

‘You have to be independent...it’s very different’: The International Foundation Year and first year international students’ transition at a post-1992 UK university.

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents findings of a recent research study that identifies examples of good practice, challenges and suggestions for change regarding ways in which universities, and partner colleges providing International Foundation Years (IFYs), can jointly help prepare international students for the first year of their degree courses in English-speaking higher education. The article highlights ways in which the IFY influences: students’ experiences of developing academic identity, confidence, resilience and engagement in the context of: learning, teaching, assessment, working relationships and support during their first year. The article also highlights differences between: students’ experiences of the IFY and degree at the partner university; and experiences of those who have and have not completed an IFY. The IFY was found to enhance students’ resilience and confidence to cope with first year transition challenges, including the need to become independent both academically and socially.

Background

Enhancing first year international student success and retention in higher education (HE) is currently a key focus for many universities across the United Kingdom (UK) HE sector (Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2008). In this context, many universities are now working in partnership with ‘pathway’ colleges, which run International Foundation Year (IFY) programmes that aim to better prepare international students for the first year of their degree courses (Kaplan, 2013). IFY programmes aim to provide a holistic experience for international students incorporating courses in discipline-specific teaching through a ‘pathway’ programme linked to the student’s preferred future degree (Kaplan, 2013).

Why is there a need for International Foundation Year programmes?

Previous research (HEA, 2008; Andrade, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kingston and Forland, 2008; Wisker, 2004) suggests that first year students’ transition into HE may be affected by their new experiences of learning, teaching and assessment that contrast with their earlier experiences of education at school or college. Lee (2010) and Li et al. (2009) found that some international students, who were used to collectivist educational customs such as rote learning, particularly struggled to adjust to individualist educational customs adopted in UK or English-speaking HE, such as critical thinking, leading to stress. Additional stress-inducing challenges that international students may face during their first year relate to insufficient: English skills, early constructive feedback, effective working relationships with academic and support staff, and emotional and academic support from peers/friends (Wilcox et al. 2005; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012).

Varied aspects of attending an IFY can help facilitate international students' transition and help address the challenges described above including: interactive sessions in English language academic skills, academic writing and exam preparation; pre-arrival and induction training, one to one tutorials and pastoral support (Kaplan, 2013; McNorton and Cadinot, 2012). These may not only support students' first year transition in practical terms, but also increase their confidence to become independent learners at university. Gu et al. (2009, p20) argue that international students' confidence during their first year at an English-speaking university is influenced by their ability to successfully combine: "language mastery, social interaction, personal development and academic outcomes", and that "differentiated and timely support", such as the support provided by the IFY, is crucial. Briggs et al.'s model of "transition as a system to support the formation of higher education learner identity" (2012, p16) provides a useful framework to conceptualize the process whereby college preparation prior to university, such as an IFY, is beneficial for students. In this context, Briggs et al. (2012, p16) argue that: a "structured programme of higher-education-related activities" helps contribute towards students "achieving success and 'belonging' as a higher education learner". However, international students who have completed an IFY may still have to adjust to new and stressful experiences. McNorton and Cadinot (2012, p6) suggest the need for a "joined up and harmonious approach that connects the IFY students with the wider academic world of the university" in order for the IFY to effectively prepare international students to start their degrees.

New research at a post-1992 university

In 2014, building on earlier work (HEA, 2008; Gu et al., 2009; Jones and Fleischer, 2012; Brigg's et al., 2012), research was conducted at a post-1992 UK university where first year international student engagement has been a concern. This explored first year international students' (non-native-English-speaking/EU and non-EU) experiences of learning, teaching assessment and support; and gained insights into ways in which completing an IFY at a partner international college influenced students' experiences of transition, engagement and confidence during the first year of their degree. The study also compared experiences of students who did and did not complete an IFY, in order to highlight possible variations in experiences of the two groups. The objectives were to identify: good teaching, learning, assessment and support practice during the IFY and degree course; ways in which the IFY influenced students' confidence and development as independent learners; and implications for further enhancement.

Research Methods

The research involved a mixed methods qualitative and quantitative approach. In spring 2014 individual interviews were conducted with 19 male and female international first year students (EU/non-EU non-native-English-speaking) studying Business, Engineering and Science disciplines, since many international students who previously completed an IFY at the partner international college were studying for degrees in these disciplines. In addition, an online survey was circulated via Survey Monkey to all first year UK and international students studying the same subjects. UK students were included in the survey sample because any potential differences between first year UK and International student experiences could then be highlighted. The final survey sample included 107 students, 56% (n=57) male and 44% (n=45) female. Just over half were UK home students (see Table 1). A limitation of the survey was that up to 40 students did not complete all questions on the questionnaire making the sample for some analysis very small. However, percentages are presented to illustrate comparisons between groups.

