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Progression of International Students through their Undergraduate Studies in an Irish Higher Education Institution: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the progression of international students through their undergraduate studies in an Irish higher education institution. Despite the increasing presence of international students in higher education, their perspectives on progression through their undergraduate studies are not adequately explored. Research into the factors that influence international students' progression is underdeveloped. The paper aims to provide new insights into international students' perspectives of their progression through their undergraduate studies in an Irish context. This study addresses this gap by exploring what factors international students deem to be significant in terms of successful student progression through higher education in an Irish context. The research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with international students in TU Dublin in Ireland. Five students volunteered to participate in the study. The findings revealed factors that facilitate student progression such as the student's motivation to study and learn new skills and partake in the class and college environment. The research also revealed factors found to impede progression such as issues relating to the college experience and environment. The results are considered in terms of implications for international student progression. This paper outlines the necessity for those involved in policy and practice to understand and act upon the challenges that international students encounter during their higher education journey.

Keywords: entry routes; international students; pathway programmes; progression

Introduction

The research outlined in this paper is the second, and qualitative part of a study on the progression of international students through their undergraduate studies in an Irish higher education institution, namely, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin). The purpose of this research is to ascertain international students' perspectives of their progression through their undergraduate studies in an Irish context. The aim is to examine what international students consider to be factors which may affect their progression through their undergraduate education. A consideration of the personal, cultural and academic challenges faced by international students is valuable due to the significant presence of international students in higher education institutions worldwide.

The first part of the research examined quantitative data which compared the progression rates¹ in higher education of direct entry international students² and international students who had completed a preparatory programme in TU Dublin (Faulkner, Ryan, Hurley & Wang, 2017). The results of this research showed that there was no significant difference in the progression rates of each type of international student suggesting that the preparatory programme that students were engaging in was bringing the students to the required standard to be as successful as direct entry international students in terms of progression in higher education. The research also showed however that international students as a whole, regardless of entry route to undergraduate education, progress to a lesser degree from 1st to 2nd year of their degree programmes when compared to their domestic student counterparts (HEA, 2016; Faulkner *et al.*, 2017). This finding therefore highlighted the need for further qualitative research to be conducted to explore what factors the international students deemed

to be significant in terms of successful student progression through higher education. This sparked the research question for this paper: According to the current pathway programme for undergraduate international students, what factors (personal, cultural and academic) facilitate and impede their progression through undergraduate education in TU Dublin?

¹ Progression is measured in terms of whether a student is present in their institution in March of the year following entry to undergraduate education.

² Direct entry international students have met both the academic and English language requirements to gain direct access to undergraduate programmes in the University.

Literature Review

Incidence and Benefits of International Students in Higher Education

The number of international students has grown by 4.8% on average per year between 1998 and 2018 (OECD, 2020). The number of international students has more than doubled between 2000 and 2011 (OECD, 2013). In 2018, 5.6 million higher education students worldwide had crossed a border to study, that is more than twice the number in 2005 (OECD, 2020). In 2012, more than 4.5 million international students were enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2014). Subsequent reports on international students studying abroad have outlined that the numbers are continually increasing (UNESCO, 2014).

As outlined in part one of this study, the tendency for students to travel to study abroad as an international student has been discussed in the research in relation to what are known as ‘push and pull’ factors (Faulkner *et al.*, 2017). These factors are either deemed to push students away from their country of origin where higher education study is concerned or pull

students towards a chosen country to study abroad in. The factors however can vary depending on the students' country of origin and chosen country to study in.

The following are some examples of such factors:

- Personal reasons, country/city effect, course suitability (Krampf & Heinlein, 1981),
- Selection of courses (Qureshi, 1995),
- Course quality (Turner, 1998),
- International recognition of degree (Turner, 1998),
- Entry requirements (Bourke, 2000) and
- Costs and availability of financial support (Qureshi, 1995).

In addition to considering the literature surrounding the incidence of international students in higher education over time, it is important when examining the factors affecting progression of international students to also examine the benefits to international students when studying abroad.

The most common rationale, as outlined in the literature, for students wishing to study as an international student abroad is to raise the status of the student both from an economic and social standpoint (Enders, 2004; Teichler, 2004; D'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021). It is quite common also that international students come from an education system with a strong focus on surface learning approaches with little focus on conceptual understanding or developing an ability to be a critical thinker or a problem solver (Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos, 2006). This can serve as further rationale for students wanting to study as an international student.

