Technological University Dublin

ARROW@TU Dublin

2019

Mind the Gap: Integration of International Students

Andrew Knox
Technological University Dublin, andrew.knox@tudublin.ie

Basil Lim
Technological University Dublin, basil.lim@tudublin.ie

Amr Mahfouz
Technological University Dublin, amr.mahfouz@tudublin.ie

Maeve O'Connell
Technological University Dublin, maeve.oconnell@tudublin.ie

Matthew Sheehan
Technological University Dublin, matthew.sheehan@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ltcpgdprp

Part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

Recommended Citation

Mind the Gap: Integration of International Students

Andrew Knox, Basil Lim, Amr Mahfouz, Maeve O'Connell, Matthew Sheehan

TU Dublin (www.tudublin.ie)

Introduction

The international mobilisation of tertiary students is increasing from 0.8 million in 1975 to 3.5 million worldwide by 2016 (OECD, 2018). This increasingly fluid student migration, supported with various European initiatives, the Erasmus exchange program (since 1987) and the Bologna Declaration (since 1999), have influenced the profile of students within the Irish higher education system. By 2016, international students comprised 5.1% of total tertiary students in Ireland (OECD, 2018).

According to Irish and UK research, lecturers have an important role in facilitating integration (British Council, 2014; Irish Council for International Students, 2017). However, for most faculty, the term internationalisation of the curriculum was unfamiliar (Clarke, Hui Yang & Harmon, 2018) and faculty also had mixed views on a need to explicitly address cultural and language issues in their learning outcomes or assessment tasks. Although some faculty viewed intercultural training as important most had not received this kind of support (Clarke et al., 2018). This background context prompted our decision to focus our project on the integration challenges international students face, and what best-practice recommendations are available to assist lecturers in aiding integration.

The Irish Context

By 2018, over 10.5% of all enrolments in Irish third-level colleges are international students (Higher Education Authority, 2018). Further growth will be driven by government policy and the consequences of Brexit. Government policy is to develop a high quality international education system attracting talent from around the world (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Post-Brexit, Ireland becomes the only English-speaking country in the EU, increasing its attractiveness for international students. In this context, it is critical that all actors in the higher education setting, students, faculty, and institution, construct a joint, comprehensive and ongoing integration plan for international students (Young, 2014). Specifically Irish issues also arise, such as a difference between degree levels or assessment grading practices, for example, the National Framework Qualifications differs from the European Qualifications Framework in terms of level numbers and what is accepted at each stage (Irish National Framework of Qualifications, 2018).

In 2009 a Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions included the delivery of education to International students, committing to a consistent quality standard in interactions with international students (Irish Higher Education Quality Network, 2009). The importance of a global perspective within the Irish education system is further evidenced by the Irish Education Department's international education strategy for Ireland 2016-2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). These initiatives steer internationalisation policy

and improve national policy coordination, but do little to enlighten the micro-scale lecturer-domestic student-international student interactions and the challenges of integration.

Distinction between Student-Led, Faculty-Led and Institution-Led Integration

The international third level institute of today recognises the importance of adopting a holistic approach to international student integration. In addition, students unions and associations can play a key role in the integration process particularly in the students first year (Coles & Swami, 2012). In the classroom, strategies that favour exchange and strategies that foster interactions in a non-academic setting are important (Kudo, Volet, & Whitsed, 2017). Faculty must be prepared to create inclusive environments when selecting texts, fomenting participation and facilitating learning to help integration (Colmenero & Pantoja Vallejo, 2016; Ryan, 2011). Thus there is a role for faculty in supporting and integrating international students.

Factors & Challenges Impacting Integration

It is consistently reported that international students struggle to adapt in the host countries (O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010). Various barriers to integration for the international students in the classroom have been identified including language barrier, sociocultural barriers, academic performance, and pedagogic variation (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis 2008; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). These factors could be interconnected, or some students may just experience challenges on some of them. Lecturers can aid international students in converting their pre-existing academic capital into a form that is more adaptive for their new social field.

