FACILITATING THE SMOOTH TRANSITION OF SECOND-YEAR XJTLU STUDENTS INTO PLANNING PROGRAMMES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL:

RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS FROM AN ONGOING SERIES OF INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract

Increasingly internationalised student cohorts within planning schools offer opportunities to enhance existent student learning, but may also present potential issues, such as language difficulties, cultural disorientation, and the need to assimilate learning styles, internationalise curricula, and varying pedagogic teaching styles, all of which can impact staffing and costs. In 2016 the Department of Planning and Geography at the University of Liverpool obtained a Learning & Teaching (T&L) Award to develop projects examining the potential for a more meaningful learning experience for undergraduate students transitioning to Liverpool from XJTLU - the university's sister institution in Suzhou, China. This intervention primarily sought to promote complementary understanding of British and Chinese planning at XJTLU and UoL to facilitate improved academic attainment for XJTLU students completing their studies in Liverpool. Evaluating those aspects of the intervention focused on additional contact and one-to-one guidance for students, this paper reflects on this project and develops recommendations on managing the process of student transfer as well as ensuring that the planning discipline integrates "soft skills" more effectively in its teaching.

Keywords

Planning pedagogy, student learning and teaching, reflective practice, authentic assessment, University of Liverpool, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

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1. Introduction

The "internationalisation" of student cohorts is a trend which will be familiar to academics who, over recent years, have seen a shift in the composition of the classes they are required to teach, and the challenges that this brings (Lauridsen 2020). Of course, internationalisation is not, necessarily, a new phenomenon. For example, students have long-sought opportunities to study abroad as a means to broaden their experience, and have been aided by schemes such as the Erasmus programme (Otero 2008) which has facilitated student exchange programmes since the late 1980s. Similarly, the Bologna Process, which sought to rationalise educational principles, outcomes and qualifications across the European Union (Davies 2008; Keeling 2006; Reinalda and Kulesza 2005), also made it easier for students to undertake study in other countries. This has taken the form outlined by de Wit et al. (2015:29) who noted that:

> 'the [Internationalisation of Higher Education is] the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society'.

Latterly, however, new forms of internationalisation have emerged which are underpinned by different rationales. In particular this has occured when universities have identified opportunities to capitalise upon emerging economies – e.g. India, Malaysia, and China. Here, and whilst the arguments of broadening student experience certainly underpin the marketing, such schemes are often underpinned by a hard economic reality – not least because non-EU students entering higher education from those countries are liable pay higher rates of fees – often three-to-four times those of domestic students (Chankseliani 2017).

The result is that, in many cases, non-EU or broader international students from outside of the UK represent an important revenue stream for universities (Creso and Sabzalieva, 2018), and such is the economic viability of these revenues that we can also observe a proliferation in universities establishing 'sister' campuses in those emerging markets as a means of maximising the opportunities that those markets present (Cantwell 2015; Kraal 2017). This can be a pervasive view within the UK, as well as in North America and Australia – places that receive the highest intake of international student enrolments. Crucially, whilst in many cases those campuses act as standalone institutions, many also provide opportunities for transfer – for example to complete all, or part, of a degree within the original UK or North American based Higher Education Institution (HEI).

The institutional-financial incentive of those opportunities can have consequences for the composition of student cohorts. Whilst traditional forms of student internationalisation might often result in classes where a minority of students of varied nationalities are mixed with a largely domestic cohort, often this newer form of internationalisation can lead to bi-national, or in extreme cases mono-national (Groeppel-Klein, Germelmann, and Glaum 2010) cultures in which domestic students are outnumbered by international students. Going further, the combination of these two elements can create a strange dynamic for universities and, ultimately, host departments to navigate – not least as they seek to maintain the core function of being education providers in a competitive environment. For example, whilst there is an ongoing need 'to engage with the complexities of diverse cultural contents, [in order to] design and deliver quality learning experiences for all' (Clarke, Johal, Sharp, and Quinn 2016: 253), any meaningful integration of learning experiences 'requires time and patience' (Kunzmann and Yuan 2014: 69).

Taking the time to contextualise teaching materials to specific cohorts (Ryan 2011), and especially with regards to the creation of internationalised curricula that are appropriate, detailed, and nuanced to diverse student needs requires universities to consider the financial implications of extra resources (and the extent to which these neutralise the income derived from additional student numbers), and unseen resource implications; staff delivering those extra facilities may be forced to divert their time from research and other associated activities (Sawir 2011). This requires an increased level of engagement with the political and socio-economic specificities of international student cohorts, especially those from developing countries, North African & the Middle East (MENA), and south and east Asian nations. Moreover, there is a need to appreciate the academic culture that students have previously been taught within. All of which may be invariably different to the structures, learning styles, and expectations of higher education in the UK or other parts of Europe or North America (Kraal 2017).

These challenges are particularly acute in British universities, which as Walker (2014: 235) notes, 'host both the second highest number of international students in the world and the second highest proportion of international students in the student body'. The expansion of higher education and access to international study in China has been of particular importance in this. To explore how universities respond to some of those challenges, this paper reflects on the experiences of the Department of Planning at the University of Liverpool – a place that embodies many of the pedagogical issues surrounding internationalisation discussed thus far. To examine these phenomena, we focus our analysis on the research questions:

1. To what extent has internationalisation led to a rethinking of teaching styles, curricula development, and assessment to meet the needs of international students?
2. What types of teaching innovations can be used to effectively engage international students with UK based curricula?
3. What added-value do teaching interventions focussed on soft skills and interaction with international students have for wider teaching approaches in UK HEIs?

The discussion of these questions centres on the need to deliver a high-quality teaching and learning experience for all students regardless of their country of origin. They also focus on a contemporary issue for UK, and international, HEIs – how to successful integrate diverse student cohorts, and what best practice exists to meet the academic, soft skills, and employability of graduates who are more mobile than student bodies were historically (Robson and Turner 2007). These skills are prominent in the University of Liverpool case study as urban and environmental planning (and its cognisant disciplines of urban design and real estate) are vocational subjects, like architecture, engineering, and medicine, that require a set of skills that go beyond the academic (cf. Schipper and van der Steppen, 2018).

This paper aims to outline potential interventions open to HEIs in the UK, and internationally, to act in a more responsive manner to the needs of international student cohorts. These react to, and acknowledge that, the changing composition of student groups may not engage as readily with more traditional lecture-based teaching, and that therefore more interactive and bespoke teaching practices that address specific concerns of the student body may be a more appropriate teaching pathway to explore (Cooner 2010).

