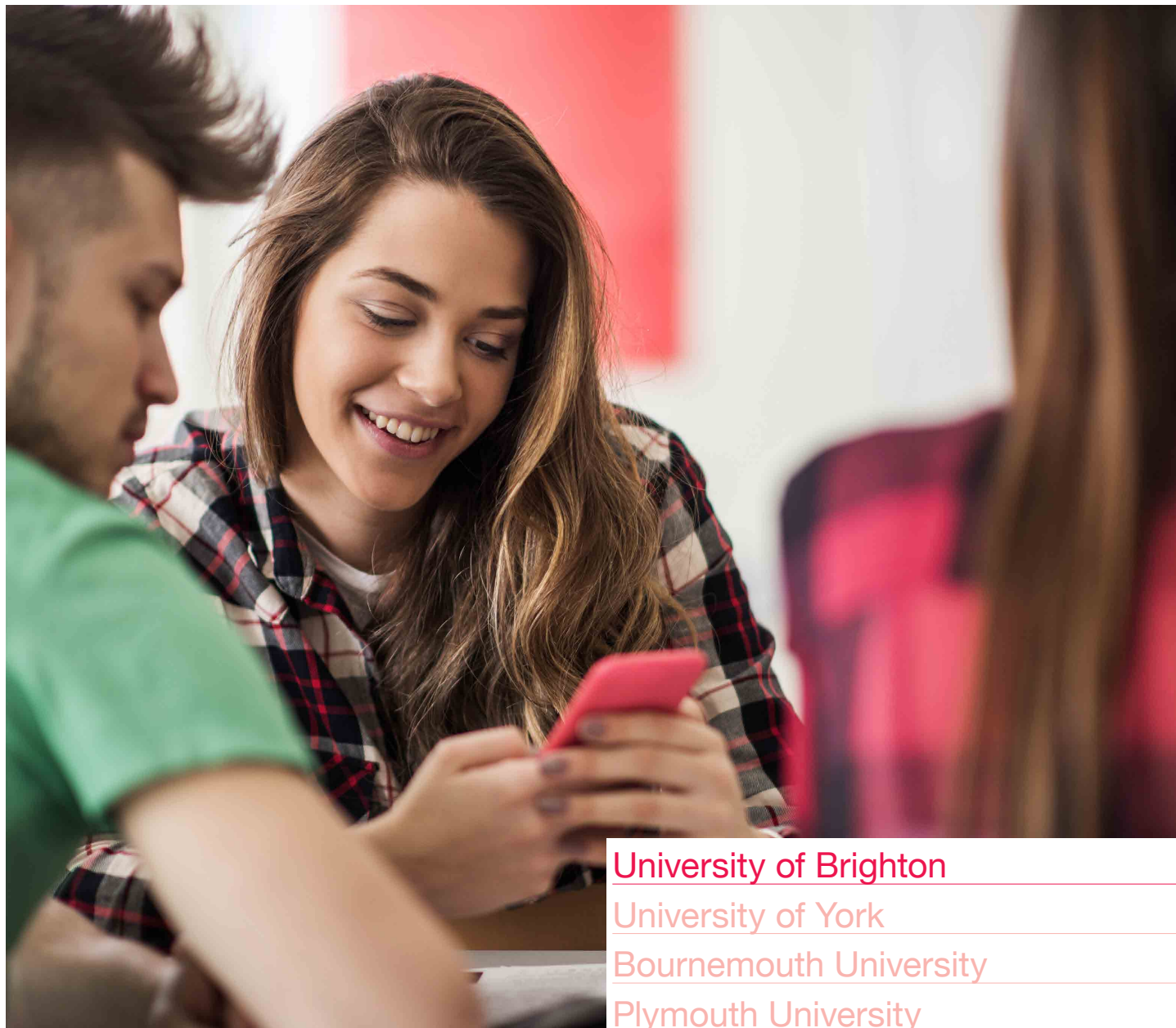# Research into the international student experience in the UK 2015-16