As well as the literature outlining the benefits to the international students of studying abroad consideration has also been given to the contribution that the international student can make to their desired country of study – these factors have been discussed in the literature in terms

of both educational and economic contributions (Andrade, 2006; D’Hombres & Schnepf, 2021). The destination higher education institution often relies on the international student enrolment due to lack of funding available for teaching, learning and research initiatives (De Vita & Case, 2003; Mellors-Bourne, Humfrey, Kemp & Woodfield, 2013). From an educational standpoint the presence of an intercultural classroom allows all students to develop skills and knowledge that is required for what is now a globally connected world (Faulkner *et al.*, 2017) - this same opportunity would not be affording to students in a fully homogeneous educational setting (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2013; Jones, 2009). Furthermore, Zimmerman, Greischel & Jonkmann, (2021) highlight the value of international student mobility for developing and enhancing students’ multicultural effectiveness and thereby enhancing their potential for success in the global job market. D’Hombres & Schnepf (2021)’s study further supports this stating how international education improves employment.

***Quantitative Research on Progression of International Students in Higher Education:
Findings from Part One of this Research***

Phase one of this research study examined the first year undergraduate progression rates of international students in TU Dublin in Ireland to determine if students who complete a one-year pathway programme, namely International Foundation Programme (IFP) in TU Dublin, progress differently to direct entry international students to the same institution.

This research found that students entering their undergraduate studies in Ireland coming from an IFP progress at a similar rate to international students who gain direct entry to the same undergraduate programmes. Due to the dataset within this research being relatively small it is difficult to make generalised statements about students’ performance per programme or other

issues. This must be taken into consideration when examining the findings of the research however the findings do suggest that the IFP in TU Dublin is bringing students up to the required standard to be as successful in terms of progression and average performance as those international students who did not have to undertake this foundation programme to gain access to undergraduate programmes.

Findings in part one were consistent with other studies in the area which found that student success to be complex (Cecil, 2020) and maintained that the adoption of a transition strategy with student-centred interventions could enhance the success factors for students (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Some further literature related to qualitative research on progression of International students in Higher Education is now explored.

Qualitative Research on Progression of International Students in Higher Education:

Existing Literature

A review of the existing literature provides an overview of the factors affecting international students on their higher education journey. Elliot, Reid & Baumfield (2016) regard the international students studying abroad experience as both enticing and frightening.

International students' everyday functioning and academic achievement could be impacted adversely if they are experiencing the negative effects of acculturation (Elliot *et al.*, 2016).

Adisa, Baderin, Gbadamosi & Mordi (2019) highlighted the adjustment to the UK's education system and culture as key issues for international students. New curricula and pedagogy are some of the adjustment issues found with the UK's education system (Gbadamosi, 2018). The academic challenges in terms of writing led to students unlearning their home writing cultures but students rose to the challenge and in turn became independent

learners (Wette & Furneaux, 2018). Several groups of international students described the experience of adapting to the culture of the host-institute as a stressful experience (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert & Niemantsverdriet and Kommers, 2012). Adisa *et al.* (2019) found that the speed of which international students adapted to the British culture is a key determinant of their academic success.

A key issue highlighted by Gbadamosi (2018) was language and communication challenges faced by those from non-English-speaking countries. Understanding the English language, associated accents and the pace it is spoken in higher education institutions are severely impacting the communication between international students and lecturers (Adisa *et al.*, 2019). The International students mentioned in Gbadamosi's study (2018) highlight the challenge of making friends with British students. A lot of sociocultural and language barriers are linked with the limited interaction of international students and local students and academics (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Educators try to ensure that international students are treated equally and in doing so they seek ways to facilitate their participation, this involves the understandings and experiences of international students but also other participants, teachers and local students as their understandings and experiences affect international students' participation (Straker, 2016). A study conducted in the Netherlands refers to how academic performance is influenced by academic integration (Rienties *et al.*, 2012). 'Issues such as language competence and culture of origin do not go away, but rather are seen in a broader context' (Straker, 2016, p.314).