Table 1: Percentage of Domicile of students

Domicile of students	Percentage	Number
EU students	15.9	17
Non-EU/Overseas students	30.8	33
UK (home) students	53.3	57
TOTAL	100.0	107

Findings

Findings presented relate to international students' first year university experiences and influences of the IFY concerning the following themes: facing challenges and developing confidence; adjustment to living and studying in the UK; teaching, learning, and assessment; working relationships with staff including feedback; working relationships with peers; support processes; and suggestions for change.

Key finding: facing challenges and developing resilience and confidence

A key finding is that the IFY helped to develop international students' confidence to face challenges and successfully navigate their first year transition at an English-speaking university. This is crucial since previous research suggests that stress induced by challenges during the first year is a key factor that de-motivates international students, contributing to their thoughts of dropping out of their course (Jones and Fleischer, 2012). Most interview participants in this research described similar challenges when starting their degrees. The survey findings show that on average more international students experienced high stress levels during the first year of their degrees (27.6%) than UK students (23.1%). Issues most frequently mentioned by interview participants and survey respondents related to: deadlines, workload and time management; group work; large classes and lack of individual attention from lecturers; academic writing; exams, disappointing grades and 'negative' marking; and different expectations from individual lecturers. The survey shows that a higher percentage of international students (25.9%) agreed that they were very worried about passing their degrees compared to UK students (15.4%). In this context, out of international survey respondents, on average more non-IFY students (29.4%) experienced high stress levels than previous IFY students (25%), suggesting that attending an IFY may help counteract international students' stress during their first year.

Table 2: Stress Levels

Stress level	International		UK		IFY		Non-IFY		All	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
High	27.6	8	23.1	9	25	3	29.4	5	25.0	17
Medium	69.0	20	66.7	26	66.7	8	70.6	12	67.6	46
Low	3.4	1	10.3	4	8.3	1	0	0	7.4	5
Total	100	29	100	39	100	12	100	17	100	68

Regarding challenges, more non-IFY respondents than IFY respondents found giving presentations, grades and feedback and communication with lecturers challenging in Semester 1; and more non-IFY students than IFY students found workload, written coursework, meeting deadlines and communication with lecturers challenging in Semester 2.

This suggests that attending an IFY may help support international students in relation to first year challenges which cause stress and de-motivation. The survey also shows that more previous IFY students than non-IFY students agreed that they felt confident or very confident in relation to most aspects of study (see Chart 1). This suggests that the IFY may be helpful in preparing students, and positively influencing students' confidence levels, relating to these aspects of university study.

First year international students' adjustment to living and studying in the UK

Most interview participants experienced challenges in adjusting to studying and living in the UK when starting their degrees. Interview participants who did not attend an IFY described adjusting to living in the new UK environment, cultural customs, independent living and the local transport system as more challenging than previous IFY students. Regarding academic adjustment, as suggested by earlier studies (Lee, 2010; Li et al., 2009; Kingston and Forland, 2008), this research found that some international participants described teaching in schools in their home countries as didactic and authoritarian.

“In [my home country] they just ask you to copy this and copy that, you're expected to read the notes and write exactly what you read.” (Non-EU Participant 12)

Our research suggests that while international participants from outside the EU found new methods of independent learning and critical thinking practised at a UK university challenging, they were also a positive and engaging change.

“Here [at university], they always look up to you to go ahead – go beyond the boundaries, which is a very good thing. So it might be new to me, but I'm actually trying to work on it, and it's working well for me. It gives me a better understanding” (Non-EU Participant 3)