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Exploring first year international undergraduates' experiences in four disciplines: influences of university and international partner college pedagogy and support practices

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Contents

1. Executive summary

In 2015-16, we conducted a research study to identify ways in which first year international undergraduates' experiences:

1. are influenced by university and international partner-college pedagogy and support practices
2. vary when comparing students who have, and have not attended an International Foundation Year in different:
   - UK universities (pre and post-1992)
   - disciplinary contexts (Arts, Science, Business and Engineering)

Across universities and disciplines, this research shows that a combination of university and International College teaching, learning and support practices help to enhance first year international students' sense of belonging, engagement, identity development and confidence when starting their degrees, as supported by earlier research (Briggs et al., 2012). There were no notable differences when comparing pre and post-1992 universities. However, there were some significant differences when comparing broad disciplinary fields and IFY and non-IFY students. Arts interview participants expressed a greater sense of belonging and supportive working relationships with staff and students than in other disciplines. Statistical analysis of survey data suggested that Science respondents were more likely to report high stress levels and to be very worried about not passing the first year than respondents from other subject areas. Business students were more likely to feel confident in academic writing.

Our study shows that key academic challenges faced by international students relate to workload, deadlines, exams and assignments. The survey shows that a greater percentage of respondents found nearly all challenges difficult in Semester 1 in comparison to Semester 2. In this context, during Semester 1 many previous IFY participants found adjusting to studying in university difficult, and different to the International College particularly in relation to larger class sizes and lack of communication with academic staff.

Our findings show that developing a sense of belonging was beneficial for international students when starting university and settling into living in the UK. Students who had attended an IFY had already established friendships, developed confidence in English and knew their way around campus by the time they started university, which helped them to develop a sense of belonging during Semester 1.

The survey results show that overall 76.8% of all students enjoyed their course. Interview participants often described how supportive working relationships with academic staff and peers, engaging learning and teaching and developing a professional identity helped build belonging, engagement, student identity and confidence as the year progressed. By Semester 2, many previous IFY participants had become aware of benefits of the IFY including: their increased social and academic confidence, competence in English and academic writing, practical subject skills, knowledge of curriculum content, links between International Colleges and universities and advice on non-academic matters. The survey also shows that by Semester 2 a smaller percentage of IFY students found the following key aspects of university study challenging in comparison to a greater number of non-IFY students: meeting deadlines, English language, exams, written coursework, group assignments and group work, understanding lectures, seminars and grades and feedback.

Our research indicates that partner colleges and universities share a joint responsibility to enhance existing good practice to help support UK and international student engagement and success during their first year at university. From our research, we have identified a need for universities and partner colleges to continue to work together to enhance:

- Connections between universities and pathway colleges at the transition stage such as: help with visas; pathway colleges involved with university orientation week; universities involved with pathway college results day activities
- Development of international and UK student integration within the context of internationalisation
- Preparation needed to help students to become independent learners and to manage time and workload through a gradual lessening of support throughout the IFY
- Subject-specific academic writing and skills support
- Communication and working relationships (including constructive feedback) between

academic staff and students in some disciplines/modules at university

- Online resources, such as podcast lectures, to support flexible independent study

2. Introduction

Enhancing first year student engagement, including international student engagement, continues to be a key priority for UK universities (HEA, 2008; Thomas 2012). To enable a high quality international student[1] experience many universities now work in partnership with 'pathway' colleges, which run International Foundation Year (IFY) programmes. IFYs aim to better prepare international students for the transition into HE by providing a holistic experience incorporating discipline-specific learning and teaching through a 'pathway' programme linked to the students' preferred future degrees (Kaplan, 2013). Attending an IFY can help facilitate international students' transition into UK HE and help address challenges they may face when starting degrees. Challenges may relate to students': new experiences of learning, teaching and assessment; adjustment to individualist educational customs practised in UK HE; insufficiencies in English skills; feedback; working relationships with academic and support staff; and emotional and academic support from peers/friends (Wilcox et al. 2005; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012). An IFY may help support students' first year transition in practical terms and enhance their confidence to become independent learners at university (Jones, Fleischer and McNair, 2015).