2. Internationalisation within Planning at the University of Liverpool

Established in 2006, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is a joint venture between the University of Liverpool (UoL) and Xi'an Jiaotong University. With a campus located in Suzhou, 60km west of Shanghai, students enrolling at XJTLU have the option of completing the entirety of their degrees in China, or embarking on a '2+2' in which the students complete two years at XJTLU, before transferring to Liverpool and 'complet[ing] the rest of their undergraduate studies in the UK' (Sykes et al. 2015: 81). Crucially, those final two years would be completed on the UoL campus, and in near-complete parallel with home/EU students. The strategic thinking behind this venture was to provide access to the highly sought after UK higher education market at an undergraduate and postgraduate level (cf. Yuan et al. 2016), to ensure revenue entered the University of Liverpool via additional student fees, and to forge research and institutional links between the UK and China; the latter being especially significant in an era of fluctuation in university enrolments from the UK, EU and globally (Kraal 2017).

The financial returns associated with HEI internationalisation have driven investment in both UK and overseas infrastructure including increased levels of staffing, the creation of new programmes of study, and the construction of overseas satellite or sister campuses (Elkin, Devjee, and Farnsworth 2005). Investment in capital infrastructure could be viewed as a mechanism to future proof student exchange via the creation of new institutional links. They also benefit from their role as an 'anchor institution' whereby research, teaching and outreach/development activities can take place with local stakeholders – an issue that has economic and socio-political relevance locally and internationally (Goddard et al. 2014).

Upon its inception some, but not all, UoL courses were offered to prospective 2+2 students – reflecting a mixture of market strength and the capacity and willingness of UoL departments to potentially expand

their programmes. Departments that participated include: Computer and Electrical Engineering, Chemistry, Architecture, Business, and the focus of this paper, Urban Planning. A common thread between each participating department was their individual (and collective) focus on the education of graduates within vocational subjects, who would then utilise their experiences at UoL/XJTLU in practice.

The first cohort of Planning 2+2 students arrived at the beginning of the 2008/9 academic year and in doing so, turned the undergraduate cohort from a largely Home/EU cohort with modest internationalisation (i.e. approximately 5%) to an effectively bi-national cohort where international students comprise the overwhelming majority. For example, of 2016/2017's second-year cohort of 109 students, over 95% were from XJTLU with the remaining 5% comprising UK, EU, and other overseas students.

From the very beginning, alongside delivering graduates capable of working as planners either in the UK, China, or beyond, the Planning 2+2 curriculum was designed with integration in mind. For the first two years at XJTLU students would complete modules which focused on providing a foundation of planning-related knowledge. This focused on planning in the UK, China, and within a global context addressing the history, theory, socio-political, economic, and environmental examination of development, so as to ensure that students opting to come to the UK would have a comparable academic knowledge[1] to students taught at UoL, whilst those opting to remain in China could similarly progress.

Within academic literature there is a corresponding discussion of how curricula can be more effectively aligned illustrating the complexity of ensuring that all students have are able to learn from a comparable academic basis. To do this effectively requires, as noted by Leask (2013:115), a better understanding of the 'mindset, skillset and heartset' of international students, as well as academic/teaching faculty and an institution's ability to react effectively to the changing needs of the student body. This includes reflecting on teaching and assessment type, and as noted previously engagement with culturally normative understandings of socio-cultural and political issues (Wylie 2008).

When registering for study at UoL, 2+2 students would be required to register on one of two pathways: *Urban* or *Environmental* planning. Crucially, in administrative terms, this was identical to the pathways on offer to those who had been at UoL through year one, although the terms of the 2+2 agreement meant transferring students would be prohibited from transferring to the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)-accredited *Master of Planning* (MPlan)[2]. Alongside two specialist modules relating to the selected pathway, as an RTPI accredited department, the second and third year curriculum also afforded opportunities to study urban design, rural planning, and to undertake an international fieldtrip. Transferring students would also be expected to complete a research-focused project in their third year (the only major pedagogical deviation is that MPlan students would complete this work in their fourth year of study).

The development of academic, research, and communication skills aimed at professional occupations has been a significant issue in the internationalisation process. In a UK context, delivering the professional competency framework of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has been central to planning teaching. Moreover, across the built environment the adherence to the practical needs of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) or the Institute of Civil Engineers (ICE) needs to be embedded within teaching programmes to ensure that graduates have the requisite technical, legal, and practical skills to translate their learning in practice. Such issues are not limited to the built environment but are evident in all vocational subjects, for example, education and medicine (Sumsion and Goodfellow 2004; McGarvey et al. 2015).

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1   The academic Urban Design and Planning programme in Suzhou was designed, and has developed, to mirror the structures and focus of its sister degrees at the University of Liverpool. Students are taught planning history, theory, and digital, communication and practice-based skills in each year of study due to the vocational nature of 'planning', as a discipline. The most significant difference in approach is the adherence to established teaching metrics, assessment and styles with Suzhou drawing more frequently on North American approaches to marking and attainment than in the UK.

2   Although RTPI accreditation is mainly relevant to UK based planners, a number of former Commonwealth countries, i.e. Malaysia and Singapore, also place emphasis on the process. Within an internationalised market the RTPI accreditation is less instrumental in attracting students to the UK, compared to the wider benefits of studying overseas.

From an institutional perspective, the logistical integration was successful, and issues such as timetabling larger rooms and increased marking loads were broadly anticipated and ameliorated – for example the faculty within Planning expanded from 9 full-time teaching staff to 15 between 2009 and 2017. However whilst there was recognition that, in the first years of the XJTLU partnership, Planning at Liverpool had done much to 'meet the needs of both the larger international student intake… [and] Home and EU students' (Sykes et al. 2015: 82), student feedback – received through a combination of Staff-Student Teaching Committees, tutorials, and informal discussion with teaching staff, suggested that the transition and integration of a significant cohort of XJTLU students from Suzhou to Liverpool could be managed more effectively. The research of Ryan (2011), Sumsion and Goodfellow (2004), and Robson and Turner (2007) discuss examples of these issues assessing the mechanisms needed to successfully integrate students into 'new' ways of learning via discussions of co-learning techniques, the promotion of soft skills, and greater reflection on effective pedagogic approaches to large and/or diverse student cohorts. Over consecutive years, this message was relatively consistent: physical transference does not always mean that students are prepared for the learning styles and expectations of a UK planning degree. Perceived shortcomings centred on two closely linked areas (a) academic feedback and support, and (b) the need to prepare students for a life beyond graduation, i.e., employment, or postgraduate study.

