Hitting the Ground Running: Helping International Master's Students to Succeed in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines potential barriers to the academic success of international master's students studying in higher education in the UK and identifies key elements that draw together university policy and culture and classroom practice to enable this group of students to 'hit the ground running'. These barriers are viewed through the lens of academic shock and academic integrity. Key themes are discussed including the importance of factors such as language barriers, misunderstandings, and anxiety, as well as the importance of providing clear definitions of what constitutes academic integrity violations in UK universities. The timeframe of one academic year, in which full-time international master's students are required to acquire new knowledge and skills often impedes the successful completion of early assignments set during their first term. Solutions for addressing these barriers are proposed and aimed at supporting the achievement of international master's students.

Introduction

Universities UK International (UUKi, 2021) report states that in 2019/20 the UK was the second most popular destination for international students with 538,615 international students studying at UK higher education (HE) institutions and accounting for 27.5% of the total UK student population. International students are defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) as students who have travelled overseas to study and who are not permanent or typical citizens of the host country. Within the European Union, Italy, France, and Germany were the top sending countries with142,990 students between them in 2019/20, of which just 29.6% were master's students. In contrast, China, India, the USA, and Hong Kong sent a majority of international students, a total of 395,630 international students of which 52.7% were master's students.

Although the UUKi (2021) report states that the UK remains a popular destination for international master's students, the academic cultural shocks that these students face should be acknowledged. Unlike international undergraduate students, who have three or four years to adapt to their host country, international full-time master's

students are normally required to complete their program of study within one academic year. They must navigate language-related, social, and academic complexities, often with a minimal period of induction. After that they are expected to rapidly comprehend the UK university culture, especially regarding expectations, learning practices, and what constitutes academic integrity, and successfully complete their studies within the set timeframe. This is compounded by the need for international master's students to gain a rapid understanding of the nuanced academic language they must use in assessments and on which their work will be assessed during their first term. HE institutions in countries such as the UK require that international master's students complete English language tests that demonstrate language proficiency before commencing their studies overseas.

This essay is framed by 24 years' experience of coordinating international master's degrees in a UK university and responding to issues of concern that have been raised at academic boards and reviews. It seeks to examine the literature related to the known and sometimes hidden challenges that influence the academic success of international master's students. This essay uses the lens of academic shock to explore how both unintentional and intentional plagiarism challenges academic integrity and ultimately, the academic effect of these decisions on international master's students. The term 'academic shock' is used to describe the intense impact of having to rapidly adjust to an unfamiliar UK academic culture whilst successfully completing a master's degree within one academic year. Finally, the essay provides guidance for institutional staff in working with international master's students to enable them to prepare students so that they can 'hit the ground running'.

Academic Integrity and Its Importance for International Master's Students Studying in HE

Academic integrity is a multifaceted and complicated issue not only because of the way in which it is described, but also because of how it occurs and what is included. Some studies have reported that international students found that academic integrity tends to differ in HE institutions in different countries, which may cause confusion regarding the appropriate methods that international students should use during their academic studies in the UK (Mangue & Gonondo, 2021; Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). In addition, while the International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2021) focuses on commitment to the values of trust, responsibility, honesty, respect, courage, and fairness, the U.S. government agency, Office of Research Integrity (ORI, 2022), focuses on research integrity and conceptualizes academic integrity violations such as plagiarizing, fabricating, and falsifying when proposing, conducting, reviewing, or reporting research findings, as disreputable acts. The core values of academic integrity consist of trustworthiness, fairness, and the support of staff and students so that these core values provide frameworks for the academic culture of HE institutions (Park, 2004). This approach is preferable to the alternative that often exists in HE that relies on punitive actions and is predominantly focused on disciplinary processes (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). Given the punitive focus of the majority of HE institutions, many international students have indicated that they felt dread, bewilderment, shock, incredulity, shame, and embarrassment when they learned about the expectations of their new university or when they were accused of plagiarism (Isbell et al., 2018).