Rienties *et al.* (2012) shares an assumption among educators that the academic and social integration of international students is not yet ingrained in the policies and practices of Western institutions. Institutions with international students need to understand the

challenges faced and the preferred coping strategies in order to provide support services such as academic literacy and social support (Wette & Furneaux, 2018). Furthermore, Gbadamosi (2018) states the value of establishing acculturation focus groups and effective induction programmes where both students and faculty members are involved in the process. Similarly, Adisa *et al.* (2019) notes the importance of robust and effective mentoring programmes and institutional supports. Activities such as the aforementioned attract and support this important cohort of the student population (Wette & Furneaux, 2018).

The way international students enter higher education varies depending on their needs and backgrounds. It is important to outline these entry routes prior to detailing the background of the students who have taken part in this research.

Summary of Entry Routes to Higher Education for International Students

Internationally Higher Education Institutions typically offer international students three pathway routes to enter undergraduate and postgraduate programmes:

- Direct entry for students who have met both the academic and English language entry requirements.
- Pathway programmes for students who require both English and academic skills, for example International Foundation Programmes and Pre-Masters Programmes.
- Pathway programmes for students who have met the academic requirements and only require English language preparation, for example the International Bridging Programme or Pre-sessional language programmes.

In the case of this research the students being discussed come from a Pathway programme for students who require both English and academic skills. Details of the programme they have completed are outlined next.

Context for this Research: TU Dublin International Foundation Programme

TU Dublin offers a suite of pathway programmes to international students. These are as follows: IFP, Extended Foundation Year, Bridging for Undergraduate studies, Bridging for Postgraduate studies, Pre-Masters and Joint Degree Programme. The details of these programmes in terms of their type, in-takes and IELTS requirements are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: TU Dublin International Pathway Programmes (Faulkner *et al.*, 2017)

Pathway Programme	Type of programme	In-takes	IELTS requirement
International Foundation Programme (IFP)	A two semester English & Academic preparation programme for students who have not met the English or academic requirements for direct entry to UG	September & January	One band less than the direct entry requirement. Typically, IELTS 5.0
Extended Foundation Year	A three semester English & Academic preparation programme for students who have not met the English or academic requirements for direct entry to UG	July & September	One and a half bands less than the direct entry requirement. Typically, IELTS 4.5
Bridging for undergraduate (UG) studies	A one semester English only programme for students who have met the academic requirements for UG but need to further develop their English	September, January and July	Half a band less than the direct entry requirement. Typically, IELTS 5.5
Bridging for postgraduate (PG) studies	A one semester English only programme for students who have met the academic requirements for PG/PhD but	September, January and July	Half a band less than the direct entry requirement. Typically, IELTS 5.5

	need to further develop their English		
Pre-Masters	A two semester English & Academic preparation programme for students who have not met the English or academic requirements for direct entry to PG	September	One band less than the direct entry requirements. Typically, IELTS 5.0
Joint Degree Programme	TU Dublin has a number of partnerships with international universities. Some partnerships offer students a joint degree whereby students complete two years in their home country and subject to passing & meeting language requirements, they can progress to year three in TU Dublin to finish their degrees.	September	Direct entry IELTS for the relevant programme

Context for this Research: Technological University Designation

It is important that this research is considered in the context of the evolution it has gone through from the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to a Technological University; The Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin). With this change of designation to a TU came a specific strategic plan; the ‘Strategic Intent 2030’ which aims to embed internationalisation in all aspects of the institution with the strategic objectives and milestones stating that ‘15% of our new student intake will be international students and ‘international students will represent at least 1/5 of the student population’ (p.19). The need for Irish HEIs to prioritise internationalisation is also explicit in the Hunt Report (2011). It also stresses the responsibility of HEIs to integrate domestic and international students and to engage with international students more creatively (Hunt, 2011). The Hunt Report (2011) requested a distinct mission for TUs that is based on career-focussed education and closely aligned to labour market needs. Today’s labour market expects interculturally competent students who

