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International postgraduate taught students' perspectives on resources to support learning transitions: A preliminary case study

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Abstract

The importance of universities understanding the induction needs of international students to enable them to succeed is well documented in literature. This article focuses on a small-scale, exploratory study into an Induction Resource developed for international students to support them with the academic aspects of transition into Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes. The article gives some insights into the Induction Resource and discusses findings and analysis under three key themes: 'A matter of timing and clarity', 'Great expectations – active and engaged learning', and 'Beyond classroom walls'. The article concludes with some recommendations for next steps in supporting the academic transitions of international PGT students that may be of interest to any higher education institution with international students on a PGT programme.

Keywords

international students, academic transitions, induction, higher education

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Introduction

The importance of universities understanding the induction needs of international students to enable them to succeed, is well documented in literature (e.g. Coates & Dickinson, 2012). The aim of this small-scale preliminary case study was to examine students' perceptions of a resource that was designed to help postgraduate students' transition to learning, along with other resources that enable them to fulfil academic expectations at the Higher Education Institution (HEI).

The resource was introduced in response to concerns raised by international students and university staff about challenges faced by international students undertaking academic transition into postgraduate taught (PGT) courses. The broad aim of the resource was to equip students with skills and knowledge needed for their learning journey. It was designed to help international PGT students get ready to start their studies and transition to a new learning and teaching environment at a HEI without communication of deficit model or otherness messages. Instead, the resource was designed to recognise and build on their skills and previous learning experiences.

A review of the current literature in the space of international student transitions will be presented, followed by a discussion of the methodology employed in the study. Subsequently the 'findings, analysis and discussion' will be presented under the following themes: 'A matter of timing and clarity', 'Great expectations – active and engaged learning', and 'Beyond Classroom walls'.

Large numbers of international students are enrolled on PGT programmes in the United Kingdom (UK) HEIs. It has been widely documented that many international students experience "pedagogical shock" when studying in the UK, resulting from differences in their previous learning experiences and home culture contexts (Bishop et al., 2022, p. 8). With increasing numbers of international students, and a recognition of the different expectations they face in their academic journey, an Induction Resource was developed. This was founded on the notion that useful resources can facilitate positive learning journeys for students (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018).

Literature review

Although there is extensive research into international students' generic learning experiences in university, specific research on the transition of international students into taught masters' programmes is sparse (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2016). Across all degree programmes, international students' academic adaptation has received much less scholarly attention in comparison to their socio-cultural adaptation (Cao et al., 2016; Cena et al., 2021). Individual institutions should deepen their understanding of the needs of international students in this regard, to ensure these are met (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). What follows is a review of associated literature, such as research conducted by Cao et al. (2021) on international students' learning experiences in western educational contexts, including cultural differences that influence students' participation within the classroom. It considers international students' engagement within groupwork activities (Seithers et al., 2021) and classroom participation (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In addition, the importance of creating opportunities for tutor-student engagement, as well as student-student engagement, is noted.

The bridge between undergraduate and postgraduate study

International students are a diverse group and "are influenced by personal, familial, institutional, and national milieus, and these milieus shape students' academic, pastoral, and social experiences" (Heng, 2019, p. 608). For example, there are key differences for students whose undergraduate study took place in individualist versus collectivist cultures. For example, "Chinese students brought up in collectivist cultures are usually compliant, remain quiet in class, obey the teachers, and withhold expressing their thoughts or asking questions until invited to do so by teachers" (Cao et al., 2021, p. 243). Matheson and Sutcliffe (2016) warn, this should not lead to assumptions about the homogeneity of international students from the same home country. Soontiens et al. (2016) criticise approaches to the academic transitions of international students that situates domestic students as stronger. There are cases where there is a subtle tone of non-western students as "other" (Dippold, 2015, p. 78) and provision of extra resources can imply "deficit" or "otherness" (Turner & Robson, 2008). The support needed to facilitate a smooth transition to postgraduate study should not reinforce these ideas. The University of Cambridge developed a resource to support the transition of a diverse group of master's students, acknowledging them as a heterogenous group. The resource is founded on the belief in the importance of "learning before arriving" (Murphy & Tilley, 2019, p. 271). Like the subject of this article, the University of Cambridge resource takes the form of an online platform, with no facility to enable contact with future peers. Creating opportunities for students to have contact with peers, and teaching staff, sooner than later could have a positive impact on student transitions. Bownes et al. (2017, p. 3) found that "better communication with lecturers and peers was important to the success and satisfaction of students, particularly after beginning PGT study".

Mearman and Payne (2023) concur, suggesting that meaningful contact with students prior to their arrival at university eases students' transition to study. Therefore, informal pre-induction sessions, even online, would be useful to start to build relationships among students and with teaching staff. The importance of induction in establishing and understanding the educational backgrounds, learning approaches and expectations of diverse student cohorts has been accepted for some time (Billing, 1997). Enabling teaching staff to gain insights into their student cohort, in advance, could help them to tailor their teaching to ensure a positive student experience. Diagnostic assessment, commonly conducted when students have already joined an institution, might be better placed as a pre-induction activity. Diagnostic assessment has multiple purposes, but a broad aim is to enable students to ascertain areas of strength and learning needs (Kong & Pan, 2023). Lin et al. (2013) suggest that the timing of the feedback is important, to enable learners to act on feedback. It is possible to conclude, diagnostic feedback for new students would be more useful if it was available soon after they start. This would provide students with a clear idea on what to focus, before their first assessments are due for submission.

Effort to enhance the overall learning journey is important; student transition should not be the only focus. Many argue for induction to be integrated with the taught programme over an extended period and not just one week prior to the start of students' learning journey at a new institution (Gannon-Leary & Smailes, 2004; and Ladd & Ruby, 1999) According to Turner and Robson (2008), effective induction needs to continue for several months after arrival. This is because students are often overwhelmed by physical and socio-cultural changes, which means it may be several weeks before students can tackle the values, norms, and learning expectations of the new institution. Chen et al. (2011)

conducted research on students' experiences of online learning and found, "information overload has been identified as a significant barrier to effective learning" (as cited in Conrad et al., 2022, pp. 538-539). In addition, for students arriving late, this increases the negative effects on their ability to access and engage with induction material (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi (2018) highlight a warning given by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to HEIs, that induction should not be stand alone at the start of the year but should be longer term. In an ideal world, guidance on academic expectations, that is often highlighted only in induction, would be embedded into degree content (Turner & Robson, 2008). Information that is clear, easy to access, and integrated throughout the student journey would be extremely beneficial.