A critical starting point from the university's perspective is that of academic freedom, which is seen as "essential to top-quality teaching and research, which are themselves essential to national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy" (Kinzelbach et al., 2021, p. 17). Given the importance of this, intentional and unintentional plagiarism can have a profound impact on the standing of a university. It is therefore incumbent on universities to understand the prior learning experiences of international master's students so that the university can provide appropriate support and effective learning.

Unintentional plagiarism arises when students are unfamiliar with citation and quotation rules or use inappropriate paraphrasing styles such as patchwriting (Park, 2003; Rogerson & McCarthy, 2017; Vij et al., 2009). The *Oxford English Dictionary's* (2021) definition of plagiarism that is, "the action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own" and is generally accepted by many academic institutions. Similarly, the description of intentional plagiarism as stealing the words, reflections, and ideas of others and presenting them as one's own is also commonly accepted within UK HE (Barrett & Cox, 2005; Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Park, 2003; Pecorari

& Petrić, 2014). This definition is deemed by most institutions to include cutting and pasting from online electronic documents (Morgan et al., 2004) and paying for custom-made assignments (Evans, 2000).

Only one review was found that focused on international students, plagiarism, and pedagogical analysis (Adhikari, 2018) which concluded that academic staff should consider implementing pedagogical solutions that investigate the students' academic skills and other external factors such as the limited timeframe they are given to adjust to their new educational context before submitting their first assignments. Plagiarism is perceived by Payne and Nantz (1994) as a social construction that is based on the academic behaviour of students. It is acknowledged that plagiarism is also intentionally or unintentionally committed by many UK students and that although the use of plagiarism may currently be perceived as a vice in HE institutions in the West, this was not always the case as historically it was viewed as a virtue in some sectors such as the arts in the West (Thomas, 2000). DiPietro (2010) and Kaur (2019) argue that in some cultures incorporating another writer's work into one's own is still perceived as showing respect for other writers, and it is not deemed necessary to include any acknowledgment. Intentional or unintentional plagiarism may occur for a number of reasons such as having different cultural attitudes toward the ownership of works; being taught via practices that utilize copying and memorizing texts as learning styles and therefore seeing these methods as acceptable; and having difficulties expressing ideas and critiquing text at master's level because of language barriers (Bai & Wang, 2022). Adhikari (2018) warns against adopting deficit models of international students and advises caution against using such traditional cultural perspectives as they can lead to stereotyping. Adhikari argues instead that intentional or unintentional plagiarism should be perceived by HE institutions in the West simply as students encountering a new academic practice and that this can be addressed by utilizing the varied pedagogical approaches used in advanced levels of education and the diverse approaches to learning that exist within different disciplines, and by clearly explaining the specific course-related expectations.

Academic Shock

While many international students indicate that they are happy with their educational experiences in host countries (Bird, 2017), there is evidence that a large number also experience academic anxiety (Wu & Hammond, 2011). Academic anxiety encompasses encountering new academic cultural, linguistics, teaching, and learning styles (Oyeniyi, et al., 2021) that can be difficult to assimilate and overcome, resulting in academic shock (Bai & Wang, 2022). The adaptation process of some international students is likely to be affected by unfamiliar teaching and learning styles prevalent in the host country. These differences could include variances in what their respective home countries and the UK may classify as academic knowledge (Garwood, 2022).

Decades of research on the learning experiences of international students has resulted in a shift in focus from a deficit model portraying the intense challenges that they face, to looking at how educational institutions support these students (Tran & Vu, 2018). For instance, Ryan's (2005) academic shock framework posits that some students may be challenged by the different academic approaches and expectations of the host country such as the approach used in academic discussions and analyses where adversarial approaches to questioning and critiquing are used in universities in the West. For some international master's students who are studying in the UK for the first time, this academic shock may include having to swiftly acquire new ways of learning, adjust to different teaching styles, and to adapt to new academic approaches in the host country so that they can successfully complete their studies within the allocated academic year; they often have to complete their first assignments within weeks of their arrival. Ryan (2005) argues that some international students may initially understand just 10% of what they hear in the classroom, given that English is spoken in a variety of accents and because of the speed of delivery (Ramachandran, 2011). However, despite these apparent academic challenges, many international master's students discuss the joy they experience from studying overseas and how they are personally transformed by their learning experiences (Rhoden & Kinchington 2021). It is important that academic staff understand the agency and adaptability skills that international master's students bring with them and how they should be supported appropriately during their studies (Ryan, 2005). A number of studies support the need for academic staff to be culturally aware. Significantly, Hofstede (1986) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) found that social interactions, including within educational institutions, are culturally mediated as they are naturally contradictory. Their study claims that this inherent