However, McNorton and Cadinot (2012, p6) suggest the need for a "joined up and harmonious approach that connects the IFY students with the wider academic world of the university" in order for the IFY to effectively prepare international students to start their degrees. In this context, the Briggs et al. model of 'organisational influence on the development of learner identity' (2012, p17) conceptualises ways in which combined academic and support practices provided by colleges and universities help to enhance student belonging, engagement, identity development, confidence, independence and success.

1. Interview participants and survey respondents in this research refer to international students from inside and outside the EU. English was not the first language for the majority of these students.

3. Aims and objectives

Building on a previous study into first year international students' experiences (Jones et al., 2015) and Briggs et al. (2012, p17) we conducted new research. This aimed to: identify ways in which: 1. first year international undergraduates' experiences are influenced by university and international partner-college pedagogy and support practices; and 2. experiences vary among first year international undergraduates who have, and have not, attended an IFY in different UK universities and disciplinary contexts. This research contributes to knowledge in international student transition research, helping to identify effective practices and ways to address challenges when working with first year international students.

4. Methodology

We adopted a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010) incorporating qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey at four UK universities (two pre and two post-1992 universities). In 2015-16 during Semesters 1 and 2, we conducted 24 in-depth face-to-face interviews with first year international students at three universities (two post and one pre-1992 universities). They were studying the following broad disciplines on modules where previous IFY students had enrolled: Business, Science, Engineering, and Arts. We interviewed students who did and did not attend an IFY. We qualitatively analysed interview data using cross-sectional content analysis. In Semester 2, we circulated a survey via Bristol Online Survey (BOS) to all first year international students studying Business, Science, Engineering, and Arts disciplines where previous IFY students were enrolled at the four participating UK universities. The final sample comprised 108 first year international students from three institutions, post-1992 a (100, 92.6%), pre-1992 a (6, 5.6%) and pre-1992 b (2, 1.6%). Students studied in: Arts (34, 31.5%), Business (30, 27.8%), Environment, Engineering and Mathematics and Computing (22, 20.4%) and Science including Pharmacy (22, 20.4%). 34.3% (37) were male and 65.7% (71) female. The majority of students in the sample (64.8%) were 18-20 years old, 30.5% aged 21-24 and 4.6% 25 years or older. The majority of the sample (66.7%) was from outside the EU in comparison to 33.3% of EU students.

Table 1: Percentage of domicile of international students

Domicile of students	Percentage	Number
EU student	33.3	36
Non-EU/Overseas student	66.7	72
Total	100	108

In the sample, 45.4% (49) of respondents completed an IFY and 54.6% (59) did not. Of those who attended an IFY 2% of respondents studied for one term, 53.1% for two terms and 44.9% for three terms at an International College.

5. Research findings

5.1 Students' early experiences of university: developing a sense of belonging

As reflected by earlier work (Wilcox et al. 2005; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012), in this research many international students experienced challenges when starting their degrees. Earlier research suggests that developing a sense of belonging in the early stages of starting a degree is important in coping with challenges and building resilience (Thomas, 2012; Wenger, 2009; Masika and Jones, 2016). In this context, most interview participants in this study across disciplines and universities described the benefits of developing a sense of belonging and being part of a Community of Practice. Examples often mentioned included:

- Feeling part of an international community
- Friendly and welcoming academic and support staff (particularly noted in Arts disciplines)
- Friends that students already knew (eg from the IFY)
- Family members staying and supporting students at first
- Making new friends through accommodation and on the course
- PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) sessions/ experienced student mentors helping new students know what to expect
- Orientation activities: a means to meet new friends and understand academic expectations

> "I like all of my tutors and when I had my first talk with one of my tutors in my tutorial I felt very reassured so I feel like they are there for us and can help us."
>
> (Arts participant)

In this context, several participants in Arts disciplines described academic staff as particularly friendly and caring. Most participants described different sets of friends they had made from their accommodation, course and during the IFY. The survey results suggest that a majority of students made friends on their course (91.7%) and that there was no statistical difference for IFY and non-IFY students or by subject groups. Overall 68.3% said that friends supported their studies, 52.0% of IFY students and 80.0% of non-IFY. This difference was statistically significant ($x2= 5.284$, $df=1$, $p=.022$) and may suggest that non-IFY international students needed to rely more on support from friends in comparison to IFY students.