Student integration

In terms of international students' integration, most literature focuses on Chinese students' acculturalisation to anglophone universities. This reflects that they are the largest single population of international students within UK HE (Cena et al., 2021). Students from China have been singled out as those who find the academic transition to western learning approaches most challenging. However, there is a lack of recognition of prior educational achievements and experiences. Induction Resources and programmes that fail to do so can lead to detrimental effects on student's self-concept (Turner & Robson 2008). According to Dippold (2015), international students often perceive there to be a lack of recognition of their skills and previous experience by their new institution. When it comes to tackling competency challenges such as language barriers, academic writing and self-regulation, studies found that some Chinese students take a problem-focused approach to coping by seeking an answer to a question, for example. However, when learning approach challenges were encountered, such as class participation and critical thinking, Chinese students typically coped through forbearance (just accepting it) rather than through being problem focused (Cao et al., 2021; Dippold, 2015). Sun and Richardson's (2012) study, involving 207 postgraduate students from mainland China, found that contextual factors influence the participants' approach to study. There was not one approach adopted by the students who took part in the study. Sun and Richardson urge educators to avoid stereotypical views of students from China.

Adapting from their previous contexts, living, and studying in a different environment requires students to immerse themselves in new ways of being. This can be helped through the provision of social and cultural activities, which can help to build relationships (Hernández, 2021). This emphasises the need to provide meaningful, and regular, opportunities for international students to build connections with peers. There is a correlation between peer connections and integration (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, as cited in Merola et al., 2019, p. 537). Of note, meaningful connections have been linked to academic success (Pruitt, 1978, as cited in Merola et al., 2019). Montgomery (2009) refers to a discourse in which international students are negatively perceived as being insular or unwilling to mix with peers. For example, Ge et al. (2019) found that students from China felt stigmatised, subject to perceptions that their language skills were not adequate to meet the requirements of study because of their reluctance to speak out in class. Cao et al. (2021, p. 243) note, "in multicultural academic contexts, these culture-related classroom behaviors may be misinterpreted as withdrawn or uninterested". It seems relevant, though, to note findings from Cao et al.'s (2016, p. 15) earlier study, "that language constraints and culture difference play a key role among all the acculturative stressors experienced by Chinese students in the EU". Rather than labelling students as

unwilling participants, a deeper understanding is needed of the stressors that international students face when they are not studying in their first language, as well as understanding the diverse learning cultures from which students come (Tan, 2010). As Coates and Dickinson (2012, p. 295) note, "if HE institutions can better understand their students' learning backgrounds, they will be more able to develop effective learning and teaching strategies to facilitate international students realising their potential". The pressure is more significant for international students undertaking a one-year programme, who have significantly less time to acculturate, therefore opportunities to build social and academic connections are vital.

Groupwork

Groupwork is a key feature of active learning within HE and aims to enable students to develop collaborative skills that will be useful in their professional lives. Differences in prior educational cultures may impact students' experience of, and participation in, active learning through groupwork. Seithers et al. (2021) found that domestic students in an anglophone university were in a stronger position to understand the university's expectations and tended to take charge in Groupwork. However, it is worth noting that Walker (2001) conducted an action research project with over one hundred students from a British university about their experience of Groupwork and found examples of negative prior experiences of Groupwork in the sample. Caution should be taken in assuming domestic postgraduate students will automatically embrace the Groupwork experience. Dippold (2015) suggested that international students often have negative views about Groupwork. For students who participated in more teacher-led undergraduate studies, they face the additional pressures of learning how to work in a group, assimilating content, in addition to learning how to take a critical approach. What should be an enriching experience that enables students to develop skills for future could end up as anxiety-inducing.

Volet and Mansfield (2006, p. 349) found that "students linked negative experiences to difficulties with group management, poor communication and unequal distribution of work, and conflicting work ethics, attitudes, and goals". They also found that teacher-established group contracts resulted in less investment by some group members. Therefore student-established group contracts may be more meaningful. Reflecting Volet and Mansfield's point, that "students desired more teacher involvement to support group processes" (p. 348), teachers can support students to establish a group contract. Teachers should encourage students to share goals, ways of working and ways of communicating. A clear articulation of how problems will be addressed should also be an essential part of the group contract. This reflects the study by Alavi and McCormick (2008), who suggest, when levels of interdependence are high within groups, the group experience is more positive.

Cognisant of the earlier point, that international students' prior learning experiences are varied, Li et al. (2014, pp. 227-228) note, "within the last decade, groupwork has been introduced and increasingly employed as a teaching strategy in tertiary education in Mainland China. Two influential factors have promoted this trend: the change in educational policies in China and the influences of western universities setting up campuses within China", although they accept that teacher-initiated groupwork in the form of assessments is still rare. This means that there still is the need to help students to navigate groupwork to ensure that it is a fulfilling experience for all involved. This is

particularly relevant when considering that active learning, of which Groupwork is a part, is an ever-increasing feature of education at the HEI.

Active learning

Ribeiro-Silva et al. (2022, p. 9) found, "the use of active learning methodologies (in and out of class) in higher education positively impacts students' well-being, particularly, in their academic accomplishment, physical, emotional, and social lives, and to equip them with multi-competencies for their professional future". Aston's (2023) study found that international students benefited from participation in active learning activities that enabled them to explore key elements of critical thinking, which is foundational to higher education study in the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond. Specifically, "students from educational traditions that favour certainty and authority showed greater tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to judge for themselves" (p. 1). When done well, active learning activities provide engaging opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of new knowledge and consider this alongside peers' perspectives, which is a core part of criticality.

