



INTERNATIONAL VOICES TO THE FORE

**RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN**

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	5
Contextualizing the topic	5
Aim of research	5
RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS	6
METHODOLOGY	7
Literature Review	7
Situation analysis	7
Data Collection.....	7
Non-participant observation.....	8
Sampling and recruitment	8
Interviews with students.....	9
Focus groups with students	10
Data analysis	10
Anonymity and confidentiality.....	10
Reflexivity of Researcher	11
Contribution of mixed methods approach	12
Tentative Outline	12
PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
I. Contextualizing the Issue - Internationalization of Higher Education	14
II. Working Definitions and Hypothesis	15
III. Learning Processes of International Students	17
1. Academic skills / Academic literacy	18
2. English language proficiency.....	20
3. Experiencing the teacher-student relationship	21
4. Academic Support Services.....	23
4.1. Classification	23
4.2. Best Practices	25
IV. Conclusion.....	28
PART TWO: SITUATION ANALYSIS.....	30
I. Student Learning Development.....	30
1. SLD General Profile	30
1.1. Theoretical approach	31

1.2.	Methodology and services provided.....	31
1.3.	Marketing strategy.....	34
2.	SLD and International Students	35
2.1.	Challenges and Issues of International Students	35
3.	Preliminary Conclusion	37
II.	Stakeholders	38
1.	Undergraduate Students.....	40
2.	International Students	42
3.	Other Stakeholders	44
III.	International Students Orientation	46
IV.	SWOT Analysis	48
PART THREE – THEMATIC ANALYSIS		50
I.	Why Do International Students Choose Trinity?	50
II.	What Are Their Academic Expectations?	52
III.	What Academic Challenges do International Students Face?	55
1.	Academic Culture.....	55
2.	The College’s expectations	57
3.	Academic background.....	59
IV.	How do International Students Experience Independent Learning?	61
1.	Responsibility and Time Management	61
2.	Perceived Disadvantages	63
3.	Perceived Advantages.....	64
V.	How do International Students Experience the English Language?	66
1.	English Language Requirements	66
2.	Language Barriers	67
3.	Self-Conscious About Language Use.....	68
4.	More Time and Attention	69
5.	Proofreading	71
VI.	How do International Students Negotiate Writing?	74
1.	Cultural Differences in Writing	74
2.	Writing Challenges.....	75
3.	Writing Expectations.....	76
4.	Feedback.....	78
VII.	How Is It to Attend Lectures?	81

1. Teaching and Learning method	81
2. Lecturers Perceived as Engaging Experts in Their Fields	82
3. Lecturers Perceived as Approachable and Accommodating	83
4. Lecturers Perceived as Intimidating and Unapproachable	85
VIII. How Is It to Attend Tutorials?	88
IX. How do International Students Experience Trinity Exams?	90
1. Revision	90
2. Preparing for Exams	91
3. Exam Pressure and Anxiety	92
X. Academic Coping Strategies	95
1. Language	95
2. Reading	95
3. Tutorials and Presentations	96
4. Time Management and Preparing for Exams	97
5. Discussing with Peers and Reading Emails.....	97
XI. Asking for Help and Accessing Services	99
1. Asking for Help	99
2. Accessing services	100
2.1. Knowledge about the services	100
2.2. No need of the services	102
PART FOUR: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	104
I. TRANSITIONING TO TRINITY	104
Discussion.....	104
Recommendations	107
1. How to Study in Trinity. A Guide for International Students	107
2. International Students Section – SLD Website and Blackboard	110
3. Pre-Arrival Promotional Video / Animation.....	112
4. SLD Adapts to International Students – College-Wide Launch	113
5. International Students Orientation Sessions - SLD	115
6. Academic Information Stand – Post-Fresher’s Week	116
Conclusion.....	117
II. EXPERIENCING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)	118
Discussion.....	118
Recommendations	119

1. SLD ESL Resource Development	119
2. SLD – EAP Coordination – Joint Workshops.....	120
Conclusion.....	120
III. ACADEMIC AND SUPPORT STAFF.....	121
Discussion.....	121
Recommendations	122
1. Individual Meetings with Key Stakeholders – Summer 2015	122
2. Committees Representation	125
3. Support Services	125
Conclusion.....	125
FINAL THOUGHTS.....	126
BIBLIOGRAPHY	127

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing the topic

Global student mobility has been on the rise, leading to an increasing number of international students moving from one corner of the world to another in the hope of gaining a better, more suitable higher education experience, as well as greatly, and sometimes unknowingly, contributing to state revenues, knowledge transfer and cultural exchanges.