5.1.1 Friends and social transition when starting university

Students who had attended an IFY had already established friendships by the time they started university, which helped them settle in to living in the UK.

> "My accommodation helped. I lived in shared accommodation at the time and that helped in the sense that I got to meet more people and that obviously opens you up, but also being at the International College helped. There was always information available at the reception. So if you need to know stuff or how to get around you could ask people… so that helped, and making different friends in the International College also."
>
> (IFY participant)

In addition, some previous IFY participants said they had overcome cultural and linguistic challenges when they started university, whereas some non-Foundation participants mentioned greater challenges in this context. However, a few participants said they found some British people less approachable than in their own country; and described some UK students on their course as cliquey.

> "In the university English people have their groups and they're not really that open to talk to other people and maybe I prefer to be with my other friends… international friends."
>
> (IFY participant)

In this context, a small minority of participants described their lack of confidence in

communicating in English, and because of this found it more difficult to make British friends. In addition, some participants described how they did not want to take part in the clubbing and restaurant culture that many UK students enjoyed and were less likely to make friends with UK students for this reason. However, most participants described how confidence in English and communication with British students became easier over time.

> **"Most of our classmates are understanding, even though we don't drink they are friendly to us … and we are in the same stage together…if we are frustrated they are pretty much in the same state so we can talk about that among each other. It's pretty fun to work especially in Architecture."**
>
> (Non-IFY participant)

5.1.2 IFY students' academic transition in Semester 1

In the first semester, many previous IFY participants found adjusting to studying in university difficult, and different to the International College. This often related to students' need to work more independently at university and manage their own time, and receiving less academic and pastoral support in comparison to greater support at the International College. In this context, participants across universities and disciplines frequently described how students learn in small groups at International Colleges, but generally attend much larger lectures at university. At International Colleges, participants described how it was easier to ask lecturers questions and interact, whereas at university it was more difficult. The only exception was Arts, where more participants described receiving attention and academic advice from lecturers than in other subjects. A previous IFY participant was critical of the International College's approach of providing lots of support, which then made it more difficult for international students to adjust to the level of independence required when starting a degree. However, several participants realised they needed to become more independent learners at university and that this was what being at university was about.

> **"I would say I don't really like the aspect of the college giving too much support because the student will now feel that when they get to the university they will**

> **get that kind of support and then when they get there they figure out they don't get that support, so it will now be difficult for them to adjust. "**
>
> (IFY participant)

5.2 Students' experiences as the first year of their degree progressed

Most international interview participants and survey respondents faced challenges throughout their first year, which will be discussed in Section 4.3. However, the survey results show that overall 76.8% of all students enjoyed their course, 22.2% strongly agreed, 54.6% agreed, 19.4% neutral, 1.9% disagreed and 1.9% strongly disagreed. Interview participants often mentioned the following engaging aspects.

5.2.1 Working relationships with academic staff and peers

Participants often mentioned that developing good working relationships with academic staff and peers (particularly mentioned in Arts disciplines) was engaging and helped develop their sense of belonging and confidence. Aspects included:

- staff encouragement and friendliness
- flexible communication with academic staff including time to ask/answer questions and prompt email communication
- constructive feedback
- staff posting lecture material including slides and podcasts online
- collaborative peer support in and outside formal teaching

> **"In Hong Kong we care about the different level of student and teacher but here they are like friends so when you talk to your lecturers they are friendly to you, so you don't feel nervous and you can ask them anything and they will answer you."**
>
> (Arts participant)

5.2.2 Engaging learning and teaching

Aspects of engaging learning and teaching frequently described included:

- an entertaining teaching style in lectures/ seminars
- subject matter that students were passionately interested in
- interesting and varied learning and teaching resources (including e-learning)
- interactive and collaborative seminars and class discussions

- group work (although this was also challenging)
- practical, professional and real-life experiences

"I really like practical jobs, doing pitches and organising presentations together, but I still have some problems organising them because some of the other students are less engaged by doing these things. Sometimes it's very difficult to chase them, but it's a shame because I really like to do this; so I need to find a group that has the same goal."