Acknowledging this divergence, and as a means to facilitate the development of a more 'employable' and meaningful teaching experience for students making the transition to Liverpool from XJTLU, as well as addressing consistent commentary in Staff-Student Teaching committees a £5,000 Learning and Teaching (L&T) award was obtained for the 2016/2017 academic year by the then-Director of Undergraduate Planning. In doing so, the L&T intervention was premised on the following three research questions, which not only reflect the why and how approaches to teaching, but subsequently also address the what can be done question:

> Is there a need for [Planning at UoL to make] tailored interventions to better prepare and accommodate the needs of students transferring from XJTLU?

This was supplemented by a number of related issues:

> a. If students do need more support, what alternate teaching strategies could be deployed?
> b. Are skills-based interventions needed throughout the duration of a module?

Although focussed on the transition of Planning students the T&L project was premised on an understanding of wider institutional discussions pertaining to the successful integration and attainment of students transferring to UoL from XJTLU. Existent research literature focussed on internationalisation highlights that this issue is not unique to planning students at UoL or indeed to UoL. Rather, it is a phenomena that is directing innovative thinking about teaching and learning in North America, Australia and other parts of Europe. Interestingly, the real time needed to develop alternative strategies to maximise the effectiveness of learning is leading to greater innovation in practice across the HEI sector (Bowles and Murphy 2020; Bretag et al. 2014; Azmat 2013; Kraal 2017). The redevelopment of teaching materials to establish a more global, or Chinese, focus was paramount in such debates to ensure that graduates were able to apply their learning outside of the UK. The relevance of UK-centric curricula for a predominately non-UK student cohort required a systematic reflection on how, what, and why specific 'planning' topics were taught (see also the discussion of the teaching of law by Kraal (2017) for a comparison). UoL also aimed to ensure that graduates were receiving the most appropriate digital, i.e. urban design and cartographic, and communication skills required of an evermore demanding internationalised job market. Moreover, the ongoing transfer of students fluctuated yearly, and thus UoL had to consider what makes the university an attractive proposition for students: academically, socially, and in terms of employability.

The project was premised on four interventions into the teaching materials based on additional contact time and seminars associated with the second year module ENVS205 People and Place (Research Skills) module. The interventions were split between activities on-campus in Liverpool (Interventions One and Two), and those delivered online or in China on the XJTLU campus (Interventions Three and Four).

2.1. Interventions One and Two

First, a survey of 12 statements and 3 questions (numbered consecutively from 1-15) was administered to all students within the second-year cohort to obtain a base-line of students' perceptions of their key skills and competences, as well as their cultural expectations to generate baseline understanding for transferring and progressing students. Secondly, contact hours were doubled within the compulsory *ENVS205* module, through fortnightly non-compulsory workshops, focused either on developing key skills or reinforcing the learning objectives covered in previous lectures. Crucially, so that the students might take greater ownership of their own learning and development (Levy and Petrulis 2012; Winstone, Nash, Parker, and Rowntree 2017), the focus of over 50% of the workshops was informed by emerging student concerns rather than having being predetermined by course facilitators prior to the module's commencement.

2.2. Interventions Three and Four

Thirdly, an exchange of senior staff between XJTLU and Liverpool provided an opportunity to discuss curriculum development and synergy (informed by the results of the survey). Fourthly, a one-week crash course on key principles of UK planning was delivered to students at Suzhou prior to their arrival in Liverpool3. In addition, a growing pedagogical exchange developed between staff at UoL and XJTLU due to engagement with cross-institutional T&L development, module development and moderation, and joint supervision of student research projects.

The proposed interventions aimed to increase contact time, academic discussion related to study materials, and promote improved dialogue between 'UoL' and 'XJTLU' students and staff. Being partially student led allowed the facilitators a greater level of reflectivity in teaching practices to address both structural issues and the application of understanding within the student cohort. The reactive nature of the additional workshops provided a secondary mechanism to teaching in addition to traditional 'chalk and talk' lectures and group seminars.

3. Methodology

This paper deals with the interventions that specifically provided additional contact and one-to-one guidance for students in Year 2: namely, Interventions One and Two. With Interventions One and Two directly informing and being informed by the 'exchange' elements of Interventions Three and Four, careful design was required to maximise the efficacy of the data collection. Accordingly, the interventions were conducted as follows:

3.1. Intervention One: Surveys

To obtain baseline data of student perceptions of their key skills, an individual survey (Figure 1) was administered in the first session of ENVS205 (Week One, Semester One, 2016/17). Comprised of fifteen questions, and reflecting the work of Nunes (2004), the survey was designed to enable students – International and Home/EU alike – to reflect on their expectations of studying Planning at UoL, studying in the UK, and assess their own perceptions of the key skills they would require in doing so.

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3   The one-week programme of lectures focussing on the structure and focus of the UoL Planning course, workshops discussing the transition to Liverpool, and a talk on student expectations was delivered in Suzhou in Semester Two of Year 2 for XJTLU students/by the former Head of Undergraduate Programmes via UoL/XJTLU staff exchange funding.

1. I want to study Planning in Liverpool because I want to improve my English language skills.
2. I easily understand what university staff are saying to me.
3. Often I have trouble understanding the Liverpool accent when I am visiting shops and restaurants.
4. I try to speak and write in English for at least three hours each day.
5. I feel that my studies in China have prepared me well for this experience
6. I believe that international students should not be penalised for making more writing mistakes than UK students
7. I have worked in small groups of four or five students on university projects in the past.
8. I am looking forward to group work with students from all over the world.
9. I am worried that I will not understand what the other members of my group will want me to do.
10. I feel confident that lecturers and other staff will make time to see me and listen to my concerns.
11. I feel embarrassed asking for help when I do not understand something.
12. There is a lot of learning support available to me if I need to access it.
13. Why did you want to study in the UK and at Liverpool?
14. What do you hope to achieve through this experience?
15. What else could the University of Liverpool do to help support your learning?

Figure 1: Survey of statements and questions administered to ENVS205 students at the start of Semester One

The survey comprised a mixture of closed Likert Scale answers, and more open qualitative reflection used to encourage students to proffer more substantive and contextual comments. Student participation was voluntary, and staff made clear that the survey was both anonymous, and not linked to a formative or summative assessment. This acknowledged the work of Bryman (2012) who observes that anonymity gives respondents more confidence to be frank and is considered to be less threatening. 91% of the class completed the survey proffering a wide range of well-considered comments suggest the students felt sufficiently assured to be candid.