can work efficiently and effectively in a rapidly changing and diverse labour market. Likewise, the Marginson Report (2011) highlights the need for TUs to have ‘expanded international orientation and a portfolio of international activity (Marginson, 2011, p.5). Furthermore, the specific HEA criteria around internationalisation in TUs as per the Landscape Document stipulate that: The international engagement of a TU will specifically reflect its mission and orientation. The TU will demonstrate a developmental trajectory for the enhancement of internationalisation, related to teaching, learning, research, staff development, and a sustainable range of international collaborations such as joint programmes, student and staff exchanges including the collaborative provision of academic and training programmes (HEA, 2012, p.17). This study will assist TU Dublin and in turn other HEIs to address internationalisation of its T&L activities through better understanding international students’ progression needs. Additionally, the research supports the work of the HEA report on Internationalisation of Higher Education (Clarke, Yang & Harmon, 2018) which stipulates the need for Irish HEIs to better understand and engage with international students.

Research Design

Methodology

The aim of this research is to establish, from an international student point of view, what factors they consider affecting international student progression through their undergraduate education. For the purpose of this study, international students were defined as students who were born outside of Ireland, whose parents were not Irish nationals and who had not completed their final state school exams in Ireland (Finn, Mihut & Darmody, 2021). International students in this study had all completed either an international pathway programme or participated in a joint programme. Erasmus students were not considered in

this study. Previous research carried out on international students, both direct entry and those entering undergraduate education having completed a pathways programme in TU Dublin, showed that although each type of international student progresses through their undergraduate education at the similar rate to each-other their progression rates are less than that of their domestic student counterparts (Faulkner *et al.*, 2017). These findings therefore call for a more in-depth qualitative analysis to be carried out with international students which may reveal insights into factors that facilitate and impede progression through undergraduate education for international students. The research question which will be addressed is therefore:

According to the current pathway programme for undergraduate international students, what factors (personal, cultural and academic) facilitate and impede their progression through undergraduate education in TU Dublin?

The research hypothesis for this question is detailed in the following section.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesised that international students will consider both economic/financial, personal and academic pressures when discussing possible impeding factors to progression to undergraduate education in TU Dublin as is addressed in the literature (Adisa *et al.*, 2019; Elliot *et al.*, 2006; Rienties *et al.*, 2012; Straker, 2016; Wette & Furneaux 2018). The authors also anticipate that by revealing such insights into impeding factors to progression that this will in turn offer some explanation as to why domestic students may progress to a greater degree in undergraduate education when compared to international students. Finally, it is hypothesised that the international students will reveal further insights not previously considered by the authors or outlined in the existing literature in this area. This hypothesis is

based on the knowledge that much research in the area of international student progression internationally is likely to show common trends across countries however contextual and cultural factors linked to the destination country and institution as well as the country of origin are always likely to come together to reveal unique insights also. The data within this research will be collected through the medium of interviews and the methodology employed for these interviews is outlined in the section which follows.

Interview Methodology

One hundred students approximately were contacted via email to participate and just five students agreed to take part. It was extremely difficult to access students willing to engage in the study therefore a convenient sample was used. The group comprised of students from the School of Hospitality, Management and Tourism in TU Dublin who had completed international pathway programmes prior to commencing their degrees. Two students had completed International Foundation Year programmes, one had completed a bridging (pre-sessional) course and two had commenced their degrees in their home countries as part of a joint programme with TU Dublin prior to commencing year three.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of the key influencing factors associated with international students' progression and the associated challenges. This information had previously been quantified and statistically described in (Faulkner *et al.*, 2017) study which examined first year international students' progression rates in TU Dublin.

Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to further probe the students' insights and perspectives, which resulted in rich and nuanced data surrounding the progression of

international students. The first stage was to design the interview schedule, which is fundamental to a successful interview (Drever, 2003). The research questions informed the schedule which predominantly consisted of open-ended questions which were listed thematically. Each question had associated prompts and probes to ensure broader coverage and more in-depth answers (Drever, 2003). The use of short, clear and straightforward questions was a priority when devising the interview schedule. The interviewer was mindful to avoid asking leading questions or to influence the answers in any way (Drever, 2003). Furthermore, it was made clear to the participants at the beginning of the interview that there were no right or wrong answers and that all answers were relevant to the research to help minimize social desirability bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

With the participants permission the interviews were recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used for participants and lecturers' names were removed.