Language Barrier

Language difficulty is one of the biggest concerns of the international student (Ng, 2006). Students with different native language may feel discomfort in participating in group discussions, avoiding challenging ideas, or misunderstand task allocation (Crose, 2011). Language differences can also result in a power differential between the domestic and international with the domestic than perceived as the "expert" (Harrison & Peacock, 2009). The language barrier can also impact the student's behaviour in the classroom. For instance, where the international and the domestic students locate in the learning space, it is found that international students frequently cluster at the front, voluntarily creating a physical barrier between the two groups exacerbating differences from the domestic student and limiting spontaneous interactions between the groups (Harrison & Peacock, 2009).

On the level of the academic performance, Lecturers have generally reported language difficulties including grammar, vocabulary, writing style, inappropriate register in a formal text, and a highly informal tone for e-mails. Some students have problems understanding colloquial usage in lectures and seminars, potentially hinting at some distance of international students to sociocultural norms in everyday communication practices (Sheridan, 2011). Through the use of varying teaching and assessment methods, faculty members can assist international students in acclimatising to their new cultural environment while also assisting domestic students in adapting to new cultures being introduced into the classroom.

Sociocultural Barrier

Social support is essential for international students to adapt to the new social, cultural and educational environment. Researchers found that sharing the accommodation with domestic students and participating in social and sportive activities afford opportunities of exchanging the experience of studying abroad and overcoming adjustment difficulties (O'Reilly et al., 2010). Moreover, social support alleviates college related stress and the level of loneliness (Çeçen, 2007).

The socio-cultural barrier also impacts the domestic students behaviours negatively impacting communications described by one researcher as `passive xenophobia' (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). This can manifest in a reluctance to include international students in group work, which by its nature is complex, as it adds an additional layer of complexity, or in group conflict arising from unwillingness to make additional effort, rather than language or cultural issues per se. In addition, the domestic students may hold the view that international work-groups achieve lower academic results. Communication paralysis can also arise from a fear of saying the wrong thing that may offend, impacting not just the domestic students but also academic staff who are not experienced with multiple cultures or trained to manage the difficulties that may arise. Numerous issues with group work were identified throughout the literature, however, different approaches to group work and understanding what makes a good group are culturally determined. International work-groups require additional support, however, academic staff are untrained, under-supported and under-resourced to undertake this significant additional investment required to make international work-groups effective learning units (Harrison & Peacock, 2009).

Academic Performance

Academic integration is defined as the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life (Tinto, 1975). The academic performance of international students is significantly affected by the academic, social, personal & emotional adjustments and attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1999). The level of social integration plays a vital role in successful academic performance for the international student through the perceptions of faculty, social support, social life, ethnic background, and financial support (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2012). Academic and social integration are linked and interconnected, however, the factors of academic and social integration can have contradicted effects on the study performance of the international students. For example, students that are more involved in social activities may devote less time on the academic activities (Rienties et al., 2012), but lower social integration may be compensated for with more academic interest and focus (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Mannan, 2007).

Cultural contexts and language barriers can lead to incorrect interpretations of directions and expected outcomes in a globalized classroom. There can be differences in prior experiences of assessment methods assessment method. For example, a student who is familiar with assessments that emphasis testing, can find evaluation based upon thought process, creativity, and interactions with their fellow classmates and lecturer highly stressful (Crose, 2011). Assessments dependant on essay and oral presentations, common in Irish third level and DIT, highlights an expectation of literacy in these forms in order to succeed, but may not have been a priority in the international students prior education (Sheridan, 2011). Lecturers need to be explicit on what is expected of a particular assessment method, and provide

examples of completed assessments being wary of host country's hidden assumptions (Sheridan, 2011). Lecturers could also use a variety of assessment, possibly even give a choice in assessment type, to facilitate demonstration of mastery of the topics and skills (Sheridan, 2011). Grading rubrics can be helpful as well as providing a platform for questioning. Evaluating student work based upon the processes used rather than the actual outcome or product is also a useful approach (Sheridan, 2011) and authentic assessments are beneficial in the culturally diverse classroom (Leask, 2009).