3.2. Intervention Two, Part i: Workshops

The fortnightly workshops ran for the duration of Semester One, with each taking a theme broadly aligned to the previous week's lecture content. The workshop provision was principally motivated by the findings of Cuseo (2007, 6), who suggests that students may feel unsupported in traditional lecture environments, and may therefore be susceptible to a 'reduced depth of student thinking' and 'lower levels of academic achievement'. Thus, the fortnightly workshops funded through the L&T award gave students an opportunity to revisit themes and concepts discussed in the lectures and reinforce their existent learning. The format of the workshops varied between sessions, but centred on self-selected groups (of c.8 students), and provided opportunities to present and discuss their work, either individually or as a group, and receive peer feedback – reflecting Harland, Wald, and Randhawa's (2016, 2) contention 'that 'feedback is most effective when students are actively involved in the process'.

During Semester Two, the tone of the fortnightly workshops shifted to focus on a range of study skills issues that the students had themselves identified during Semester One – either through the survey administered under intervention one, or through discussions with facilitators. In this way student-led opinions and concerns directly shaped the content of subsequent sessions, and thus enabled the further reinforcement of 'inclusive practices [that]… overcome barriers to the participation and learning of students'(Ainscow 2015, 114), as well as creating a two-way process of dialogue in which student feedback is interpreted and acted upon (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2016).

3.3. Intervention Two, Part ii: Drop-ins

Further to the workshops, one-to-one drop-in sessions were held during Semester One. Held after feedback for the first summative assessment for ENVS205 was made available, the 15-minute sessions offered students an opportunity to seek specific guidance on how they could have improved their assignments, as well as acting as a vehicle to ask questions regarding specific learning and teaching concerns. Although offered to all students in the ENVS205 cohort, all those who chose to attend the drop-in sessions were XJTLU students.[4]

4. Interventions One and Two: Findings and Analysis

4.1. Intervention One

Of the 96 respondents to the survey, when asked about their motivations to study at Liverpool, (Statement 1 and Question 13) 65% suggested that Liverpool's strong history, as the world's oldest planning school, was a motivating factor. In addition, a substantial majority (69%) of transferring students believed that they were relatively well prepared for their time abroad, that they possessed a good level of time management skills, and viewed the more theoretical Planning course offered by UoL, as a complement to the design-led courses that they had already studied at XJTLU. Away from this, a substantial majority (72%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to study Planning in Liverpool to improve their English language skills (Statement 1). However, the first survey also suggested that transferring students believed their English-language skills were good, with most either agreeing (40%) or ambivalent (43%) that they easily understood what university staff said (Statement 2).

Though responses to these questions highlighted students' self-perception of their confidence in spoken and written English, other responses suggested that this confidence had its limits. Though more than 80% of students said they could easily understand university staff, many observed that lecturers speaking either too quickly, or in non-standard accents (both regional, and international), presented them with the greatest difficulties (Statement 2 and Question 15). This was a comment that was further expanded upon in the qualitative comments made by five students who noted that they experienced particular difficulties when trying to communicate in local shops with Liverpudlians as a consequence of the latter's accents (Statement 3). This suggests that there may be merit in transferring students being afforded opportunities both within classroom and ex-curricular activities for further immersion into their host country's language and culture. In addition, greater reflection on how students can be exposed to 'native English' speakers in Suzhou by XJTLU could facilitate a greater understanding on arrival in the UK, i.e., greater staff exchange between UoL and XJTLU to teach students in China before they transfer to Liverpool.

In a similar manner, there are clear teaching and learning implications that only 22% of respondents agreed to the statement posed in Statement 4 that they 'try to speak and write in English for at least three hours each day', not least given that the most common written statements accompanying this answer noted how individual students were either too busy to achieve this or that most of the people they knew (e.g. roommates) were Chinese. Indeed, the perception that, despite the internationalisation of both the curricula (in terms of the literature, examples, and skills discussed) and cohorts, full integration remains difficult to achieve, was further exemplified by the fact that 50% of the transferring students indicated that they had either little or no contact with English students. Given, the benefit of total immersion and cultural interaction in second language skills noted by Kormos, Csizér, and Iwaniec (2015), and in light of clear indications that this was not occurring naturally, these findings suggest that there is a need for universities to be more proactive in giving students opportunities both within and beyond the classroom through which to engage with language and cultural transfer. This was discussed by Robson and Turner (2007) who called for a more holistic approach to internationalisation that challenged established practices (nominally those of male Anglo-Saxon staff) to embrace new forms of pedagogy and integrate them into practice.

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4   Interestingly the additional non-UK students within the cohort choose not to attend any sessions. This suggests that (a) they felt confident in their academic learning; and/or (b) that non-XJTLU students felt the sessions were aimed as students transferring into UoL from XJTLU and not for progressing students.

Notwithstanding such linguistic obstacles, almost all of the students surveyed had, according to their answers to Statements 7, 8, and 9, previous experience of working in group projects (97%), with the majority either strongly agreeing or agreeing that they were looking forward to doing so with students from all over the world (80%).[5] The notable exceptions to the latter question were the five English students who completed the survey, all of whom either strongly disagreed or disagreed that they were looking forward to the experience. This gave insights into the issue of language (and wider ethos of group work/participation between mixed cohorts, Turner 2006; Gabb 2006) from another perspective where, with regard to worrying whether [other students] would understand what the other members of a group will want them to do, 32% agreed, with only 20% disagreeing (Statements 7, 8, 9). Here, almost all of the Home-EU students who completed the survey spoke of their concerns about their overall marks – particularly given that their second-year marks count towards their overall degree classification. Although these concerns related to issues around student grades, and the utility of the learning process, (Black et al. 2004), they suggest a degree of 'othering' is visible by Home-EU students with regard to transferring XJTLU students (see Hayes 2017 for a more detailed analysis of 'othering' and it's socio-cultural, political and financial meanings in UK HEIs). In turn, this suggested that further guidance, support and encouragement, as to the benefits of active cross-cultural working – both in terms of learning, and authentic experiences in the workplace – is necessary.

Statement 6 - whether international students should or should not be penalised for making more writing mistakes than UK students demonstrated the most widely distributed responses, 36% either strongly agreed, or agreed – each with 18% of responses. A further 35% were neutral on the matter, and 20% disagreed (9% strongly disagreed). Commentary included that 'ideas are more important than spelling', and that 'all students are equal', particularly 'if choosing to study in English'. Here, students recognised the importance of this issue, and welcomed dialogue with one comment [Respondent 41], saying that this was 'a good question which we should talk about'.