Data Analysis

This study was an exploratory process which aimed to generate themes to further understand international students' perspectives of the key factors that influence progression and the associated challenges. Limited studies to date have captured international students' perspectives of their academic progression (Adisa *et al.*, 2019; Elliot *et al.*, 2006; Gbadamosi, 2018; Rienties *et al.*, 2012) and this study prioritised the student voice. Braun & Clarke (2013) six phase thematic analysis were utilised to conduct the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis offers a means of identifying themes and patterns of meaning from across a dataset in relation to RQs. The analytic interest in this paper was students' perspectives of their academic progression.

Braun & Clarke (2013) thematic analysis included the following phases: Familiarising oneself with the data; Generating initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; and Producing the report.

Results

Upon analysis of the interview data using Braun & Clarke (2013) thematic analysis the following three main themes, and subsequent subthemes, emerged:

- Factors that facilitate progression
- Factors that impede progression
- Suggested improvements to support progression

The details of the interviewees in terms of their access route are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Interviewees and Access Routes

Interviewee	Access Route
Interviewee 1	Commenced degree in home country
Interviewee 2	Bridging (pre-sessional) course
Interviewee 3	International Foundation Programme
Interviewee 4	International Foundation Programme
Interviewee 5	Commenced degree in home country

Theme 1: Factors that facilitate progression

Based on the data analysis of the interviews it is evident that for international students there are several factors that facilitate student progression. The five sub-themes that emerged within this theme are as follows:

- Motivation to study outside home country
- Developing independent learning skills
- How pathway programmes lay the foundation for progression.
- Supportive Lecturers

- Attending classes

Motivation to study outside home country

Upon analysis of the interviews there were references made that suggested students typically choose to study abroad in order to expand their horizons: *'I think most importantly it can help me expand horizons'* (Interview 1). Students also noted the opportunity to gain work experience with one student stating *'I just wanted a degree and I want to continue to fourth year; the main motivation is I get one year to work in Ireland'* (Interviewee 5). Engagement in graduate programmes was also a priority, one student stated, *'how there are opportunities I have when I graduate or graduate programmes might course has'* (Interviewee 2).

Developing independent learning skills

The development of independent learning skills was frequently acknowledged by students as a factor that facilitates their progression. Students reported utilising online resources provided by the college *'the materials online, the college but there is through the library, there is a lot of books and a lot of resources online through the library, helpful'* (Interviewee 3). They felt they enhanced their learning by *'working and learning alone'* (Interviewee 1). Another student noted *'I did well, I studied, my results, so, like I got myself into third year, through hard work'* (Interviewee 3).

How pathway programmes lay the foundation for progression

Data relating to the benefits of pathway programmes for laying the foundation for progression were cited by former pathway students; the key highlights were language and writing skills *'we had three communication modules in my foundation year, that was helpful, when I got to my first year, I already knew how to write a report, from my foundation year'* (Interviewee 3) and *'they taught us actually how to write essays'* (Interviewee 2). The pathway programme provided more than just language and report and essay writing skills,

'they gave us general information about third level education in Ireland so quite different from my country actually, the system and exams so I learnt it there so I could start with no problem' (Interviewee 2). Similarly, this student noted the following *'I think the bridging programme was great, we had a module of Irish studies or culture, that was great'*

(Interviewee 2). For one student, cultural and programme adjustment is paramount, *'the most important thing is like we adjust to culture and programme'* (Interviewee 2).

Supportive Lecturers

Some students attributed their progression to their lecturers' support. They found their lecturers to be very good at what they do, one student stated, *'my lecturers, they are like really good'* (Interviewee 3). A lot of support and encouragement is shown to students by their lecturers, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'the lecturers also, they give us support, they encourage us to do more, so my lecturers give me a lot of support'* (Interviewee 3). Classes are focused on learning and understanding while paying attention to students' needs *'as in if I have any questions, the lecturers are more attentive, in Malaysia they skip a lot of details, ... explain more in details so we can try and understand better'* (Interviewee 5).

Attending classes

It should be noted that international students are required to attend a minimum of 85% of their classes in line with student visa requirements. The visa requirement and the inherent importance of attendance for progression is regularly communicated to international students via programme coordinators and lecturing staff. In the interviews attendance of classes was frequently acknowledged as a factor that facilitates student progression with one student stating *'attending classes was part of my progression into third year'* (Interviewee 3). A number of students highlighted the importance of being in the classroom for learning *'I have the experience in learning and listening in the classroom'* (Interviewee 1), and *'I think we*

cannot be absent in the class' (Interviewee 1). One student in particular is attempting to attend more classes, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'just trying to attend more classes'* (Interviewee 5).