(Business participant)

5.2.3 Developing a professional discipline related identity

In most disciplines, participants described how teamwork was part of the disciplinary and professional culture within their field. Hence, group work helped participants develop learner and professional identities. Many participants said that they found practical learning that related to real-life and professional experiences engaging.

"The good thing is that teachers make you feel Architecture is teamwork. You can't work as an architect without people to support you and share ideas. That's the good thing, I think, about my course. You always find people to help you and you learn from them and they learn from you."

(Arts participant)

5.3 Students' challenges

As mentioned earlier in this report, most interview participants including IFY and non-IFY students described varied ways in which they found starting a university degree challenging. Frequently described challenges in Semesters 1 and 2 included both academic and practical issues.

Supported by the survey results (see Table 2) academic challenges included:

- Managing time, coping with workload and meeting deadlines
- Adjusting to independent study
- More challenging level of work
- Stress caused by starting unfamiliar subjects
- Fas-paced lectures
- Less support from academic staff
- Lack of clarity about academic expectations
- Exams and written assignments
- Academic writing (particularly discipline-specific reports)

- Group work and group assignments when other members do not contribute equally
- Understanding discipline-specific terminology and language
- Presentations

Practical and social issues often described included:

- Managing finances
- Visa issues
- Difficulties in making friends
- Missing orientation and induction activities
- Inconvenient timetabling
- Adjusting to the university VLE/intranet
- Working part-time
- Feeling out of place/not feeling a sense of belonging to the university or course

5.3.1 Variation of students' challenges by semester

According to survey results and interview data challenges that international students faced varied from Semester 1 to Semester 2. In this context, the findings are supported by findings from earlier research, and when merging datasets from 2014 and 2016 (Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Jones et al., 2015). In general, the survey results show that a greater percentage of respondents found nearly all challenges difficult in Semester 1 in comparison to Semester 2. A higher percentage of non-IFY compared to IFY participants found English Language difficult in Semesters 1 and 2; and a higher percentage of non-IFY participants in comparison to IFY participants found exams and written coursework difficult in Semester 2. A greater percentage of non-IFY respondents compared to IFY also found group assignments and group work difficult in Semester 2. (Please see Table 2 on page 9). This suggests that IFY students may feel better prepared and more confident in these aspects than non-IFY students by Semester 2, which is also reflected by qualitative data.

5.3.2 Key challenges: workload, deadlines, exams, group work and written assignments

As reflected by the survey results, many interview participants (IFY and non-IFY) found varied aspects of assessment and feedback challenging (see Table 2). Exam related issues often mentioned included: writing under pressure, nerves and taking exams or tests online when students are not used to this.

Table 2:   Aspects students found difficult in semester 1 and 2 (in percentage) by attending an IFY

Found difficult	IFY		Non-IFY		All	
	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 1	Semester 2
Workload	38.8	44.9	40.7	44.1	39.8	44.4
Meeting deadlines	55.1	34.7	40.7	42.4	47.2	38.9
English language	28.6	16.3	33.9	25.4	31.5	21.3
Exams	38.8	24.4	23.7	35.6	30.6	30.6
Written coursework	38.8	34.7	40.7	42.4	39.8	38.9
Giving presentations	38.8	28.6	39.0	27.1	38.9	27.8
Group assignments	38.8	22.4	25.4	32.2	31.5	27.8
Group work	38.8	18.4	25.4	30.5	31.5	25.0
Understanding lectures	34.7	14.3	28.8	20.3	31.5	17.6
Seminars	30.6	10.2	22.0	20.3	25.9	15.7
Grades and feedback	30.6	20.4	28.8	22.0	29.6	21.3
Making friends	32.7	20.4	32.2	23.7	32.4	22.2
Family	26.5	16.3	22.0	23.7	24.1	20.4
Money	26.5	24.5	37.3	35.6	32.4	30.6
Accommodation	24.5	24.5	25.4	25.4	25.0	25.0
Travel	14.3	14.3	13.6	16.9	13.9	15.7
Understanding feedback	14.3	16.3	15.3	22.0	14.8	19.4
Understanding university rules	18.4	14.3	13.6	16.9	15.7	15.7
Communication with lecturers	28.6	28.6	20.3	25.4	24.1	26.9
Reading	26.5	20.4	23.7	25.4	25.0	23.1
n	49	49	59	59	108	108