Difference in education systems – the Pedagogic variation

International students arrive with their own particular cultural capital gained and ingrained over time, and then engage with their new higher level institution with its own practices and expectations with a potential for a mismatch between the two pedagogical approaches (Sheridan, 2011). Learning to navigate a new academic context is like learning to play a game that has new rules and strategies and lecturers can help international students by being as explicit as possible about the rules of the game (Carroll & Ryan, 2007).

Expectations of the educational systems can differ across cultures, for instance, where academic success is measured on standardised tests, leading to high test scores influencing job selection, salaries, social status, and overall quality of life. Thus a carefully review of teaching practices and assessment criteria is required to avoid unfairly disadvantaging one group of students. This focus on the whole student group also ensures that efforts to integrate do not risk an excessive focus on a few students forcing them to represent an entire cultural group.

Pedagogy needs to be adjusted in order to provide an academically rewarding experience for both international and domestic students while fostering intercultural understanding and relationships. An institutional stance which considers diversity should be evident in course content and teaching methods as any student arrives into a third level institution (Sheridan, 2011). This includes moving away from "euro-centric" or western source material to encourage inclusive learning for the benefit of all students. The introduction of new pedagogies in a new education environment can be a challenge for all students, however, with all of the adjustment required of international students, new methods can impact their confidence accentuated by the reluctance of international students to ask for clarification or guidance when confronted with these new pedagogies (Crose, 2011).

However, just placing aspects of the curriculum in an international context could be tokenism by staff and not helpful or relevant (Hyland, Trahar, Anderson, & Dickens, 2008). However, even where there are universal skills, such as maths or engineering, there can often be a domestic focus, for example instructing to national standards, leading to international students questioning the usefulness of their learning back home. Instead, institutions and lecturers can highlight where the standard is based on best international practice, or the importance of achieving the standard to demonstrate a high level of competence in the chosen professional arena. Finally, a balance must be achieved between a focus on the international and the domestic students, as domestic students have criticised the disproportionate time spent supporting international students, in for example, explaining in

detail for international students a concept familiar to domestic students or an inability of the domestic student to secure equivalent one-to-one support (Harrison & Peacock, 2009).