When asked about perceptions of pre-existing institutional support (Statements 10 and 12), most students were confident that lecturers and other staff would make time for them (45%), although a substantial number remained ambivalent (37%). Additionally, 65% believed there was substantial learning support available if needed. However, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, and several comments suggested that the various mobile apps and UoL's online teaching portal were not sufficient, as more personalised support was important. Encouragingly, from the perspective of facilitating learning, a majority of comments noted that that there were no negative connotations in seeking assistance and that students felt comfortable approaching lecturers for assistance (Statements 10, 11,12).

The three, more open-ended, questions, which closed the survey, allowed students to return to some of these issues in more depth. For example, in Question 13, which asked 'Why did you want to study in the UK and at Liverpool?', the positives of having an international experience was a motivating factor (38%), but others spoke of broader pressures including parental/familial wishes, and longer-term career-focused positioning, e.g. the experience would better equip them for undertaking postgraduate study elsewhere in the UK. Building on many of the career-oriented issues raised thus far, Question 14, asked participants what they hoped to achieve through the experience of studying at UoL, providing a platform for respondents to go into greater depth. Again, whilst a majority (36%) discussed improving their English competency, improving professional skills was also a prominent aspiration (30%), with two detailed comments indicating that students hoped that studying Planning at Liverpool would help them get a better job. Although international experience (7%) was an existing theme, here answers put a culturally specific perspective on it, with two particular replies: 'to build a better China' and to determine 'how a capitalist country is different from a socialist country', indicating how this would be put to practical use after graduation.

Students also spoke of life beyond study, indicating the importance that students place on work-life balance. Here, numerous respondents commented that making a 'happy life with friends' was important. One ambitious student thought that the year abroad would help him 'to be a better man, positive, helpful, who never gives

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5   It is noticeable that those students reading Planning at the University of Liverpool are predominately British or Chinese/Hong Kong nationals. Only a minor proportion of students taking undergraduate planning degrees are from a wider European or international background.

up'. This is important, and shows that for many students university study is more than grades; which may raise potential areas of conflict between students who see university principally as a 'means to an end' – i.e. are focused exclusively on grades as extrinsic learners – and those who see the opportunity as one for general betterment (Bretag et al. 2014).

Finally, Question 15 (What else could the University of Liverpool do to help support your learning?) elicited the greatest number of comments, and again revisited many of the issues discussed above. 9% of participants wanted more support for Chinese students, with Respondents 8 and 94 wanting more English conversation to be facilitated. Respondent 2 issued a plea for staff to speak more slowly, which echoes earlier comments made regarding Statements 2 and 3. Speaking to both pre-and-post-submission concerns the request for more guidance on progress was voiced by Respondents 38 and 39, whilst Respondent 22 also suggested that a group could be set up to check and advise students on grammar and spelling in coursework. This was a concern that would be further noted – and addressed – in the drop-in sessions that were subsequently held. These responses also give further credence to the previously noted opinions of Harland, Wald and Randhawa (2016) with regard to the need to increase peer-review learning and feedback opportunities. Here, there was also a clear desire to have more one-to-one contact with lecturers, as three respondents believed that face-to-face talks between students and staff would be helpful; Respondent 9 would even like to 'make friends with lecturers', as well as obtain 'good references for postgrad study'. Beyond this, other students (14, 90) spoke of their desire for self-supported study, and in a similar manner, six participants suggested that it would be useful to access beforehand the key readings for a lecture (5, 12, 50), arguing that this would allow them to 'check the difficult work before class'.[6] This concern by a limited number of students suggests, however, that further – and continual – reinforcement of the availability of such resources is needed if facilitators are to ensure that learners' potential is always maximised.

4.2. Intervention Two, Part i: Workshops

Through the L&T workshops, alongside informal information gathered in conversation with the students and observations during both lectures and tutorials, it became apparent that transferring students desired more written and directed feedback. Here, international students in particular sought greater guidance and informal formative feedback on either drafts of their summative assessments, or reassurance that their work conformed to the demands of the assessment. This was especially evident in those workshops that focused on the module's first summative assessment.

Prior to the intervention, it had been assumed, in line with the findings of Rowe (2011), that students – especially within the more marketised setting of higher education, merely desired more feedback *per se*. What was surprising, therefore, was the extent to which students across the cohort sought *further* guidance, not only on individual assignments themselves but also more general academic skills. This was exemplified by the fact that, as Semester One developed, students asked for workshops to be held on, for example, the differences between reports and essays, conducting a literature review, using archival sources, and practical advice on group work scenarios. Students also wanted to receive feedback on the practice presentations that they were undertaking in preparation for future group-based oral presentations delivered in Semester Two.

With regard, therefore, to how the L&T grant could shape and enhance future teaching and learning, such student comments revealed a clear need for the incorporation of learning environments beyond that of the traditional lecture hall in order to address significant skill gaps and thus leave *all* students feeling adequately prepared for their assignments. Additionally, the number of topics requested far exceeded the workshops timetabled (and costed) for Semester One. This may therefore suggest - and it is accepted that the results from an L&T grant focused on a single module cannot be generalisable - that students themselves see degree programmes as not only needing to deliver subject-specific knowledge, but also as needing to train them in an array of skills that, in previous generations, were left to be developed outside the classroom. Thus, a process of osmosis is visible whereby students engage in a dual form of learning: academic and socio-cultural, that

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6   Well before the present outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the dissemination of teaching resources, it was already established practice within the discipline at Liverpool that core readings, lecture slides, and other learning resources were placed online at least 24 hours before a given lecture takes place.

allows them to develop new capabilities (Lauridsen, 2020). However, this process requires a level of curation by academic staff that goes beyond merely conducting assessment to ensure that a balance is established between academic attainment and life skills (Bretag et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2018).