Factors that impede progression

Based on the data analysis of the interviews, it is evident that for international students there are several factors that impede student progression. The five sub-themes that emerged within this theme are as follows:

- Lecturers' lack of understanding of international students' needs
- Group Work
- Lack of communication
- Environment/facilities
- Lack of integration with domestic students

Lecturers' lack of understanding of international students' needs

Students maintained that there was a lack of understanding by lecturers in terms of their learning needs. This was seen as a factor that may impede progression. Students raised concerns about the learning and exam experience, in particular listening and writing. One student noted *'the teachers in Ireland they speak English very fluently and fast and so, I have difficulty listening to the teacher and then I also have difficulty writing in and especially in my final exams, and so I prepared my final exams for a long time but I think I have reviewed all of them but I didn't get a good grade so that is what very confused and anxious'*

(Interviewee 1). The appropriate guidance or requirements does not appear to be provided by lecturers, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'I feel I don't get clear guidance regarding passing marks and that I feel I have to find it out'* (Interviewee 5). The lecturers do not understand the words used by the international students, one student stated, *'I think it must be*

writing, some words that teachers do not understand, and or they think it is not very standard' (Interviewee 1). Students voiced the need for a high level of English due to language barriers and problems, *'So first of all I think English is much more important although we can, we can we have passed IELTSs test, our English is not very enough, enough for undergraduate study, listening and writing, especially writing, because the final exams so we need to write a lot of so that is very important'* (Interviewee 1). Allowing the use of dictionaries in class could greatly help students' learning and understanding, *'I want my lecturer to allow to use if I want sometimes like use dictionary'* (Interviewee 4).

Group Work

Students acknowledged their concerns about group work impacting their progression from an international students' perspective. This sub-theme is also noted in theme 3 'suggested improvements to support progression', subtheme 'Lecturer level suggestions to support progression'. Group work is a new learning activity for a lot of students and is typically not practiced in their home countries, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'I didn't get a visit to the group work, because in China most students finish their work individually'* (Interviewee 1). Students completed group work in a number of modules, one student stated, *'here every course the teachers ask to be in a group and submit a group assessment, a group assignment'* (Interviewee 1). The group work requirements are unclear, and this leads to misunderstandings, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'may be they don't understand the what teacher's requirement so they don't, ok, what is very dangerous because if we have the misunderstandings, we do it different research and we can't finish our assessment under the requirements and so we cannot get a good grade'* (Interviewee 1).

Lack of communication

Students highlighted communication issues that they experienced in their School. Students experienced a lack of communication at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, resulting in missing their orientation; one student stated, *'we didn't get all the information about orientation and stuff at first so we actually missed the orientation, we didn't get any email, or anything and when I came to school to just look around and they said the orientation for your course already happened last week'* (Interviewee 2).

Environment/facilities

Students highlighted issues with the college environment, facilities and the lack of support and follow-up with their application as factors impeding progression. It should be noted that at the time of writing a new campus is almost completed and will be ready for the next academic year. Students voiced their concerns about the number of modules in one semester, *'so actually in the first semester of my third year we had six subjects, I think it's too much to have six subjects for a semester because it actually that affected my result for first semester of my third year, I didn't like my results because it just I studied well but it was too much six subjects, five exams'* (Interviewee 3). This occurred due to transition arrangements, post programme review. The study and college environment is in need of attention, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'the environment, our campuses don't offer a better environment for us to study, like I know, ... Street, I don't like the campus, like I don't know, every time I want to study, I go to café, or I go to Aungier Street library'* (Interviewee 3).

Lack of integration with domestic students

Students highlighted a lack of integration in their classes as a factor impeding progression. Some international students experienced very little or no integration with domestic students, one student stated *'there is a little division between international, people from somewhere around the world and Irish students so I don't know, when there is group project, we usually*

do with the same people, but I don't think anybody else can help we need to do it ourselves' (Interviewee 2). In one case a feeling of dislike towards international students was reported, *'I heard like in the first year like some student doesn't feel good that like international student is in the classroom. We have that kind of things'* (Interviewee 4).