Criticality

Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022) recognise the importance of students' criticality within higher education. Many international students report a lack of prior experience with this type of thinking and writing (Cena et al., 2021). Melles (2009, p. 168) found "significant cultural and prior educational obstacles for students who have English as their second language (ESL). Prior educational background and, in some cases, cultural taboos or norms may interfere with student uptake of critical appraisal as practice". Aston (2023) notes that critical thinking is not the preserve of western educational systems. However, Hammersley-Fletcher and Hanley (2016) consider criticality to be more prevalent in certain cultures, reflecting common social practices than educational concepts. They suggest induction programmes should familiarise international students with a range of traditions of thinking, contextualising critical thinking as one of many approaches. Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022, p. 40) note, assistance is needed to facilitate some students' transition "from memorisation to critical thinking, capitalising on students' inherent abilities, regardless of their inherited pedagogy". The need to provide active learning opportunities, in which students can practice critical thinking, reflection, reading, writing and discussions is vital. Matheson and Sutcliffe (2016) note, reflective practice is a significant factor leading to academic transformation for international students. Therefore, simply explaining study conventions, such as critical thinking, is not sufficient to facilitate change; practice is also needed (Turner & Robson, 2008). The classroom is not the only context in which students can be assisted to develop these skills – transformation can take place beyond the confines of timetabled classes.

Resources to support learning

Whilst time spent in lectures and seminars is a significant part of the academic journey, there are other resources that enhance the student journey. Regular office hours that provide students with the chance to 'drop-in' to speak with their teachers are an additional resource. Hsu et al.'s (2022) study found that the most common reason students attended office hours was for content clarification, although it should be noted that not all students feel able to access this resource. Hsu and Goldsmith (2021, p.5) found that some students "perceived them as scary or identified a social stigma surrounding attending office hours". Opportunities for critical discussions on course literature with

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) can enhance the student experience. Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko's (2016) study of students' perceptions of GTAs found, amongst other things, that when class numbers were smaller, student satisfaction of GTA input was higher. Regular opportunities to engage with GTAs reflect Richardson and Radloff's (2014) emphasis on the positive benefits from enabling interactions between faculty staff and international students. The support that is put in place enables a positive student experience, which will ultimately lead to successful completion of programmes.

Beyond postgraduate studies

It is important to remember the fact that support and resources provided to postgraduate students are not simply intended to help students to pass exams and gain degrees. The hope is that graduates are equipped for life beyond university, for work, future training/education, and life in general. Wong et al. (2021) researched UK universities and their "institutional aspirations" (p. 1340), noting that discourses about graduate attributes are associated with the marketisation of higher education. However, looking beyond the marketing messages, it can only be a positive thing if graduates gain skills and knowledge that will equip them for an ever-changing world (Ribeiro-Silva et al. (2022). For example, Liang and Schartner (2022) suggest that intercultural competence is a desirable attribute in an increasingly diverse world. Researchers suggest an inclusive approach to setting institutional attributes, by enabling students to express their aspirations, but also that teaching staff have a significant part to play in designing learning experiences that enable students to gain meaningful attributes (for instance, Coetzee, 2014; Wong et al., 2021). Accessible, easy-to-navigate resources and an embedded approach to induction are the foundations upon which to build. This connects to Ribeiro-Silva et al.'s (2022) assertion that the student journey should end with graduates who can successfully function in real-life situations.

Research design

An overview of the resource

To understand the research design and the discussion within the 'findings, analysis and discussion' section, it is necessary first to provide a brief overview of the resource designed to support the academic transition of international students. The online resource was designed in collaboration with a range of HEI staff and current international students. This included staff with specific responsibilities for supporting students' academic learning, skills and employability, staff who support student transitions, as well as experts in the use of technological applications and platforms to support and enhance learning, teaching, and assessment.

The resource was developed between April 2022 and September 2022 and is hosted on the HEI's virtual learning environment (VLE). During an induction week, prior to the commencement of teaching, all international PGT students within the College of Social Sciences were given access to the resource using university credentials. It appeared on the students' personal dashboards on their VLE, alongside other courses, and an announcement was sent out via the VLE to all students enrolled on resource to alert them to its presence. Prior to this, information about the resource had also been included in internal communications sent out to all enrolled international PGT students within the social sciences.

The resource is composed of short sections featuring a collection of visual media, texts, and short activities. It was designed to address criticisms of international student Induction Resources arising from research literature. Firstly, care was taken to avoid communication of essentialist views and of deficit messages. Reflections and tips on learning at the HEI from current international postgraduate students were included in the form of written quotations, and individual self-directed activities were incorporated in the resource in which students draw on their individual identity and previous experience. Secondly, opportunities for reflection were embedded within the resource. Within the resource a reflective learning journal template is available to download, to accompany prompts included throughout the resource to encourage students to take notes of their own thoughts, reflections, and experiences.

The resources focuses on three topics, under the following headings:

1. Reflections on past knowledge, skills, and learning experiences

This section highlights the different knowledge, skills, and experiences international students bring with them to their postgraduate studies such as experiences of rote learning or criticality. It attempts to convey the message that no matter what a student's previous learning or work background, there are elements of those experiences that will be useful to them for their studies in their new HEI.

2. Learning and teaching – what to expect and why

This section introduces students to what to expect as a postgraduate student, and how it might differ from their undergraduate learning experience in terms of lectures, seminars, student-teacher interactions, studying, and assessments. For example, in relation to Groupworking and critical writing. It encourages students to reflect on how they can use past knowledge, skills, and experiences to help them succeed in their postgraduate studies. It also prompts them to consider how they might navigate any challenges they will face.

3. Making the most of your time here – resources to support your success

Rather than duplicate existing resources, this section provides students with links to extra courses, resources, and other sources of support for postgraduate students to help them manage the academic transition; for example, workshops available to students focused on effective groupwork provided by other student and college services at the HEI.

