4.   We return to this important issue shortly when considering whether academic conventions themselves raise learning barriers in University education for international students.

5.   Pioneered by Jack Mezirow after extensive studies of the education of adults returning to academic studies in the US in the 1970s.

6.   It is interesting to note that these four parts of the description are in essence a paraphrasing of the thesis learning outcome aims articulated by Cadman (1997) and which caused much distress to her international postgraduate students!

7.   And by doing so, you would encourage the student to reflect on their work and seek to recognise and appreciate the different ways of interpreting data and experience.

8.   This was for international students studying in the US.

9.   Based on a report by the Higher Education Strategy Associates and HSBC Research, as reported in the Times Higher Education Supplement. That data cites the 10 largest universities in each country, while living costs are taken from Global Higher Education Rankings 2010: Affordability and Accessibility in Comparative Perspective.

10.   See the discussion here for example by Paul Whitely (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/33033) where according to UNESCO and OECD figures, the UK continues to have a significantly smaller proportion of enrolments per 100, 000 people than the US and in comparison to other OECD countries, has reduced rather than increased HE funding since 2007 and made admission and enrolment to UK HE programmes by International students a more difficult and time consuming process.

11.   Concerns with the value of league tables can be reflected in some evidence from Europe (Italy) that using this data of achievement to make an informed decision on the quality of an institution and programme is flawed (see Bagues et al, 2008).

12.   See http://78.158.56.101/archive/palatine/files/1349.pdf April 2014

13.   This is an issue because of how we understand individuals attribute success or failure to themselves (called attribution theory) and through social cognitive views of their self potential for achievement.

14.   The work cited by Saebi & Payne (2012) does not outline any expected gender differences for these IPS.

15.   For a detailed discussion of the breadth and scope of Resilience Models, see Van Breda (2001) accessed at: http://www.vanbreda.org/adrian/resilience/resilience_theory_review.pdf May 2014.

16.   See http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5049&context=etd Accessed May 2014.

17.   Note – it is unlikely that such questionnaires will be identified by the word 'resilient' to you.

18.   Scaffolding practices refer to your learning being progressed through building upon your existing understanding, to construct new knowledge and understanding with your tutors and peers. Threshold concepts refer to those identified and important central concepts and practices, the understanding of which allows mastery of your course or module of study.

19.   The HEFCE funded project 'Student Progress and Transition' project (SPAT) of 2004 sought to identify and address this deficiency.

20.   Moreover, an important reason for student drop out and poor retention is where student expectations about HEI study differ from the reality (Barron & D'Annuzio-Green, 2009). Ensuring that the two are convergent through appropriate supports both increases retention and is cost effective.

21.   The promulgated 'U' model of student adjustment to an international HEI is now of limited credibility – primarily due to limited empirical evidence of its viability and actual existence (see Brown and Holloway, 2008). Mixed models of influences are instead promoted as more effective ways of understanding international student 'adjustments'.

22.   This is described as reading that is directed to achieve a purposeful outcome and goal.

23.   Phakati's (2008) work explores a selected number of variables only through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). It can be expected that other variables account for grade achievement on an individual basis and are not presented.

24.   Neither Brown (1997) nor Nguzi and Kayode (2013) offer evidence that suggests it is the supervisor: supervisee relationship that directly affects the successful completion of the dissertation. Other (student oriented) factors are predominant.