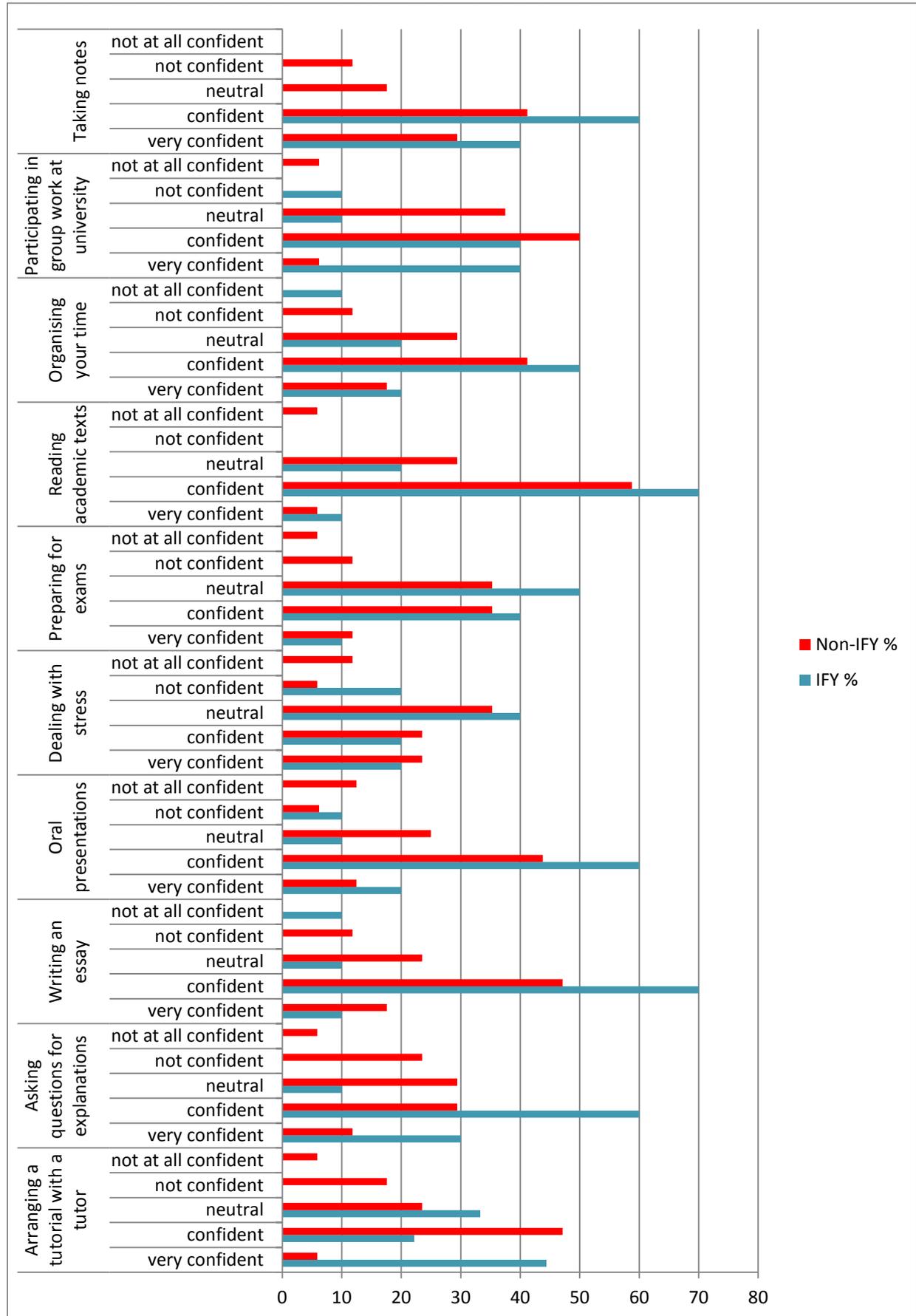
Although some participants suggested the learning style during the IFY was more independent than in their home country, other participants described how their previous academic experience of school and the IFY were similar, in contrast to their experience at university. This suggests that an IFY may not provide students with the same level of independent learning that they will experience when they start university.

“In the school for example, they gave us their notes and in the international college they gave us notes as well. In University you have to make your own notes. You have to be independent. You have to do everything on your own. It's very different.” (Non-EU participant 19)

Our research found that attending an IFY was particularly helpful in terms of student socialisation, which is important according to Tinto (2003) in building a sense of belonging, confidence and engagement when starting a degree.

“I've had friends and family who are here already before I came, which helped me out in many things. Slowly I started depending on myself and realised that you have to live on your own. The IFY also helped me a lot in starting to settle.” (Participant 19)

Chart 1a: Confidence levels in relation to different factors



However, integrating with home students was sometimes described as a particular challenge for many international students, and there is no evidence to suggest that the IFY helped students with this.

Teaching, learning and assessment

Interview participants who had previously attended an IFY described differences between learning and teaching during the IFY and the degree. A key difference that participants often described was that there was greater interaction with lecturers during the IFY than at university. Participants suggested that it was more difficult to develop a good working relationship with lecturers in larger classes at university. However, most previous IFY participants suggested that the IFY had helped prepare them to start their degrees as the partner international college and the university had similar processes, protocols and curricula. These included classes or support in English language, essay writing, academic skills, giving presentations, group discussion and curriculum content. Of survey respondents who attended English support sessions during the IFY, 41.7% rated them as very useful, 41.7% as useful and 16.7% as average (n=12).