Case study methodology

Case study methodology was used for this small-scale preliminary research of a single bounded case. Case studies are used to study a phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2009). In this study, the phenomenon being investigated is international students' lived experience of support to make the most of their exposure to learning and teaching practices in a new country. Case study is an in-depth approach to exploring a phenomenon within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). In this study the single bounded system comprises taught social sciences' postgraduate programmes within a Scottish university. As many variables operate within a single case (Cohen et al., 2018), the data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews and access statistics for a VLE. This reflects Creswell (2007), and Yin's (2009) emphasis on the need to rely on more than one source of data.

One of the contentious issues around case study methodology is the extent to which the findings from a small single group can be generalised to larger populations of similar groups (Priya, 2021), if at all. Although case studies cannot form the statistical basis for generalisations (Yin, 2009), they can form analytical generalisations that are useful for further study (Priya, 20210). It is not our intention to generate broad generalisations but, rather, to undertake an exploratory case study that explores international postgraduate students' experience of academic transition in a Scottish university. Case studies can enlighten (Cohen et al., 2018) and it was our hope that we would be enlightened to the support that best meets the needs of international postgraduate students. As such, this case study may be considered a step towards further research and action (Cohen et al., 2018).

Research questions

R1: How well accessed is the specifically designed resource and why?

R2: What is the perceived usefulness of the resource and why?

R3: In what ways could the resource be adapted or used to better support?

R4: What other support is effective or requested?

Participants

All international PGT students who were enrolled on the resource were invited to participate in the research project. Recruitment of participants, using convenience and snowball sampling, was done through repeated announcements on the Induction VLE, in-person visits to classes and emails to students recommended by participants. Students taught, or assessed, by the project researchers were not included within the study. Six participants took part in the study. The participants represented a small range of non-anglophone cultural backgrounds (Georgia, Columbia, Ukraine, and China). Of note, only two of the six participants were recruited through announcements on the induction VLE.

Data collection and analysis

The university's College of Social Sciences ethics committee granted ethical approval for this study. Quantitative access statistics were extracted from the VLE for all students enrolled for the resource. Data showing the number of access events to the resource for semesters 1 and 2 were also collected for each individual study participant. Qualitative data about students' perceptions were gathered though semi-structured interviews. These semi-structured interviews explored students' experiences of learning, pedagogical and academic transitions, and the role that the resource played (if any) in supporting them. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Two were carried out online using Zoom and four were carried out in person, based on the participants' preference. The interviews were undertaken between the early part of semester one and the later part of semester two. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, using intelligent verbatim transcription (McMullin, 2023).

During the semi-structured interviews, particular consideration was given by the interviewer to cultural differences and contexts (e.g., power-distance relationships) to increase the honesty and accuracy of data gathered. Care was taken by the interviewers to avoid communication of deficit model messages and essentialist views. Lack of recognition of individual student identity and previous experience can have, according to Turner and Robson (2008), detrimental effects on student's self-concept. As such the

interview questions (see appendix) provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the academic skills and knowledge that they have brought with them to their new studies.

The transcriptions were thematically analysed separately by both researchers and a consensus on key findings were agreed. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but is widely used as an umbrella term (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke suggest that there are different approaches to thematic analysis; for instance, it is possible to conduct both inductive and deductive analysis together. We used what they refer to as "theory-driven data coding and analysis" (2021, p. 58). Given the small sample size, we incorporated what Cresswell (2007) describes as a direct interpretation approach to coding; theory-driven codes could be drawn from the data without the need to look for multiple instances.

The first phase of thematic analysis is to familiarise oneself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were divided between the researchers with each taking responsibility for the verbatim transcription of half the interviews. The transcriptions were then shared with each other, and each researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data. The researchers then undertook a process of blind parallel coding (Cohen et al. 2018) highlighting initial points of interest and noting down ideas. This stage can be considered a holistic analysis of a case study which is later followed by analysis of themes (Creswell, 2007). In the second phase each researcher identified initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) such as '1. mentioned Groupwork'. The focus was on semantic codes drawing on the surface meaning of the data rather than attempting to identify underlying assumptions or ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Yin (2009) identifies using existing theories as a useful strategy for the analysis of exploratory case study evidence. In this case the researchers looked for theories that arose from the literature review such as student engagement with Groupwork activities. Following separate coding the researchers worked together to collate the codes and to identify, review and name themes e.g. expectations of students. This process covers the third to fifth phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The final theme names are used below to structure the 'Findings, analysis and discussion' section.

Table 1 shows the correlation between the research questions and data collection methods. A copy of the interview questions can be found in the appendix.

Table 1. Correlation between research questions and data collection methods

Research question	**Data collection tool**
R1: How well accessed is the specifically designed resource and why?	VLE access statistics Interview questions 5 and 6
R2: What is the perceived usefulness of the resource and why?	Interview questions 5, 6 and 7
R3: In what ways could the resource be adapted or used to better support?	Interview question 6
R4: What other support is effective or requested?	Interview questions 4, 5 and 7

Findings, analysis, and discussion

The findings, analysis and discussion are considered together, rather than as three distinct parts. They are presented under three global themes: 'A matter of timing and clarity', 'Great expectations – active and engaged learning', and 'Beyond classroom walls'.

Before exploring these further, some insights into the Induction Resource provide foundational information upon which some analysis and discussion is based. Table 2 notes the research participants' engagement, or not, with the induction VLE for context.

Table 2. Research Participants' Engagement with Induction Resource

Participant 1	Accessed four times in Semester 1 and three times in Semester 2
Participant 2	Accessed four times in Semester 1
Participant 3	No access to resource
Participant 4	No access to resource
Participant 5	Accessed once in Semester 1
Participant 6	No access to resource

As indicated, only half of the research participants had accessed the resource. Of these, only two had accessed the resource multiple times and only one of these had accessed the resource during both semesters. In terms of the wider context, by the mid-point of semester one, 333 students in the wider college had accessed the resource. With over 4000 students enrolled on the resource however, this represented only 7.5% of the enrolled students. By the beginning of semester 2, an additional 100 students had accessed the resource with around quarter of these students accessing the resource multiple times (27%). However, the percentage of students enrolled on the resource who had accessed the resource by the start of semester 2 only increased to 9.7%. This aligns with overall viewing statistics (as shown in Figure 1), which showed that there was a significant peak in views per month of the resource site during the month of September between the students being provided with access to the resource and the first date of gathering resource access data.