Artefact - Mind the gap: International Integration Index

This application is designed as a tool to help lecturers address the issues faced by international students in an academic environment. Through the use of 13 simple and easy to complete exercises, to be implemented over the course of an academic semester, the III leverages the principles of universal design to encourage desegregation and integration. Each exercise is specifically aimed at encouraging integration in a way that benefits all students, domestic and international. Each exercise is designed to fit into as many modules as possible and designed to be easy to add to lesson plans. Additionally, randomly selected tips relevant to international empathy are added below each lesson plan. The link to the App is listed https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.PGDip2018Basil.III and a screenshot of the App in included in Figure 1 below with further screenshots captured in Appendix A.
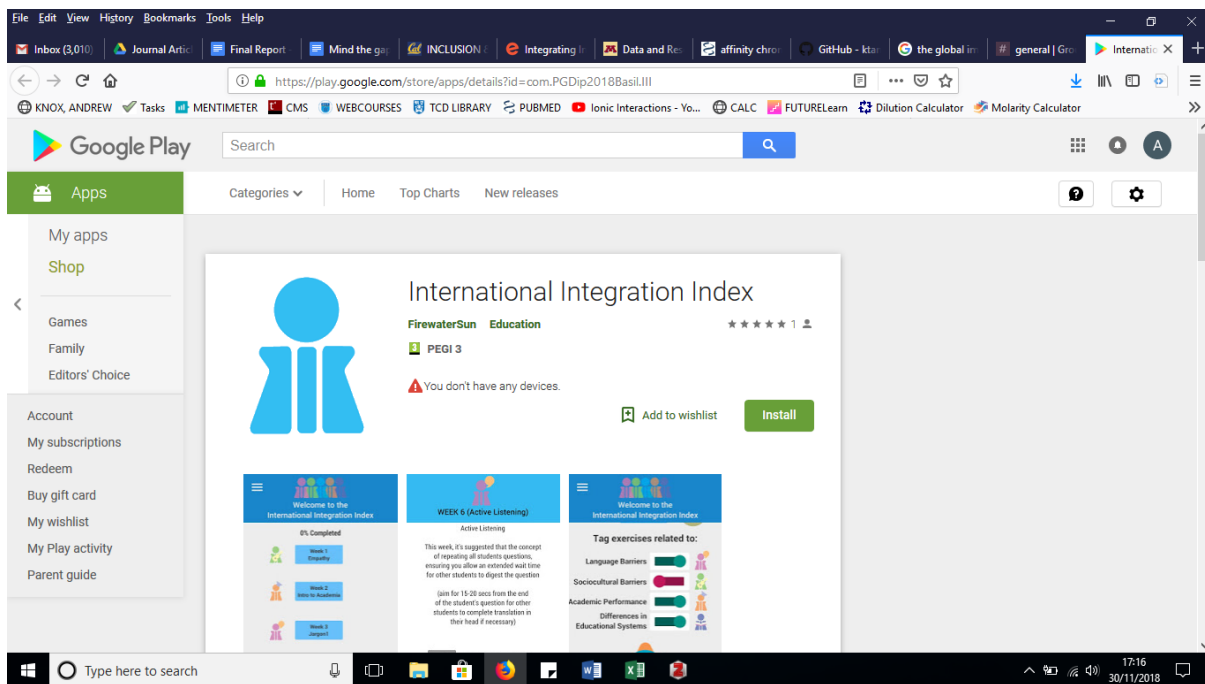

*Figure 1: Screenshot of the **International Integration Index App** now live in the Google Play Store.*

Conclusions

Four themes were identified within the literature on the barriers to integration of international students with lecturers, domestic students, and international students all benefiting where these barriers are minimised. A clear need for a lecturer toolkit to provide detailed, authentic, practical, guidance gleaned from published evidence to support faculty in facilitating integration of international students was identified. This informed our work developing a solution-oriented app aimed at faculty. Learnings from this project were implemented in the group's members' practice.