Some previous IFY interview participants noticed that their academic writing was better than their colleagues' writing skills who had not attended an IFY. Participants who had not attended an IFY appeared to find academic writing at degree level more difficult and appeared less confident in it because it was time-consuming to write in English and they were not used to the formal requirements such as formatting and referencing. Regarding course content, participants explained that in their degrees they were taught similar subject-specific course content to that they had studied during the IFY, but at a slightly higher level, so they felt confident in learning and well-prepared. This included subject-specific practical skills such as lab work in Science. As the first year of the degree progressed, interview participants often described how the IFY had continued to help prepare them for their degree. However, a few participants said that the second semester of their degrees was more difficult than the first, and that the IFY had not prepared them for some course content or ways of working such as independent study and the need to rely on peer support.

“Second semester is totally different from the foundation. We didn't study structural analysis during the Foundation Year. Also Semester 2 is a hard semester. You have to study hard at home. You have to ask your friends. You have to study in a group.”
(Participant 13)

In terms of exams and assignments, some interview participants who had completed an IFY said that exams and assignments were more difficult at university, and there was a need to be better prepared.

Working relationships and communication with academic staff/ feedback

Previous IFY participants mentioned their need to adjust to less frequent communication with lecturers at university compared to during the IFY. Lecturers at university may not answer emails as quickly, send as many reminders to students; and be less approachable. In addition, there were fewer tutorials available at university than during the IFY, and fewer opportunities to receive constructive feedback on assignments or exams.

“At the international college we saw our tutors frequently, and they helped us with lots of things...After my exam, we talked about my results and how I could improve. They don't do that at the University of Brighton, they don't go through our essays.”
(Participant 18)

However, participants emphasised their need to take the initiative in approaching lecturers in order to ask for help, evidencing their confidence in development as independent learners.

“I kind of miss the support from teachers [at IFY]. I don't really find it in the university, even though it is there, but you have to make a greater effort to reach that support.” (Participant 19)

Most participants explained how prompt constructive feedback at university was beneficial and motivating in helping them to improve their work. However, a minority of previous IFY participants described how the constructive feedback they received during the IFY was essential in helping them to improve, and that they were not provided with the same amount of feedback at university.

Working relationships with peers

Previous IFY students had made more friends on their degree course than students who had not attended an IFY, which indicates that the IFY was helpful for international students' socialisation. Earlier work suggests that friends are a crucial form of support for first year international students (Wilcox et al. 2005, Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Zepke and Leach, 2005). Our research shows that international students also benefited from informal academic and emotional support from friends outside class. Interview participants often described how friends helped each other when one person did not understand, and provided work examples for others to follow. Friends were described as providing moral support or company when students preferred not to study alone. This helped to build confidence.

“Being at Uni had made me realize that studying with people really helps you because you get to share ideas. You might be struggling with something. Someone else really understands. That really encourages you.” (Participant 8).

Most interview participants mentioned that they worked with students from other cultures. However, they often found it difficult to integrate with students from other cultural backgrounds, particularly British students.

“It's not that easy to work with people that are not your nationality. I'm not being racist, but it's not easy to talk to other people very easily. Everyone's kind of segregated in the class. So usually you find that black and the Asian people together at the front. Then you have the white people.” (Participant 2)

This is supported by the survey results which found that only 10.3% of international students' friends on the course were from the UK. IFY survey respondents reported the highest percentage of friends of their own origin and other international students on their course. This is identified as an issue that needs addressing by universities and partner colleges in order to enhance internationalisation.

Support for international students

The survey findings show that more (38.9%) non-IFY international students needed greater support during their first year compared to 23.1% of previous IFY students, implying that previous IFY students were feeling more confident because they needed less support. Aspects of support that most international students found useful or very useful included personal tutor support (70.9%) and peer support (56.7%). The survey suggests that more previous IFY respondents than non-IFY respondents found most aspects of support either useful or very useful, the only exception being peer-support, which a higher percentage of non-IFY participants found useful or very useful. This reflects the finding discussed earlier regarding the need for non-IFY participants to rely on friends in academic study, whereas previous IFY students experienced less need to rely on peers.

Other forms of academic support that participants often described as useful included academic skills or peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), and Maths and Statistics support.