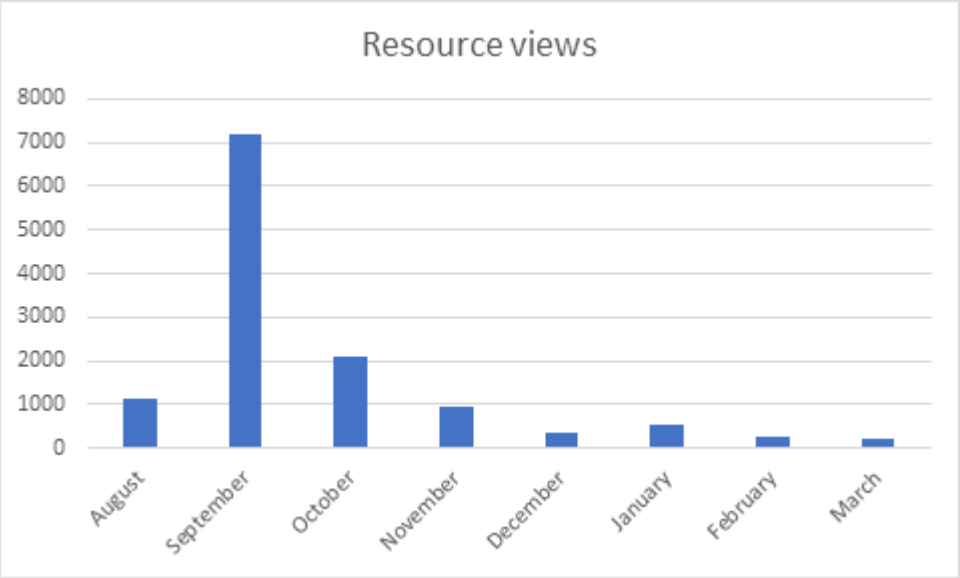

Figure 1. Students' views of Induction Resource

As previously mentioned, the broad aim of the Induction Resource was to equip students with skills and knowledge needed for their learning journey. It included information about, and signposting to, various resources about Groupwork, active learning, and criticality. It is not possible to draw conclusions about the impact of the resource on these aspects of students' study due to the small sample size. However, findings from this study and relevant literature enable some discussion on these aspects of postgraduate study under the theme 'Great expectations – active and engaged learning'. Before discussing this theme further, the article continues by discussing the theme 'A matter of timing and clarity'.

'A matter of timing and clarity'

The broad aim of the Induction Resource was to equip students with skills and knowledge needed to begin their learning journey such as those associated with Groupwork, active learning, and criticality. Participant 2 found the resource to be useful in terms of providing some insights into what to expect on their educational journey, "I think it's very helpful for the students because it's showing you like, okay, what are you going to expect". They particularly liked the explanation about the types of teaching and assessment methods that would be used, "That[s] the way they do it here, like with the lectures, with the assignment, because in the end you need to be in it to know what's coming". The role of the resource in supporting their understanding of assessment was also mentioned by Participant 1 who particularly liked the guidance provided on writing essays as they were unfamiliar with that form of assessment stating "I love the writing essay helpful stuff because it was so helpful for me as an international student because, as I mentioned that [I] had not had experience to write the assignments like this way".

Several participants experienced challenges in accessing the Induction Resource due to the complexities of navigating the VLE site on which it was hosted. The VLE, in general, was flagged as difficult to navigate by most participants. This adds to the pressure that new postgraduates experience as they begin their learning journey at a new HEI. Participant 3 found it unhelpful that VLE courses simply appeared on their dashboard without explanation, which meant that they were less likely to engage with them. In general, they felt that there were too many VLE sites and not enough time to engage with them. "It's so hard to navigate. Different random courses pop up into my dashboard [...] it's a lot of them there [...] there [are] too many materials, and not much time to look at them". Participant 6 added to this sense of difficulty stated that "The instruction information made me feel it wasn't easy to get to".

Several participants also suggested that they faced challenges accessing the resource due to the impact of arriving late to begin their studies. Some participants reported feeling overwhelmed with the breadth of information provided to them on arrival, which reflects findings from Chen et al. (2011) about information overload as a barrier to learning. Participant 5, who registered late on their programme, suggested that access to the resource should be provided sooner, noting "this course [the resource] can be earlier when people are getting ready to learn". This aligns with Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi's (2018) suggestion that HEIs have a responsibility to provide support and guidance on all aspects of student life in a timely, and accessible, manner and that failure to do so can result in increased stress and anxiety for students, which impacts their studies. Enabling students to access Induction Resources two to three weeks before classes begin could help to address these issues.

Delayed access to the VLE because of students starting late on programmes appeared to be a significant barrier. In general, participants felt that by the time students got access to the correct VLE sites, they did not have time to go back to fully engage with induction information. Their focus was on catching up with what they had missed, as well as quickly orienting themselves to lectures/seminars. Participant 5 stated, "because I come here late, and I have not been a student for a long time". They felt overwhelmed, stating they faced "too [much] information comes to me". As soon as teaching started, Participant 4 felt that course specific VLE sites were more important than general VLE sites, including the Induction Resource, stating that "I just read some materials [on general VLE sites] [...] I pay more attention to my courses". Participant 2 agreed stated "If a person arrives late, then that person is going to catch up on this subject more than the induction. So, I would say the other option would be like having online joining sessions for the one that cannot be here". Again, access to online Induction Resources in advance of classes could go some way to mitigate these problems. The challenges of access noted by several participants may go some way to explaining the proportionally small number of students who accessed the Induction Resource.

Although distinct from the Induction Resource, several participants found the HEI diagnostic writing assessment a particularly useful resource. It was noted by several participants that feedback was too late. At times, feedback is returned after the first assessment is due, which causes students stress and anxiety. Lin et al. (2013) concur; they suggest that the timing of the feedback is important, to enable learners to act on the feedback. Participant 5 talking about the diagnostic exercise stated "[...] I think if it can have it at the first beginning of the semester, and then we can go to the feedback and much earlier, and then we can benefit because well, we have the diagnosis foundation [...] People also got some kind of class of writing classes [...] If I can have this class early, and then I can know that struggle with my assignments and because they do give some good suggestions". Timing matters, as well as clarity of information, to ensure that students do not have to wade through information trying to find key information that will help them to succeed. Ensuring that students are clear about what is expected of them is another factor that will assist the student experience.