According to ICEF Monitor (2014) “the movement of students between countries is now a mass movement”, the number of worldwide international students growing from 2.1 million in 2000 to 4.5 million in 2011. Asian students coming mainly from China, India and South Korea form 53% of all students studying abroad, and the numbers of international students in Europe increased by 114% from 2000 to 2010 (ICEF Monitor, 2014). These are just two examples that show the great extent of student mobility, but also that of universities’ outreach programmes and the constantly increasing need of students to pursue their education abroad.

Capitalizing on this need, but also noticing the need of universities for both the financial and academic contributions of international students, these institutions are constantly involved in extensive marketing and outreach campaigns that would attract more and more international students to their campuses, contributing to the worldwide student mobility. Such leading institutions are from the US, the UK, Australia and Canada.

Mobility in higher education, however, means also flexibility, opening up and adapting to a new cohort of students that come through the university doors. Many of the institutions leading the way in international higher education have put in place methods of internationalizing both the curriculum and teaching methods, as well as support services that accommodate the various needs of this particular student cohort.

Aim of research

Trinity College Dublin has a small number of overall students compared to other universities, therefore it is not inscribed at the top of the list as a preferred destination. However, according to the 2014-2019 Trinity Strategic Plan, internationalization is one of the key objectives that the university is aiming to continue to strengthen. Furthermore, the Global Relations Strategy has been focused on establishing partnerships with countries such as India, China, Singapore, North America, Brazil and Turkey, contributing further to increasing the number of international students on campus. During academic year 2013-2014, Trinity College had an international student body of 3295

out of 16729, both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Furthermore, “Trinity continues to score highly in the International Student Barometer (ISB), an externally monitored survey (run by i-graduate) on the learning and teaching environment, support services and the living experience at Trinity” (TCD Global Relations Strategy, 2013).

Student Learning Development (SLD) is one of the support services in Trinity that offers academic skills support and advice to all students, in various forms. In academic year 2013-2014, SLD saw 8.3% of all TCD’s non-EU students and 8.8% of all EU students, compared to 2.8% of all Irish students. This discrepancy led to an internal need to better understand the academic experiences of international students and identify whether specific learning support should be designed and implemented.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to address a potential deficit that SLD has in relation to the academic needs of international students by gaining valuable insights from international students themselves and adapting the services accordingly. Furthermore, through these findings SLD will contribute to raising awareness within College regarding the specificities of the international students experience in Trinity.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS

Given the aim of the study, the research question is formulated as follows:

How can Student Learning Development better assist international students in Trinity College with their academic challenges and experiences?

There were several aspects to be taken into account when answering this main question and I captured them in the following sub-questions:

1. What are the current resources and services that international students can use to develop their academic skills?
2. What are the current stakeholders involved in the area of international students and how are they involved?
3. How is SLD positioned in relation to these stakeholders?
4. How is SLD positioned in relation to the international students?
5. What are the academic experiences and needs of international students?
6. How do international students make use of the services and resources available to them?
How do these respond to their needs for academic skills development?

7. What are the potential solutions for improving the implementation of these services and resources?

In order to answer all these questions and gain a better understanding on how SLD can respond to the academic needs of international students I used a mixed methods approach that helped me capture the complexities of this issue.

METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

My literature review was threefold. I firstly focused on the existing research in the field of international students' experiences in academia so as to gain a better understanding of the current theoretical approaches of this topic. Secondly, I looked at the best practices and support services accessible for this particular cohort of students in various universities around the world in order to determine potential solutions that SLD could implement. Lastly, I consulted resources on qualitative research methodology to constantly improve the way I conducted this research.

Situation analysis

There are several Trinity stakeholders active in the area of international students directly or indirectly, both support services and academic staff. One of the aspects of this research was identifying the resources available for international students and the work being done by all stakeholders involved in this area in order to see where SLD fits in and what kind of independent or collaborative initiatives it can implement without overlapping with other services.

I looked firstly at SLD as a service, its activities and initiatives, and I collected data through interviews and discussions with SLD members of the staff regarding what they perceived to be the needs and challenges of international students based on their experience of working directly with these students. Secondly, I mapped all the stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the area of international students and I carried out an analysis through one to one discussions regarding their activities, as well as through consulting their websites and information materials.

Data Collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Education on the methods used for data collection, outlined below.

Non-participant observation

Once the academic year started I conducted non-participant observation during three Orientation sessions in Postgraduate Students Week and Fresher's Week. The aim of this method was to identify what kind of information international students receive before commencing their studies and whether there are any gaps that SLD could fill.

Sampling and recruitment

Given the fact that this research was qualitative, my interest was gaining "access to as wide a range of individuals relevant to the research question as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention" (Bryman, 2008: 414). In other words, what interested me was covering a wide range of academic experiences of international students in Trinity through a general method of recruitment. During the early stages of the research I decided to focus only on the undergraduate international students, full degree and Erasmus/Visiting, instead of both undergraduate and postgraduate. This decision was made due to time constraints related to the one-year research project and wanting to gain in depth information about at least one of the two cohorts in such a limited time frame. However, I was also contacted by two postgraduate students who were interested in participating in the research, one in the focus group, and the other in an interview, and I took the decision to accept their participation and input to the findings.