Such student-based changes of emphasis are especially pertinent for courses such as Planning where curriculum content is governed not only by internal departmental and university considerations but also issues of professional accreditation and delivering an education programme that maps effectively onto the competencies required for practice. In terms of planning education this relates to the RTPI and the RICS, but is also pertinent to other vocational subjects such as teaching, social work or medicine (Crooner 2020; McGarvey et al. 2015). Here, these student-driven changes reinforce the contentions of, amongst others, Duhr, Cowell, and Markus (2016, 21) who urge Europe's planning schools to reflect in their curricula the increasing internationalism of the profession, not only in terms of practitioners. Such statements provided space to reflect on the composition of Planning degrees at UoL, the alignment of professional accreditation competencies within the curriculum, and the appropriateness of the teaching programme to a bi-national student body. These additional activities were actioned by the new Head of Undergraduate Teaching during the 2016/17 academic year, asking all Planning staff to consider whether the programmes still reflected the department's teaching ethos and expertise, and whether they were suitable for a largely overseas student cohort. It also gives credence to the rejection of that traditional orthodoxy of planning teaching, whereby a planning course 'should be made up of a little bit of everything that a planner ought to know' in terms of subject discipline knowledge (for further details see Perloff 1957, 170, cited in Batey 1985, 414), in favour of the development of courses that incorporate wider soft skills that are not profession specific including communication and digital literacy (Hirt 2002). This complements UoL's policy on authentic assessment discussed earlier, which specifically promotes these principles so as best to prepare graduates for work.

Though the L&T funding for the additional workshops was only in place in Semester One, the positive results, perceived student demand for the project's activity, and as a consequence of the issues that had arisen in both the surveys and workshops, it was decided by the ENVS205/ teaching team that the intervention should be rolled forward into Semester Two. To this end, therefore, a second programme of intervention was initiated. Further workshops were held in Semester Two alongside another series of optional and voluntary one-to-one drop-in sessions. Finally, and as a means to capture the effects of this work, a second survey was administered at the end of the formal teaching period of Semester Two to f gauge students' perceived changes in their skills over the course of the module, and the utility of the interventions made.

4.3. Intervention Two, Part ii: Drop-in Sessions

The 15-minute drop-in sessions were popular amongst students. The sign-up sheets for the drop-ins were filled within two days of them being made available, and without exception, each overran. This response level gives credence to the observations of Gibbs and Simpson (2004) in that the perceived value of face-to-face contact time remains high amongst today's students.

Within the drop-in sessions, two particular soft-skill/generic academic skill questions arose. First, 75% of attendees (41 students), asked for guidance on referencing and how to add critical analysis within a Western context of academic writing. In particular, concerns focused on issues of plagiarism and how and where references were needed, the differences between a descriptive narrative and critical analysis, and how best to achieve the latter. Indeed, in every drop-in session, staff were asked line-by-line, highly specific questions as to how to phrase planning ideas and concepts, demonstrating that the questions went well beyond the mere mechanics of writing. This may suggest, though further research is needed, that despite institution-wide support services such as the English Language Centre (ELC) providing invaluable support to students in *how* to write, there is a gap between such generic training and the academic demands of planning as a discipline, which require additional interventions that are subject- and student-specific. As one student commented, although she had learnt how to write through both her studies at XJTLU and the sessions she had attended in the ELC, the drop-in session allowed her to understand the 'careless errors' that she had made and to realise that she 'needed to check work more thoroughly before handing it in'.

Other topics of interest in the drop-in sessions included discussions on the use of language; maintaining a formal tone; how shorter sentences can improve meaning; the excessive repetition of words or concepts; padding; and the differences between a report and an essay. Accordingly, the drop-in sessions not only informed the students' practice, but also permitted the further communication of needs and wants that could directly impact upon future curriculum design and, through so doing, promote enhanced teaching as well as ongoing practitioner reflection (Nixon, Brooman, Murphy, and Fearon 2016; Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor 2014).

4.4. Intervention Two, Part iii: Second Survey

1. I have improved my knowledge and skills in key areas.
2. Were you happy with the grades you have received?
3. How did the seminars help you to understand the lectures?
4. The feedback I received was helpful.
5. I would like more one-to-one time with the lecturers to understand the course better.
6. The seminars helped me to make sense of the lectures.
7. I was surprised how many errors I made in written work and referencing.
8. I have been well prepared for my studies at UoL and am able to organise my time effectively.
9. Did the team work presentations develop your skills?
10. Did you feel confident about the group presentation?
11. Did you learn useful skills in the CV exercise?

Figure 2: Second Survey Questions – Administered to ENVS205 students at the end of the module

These student-led concerns were repeated in the responses received from the 85 students (78% of the module's/ENVS205's total cohort) who completed the second, end-of-module, survey (Figure Two). As with the first survey, this survey also contained a range of statements and questions. That those students who completed the second survey wanted reassurance and advice on such matters demonstrates the importance of the intervention: according to the students themselves, they believe they need more support, thus answering the primary research question of the original L&T intervention.

To Statement 1, 69% of respondents were either confident or very confident that they had improved their skills on the course, with 85% of respondents to Question 2 noting that they were either 'happy' or 'very happy' with the grades that they had received. Question 3 sought to relate the fortnightly seminars to the lectures (also fortnightly); 89% either agreed or strongly agreed that the seminars had helped reinforce their understanding of the issues addressed in lectures. Within their additional comments, 27 students suggested that the seminars added context, with 19 remarking that the 'less traditional' format and atmosphere of seminar teaching had aided them in gaining valuable skills. This is a finding that can be seen to reflect the views of DeNeve and Heppner (1997, 232) with regard to the need to move away from the passive learning environment of lecture halls in favour of more interactive learning environments.

Furthermore, Rowe (2011) notes that students across the higher education sector want more written feedback. This was corroborated by 67% of respondents in Survey Two (Statement 4). Notably, a third of those seeking extra comments wished for feedback that *explained* rather than merely *noting* the errors they had made because they needed help *understanding how* to correct errors and *where and how* they could improve. In other words, the students wanted feedback that not only commented on the assessed piece of work but also gave them the tools to remedy such problems in future pieces of work. Whilst it is already established practice within UoL that the written feedback given to students goes substantially beyond 'evaluative feedback' (Schinske and Tanner, 2014), such student-voiced concerns suggest that more still needs to be done if we are to ensure that students are empowered to take ownership of their own learning and progression within a course or programme of study by applying that which they have done well in one assessment to subsequent assessments. Providing all students with such additional drop-in sessions and verbal feedback would, however, significantly impact staffing and the allocation of time to additional teaching sessions, and cannot be acted upon in isolation. However, that the students themselves raised such an issue potentially raises significant issues regarding the nature and scope of feedback provided in a marketised higher education sector.

Survey Two also revealed differences between what students perceived as their strengths as recorded in the survey at the start of the year, and the realities of these strengths once they had reflected upon their marked assignments. In responding to Statement 7, for instance, 58% of students were surprised or very surprised how many errors they made in referencing and writing, although 19% felt that they had improved over the course of the year. This suggests that variation exists in how the University of Liverpool regulations on academic practice, i.e. referencing and plagiarism, are employed at XJTLU, which may indicate why the transition is difficult for some students.