Suggested improvements to support progression

Based on the data analysis of the interviews it is evident that for international students, there are three levels suggested that could support student progression. The three sub-themes that emerged within this theme are as follows:

- Lecturer level suggestions to support progression
- School level suggestions to support progression
- Institution wide level suggestions to support progression

Lecturer level suggestions to support progression

Lecturers can and need to play a role in supporting student progression. It is strongly suggested that lecturers are involved in the integration of domestic and international students, especially in relation to group work activities, for example, to create groups/assign team members, this is illustrated in the following quotes: *'it's a good idea to just mix up and the lecturer separates the groups up. I'm always doing like group work with the same person'* (Interviewee 4), and *'So I think teachers can help us to create a new group, or can help us assign the team members because we a 3rd year student, so we are not familiar with the local students in Ireland so in most situations, and Chinese students consist of a group but local students consist of another group so it is not international I think, so I think teacher can, can help us and do some tasks, or requirements, yeah, for example, can mix them, so that is more fair'* (Interviewee 1). It is also suggested to have some group work activities in class *'mix them at least teachers can give the requirement and so I think that do some group activities in*

the classroom in class so that can help us understand the knowledge deeper' (Interviewee 1), *'yeah like you say integrate with the class rather than your own group*' (Interviewee 2). The learning experience of international students can be dramatically different to Europe/Ireland, an awareness of this is important, one student stated, *'yeah in China, teachers ask us to do everything just to I mean, they help us one by one*' (Interviewee 1). The lecturers need to offer their support and talk to students, this is illustrated in the following quote: *'then I think we need to am talk more to teachers because most of us Chinese students are shy and they think we can understand the teachers but we cannot actually, ok, so we need to ask teachers more frequently, more fluently, more frequently*' (Interviewee 1), this can in turn lead to lecturers providing understandable descriptions/explanations, one student stated *'I didn't know exactly what difference it is between essay and report, things like that, like details*' (Interviewee 2). Assessing learning throughout the semester is suggested.

School level suggestions to support progression

A review of current practices and an adoption of efficient and effective practices are required at School level to support students. Improvements in communication is suggested for example, orientation and year 4 entry requirements, *'I don't know the entry requirements, I think it is not clearly stated*' (Interviewee 5). The promotion of supports is also suggested for example, staggered orientation/support meetings, and monitoring attendance throughout undergraduate, *'In the school there is no track of attendance, so for me I always skip classes, but in Malaysia they monitor*' (Interviewee 5).

Institution wide level suggestions to support progression

The Institute can play a key role in supporting progression. A review of the IELTS requirement for both listening and writing is suggested, one student stated, *'first of all I think English is much more important although we can, we can we have passed IELTSs test, our*

English is not very enough, enough for undergraduate study, listening and writing, especially writing' (Interviewee 1). The establishment of an international student group or union, *'gathering of people from international ... and we share information'* (Interviewee 2). The move to the new campus, Grangegorman, providing better facilities and environment for students, this is illustrated in the following quotes: *'maybe I would recommend because we are moving to Grangegorman so a better environment'* (Interviewee 3) and *'like pay a lot of money to come here, like more than €10,000 but I didn't think it's all paid off in the course, for e.g., I came the building, we are moving to another campus but there is no microwaves'* (Interviewee 2).

Discussion

Upon examining the results in relation to the research question, three themes emerged:

- Factors that facilitate progression
- Factors that impede progression
- Suggested improvements to support progression

Factors that facilitate progression

Factors found to facilitate progression within this research revealed students studied outside their home country to expand their horizons, gain work experience and engage in graduate programmes opportunities. This was consistent with the literature (Elliot *et al.*, 2006) which states that international students' experience of studying abroad is both enticing and frightening. The development of independent learning skills was a factor revealed in this theme also aligned with the literature. Wette & Furneaux (2018) note when students were faced with academic challenges, it resulted in them becoming independent learners.