"You cannot test student knowledge in one go, for example two hours or 120 minutes. I have in one semester learnt a lot of different things. How can I put everything I have been learning down in only one hour? It's frustrating because most of us when we do exams we get pressure on ourselves which is complicated, so I disagree with exams. We should find out different ways to assess us for example doing seminar or coursework, but exams as exams I disagree."
(IFY Engineering participant)

Interview participants often mentioned challenges in group-assignments relating to group members not contributing equally. Participants also often described issues relating to workload and deadlines for written assignments all coinciding. Several participants found discipline-specific reports that they had not experienced before challenging. Some non-IFY participants described challenges in written assignments relating to academic skills, grammar and competence in English.

"I find the literature reviews are probably the hardest. You have to get all your sources and referencing; it takes so much time because you have to do the year, author, the book and all that."
(Non-IFY Business participant)

Participants' experiences of feedback were inconsistent across modules and disciplines. While some lecturers provided very detailed and constructive written and/or spoken feedback, some only provided a mark and short comment, which was not constructive in directing students on how to progress further.

"We've had tasks to submit which were drawings. We had feedback but it's just a paper that is written good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory or fail. They only put a circle on the thing but they don't really tell us enough comments. They can say for example 'edit it', but they don't really tell us what really we have to do."
(IFY Arts participant)

5.4 Influences of the IFY on students' experiences in Semester 2

By Semester 2, many previous IFY participants had become aware of benefits of the IFY including: their increased social and academic confidence, competence in English and academic writing, practical subject skills,

knowledge of curriculum content, links between International Colleges and universities and advice on non-academic matters. The survey also shows that by Semester 2 (see Table 2) a smaller percentage of IFY students found the following aspects of university study challenging in comparison to a greater number of non-IFY students: meeting deadlines, English language, exams, written coursework, group assignments and group work, understanding lectures, seminars and grades and feedback.

5.4.1   Confidence
In relation to developing social confidence, IFY participants had established friendships that helped them feel a sense of belonging when starting degrees in Semester 1. Academically, by Semester 2 students described how the IFY provided solid building blocks of learning in relation to English language, subject knowledge and academic skills such as referencing and academic writing.

> **"I think maybe what I have gone through before, I think going to the International College that has helped me build up my confidence coming to the university"**
> (IFY participant)

5.4.2   Competence in English language and academic writing
The survey results show that on average IFY students felt more confident than non-IFY students in: writing an essay and preparing for exams (see Table 3). In addition, English is a key area, which a greater percentage of non-IFY students found challenging in comparison to IFY students in Semesters 1 and 2, and in Semester 2 in particular. This finding is also the same when merging data from the 2014 survey with the 2016 survey; and is reflected by IFY interview participants, who often described how developing and practising their skills in academic writing during the IFY was helpful during the first year of their degrees. Examples included how to structure an essay or report and academic skills including knowing how to use references and understanding plagiarism.