conflict combined with intercultural social contacts adds to the potential for additional conflicts. Hofstede (1986; 1991) identified four cultural dimensions, comprising masculinity, power distance, uncertainty-avoidance, and individualism that helped to shape behaviours generally, including that of students in educational settings. Short-term orientation versus long-term orientation which are based on differing approaches toward social obligations, avoiding shame, and respecting traditions were added later to address alleged cultural biases in earlier studies (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It is therefore essential that international students are not discussed in terms of a homogenous group (Montgomery, 2010), and importantly, Kim's (2001) concept of 'preparedness of change', reinforces the notion that the disposition of each international student ultimately determines the level of agency and adaptability that each of them possesses.

International master's students studying in the UK face additional issues such as stress and social/cultural problems (Adhikari, 2018) and in the case of mature female students, accessing affordable childcare for preschool children while studying (Rhoden & Kinchington, 2021). These issues can have a detrimental impact on the ability of many international students, especially master's students, to adjust quickly and settle in their new location so that they can focus on their studies (Bista, 2011). As a result, these students may develop negative psychological reactions such as feeling homesick, isolated, and powerless and suffering from depression and academic shock (Bai & Wang 2022).

Academic Integrity Violations: Repercussions and Sanctions

Identifying students' academic integrity violations (AIVs) and the subsequent application of sanctions by UK HE institutions are based on a commitment to deterring and preventing intentional or unintentional plagiarism. However, the individual approach that is used by each institution is influenced by the academic learning cultures and contexts of that institution. The level of seriousness with which a university treats intentional and unintentional plagiarism should be clearly conveyed to all students and faculty staff in a transparent manner, including what is classified as intentional and unintentional plagiarism, and the sanctions that will be applied if it is discovered. Studies by Macdonald and Carroll (2006) and Sutherland-Smith (2011), for instance, demonstrated that generally, international students were expected to take personal responsibility for identifying and rectifying problems relating to AIVs, while the role of HE institutions was to ensure that appropriate levels of disincentives and sanctions were in place.

The consequent application of formal sanctions to individual students committing AIVs has a negative effect on their ability to quickly overcome any academic challenges, to engage with their studies, to gain satisfaction from their learning experience, and to successfully graduate. Research by Larkham and Manns (2002) suggests that the most common sanction that was imposed for AIVs was being given a mark of zero for the relevant assignment. The second most frequent punishment was to require that the student resubmit their work, with the highest mark available for the new submission often being capped at the institution's pass mark. Other institutions may apply a mark of zero for the unit of study and the student may not be permitted to resubmit the work. Some universities, however, may penalize the student by reducing the classification of the degree that is awarded by one class or requiring them to repeat the year of study. Fass-Holmes' (2017) study in the USA indicated that while students who were reported for AIVs had a high likelihood of being suspended or expelled, almost half to three-quarters of those that were suspended were ultimately allowed to return and eventually graduated.

Supportive and developmental learning tools that replace a focus on sanctions include, for example, providing all students with extracts and graded exemplars of practice and grade criteria to support their completion of assignments and examinations and giving them detailed formative and summative feedback on assignments and learning in a timely manner to ensure that they can apply any recommendations to future submissions. Stappenbelt (2012) explored the impact that the cultural background of international students had on their responses to intentional and unintentional plagiarism and how to avoid it. The study demonstrated that all HE institutions need to focus less on sanctions and should develop instead an understanding of students' behaviours in their new context barriers as they encounter substantial obstacles such as academic language barriers. An awareness of perceived cultural practice in the home countries of international students (Bai & Wang, 2022; Adhikari, 2018) by academic staff, would provide a useful starting point for discussions about what constitutes plagiarism as part of the academic preparation for their study and would serve to address potential academic