Providing learners with the means to develop through reflection was a primary element of this second intervention. As Power (2016) notes, students may have less experience in formulating a reflective framework, and thus this intervention sought to develop student reflections on their learning environments. As the results of the intervention show, there is also a need to provide them with opportunities to revisit and refresh skills, even as their programmes of study develop. Given differing cultural and academic norms, this is particularly pertinent for English as a second language (ESL) students within the UoL context, and demonstrates that the research question – whether more support is needed – was valid.

The students were asked in Survey Two, Statement 8, to reflect on the extent to which previous study had prepared them for the rigours of undertaking a Planning degree at UoL, as well as the time management skills that they had developed over the two semesters: the percentage of those who felt confident in their time management abilities was, at the end of the course, only 57%. Two aspects of this result are worthy of note. First, in Survey Two, 32 students (38% of respondents) opined in their qualitative comments that XJTLU/UoL needed to provide greater guidance and expertise in these areas prior to their commencing studies at UoL. Individual comments included that students required greater guidance on referencing prior to enrolment at UoL (5 students), that guidance on 'how to improve writing, find resources [both in libraries and online] and use feedback more efficiently' could be improved (3 students each), and there was a need for lecturers to introduce more relevant reading to students both prior to, and after, individual classes (5 students).

Such comments reinforced the appropriateness of the aims of the initial and subsequent interventions and confirmed the validity of the initial research question:

> Is there a need for [Planning at UoL to make] tailored interventions to better prepare and accommodate the needs of students transferring from XJTLU?

Secondly, two entire lectures and one workshop were devoted to this issue. This confirms evidence that students might benefit from techniques such as spaced repetition (Desy et al. 2017) in the development and harnessing of such key skills. If so, again, either enhanced contact hours or revisions to the curriculum whereby key skills are incorporated throughout the delivery of modules would be necessary. Consideration of spaced repetition techniques in planning also demonstrates how the discipline could benefit from applying pedagogic techniques that have, traditionally, been found in other disciplines, especially medicine (Cecilio-Fernandes et al. 2017; Brown 2017) and would further underline the extent to which there is a need for facilitators to be aware of pedagogic developments outside their own specialisms and the benefits of being open to new teaching methods.

Survey Two also revealed issues regarding contact hours, teaching, learning, and assessment styles. Despite more than doubling contact hours through the L&T workshops and subsequent drop-in sessions, 64% of students wanted more designated (and specifically one-to-one) contact time. Most students had also attended designated office hours and thus it was not because they had failed to use support already available that they attended the drop-in sessions. The survey and take-up of the drop-in sessions offered may indicate that there is a disparity between the contact hours desired by students and those presently afforded. That the specific focus of these extra time requests is related to one-to-one time rather than general 'class' time is also significant because it suggests – in keeping with the anecdotal evidence accumulated through both intervention programmes – that targeted help is sought in privacy, away from the potential judgement of peers. This finding reinforces a cultural dimension noted in Survey One, that 65% of XJTLU students felt a form of embarrassment at having to ask for help publicly. This corroborates research stating there is a need to embed mechanisms by which students can readily seek additional guidance without undue stress, be it

through the use of email, Post-it notes or clickers during lectures (Wentao, Jinyu, and Zhonggen 2017), or through the use of other (non-lecture hall) learning practices (Singh, Hachemi, and Pena-Fernandez 2017).

Finally, Survey Two asked students to reflect on their group work experiences within the module, especially the usefulness of the CV/letter exercise (Semester One), and the group oral presentation that students were required to deliver upon different aspects of the Northern Powerhouse (see Nurse 2015 for a discussion of the development of this terminology), in Semester Two. A significant majority – 87% – of respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the CV exercise had taught them important life skills; and, 23% of respondents commented that exposure to actual CVs in the workshops and discussing different CV approaches had been very helpful. Moreover, 85% respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the group oral presentation had improved their communication and presentation skills, with some noting that peer-encouragement and feedback in the second set of workshops had helped them. Such findings have direct implications for developing future approaches within the module so that it can be delivered in a manner that always maximises learning potential. Students' perceived preference for active learning environments such as workshops confirms research by Schumm et al. (2014) that traditional lectures need to be substantially supplemented by alternative delivery protocols, such as workshops. Indeed, as Singh, Hachemi, and Pena-Fernandez (2017, 1193) submit, the 'traditional lecture…is a relatively poor instructional approach' to learning. A substantial number of respondents (62%) preferred the group work and CV exercise to more traditional (essay-based) forms of assessment. This finding confirms that moves by UoL towards embedding realistic assessment techniques over traditional learning formats are attractive to students.

5. Implications of the Research

From the evidence attained from XJTLU students in the ENVS205 module 2016/2017 cohort there appears to be a demand for tailored subject- and skill-specific support sessions. These are not proposed as a replacement for existing teaching mechanisms but should be planned to provide additional learning/assessment outcome led activities and be focused on the acquisition and reinforcement of individual skills. The responses from students at UoL are not unique and represent a wider set of challenges facing HEIs as greater numbers of international students continue to study overseas (Robson and Turner 2007; Bretag et al. 2014). Support therefore needs to be given in an active learning environment where students are engaged in a two-way (staff-student) or multi-directional (staff-student-peers) process of learning, as opposed to the passive environment of the lecture hall (Haidet et al. 2004). This confirms the assumptions that informed the original research questions and justified the interventions. Mechanisms whereby students can seek guidance and support without feeling embarrassed or judged by their peers are also essential.

Secondly, in a more commercialised and internationalised higher education environment students expect greater one-to-one contact with staff and more feedback (especially written), including opportunities to learn from their peers (Lee et al. 2018). This suggests the existing dominant method of module delivery (lectures) should be supplemented by workshops, seminars, and one-to-one contact to enhance educational opportunities. Questions though remain regarding whether HEI will continue to fund new teaching and/or faculty posts or invest in technology or physical infrastructure to meet the added capacity needs of growing student body Elkin, Devjee, and Farnsworth 2005; Goddard, Coombes, Kempton, and Vallance 2014). The continuing expansion of student numbers suggests that such investment would be prudent. By maintaining the infrastructure supporting the quality of the academic and living environment international students are more likely to continue to engage in learning outside of their home countries (Cantwell 2015). An ongoing evaluation of student needs and institutional capacity is therefore needed across the HEI sector.