Each group member intends to promote the App to their respective schools and to engage the International Student Office at DIT for further realisation of the potential of the project. Future work in developing our app includes functionality for communication between the community of teachers to share ideas, successes, and challenges. The App usage statistics can identify most and least popular activities to further refine the toolkit. As new research is published in this field the App allows us to dynamically update and extend the content.
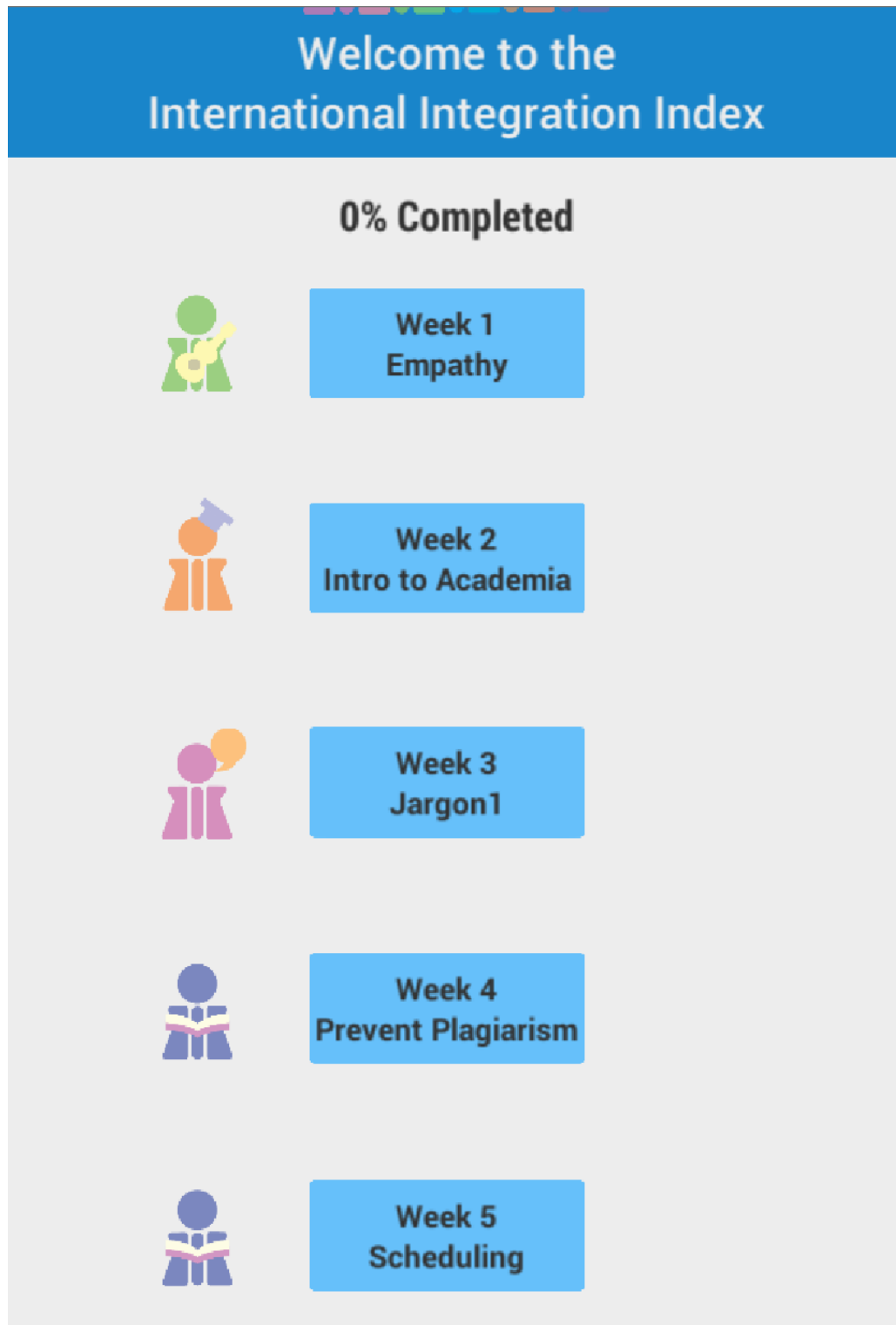
References

Baker, R.W., & Siryk, B. (1999). *SACQ: Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire: Manual*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.

British Council (2014). *Integration of International Students, A UK perspective.* London, England: British Council.

Carroll, J., & Ryan, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Teaching international students: Improving learning for all*. London, UK. Routledge.

Çeçen, A.R. (2007). Humor Styles in Predicting Loneliness among Turkish University Students. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal, 35*(6), 835–844.

Clarke, M., Hui Yang, L., & Harmon, D. (2018). *The Internationalisation of Irish Higher Education*. Dublin, Ireland: The Higher Education Authority.

Coles, R., & Swami, V. (2012). The sociocultural adjustment trajectory of international university students and the role of university structures: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *11*(1), 87–100.

Colmenero, M., & Pantoja Vallejo, A. (2016). Las competencias docentes del profesorado universitario europeo en función del alumnado Erasmus, *Opcion, 32*, 480-504.

Crose, B. (2011). Internationalization of the Higher Education Classroom: Strategies to Facilitate Intercultural Learning and Academic Success*. International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *23*(3), 388–395.

Department of Education and Skills (2016). *Irish Educated Globally Connected, An International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020.* Dublin, Ireland: Department of Education and Skills.

Fritz, M.V., Chin, D., & DeMarinis, V. (2008). Stressors, Anxiety, Acculturation and Adjustment among International and North American Students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 32*(3), 244–259.

Harrison, N., & Peacock, N. (2009). Interactions in the international classroom. In Jones, E. (Eds) *Internationalisation and the student voice: Higher education perspectives*. London & New York: Taylor & Francis.