The main method of recruiting respondents was through a general recruitment advert (see Appendices) distributed as follows:

- via the undergraduate and Study Group International email addresses that SLD was authorized to use;
- via other stakeholders involved in the international students area: Student2Student, Global Officers, Students' Union Educational and Welfare Officers, Global Room, Student Societies;
- via leaflet distributed in various SLD workshops and one-to-one appointments;

This way of recruitment allowed students to respond to the advert and contact me themselves if they were interested in participating in this research, without being pressured in any way, thus having the motivation to attend and not feeling coerced to participate. Furthermore, this general recruitment method was chosen so that all students were equally targeted and no groups were considered specifically, in order to minimize intervention through staff and avoid any bias. Moreover, this method ensured that the students' email addresses were used

according to the College's protocols. Several reminders were sent to students in the weeks after the general recruitment advert was sent.

Interviews with students

The main method of data collection was semi-structured, qualitative interviews. The aim of this method was to capture the voices of international students and gather as much information as possible on their academic experiences and challenges.

In November and December 2014 I conducted 7 semi-structured interviews as part of a pilot project for testing out the interview guide. After the necessary changes were made, I conducted 16 more interviews in February and March 2015. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 2 hours, with an average of 45 minutes. Therefore, a total of 23 interviews were conducted, encompassing 14 hours of recorded data.

According to the type of studies, the respondents were distributed as follows: 13 full degree students, 1 advanced entry full degree student, 8 Erasmus and Visiting students and 1 postgraduate. There were 14 EU respondents (Czech Republic-2, France-4, Germany-2, Lithuania-1, Italy-1, Norway-1, Switzerland-1, UK-2), and 9 non-EU students (US-3, Brazil-2, China-1, Russia-1, Japan-2). Furthermore, the respondents' distribution per school was as follows: 17 respondents from AHSS (Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences), 5 from EMS (Engineering, Maths and Sciences) and 1 from HS (Health Sciences).

Since the recruitment was done via a general advert sent to all undergraduate students indiscriminately, in order to avoid any bias and to allow them to choose whether to take part in the research or not. Due to the time constraints of the research, I wasn't actively looking to have a representative sample from each faculty, but to reach a wide variety of student experiences using a general recruitment method. The result was that the AHSS had the most active students, with 17 of them willing to get involved, followed by EMS with 5 respondents. At the opposite end, HS students were harder to reach through this general method of recruitment, and in the end there was only one postgraduate student participating, who wanted to get their opinions across. This is an important aspect of the data collected and a potential limitation of this research, which could be minimized by a follow-up research, with a more targeted recruitment method addressed specifically to students coming from the Health Sciences faculty. However, despite this limitation, the data collected proved to be very valuable for capturing various aspects of the experiences and challenges of international students in AHSS and EMS.

Focus groups with students

Together with Student2Student (S2S) and Student Counselling Service (SCS) I organized one focus group on the challenges and barriers international students face when accessing services. The focus group took place in October 2014 and lasted for 2 hours, with a short break in the middle. The country distribution of participants was as follows: China-1, Germany-1, France-1 and US-1. Participants were recruited through a general recruitment add (see Appendices) sent to the undergraduate email address that SLD was authorized to use. This particular data helped me gain a better understanding of how SLD can be made more accessible to international students.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis incorporated the findings from the interviews, as well as the ones from the focus group. Despite being guided by the literature review, I aimed as much as possible to analyse the data with a grounded theory ethos, thus allowing the themes and categories to emerge directly from the voices and experiences of the respondents. The main categories that took shape through this approach were reasons to choose Trinity, academic expectations, academic challenges, independent learning, experiencing English as a second language, academic writing, lectures, tutorials, exams, academic coping strategies, asking for help and accessing services. All these themes will be discussed in detail in Part Three of this research.

Anonymity and confidentiality

With one exception, the interviews with students took place in the rooms at SLD office: 7-9 South Leinster Street, 3rd floor. However, to ensure accessibility, I allowed students to choose a place of their convenience if SLD was hard to reach or uncomfortable for them, having in mind my comfort and safety as well. The focus group took place in the Seminar Room of SLD.

Participants were informed from the recruitment email/flyer that confidentiality and anonymity will be respected. The only documents having their names stored were the email conversations that I had with them in order to establish the appointments for the interviews and the consent form (see Appendices) that they had to sign before the interview/focus group started.

Both interviews and focus group were recorded, but participants stated only their school/course and country of origin on the record, without mentioning their names.