Thirdly, as evidenced in the answers to Survey Two Question 8, whilst XJTLU does prepare, to some extent, transferring students well for undertaking study at Liverpool, improvements could be made so that, for instance, students are more aware of the specific referencing and analytical demands of the course prior to commencing their studies. Moreover, a greater emphasis could be placed on mapping the intended learning outcomes of Year 1 UoL modules onto Year 1 and 2 module at XJTLU to ensure complementarity and continuity of learning. If such an intervention in study skills could be made, students could progress throughout the course, rather than 'stalling' and then progressing. Thus, the proposed one-week crash course suggested in

the original intervention could, if continued in coming years, provide greater insight into the process students undergo in preparing for their year abroad.

Finally, there was an unexpected issue that arose during Intervention Two, which should, arguably, be investigated further. The workshops on preparing for the oral presentations were not attended by any Home/ UK registered students. As an adjunct to the intervention's focus (given issues of time and cost), a small group of the Home students were asked why they had chosen not to attend; they were assured that their responses would remain anonymised. Reasons given included comments such as 'I didn't need to, I know how to speak the language', and 'it's a session that only the foreign students need'. The belief held by some Home students that their natural advantage in terms of language proficiency was such that they would not benefit from further preparation and guidance was, in many cases, misplaced. In Semester Two's group oral presentation exercise, the three top performing groups were all exclusively comprised of XJTLU students. Each XJTLU-based group had applied themselves diligently, received initial feedback from their peers and staff, and spent several hours within those workshops refining their presentations; these were aspects notably absent in the preparations from the approach adopted by their Home counterparts. Notwithstanding potential underlying issues of cultural entitlement (see the discussion of 'othering' by Hayes 2017), the Home students did not perceive a need for them to avail themselves of an intervention that was designed for all. In considering a penumbral issue to the research question, it is evident that their skills also needed to be enhanced throughout the module. Although the interventions were cognisant that XJTLU comprised the majority of the cohort, they offered significant benefits for all students and it could, at first sight, be seen as a failing on the part of facilitators that this was not adequately communicated (Ryan,2011). This, and the cultural 'othering' inherent with the comments of the Home Students is, however, a greater issue than this paper can address, and further research would be needed before an approach to resolving such emerging issues could be developed.

6. Conclusion

The transfer of a large, and homogenous, cohort of international students between institutions raises interesting and complex questions about teaching, curricula and how student support are managed. At an institutional level the transition is simply a mathematical issue of registering students, finding them accommodation and integrating their numbers into timetabling. However, at an operational and departmental level the integration of a high number of English Second Language (ESL) students, even those educated for two years at a sister institution, presents problems. The L&T project sought to smooth the transition of XJTLU students from Suzhou to the University of Liverpool by recognising that there are logistical, staffing and socio-cultural elements to the move that are not necessarily addressed by either institution either before students' departure, or on their arrival (Ryan 2011; Kraal 2017; Azmat et al. 2013). In addition, the L&T project identified a need within the student body to receive a greater proportion of one-to-one teaching about *how* to improve performance and not simply on the substantive *'what'* of module content. It was also proposed that the level of preparation of students prior to the transfer could be improved to ensure a continuity of approach is used to structure and grade assessments in the UK and China. A further dilemma for teaching staff in Planning at UoL was whose responsibility is it to ensure that students are prepared for the move and how do staff ensure that all transferring students gain the most effective education form their two years in Liverpool? Again this is not unique to planning, or to planning staff and students at UoL, but is an issue that requires ongoing reflection to ensure the learning environment is appropriate and equitable (Kelly and Moogan 2012). To date neither XJTLU nor the University of Liverpool have addressed this issue effectively at an institutional level, and it has fallen to individual departments to ensure that the transition is smooth.

To address these issues the interventions planned and undertaken via the L&T project in 2016/17 highlighted a series of issues that should be addressed if the transition of planning students from XJTLU to the University of Liverpool is to be improved.

1. Both institutions need to place more emphasis on preparing students for transition. This should incorporate an increased engagement with the types of learning employed at the University of Liverpool, regulations regarding academic practice, i.e. plagiarism, and more specific guidance on life in the UK. Within the L&T project the then Head of Undergraduate Programmes visited XJTLU twice and gave talks on the programmes, life in the UK and what to expect from the transition. This was

not a common practice from individual departments or at an institutional level, due to logistical and financial costs, at the time and the student responses to discussions of assignments, expectations of group and individual work, and the wider pedagogical approach taken by the University of Liverpool were not known.

2. An acceptance by XJTLU and the University of Liverpool that, although sister institutions following the same academic model, education in China and the UK is different, and that students need to be trained in working in both systems. The aim of such activities is to balance the expectations of students transferring to Liverpool and smooth the transition between institutions. To achieve this funding should be made available for departments to create bespoke training/classes to facilitate this process, as originally planned within the L&T project.

3. Students need to recognise that they have moved institutions and are now working within the University of Liverpool system. This includes recognition of their own limitations, expectations from their time in Liverpool, and preparedness to up-skill with the academic and personal approaches to life in a foreign environment. Within the L&T project transferring students engaged extensively and effectively with the additional support provided and used the sessions to address short comings that were identified once they arrived in Liverpool.

4. An ongoing development, funding, and delivery of targeted interventions would be beneficial to international and home students in preparing their soft skills, which are becoming increasingly valuable to employers. From the analysis presented previously we can highlight the improvements made in student attainment when engaging with the additional sessions provided.

Overall, the L&T project was deemed to have effectively aided the transition of students from XJTLU to the University of Liverpool in 2016/17. Through additional contact sessions and one-to-one guidance, students concluded the ENVS205 module with a greater awareness of their skills and importantly areas in need of improvement, which was absent at the commencement of the project. The project also highlighted a lack of effective preparation for students moving to Liverpool, which could be addressed through further engagement between departments in Suzhou and Liverpool. The L&T project also highlighted how students transferring to Liverpool were prepared to engage with additional skills-based activities when they were linked to their degrees (and their attainment). It therefore seems viable to ensure that soft and employable skills are integrated more effectively into the teaching of planning students. Finally, we conclude that the transition of a large cohort of students from XJTLU to the University of Liverpool is a complex process. Therefore, through more directed interventions in preparing students for the move their expectations can be managed and subsequently, by engaging them in soft skills sessions on arrival, the transition from a Chinese system of university education to a UK centred practice could be more effectively managed.

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