Supportive lecturers were another factor revealed in this theme. This was also consistent with

the literature whereby Straker (2016) emphasises how educators are trying to level the playing field for international students, through investigating ways to help their participation. While the literature (Elliot *et al.*, 2006; Straker, 2016; Wette & Furneaux, 2018) addressed some of the factors that facilitate progression, there was limited mention of ‘attending classes’ and ‘how pathway programmes lay the foundation for progression’ which emerged in this study. The results revealed the value of pathway programmes in terms of language and writing skills, third level education in Ireland information and an Irish studies/culture module. This approach could help inform higher education institutions address some of the challenges faced by international students.

Factors that impede progression

Factors that impede progression revealed that lecturers may lack an understanding of international students’ needs. Concerns were raised by international students in the areas of the learning and exam experience, in particular listening and writing and words used by international students not being understood by lecturers. This was in line with the literature (Adisa *et al.*, 2019; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011) which states the English language, accent and the pace spoken in higher education institutions are seriously impacting the international student-lecturer communication. Furthermore, Wette & Furneaux’s (2018) study states that students are unlearning their home writing cultures. The lack of integration with domestic students was also a factor revealed in this theme which aligned with a number of studies that discuss how educators are trying to ensure international students are on an equal footing and in order to achieve this they are prioritising participation, which involves the understandings and experiences of international students but other participants like teachers and local students as well, their understandings and experiences impact international students’ participation (Gbadamosi, 2018; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Straker, 2016). While the

literature (Adisa *et al.*, 2019; Gbadamosi, 2018; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Straker, 2016; Wette & Furneaux, 2018) addressed some of the factors that impede progression, there was limited mention of how a lack of communication from lecturers and how environment and facilities impact students, this was evident in our study. This could help inform school level and institutions wide level suggestions to support progression.

Suggested improvements to support progression

Suggested improvements to support progression revealed that there are three levels of supports suggested namely, lecturer level, school level and institution wide level. The lecturer level suggestions to support progression relate to the involvement of lecturers in the integration of domestic and international students, especially in relation to group work activities. This aligned with the literature (Rienties *et al.*, 2012) which states ‘academic performance is affected by academic integration’ (p.696), Furthermore Straker (2016) points out that educators are trying to facilitate participation to help international students be at the same level as local students. While the literature (Rienties *et al.*, 2012; Straker, 2016) addressed some of the lecturer level suggestions to support progression, there was limited mention of how the learning experience of international students can be dramatically different to Europe/Ireland and the types of supports that lecturer offer e.g. - talking to students and providing understandable descriptions/explanations which was evident in our study. The school level suggestions to support progression are associated with improvement in student-school communications and the promotion of supports available to students. There was limited mention of these in the literature, which was evident in our study. The institution wide level suggestions to support progression in our findings suggest a review of the IELTS requirement for both listening and writing and the establishment of an international student group or union. Similarly, Adisa *et al.* (2019), Gbadamosi (2018) and Wette & Furneaux

(2018) which showed the need for institutions to recognise the challenges faced by international students in order to provide the appropriate support services. Furthermore, Rienties *et al.* (2012) point out that among educators, the academic and social integration of international students is not yet clearly defined in the policies and practices of Western institutions.

Conclusion

The qualitative research conducted identified factors that facilitate and impede progression of international students through higher education. The student's motivation to study outside of their home country and develop their independent learning skills, along with completing a pathway/foundation programme, supportive lecturers and attending classes are the factors that play a key role in facilitating progression of international students through higher education. The factors found to impede progression of international students are the lecturers lack of understanding of international students' needs, challenges with group work, issues with lack of communication, college environment and facilities and a lack of integration with domestic students. The suggested improvements to support progression highlighted in both the findings and literature provide insights and actions for lecturers, schools and institutions. The authors suggest that lecturers are educated on the need to integrate domestic and international students, especially in relation to group work activities. At a faculty or school level the authors recommend that a focus is placed on improvements in student-school communications and the promotion of supports available to students. At an institutional level the authors make a recommendation for a review of the IELTS requirement for both listening and writing and the establishment of an international student group or union. It is evident the research contributes to our understanding of student success through the lens of international students and the findings would be of interest to both the Higher Education Authority (HEA)

and the National Forum for Teaching and Learning future reports on understanding and enabling student success in Irish Higher Education. Similar to other qualitative research studies this study had a small number of participants with just five interviewees. A future study of this nature could engage with a larger number of participants from a wider reaching space in higher education to find further insights into the findings reported here.

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