'Great expectations – active and engaged learning'

All participants mentioned their experience of Groupwork and active learning at the HEI. For some, this was a very new experience, which is something that tutors should consider in the delivery of learning and teaching in courses. Participants in this small study perceived that tutors at the HEI routinely expected students to participate in small group and class discussions, demonstrating their critical thinking skills, which are core elements of active learning. As noted, Ribeiro-Silva et al. (2022) found that students benefit greatly from participating in active learning activities.

Groupwork and active learning

Overall, the participants demonstrated an understanding about the need for students to work in groups as part of their studies and saw it as a key feature of their learning at the HEI. Although Dippold (2015) suggests that international students often have negative views about Groupwork, one participant commented on the benefits of that experience in relation to learning about ideas that they had not previously encountered. Participant 5, talking about a group presentation they had taken part in stated "I really learned something that I never touched before [...] I learn[ed] something new, and also give me

more information". This suggests a positive experience of Groupwork. Participant 3 emphasised the need for active participation from members to ensure success, suggesting "there has to be this proactive component to it" for all group members. There was a recognition by participants that some international students are inexperienced in terms of working in groups within their studies. Participant 6 referred to a friend on a different programme that involved "a lot of small Groupwork. She told me she doesn't have a good experience about that, because the people in her group don't have the skills, the collaboration skills and cooperation skills". This is reflective of the claims by Volet and Mansfield (2006) that difficulties with group management, poor communication and unequal distribution of work can lead to negative experiences of Groupwork for students. Tutors can play a role in helping groups to successfully navigate Groupwork, as suggested by Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi (2018), including signposting them to resources such as the Induction VLE.

Participant 6 stated "maybe it's better to teach us what we should do when we have a Groupwork", demonstrating their expectation of the HEI. As a reminder, Participant 6 did not engage with the Induction Resource and did not access the guidance about Groupwork. It is therefore not possible to comment on whether the guidance on the Induction Resource was useful and easy-to-navigate. Turner and Robson (2008) note the importance of useful, and ongoing, guidance about the expectations of the institution. When asked what additional support could be provided by the HEI, to enhance their learning, Participant 6 suggested "help me to be able to be extroverted during the class". This connects to both participation in Groupwork and the emphasis placed on active learning within the HEI.

In most cases, the participants referred to a difference in expectations of them, compared to their prior learning experience. Participant 2 was surprised about their learning experience in the HEI stating, "so many things happen that you wouldn't expect to happen in the Academia", such as active learning. However, the importance of students sharing their ideas in class was understood by all participants, with most noting that speaking out in class was not expected from them in their undergraduate studies; their experience was lecture-based and teacher-led. Participant 4 noted, "our tutor always persuades us to answer questions, to discuss with my classmates. But in China, sometimes our tutors just test knowledge. They talk more than students". All participants noted that class discussions are a component part of their learning journey at the HEI – an expectation of them as active in their learning journey. However, speaking out publicly (in person or via forums) was felt to be shameful in some cases. Participant 4 stated that "when we send the email to our users on the forum. Everyone sees what questions we have asked. So, it's just like a shame [...] I might seem a little bit stupid". Again, the resource highlights the need for students to speak out but, as suggested by Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022), practice in low-risk situations is what is needed. Participant 5 noted that other students had "stolen" their ideas in a previous activity, which prompted them to stop speaking out in class, or to share only simple ideas. Turner and Robson (2008) note that ongoing guidance about the expectations of the institution should include guidance on how to acknowledge the work of others, including their peers.

When discussing active learning and Groupwork, most participants specifically mentioned students from China, reflecting common perceptions noted in the literature. For example, Participant 1 (not from China) noted, "they have knowledge. They are really good, but they can't present it". There are several reasons for this, such as a lack of confidence in

language and presentation. Multiple participants noted that many students from China are quiet in class, preferring to listen, which they perceived as Chinese students' lack of confidence to share their ideas or ask questions in front of peers. Whilst Cao et al.'s (2016) study noted that language constraints and culture differences impact Chinese students learning experience in the UK, their later study (Cao et al., 2021) also noted that culture-related classroom behaviours may be misinterpreted. Participant 4, for example, stated that Chinese students "are used to keep[ing] quiet". They also asserted that some peers from China "do not want to express themselves [...] I think maybe sometimes, because they do not read [the] reading materials". Participant 6 provided a further reason some students remain silent in class. Based on their classroom experience, they felt worried that others would steal their ideas and get credit for them, "I pretend to be worse. I don't want others to just copy my thoughts, because it really happened". A deeper understanding is needed of the diverse learning cultures from which students come (Tan, 2011) and assumptions about the homogeneity of international students from the same home country should be avoided Matheson and Sutcliffe (2016).

Criticality

As reflected in literature (e.g. Cena et al., 2021), expectations about independent thinking and criticality were commonly mentioned as different from teaching approaches used in undergraduate home degrees. Participant 1 stated that "since I moved here, I realise that I have skills [...] to find that article [...] and read more and analyse it [...] but to criticise this, I missed that in Georgia"' Participant 5 stated, "I found that involving together the students discuss and the share their ideas, especially guide them to think differently, think critically [...] It's kind of different with China [...] here, you are kind of pushed to do that". For one participant, however, the concept of critical thinking was not new. This aligns with Aston's (2023) assertion that critical thinking is not the preserve of western educational systems.

All participants understood the importance of them taking a critical approach in their learning at the HEI. For example, Participant 6 stated that "After coming here and study, studying for several months, I think that a good student will have their independent thinking, just, critical thinking. They will have their own view on one thing, or maybe just the relationship between the concepts you learn from the book. That is critical thinking". Participant 3 enjoyed this experience "So I totally enjoy [it], because I finally can critique so many things. I really really like this aspect of education of it, making sure there is no right, no wrong answer, or something the Professor expects you to tell in certain way. That's really something I really didn't have in my undergrad".