> **"I think because of being in the International College, they teach us how to write essays and reports; and I think that was really helpful for my course because I have to write a lot of reports; and now I know how to write the structure and everything; so I find that's been really helpful."**
> (IFY Business participant)

Table 3:   Confidence ratings (mean and standard deviation (SD)) by attending an IFY (1 being very confident, 2 confident, 3 neutral, 4 not confident, 5 not confident at all)

Confidence means		IFY	Non-IFY	All
Participating in group work	Mean	2.59	2.36	2.46
	SD	0.956	1.126	1.054
Arranging tutorials with a tutor	Mean	2.57	2.49	2.53
	SD	1.080	0.972	1.018
Taking notes	Mean	2.18	1.98	2.07
	SD	0.782	0.900	0.851
Asking questions for explanation	Mean	2.78	2.53	2.64
	SD	0.963	1.165	1.080
Writing an essay	Mean	2.57	2.80	2.69
	SD	1.041	1.186	1.123
Oral presentations	Mean	2.86	2.80	2.82
	SD	1.099	1.079	1.084
Dealing with stress	Mean	2.82	2.66	2.73
	SD	1.167	0.921	1.038
Preparing for exams	Mean	2.59	2.81	2.71
	SD	0.998	0.973	0.986
Reading academic texts	Mean	2.59	2.56	2.57
	SD	0.911	0.970	0.939
Organising your time	Mean	2.73	2.78	2.76
	SD	1.186	1.001	1.084
n		49	59	108

5.4.3 Practical subject skills

Several interview participants described gaining subject-specific practical skills during the IFY as helpful, such as giving presentations, technical drawing or lab work.

> **"There's some really basic skills that I learnt from the Foundation course...how to do technical drawing and how to use the tools because there's so many machines in different aspects like drilling machines that others don't know about but because I took the Foundation course I know about them."**
>
> (IFY Arts participant)

5.4.4 Curriculum content

Most previous IFY participants described how they had benefited from having learnt the same basic curriculum content during the IFY that they were currently studying during their degrees. They perceived this to contribute to their confidence and success.

> **"It opened me up to the international way of business that is in the subject and it has been a good pathway for me going into the university. It was very helpful because having gone to the International College I knew some of what to expect. Even now I'm still not comfortable, but I'm happy because having gone through the International College, I know a lot compared to other people who never went to the International College."**
>
> (IFY Business participant)

5.4.5 Links between the International College and the university

A few participants described how the International College and the university processes appeared to be linked; and that the degree seemed like a continuation of the IFY.

> **"Coming from the college has made the transition much smoother because the International College and the university are linked together, we use the same facilities, the lecturers even if they're into the same they know quite a lot about the university and I felt like it was just a continuation."**
>
> (IFY Business participant)

5.5 Participants' suggestions for enhancement of pedagogic and support practices during the IFY and at university

Interview participants' suggestions for enhancement included:

– **At the University:**
- A calendar including key dates for the whole year provided at induction
- Available support and how to access this explained at induction
- Subject-specific training in writing and practical skills
- Slowing down the pace of teaching
- Podcasting and lecture slides available online
- More interactive seminars that clearly follow on from lectures
- Greater support in encouraging students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to integrate

– **At the International College/prior to university**:
- A clearer explanation regarding degree workload, curriculum and academic expectations before starting university
- Additional specific subject training related to the degree, eg in practical skills and reports
- Increased preparation for becoming an independent learner
- More strongly communicated advice on applying for a visa

5.6 An overview of variations according to different groups

It was not possible to identify any statistically significant differences between pre and post-92 university survey respondents' experiences. However, interview participants across three different (pre and post-1992) universities, described similar experiences including helpful factors and challenges, and therefore we may conclude that international students' experiences and challenges are similar in different types of UK universities. However, there were significant differences in survey responses, and variations in interview participants' experiences, when comparing broad disciplinary fields. Qualitative data analysis revealed that Arts interview participants expressed a greater sense of belonging and supportive working relationships with staff and students than in other disciplines. Statistical analysis of survey data found that Science respondents were more likely to report high stress levels than respondents from other subject areas and this result was statistically

Table 4: Stress level by subject area (percentages)