challenges. Hernandez Lopez (2020) and Ward et al. (2001) found through their culture shock framework that international students experienced most stress and shock during the initial stages of their relocation due in part to their unfamiliarity with local educational and cultural norms. Other studies (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; George et al., 2013; Haitch, 2016; Pennycock, 2016) have suggested that it would be better for students if HE institutions, instead of focusing on sanctions, to focus on educating students so that they did not commit AIVs. Kaktins (2014) argues that university plagiarism policies are now more inclined to focus on offering a clearer education regarding plagiarism and AIVs rather than focusing on sanctions, which they did in the past.

There is limited research on how international students compare to home students in their understanding of AIVs (Tan & Carnegie, 2020). However, a study by Fass-Holmes (2017) found that the steady growth in the number of international students studying overseas has resulted in a similar growth in the number of international students being involved in intentional or unintentional AIVs. Studies have also found that having an international student status may place some of those students at a higher risk of being guilty of AIVs and that they were twice as likely to be involved in AIVs than home students (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Newton et al., 2014; Walker, 2010).

Research has identified that successful academic writing depends on students demonstrating two aspects of knowledge in relation to AIVs. Critically, they should be able to recognize that plagiarism has occurred (declarative knowledge) and, secondly, they ought to be able to demonstrate how the AIVs can be resolved (procedural knowledge); the application of procedural knowledge requires a deeper level of understanding by the student (Pecorari, 2003; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). Interestingly, a recent study by Tan and Carnegie (2020) found that while the international students in their research outperformed the home students regarding their declarative knowledge of academic writing, their procedural knowledge was equal to that of the home students. Examining the role of declarative and procedural knowledge in the academic writing of international master's students offers a potential area for further research.

Guidance for Best Practice

The ICAI (2021, p.11-12) offers guidance at both the institutional level and the student level. Although international students (like all students) are personally responsible for the relevant AIVs, responsibility should also be placed on academic staff and the number and timing of assignments that master's students are required to complete. The requirement to submit assignments during their first term after arriving in the UK, when they are likely to be experiencing academic shock (Ryan, 2005) and still adjusting to their new location, should be reviewed.

The following list is based on the extensive academic experience of co-ordinating international master's student's programmes in HE by the authors, cited earlier, and informed by the collective research carried out for this essay. It is proposed that these examples of best practice adopted by all staff to support international master's students during the early stages of their move overseas, could also benefit UK master's students. Specific points that directly impact university policy and the academic learning culture and that can be translated into classroom practice include the following:

i. **Understanding academic expectations:** All master's students, including international students should be educated about standards concerning academic integrity during the early weeks of the academic year, at the outset of their program of study and prior to the setting of any assignments. In addition, academic staff should attend regular staff development and training sessions to ensure that they are reminded of the likely impact on academic integrity standards and international master's students of setting assignments if there is insufficient support and guidance about academic integrity during the students' early weeks and months in the UK. This will ensure that all members of the community are familiar with the current academic expectations of the university in which the students will be studying and are able to recognize how these integrate with the overall educational culture that exists in UK HE institutions.

ii. **Clarity and transparency:** An easy way to ensure that all master's students comprehend academic integrity in the classroom and when completing assignments is to develop and publicize clear and fair policies, procedures, and statements that use plain English. This guidance should be easily accessible online for students and academic staff. Written procedures should also be easy to follow, and all students should be able to see that when AIVs occur, the procedures used for dealing with them are applied transparently and consistently by academic staff.

iii.   **Solutions, not sanctions:** Identifying the root of a problem that gives rise to intentional or unintentional plagiarism and AIVs is central to their solution. Where part of the underlying problem lies in the application of pedagogy by staff unfamiliar with best practice in course design, the pedagogy should be re-envisioned. Reviewing the competencies an assignment is testing and the learning outcomes that enable the students to practice, make errors, and learn from constructive feedback that they receive is key to developing students' academic confidence. Importantly, staff should ensure that all master's students, including international students are provided with sufficient time at the beginning of their studies to develop appropriate academic writing confidence and should consider staggering course assignment submission dates to avoid unintentional or intentional AIVs that could arise because assignments are 'bottlenecked' within a period of two or three weeks, especially during their first term.