Whilst there is information on the resource about criticality as a core element of the educational experience at the HEI, several clicks are needed to reach the written guidance on taking a critical approach. This information could be more prominent and visual. Participant 5 noted, "I just need a small one, one small example of what it means to be critical. This is needed in the first round of assignments. Even if it could be a [recording] that is put on the resource. We can watch it and stop it. And we can watch it every time". Whilst Participant 5 accessed the Induction Resource, the access to guidance on what a critical approach was not obvious to them. This resonates with Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi's (2018) findings that suggest Induction Resources should be easily accessible, clear, and succinct. It is important to note, ensuring an excellent student learning experience reaches beyond the confines of the classroom, whether in person or online.

‘Beyond classroom walls’

Although the aim of this small-scale preliminary case study was to examine students’ perceptions of a resource that was designed to help postgraduate students’ transition to learning, all participants commented on resources available through the HEI.

Course/module resources

Despite the difficulties participants noted in navigating the HEI’s VLE, they noted that materials uploaded to course specific VLEs by tutors supported them with their successful orientation to learning. Talking about a course/module specific VLE site, Participant 6 said “I find that everything I want that which support my study, on writing or listening, from [the VLE]”. Participant 1 noted that they liked the fact they could access lecture recordings which they felt helped them manage their time efficiently stating, “We have a video lecture, which is really I, I love it, and I appreciate it that they take care our times, because time, is so important”. Participant 4 was aware that their tutors upload key information to course specific VLE sites, and they did not want to miss crucial information relating to their course. Participant 1 concurred, noting “the tutor uploading in the [VLE] [...] everything what we have to done, and it's so helpful”.

In general, class tutors were a resource that all participants drew on, finding tutors to be helpful, friendly, and approachable. The ability to have one-to-one contact with tutors was not common for most participants in their home undergraduate studies. Participant 1 noted “we have this student hour [...] we meet our tutors, and she ask us like what is struggling us [...] and this [makes a] kind of positive impact to be a good student”. The opportunity to ask question in person, or online, or privately through ‘office hours’ was seen as important, with participant 5 noting “all my classes have got an online office hour or drop-in time, and I benefit with that part [...] I can ask a lot of questions several times”. This aligns with Richardson and Radloff’s (2014) emphasis on the positive benefits for international students by enabling interactions between them and faculty staff.

HEI resources for learning

Several participants found the academic writing support provided by the HEI to be useful, mentioning specific support services and honorary writing fellows as particularly useful resources. Participant 5 valued the support provided by an independent writing advisor, provided through the HEI, “[...] talking with her, it kind of give me much confidence”. However, Participant 3 did not find other resources to be as useful stating that “I went to a couple of developing your writing the workshops [...] and those were all right, but I wouldn't say that they were very beneficial for me [...] I was just listening to how it should be done, but when you listen to it, it doesn't always help you when you actually start writing”. This emphasises the need for a range of resources to be available to students to meet diverse learning needs. Participants also found the library to be a useful resource. When asked about resources that helped them to succeed, five out of the six participants said that the library is a very useful resource. The fact that resources are available electronically was seen as beneficial.

A missed opportunity

Several participants noted a lack of opportunity to develop their English language skills (in general terms, rather than academically) and to speak with home students. As Participant 1 put it, “I love to be [...] near local people”. Participant 1 also said “I think it should be also so interesting if the international students have a kind of volunteering opportunities”. Participant 4 noted, they would welcome “more opportunities for us to

chat with the local students. We want to make friends with them. and we want to know the culture in [locality]". These opportunities exist within the HEI therefore this relates more to ensuring that students access information about extra-curricular activities in a way that is not lost in the multitude of emails they receive. Participant 1 feels that the HEI "has a lot of opportunity to attend the other [optional events] and stuff, which is really helpful to meet like-minded people". Enabling the participation of international students in extra-curricular activities contributes to the student experience overall (Kerrigan & Manktelow, 2021), in terms of increased attainment and wellbeing.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by findings from the small-scale preliminary research, key ideas from literature relating to the experience of international students studying in Western educational contexts, and from reflections based on teaching postgraduate students in the HEI. The recommendations are organised under the following headings: Resources - both the resource and resources in general; Classroom experience – relating to expectations that tutors (working term for lecturers, professors and associate tutors) and students have of each other within the classroom; Learning experience – connected to the key expectations of the HEI's postgraduate students; and Student experience – concerning their experience beyond the classroom, both academic and social experience.

Resources

Access to Induction Resources should be available in advance of induction sessions and starting on programmes. This may require the need to enable guest log-in so that issues with registration do not hinder students' ability to prepare for their studies before the official start date. The 'Resources and support' section of the resource was most useful, with multiple links to access information about working in groups and about taking a critical approach to learning. Such sections should be more prominent, and feature at the beginning of the site, without the requirement of students' completion of activities.

Programme and course leaders, and teaching staff within the HEI, should be informed about, and have access to view the resource. This means they will be able to signpost students to the various resources that are available that will enhance the students' academic journey. The resource can be introduced during programme-specific inductions, and specific resources can be highlighted at relevant points during courses. For example, if students must undertake an assessed Groupwork task, they can be guided to the various resources that can support them in this process.

Students should be introduced to VLE sites that appear on their dashboard – quick and clear explanation on content would be useful. This should not only be done through emails. Teaching staff should be made aware of new VLE resources, so that they can alert students about them.

In addition, the Induction Resource should be made available to both home and international PGT students. Firstly, this is because all students may benefit from support with transition from undergraduate to post graduate study and secondly, making the resource available to all further reduces any sense of otherness associated with the Induction Resource.

Classroom experience

To enhance students' transition to learning at the HEI, tutors should be clear about the expectations they have of students from the outset e.g., that students share ideas, ask questions, read essential texts in advance of classes, take a critical approach in their learning etc. There should be reminders of these expectations throughout the course and not just at the beginning, as well as continuous signposting to the resource. Tutors should be mindful of differences for students whose undergraduate studies are from different learning cultures e.g., individualist and collectivist cultures (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, as cited in Cao et al., 2021). A deeper understanding is needed of the diverse learning cultures from which students come (Tan, 2010) – both from tutors and from other students.