Several participants described the benefits of subject-specific support such as AutoCAD classes for Engineering and employability skills for Business.

Students' suggestions of ways to enhance their transition when starting their degrees

Participants described ways in which the university might better support their transition when starting their degrees, and suggestions included: orientation and adjustment training, tutorials with academic staff, peer support both face to face and online, discipline specific academic skills training and international and home student integration activities. Regarding early adjustment, participants suggested a longer orientation programme and time management and planning training, as many international students felt overwhelmed at first when starting their degrees. Several participants suggested that academic staff might better help them by: providing one-to-one tutorials to answer questions; ensuring instructions are precise in order to avoid confusion, for instance, explaining the differences between grading in the UK and overseas that some participants may not be accustomed to. Although previous IFY students benefited from generic academic writing training, several participants suggested that discipline-specific academic writing sessions would be useful (if not already provided). In Science, for example, participants said they would like help with writing lab reports. Several participants also benefited from peer support in the context of PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) sessions, and suggested that PASS could start in the first university semester in order to help students adjust during this challenging period. One participant mentioned how a peer Facebook group was useful in terms of asking and answering questions. Several participants described the challenges of integrating with home students when starting degrees. A suggested way of resolving this issue might be to introduce integration activities early in the first semester to help international and home students to mix and start working together. This is a potential issue mentioned by McNorton and Cadinot (2012) regarding international students being used to working with each other in the IFY and not being used to integrating with UK students. Interview participants described ways in which learning, teaching, assessment and feedback might be enhanced. These mainly reflect participants' descriptions of good practice in this context. Suggestions included: interactive and practical teaching including group discussion; small group teaching; revision sessions; and early detailed individual constructive feedback.

Discussion

This article has presented findings showing ways in which international students who attend an IFY at a partner international college can benefit in terms of subject-based learning, academic skills, socialisation and confidence to equip them for a successful transition during their first year at university. However, the findings also identify ways in which all international students still experience challenges which are not possible to address by attending an IFY. These include the need to develop into an independent learner and successfully integrate with UK students. The findings clarify that all international students need support before they start university, for instance by attending an IFY at an international college, and when they start university in order to be engaged and successful; and highlight ways in which universities and partner colleges need to work together as suggested by McNorton and Cadinot and Briggs et al. (2012). In this context main themes emerge from this research relating to enhancing practice in supporting and preparing international students for their first year at university. The themes include: cultural and academic adjustment; social integration; English language; academic skills; consistent good practice in teaching, working relationships with students and feedback; and effective support processes.

Adjustment to starting a degree

The need to further prepare international students to become independent learners when they start university is something the university might aim to address to a greater degree by providing students with: a longer orientation programme in Semester 1 including training in

time management and planning; and early one-to-one tutorials with staff incorporating clear and precise explanations of academic expectations

Social Integration

Our study shows that integration with UK students was a challenge for many international students, particularly group assignments and formal group work. More support might be provided through: integration activities in Semester 1 and during the IFY to support International and UK students to work together.

Academic skills support

Discipline-specific academic writing skills sessions offered by academic staff and/or in PASS sessions early in Semester 1 would be useful for all students, and international students in particular.

Good practice in teaching, learning, assessment, communication with staff and feedback

Good practice for working with all students, including international students, should be consistent as outlined earlier in this paper.

Support processes

Support from friends and peers was found to be crucial for first year international students and could be further encouraged by staff through: interactive and collaborative teaching and learning activities, socialisation and integration activities in Semester 1, PASS sessions and online peer group networks e.g. Facebook.

Conclusion

As corroborated by earlier research this study shows that IFYs help prepare international students in varied ways by providing them with English language training, subject learning, academic skills, social networks and confidence to be successful and engaged during their first year. However, challenges faced by all international students include the need to integrate with UK students, to adjust to new experiences of UK HE learning with the need to become independent learners, and to reach the required HE level in discipline-specific academic writing. Additional academic challenges faced by all students, including international students, relate to workload, deadlines, exams and assignments. Our research highlights ways in which attending an IFY helps to enhance international students' confidence to cope with these challenges and to reduce their levels of stress, a key factor identified by previous research in influencing students' thoughts of persisting or withdrawing from courses (Jones and Fleischer, 2012). The research suggests that there are many ways to help support all first year students, to adjust to academic and social changes they must face and manage during their first year at university. In this context, as supported by Briggs et al.'s transition model (2012), our research indicates that partner colleges and universities share a joint responsibility to enhance existing good practice to help support UK and international student engagement and success during their first year at university.

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