iv.   **Developing communities of practice:** The formation of on-campus partnerships and collaborations between academic staff and all master's students including international students, are valuable because they allow the production of pedagogical environments that are positive and promote academic integrity in the classroom. However, academics can never be certain that all students fully comprehend what the developing pedagogical setting is attempting to achieve, especially if it differs from that which they are accustomed to or if the particular discussion involved is not clearly explained in a manner that enables the master's student, for whom English may be a second language, to easily and quickly understand and apply to their assignments.

v.   **University policy and practice:** In course and program reviews and reports to external examiners, academic staff should examine and review whether academic integrity policies and procedures are fit for purpose to ensure that they remain current, transparent, impartial, consistent, and understood by all master's students (including international students) and all staff that use the procedures. Regular reviews also ensure that any changes in the types of intentional and unintentional AIVs that occur and any changes in new technologies such as plagiarism detection systems that are used when assignments are submitted by students can be addressed and the outcomes or changes can be communicated to students and staff.

vi.   **Accessibility of student support services dedicated to international master's students:** The provision of support services that are aimed at international students will encourage the students to feel confident about achieving their aims. Provisions could include accessibility and counselling services, academic writing tutorials, and individual personal tutoring sessions. Although the development and promotion of such services should be available to all students, having services that are dedicated to the needs of international master's students is strongly advocated. International master's students, unlike international undergraduate students, need additional support to overcome any academic challenges and enable rapid transition and adaptation to a new learning environment to complete their studies within the constraint of one academic year. It should be acknowledged, however, that the resources of UK HE institutions are limited and that important decisions often must be made about which resources have to be reduced or even eliminated. It is therefore important that, given the fees that international master's students pay for their programs of study, these institutions ensure that dedicated resources for international master's students are ring-fenced and employed, allowing them to remain achievable and future-proof.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to explore how unintentional and intentional plagiarism challenges academic integrity and to examine the elements that influence and have an impact on the decisions made by international master's students. The issue of the completion of assignments during the early weeks and months of the master's students' arrival in the UK, is of concern since it which does not allow sufficient time to address any initial academic challenges or adjustment to the academic culture of their new educational setting. The timely acquisition of this new 'skill-set' does not support successful submission of compulsory assignments in the first term of their study.

The importance of factors such as academic language barriers, academic protocols and misunderstandings are recognized and addressed, as is the significance of providing clear and transparent definitions of what constitutes AIVs in UK HE institutions. Having supportive and developmental learning tools regarding academic integrity instead of focusing

on sanctions may be the lynchpin of the success of international master's students. Although developing and publicizing academic integrity policies, procedures, and statements are important, for the international master's student, these are abstract constructs unless they are demonstrated in practice from the outset so that they are clear about how these impact on their work and progress. Factors such as forming communities of practice, regular reviewing of courses and programs, and the provision of dedicated international master's student support services play equally important roles in students' success. Consequently, researchers may benefit more from looking at how universities can rapidly integrate and teach the academic integrity culture of the university prior to the submission of assignments instead of focusing on the deficit model that concerns why and how international master's students commit AIVs.

Overall, there is scant evidence to indicate that best practice is applied consistently within UK HE institutions, as the general viewpoint is that student-centred learning is essential in the pedagogy of HE, and that academic freedom is an essential part of this teaching and learning approach. We suggest that academic integrity is a key factor in providing consistency of understanding between academic staff and international master's students and is central to enabling high-level pedagogical outcomes for all students. This should be combined with the associated elements that relate directly to course objectives and assessment criteria which should be clearly explained to master's students and easily accessible online. These are key elements that underpin academic integrity and are critical in facilitating a transparent university academic university culture.

We acknowledge that there are wider and deeper debates in the literature regarding the essential factors that enable international master's students to succeed; however, the elements discussed in this essay offers an opportunity to focus on and address the experience of international master's students at the outset of their study at UK HE institutions.

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