Clear guidance should be given to students about how to work in groups as this is a key feature of active learning within classrooms. Again, students should be signposted to relevant support and guidance on the resource. Students should be guided to set group agreements for tasks, including a clear articulation of how they will allocate tasks, take shared responsibility for work and how they will communicate with peers in groups – all of which will enable students to build key employability skills.

Student experience

Tutors should provide opportunities for students to engage with them beyond the classroom setting. Regular 'office hours' should be offered, either in person or online. Participants in the research, and findings from related research, confirm that some students feel unable to ask for guidance in front of peers. Interactions with tutors in office hours can help to build students' confidence to speak out in class.

Most HEIs have dedicated teams who focus on providing support for students' academic learning, skills and employability, and student transitions. To complement the work that they do, further opportunities for students to develop their English language skills in social settings should be provided. Having the opportunity to practice their language skills will build their confidence to speak more in class. Social events that help students to learn more about local culture and mingle with domestic HEI students would improve students' general wellbeing and reduce levels of intercultural anxiety and stereotyping.

Learning experience

Clear guidance should be given about what critical thinking, reading, and writing entails, both during induction and throughout teaching. This should not only involve a lecture input during induction but should involve opportunities to practice criticality skills throughout the course and particularly before assessments are required. Enabling criticality through active learning methods has positive results for students (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022), again enabling them to build employability skills.

The contribution Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) make could be enhanced or could be consistently applied. As well as offering sessions in which students discuss focussed reading and practice criticality, GTAs can signpost students to expectations about assessments, working closely with course leaders.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine students' perceptions of a resource that was designed to help international postgraduate students' transition to learning in a Scottish HEI. The study was broadened to consider the wider process of induction and integration, to which all participants referred. As such the 'Findings, analysis and discussion' were presented under three global themes: 'A matter of timing and clarity', 'Great expectations – active and engaged learning', and 'Beyond classroom walls'.

Case study methodology was used for this small-scale preliminary research. A single bounded case of taught social sciences' postgraduate programmes within a Scottish University was considered. Recommendations for future practice are based on the case study. Although not generalisable, the findings from this exploratory study may enlighten other UK HEIs about what could enhance the induction and integration experiences of international students. It serves as a step towards future research and action in the HEI in which the research was undertaken. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in the case study. Quantitative data in the form of access statistics were extracted from the VLE for all students enrolled for the resource. Qualitative data about students' perceptions was gathered though semi-structured interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were thematically analysed, guided by Braun and Clarke's approach incorporating theory-driven data coding and analysis. In addition, a direct interpretation approach (Cresswell, 2007) to coding was also used to identify aspects of focus for future studies.

The findings, analysis, and discussion lead to the following responses to the research questions:

In response to Research Question 1 – How well accessed is the specifically designed resource and why? The resource was accessed by over 400 students; however, this represented only a small proportion of students enrolled on the resource. Based on participants responses this may be due to challenges with navigating the VLE, the way in which students are introduced to sites within the VLE and access only being available to students after they have arrived at the HEI for their studies.

In response to Research Question 2 – What is the perceived usefulness of the resource and why? As a small number of the participants accessed the resource, it was difficult to fully answer this question. For those who accessed it, the resource was useful for the participants to familiarise themselves with new types of assessment. It does not seem to have been particularly helpful in supporting participants with the key aspects of Groupwork, active learning and criticality, which are also a focus of the resource.

In response to Research Question 3 – In what ways could the resource be adapted or used to better support? Few suggestions were made by participants. This relates to one of the limitations of this study, which is that a small percentage of eligible postgraduate students accessed the resource. As a general point, the importance of making the resource accessible to students before they arrive was reflected in both participant responses and in the literature.

In response to Research Question 4 – What other support is effective or requested? Other effective support mentioned by participants included access to class resources via the VLE and academic writing support available to all international post-graduate taught students at the HEI. Additional support to develop non-academic English language skills

were requested by several participants. It transpired that this final research question became the greatest focus of the study.

Following this small-scale preliminary research, the next step for these researchers is to explore ways to overcome the barriers faced by participants gaining the relevant knowledge needed to succeed in postgraduate level study in the UK. This may involve providing access to Induction Resources for students before they arrive at the HEI and requesting staff to make connections to the resource both in class and via the course VLE sites, which participants valued. Additional research, involving a greater number of students, about what best enables them to succeed in their studies would be useful. A focus on how students can be supported to participate in active learning, Groupwork and criticality would be useful, as all participants highlighted these as key aspects of successful transition for international students.

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Appendix: Interview themes and process for semi-structured interviews with students

Interview themes:

- Attributes of a 'good' student?
- Essential conditions for a positive learning experience
- Expectations of being a student at the University of Glasgow
- Useful resources to scaffold learning journey at the University of Glasgow

We will begin each interview by summarising the purpose of the research, clarifying consent to take part, and reminding participants that they can take a break at any time, or they can stop the interview without giving a reason. We will reassure the participants that there are no 'correct' answers – that we are interested in their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions about prior learning and what is expected of them as a student at the University of Glasgow.

Question 1	How would you describe a 'good' student?
Question 2	What makes a positive learning experience for students in Higher Education?
Question 3	What skills and knowledge do you have that will help you to succeed as a University of Glasgow Student?
Question 4	What are the differences between your previous learning experiences and what is expected of you at the University of Glasgow?
Question 5	What resources have helped you to succeed as University of Glasgow student?
Question 6	In what ways, if any, did the pedagogical Induction Resource help you to reflect on your own learning experiences? How did you find the timing of access to the resource? How do you think the resource could be improved further?

Question 7	What else could be done to help you succeed as a University of Glasgow student?

We may add one or two additional questions based on prominent themes that arose during the focus groups.

Participants will be thanked for their contribution, and they will be advised that they will be provided with a summary of the results, on request, on completion of the study.

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