Harrison, N., & Peacock N. (2010). Cultural Distance, Mindfulness and Passive Xenophobia : Using Integrated Threat Theory to Explore Home Higher Education Students' Perspectives on 'Internationalisation at Home'. *British Educational Research Journal, 36*(6), 877–902.

Higher Education Authority (2018). *HEA Key Facts and Figures 2016-17*. Dublin, Ireland: Higher Education Authority.

Hyland, F., Trahar, S., Anderson, J., & Dickens, A. (2008). *A Changing World: the internationalisation experiences of staff and students (home and international) in UK higher education.* Bristol, England: Higher Education Academy, Education Subject Centre and Subject Centre for Languages.

Irish Council for International Students (2017). *International Student Forum Report*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Council for International Students.

Irish Higher Education Quality Network (2009). *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions.* Dublin: Irish Higher Education Quality Network.

Kudo, K., Volet, S., & Whitsed, C. (2017). Intercultural relationship development at university: A systematic literature review from an ecological and person-in-context perspective. *Educational Research Review*, *20*, 99–116.

Leask, B. (2009). Using formal and informal curricula to improve interactions between home and international students. *Journal of studies in international education*, *13*(2), 205-221.

Mannan, A.M. (2007). Student Attrition and Academic and Social Integration: Application of Tinto's Model at the University of Papua New Guinea. *Higher Education, 53*(2), 147–165.

Ng, K.M. (2006). Counselor Educators' Perceptions of and Experiences with International Students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 28*(1), 1–19.

O'Reilly, A., Ryan, D., & Hickey, T. (2010). The Psychological Well-Being and Sociocultural Adaptation of Short-Term International Students in Ireland. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(5), 584–598.

OECD (2018), *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*. Paris, France: OECD iLibrary Publishing. Retrieved from: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2018_eag-2018-en

Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K.M. (2007). Barriers to Adjustment: Needs of International Students within a Semi-Urban Campus Community. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 34*(1), 28.

Rienties, B., Beausaert, S., Grohnert, T., Niemantsverdriet, S., & Kommers, P. (2012). Understanding Academic Performance of International Students: The Role of Ethnicity, Academic and Social Integration. *Higher

Education, 63(6), 685–700.

Ryan, D.J. (2011, May 18). Academic shock: Thoughts on teaching international students. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/may/18/teaching-international-students

Sheridan, V. (2011). A holistic approach to international students, institutional habitus and academic literacies in an Irish third level institution. *Higher Education*, *62*(2), 129–140.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89–125.

Young, N.E. (2014). Seeking Best Practice for Integrating International and Domestic Students. *International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), a Unit of the Global Programs and Strategy Alliance at the University of Minnesota*. Retrieved from https://global.umn.edu/icc/documents/14_integration_best_practices_overall.pdf

Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2005). Integration and adaptation: Approaches to the student retention and achievement puzzle. *Active Learning in higher education*, *6*(1), 46-59.

Screenshots from the App

Welcome to the
International Integration Index

Week 11
Online Talk

Week 12
Jargon 2

Week 13
Grading

Tag exercises related to:

Language Barriers

Sociocultural Barriers

Academic Performance

Differences in
Educational Systems

WEEK 3 (Discipline-specific jargon)

Discipline-specific jargon

Create a word-cloud or list of
jargon, acronyms, nicknames, important terms
that are specific to the discipline you are teaching.
e.g. using https://www.wordclouds.com/

This will help **general comprehension**,
and remove the possibility of false friends

✓   Exercise Completed!

Back to Main Menu

Tip of the Week
Be sure to make a point of reinforcing in-class
participation, regardless of question or comprehension
level. Remember not to display impatience with

Welcome to the
International Integration Index

100% Completed

	Week 1	
	Week 1 **Empathy**	✓
	Week 2 **Intro to Academia**	✓
	Week 3 **Jargon1**	✓
	Week 4 **Prevent Plagiarism**	✓
	Week 5 **Scheduling**	✓
	Week 6	✓