Stress level	Arts and Design		Business		Engineering, etc.		Science		All	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
High	35.3	12	20.0	6	13.6	3	50.0	11	29.6	32
Medium	47.1	16	70.0	21	77.3	17	50.0	11	60.2	65
Low	17.6	6	10.0	3	9.1	2	0	0	10.2	11
n	100	34	100	30	100	22	100	22	100	108

Table 5: Percentage of how worried students were of not passing their first year of the degree course by subject area

Worry level	Arts and Design		Business		Engineering, etc.		Science	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Very worried	8.8	3	20.0	6	4.5	1	45.5	10
Fairly worried	44.1	15	40.0	12	63.9	14	27.3	6
Not at all worried	47.1	16	40.0	12	31.8	7	27.3	6
Total	100	34	100	30	100	22	100	22

significant (x^2=13.314, df=6, p=.038) (see Table 4). Moreover, Science respondents were statistically more likely to be very worried about not passing the first year than students from other subject areas (x^2=17.824, df=6, p=.007) (see Table 5). In addition, Business students were statistically more likely to feel confident in academic writing and that their written English was good enough to pass their degree than in other subjects.

Data analysis revealed differences between previous IFY and non-IFY students' experiences. Academically, most IFY interview participants found that the IFY was very helpful as the first year of the degree progressed, and this finding is supported by the survey results, particularly in relation to English skills and confidence in academic writing. Except for English language, previous IFY participants experienced similar academic challenges to other international students when starting their degrees, but struggled particularly in relation to adjusting to independent study, larger class sizes and decreased communication with academic staff, as described earlier in this report. However, the research shows that attending the IFY is very helpful for students in relation to developing a sense of belonging and making friends in Semester 1. According to earlier studies, developing belonging is a very important factor in contributing to student engagement, confidence and success (Wenger, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Masika and Jones, 2016).

6   Conclusion

This research shows that a combination of university and International College teaching, learning and support practices positively influence international students' sense of belonging, identity development, independence, confidence and engagement (Briggs et al., 2012). As supported by earlier research (Jones et al., 2015), this study also demonstrates that students' attendance of an IFY at International Colleges helps to prepare them for university in varied ways during the first and second semesters. When starting degrees and in early transition, the IFY is most helpful in preparing international students in relation to: English skills, a sense of social confidence and belonging. However, this is not always the case and varies across disciplines and according to individual student experiences.

As the first year progresses, the IFY provides international students with enhanced confidence related to: English language and academic writing, curriculum knowledge, subject specific practical skills, and similar processes linking the College and university.

Challenges faced by all students including UK and international students when starting HE include the need to successfully integrate with one another. For some, but not all, international students, there is also a need to adjust to new experiences of UK HE learning, to become independent learners, and to reach the required HE level in discipline-specific academic writing.

Additional academic challenges faced by international students, relate to workload, deadlines, exams and assignments. Again, international students are not alone in these challenges, as UK students also face them (HEA, 2008; Jones et al., 2015)

For all students developing a sense of belonging when they start university may be considered crucially important in order to counteract the loss of 'cultural capital' and 'institutional habitus' that they have experienced in moving from college to a new UK HE environment. For international students this challenging experience of feeling like a "fish out of water" may be exacerbated (Thomas, 2002, p431: Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Our research indicates that partner colleges and universities share a joint responsibility to develop existing good practice to help support international student belonging, engagement and success during their first year at university by enhancing:

- Connections between universities and pathway colleges at the transition stage, such as: help with visas; pathway colleges involved with university orientation week; universities involved with pathway college results day activities
- Development of international and UK student integration
- Preparation to help students to become independent learners and to manage time and workload, eg through a gradual lessening of support throughout the IFY
- Subject-specific academic writing and skills support
- Communication and working relationships (including constructive feedback) between academic staff and students in some disciplines/modules at university
- Online resources, such as podcast lectures, to support flexible independent study

The need to prioritise internationalisation and enhance the quality of international students' experiences in UK universities is now timely and crucial (Thorne, 2015). The findings of this study can help to inform the future development of HE and international college policies and practices in working with international students. Within this context, the integration of international and British students in UK HE may be a new focus for future research.

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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