Therefore, both the audio and the transcript are free of any information that could lead to their identification. Furthermore, when using quotes in the thematic analysis, I only

mentioned the country of origin and the type of studies pursued (full degree, Erasmus/visiting). As such, despite having to state their real names on the Consent forms, there were very limited chances to link the real person with the transcript of their interview.

Some limitations of confidentiality come from the participants involved in the focus group. While as a researcher I declared to conduct the data collection ethically, I did not have control over the participants once they left the focus group setting. In order to minimize any risk of breaking confidentiality and anonymity, the consent form for the focus group asked participants to respect these two principles.

Reflexivity of Researcher

I conducted this research from the position of Research Assistant in Student Learning Development. Additionally, it was important to be aware of other personal aspects that might influence the collection of data. I am 28 years old, therefore close to the age of some students I interviewed. I am originally from Romania, therefore I am an international member of the staff and I had been an international student myself, having experienced first-hand both the difficulties and the joys of studying in a foreign country and language. Furthermore, I am a white woman and both my cultural and academic experiences are limited to eastern and, to a certain extent, western European countries, which could act as a potential limitation in the process of data collection.

In conducting my interviews I aimed to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with the respondents through some of the aspects stated above. However, I was aware that a certain power dynamics was inevitable as there was a possibility of being perceived as the researcher in charge of gathering data from respondents. According to Sinding and Aronson (2003: 96) vulnerability may be produced for respondents “through the intersection of interview factors (an interview strategy, the interviewer’s presence, a line of questioning) with political and discursive surrounds”. To counterbalance this aspect, ethical approval was sought from the School of Education within College and particular attention was given to the interview process.

Furthermore, in order to monitor the data collection process and be aware of potential limitations or possibilities for improvement I kept a research diary after each interview session or focus group. Writing down notes and impressions on the interview process helped me maintain reflexivity and what I believe to be very important “reality checks” during the researcher’s journey.

Contribution of mixed methods approach

When deciding to combine semi-structured interviews with a focus group and non-participant observation I was aiming to capture the international students' voices and reflections on a variety of academic experiences. The most important aspect of this methodological approach came from bringing these voices to the fore and creating a much needed context to an already existent set of quantitative data. Moreover, international students' experiences were further contextualized in the higher education system of Trinity College, with its unique characteristics and influencing factors.

Based on the data collected through these methods, SLD can now implement more research based, contextualized and targeted support for international students, addressing its own limitations in working with this cohort of students, as well as increasing its international awareness. Nuancing the particularities of the students' experiences through qualitative methods brings both SLD and Trinity College a step closer to a better, more in depth understanding of the entire complexity of these experiences and allows us to move towards an internationalized learning and development system, where students and universities shape each other.

Tentative Outline

This research is organized in four main parts: literature review, situation analysis, thematic analysis and recommendations.

In the first part I start by looking at the existing research in the area of the academic experiences of international students and identifying the main themes that will guide my analysis. In the second part I focused on both SLD and the stakeholders involved in the area of international students.

Firstly, I concentrated on SLD as a service, looking at its existing structure and work and where it is positioned in relation to international students. Secondly, I mapped all the stakeholders within College working with and for international students.

The third part consists of my thematic analysis, structured on the following topics: reasons for choosing Trinity College, academic expectations of international students, academic challenges, independent learning, English as a second language, academic writing, lectures and tutorials, exams, academic coping strategies, asking for help and accessing services.

Based on the data collected through all the methods employed, the last part consists of two sections. The first one focuses on the recommendations made for SLD to implement in order to better respond to the needs, challenges and experiences of international students. In the second

section I will outline a plan for disseminating the research findings to the network of stakeholders identified in Part 2 and potential directions for follow-up.

PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter focuses on the existing research on the academic experiences of international students. I start by contextualizing the topic and providing data on the extent of the international student mobility. In the second part I outline some of the theoretical concepts noted by existing research as defining the international student experience, such as academic progress, academic achievement, academic adjustment and learning processes and I look at how these concepts are connected. In the third part I concentrate on the learning processes of international students and some of the defining factors involved, such as academic literacy, English as a second language, the teacher/student relationship and academic support services. Drawing on best practices in the field, I conclude with the importance of creating a reciprocal and internationalized learning environment, in which both university and international students are actively engaged.

I. Contextualizing the Issue - Internationalization of Higher Education

Global student mobility, defined as “the migration of students across borders for a higher education”, (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011:1) has witnessed a growing trend in the past years. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, the number of globally mobile students increased from 2.1 million in 2002 to 3.4 million in 2009. Furthermore, the number of students to cross national borders to gain an education in 1975 was 0.6 million, and reached over 4 million in 2008. UNESCO estimates that this number will reach 8 million in 2025 (Nyland et. al., 2013: 656).

There are four leading destinations for international students: US, Canada, UK and Australia (UNESCO, 2012). Project Atlas (2010) reported that 6 countries hosted 64% of the world’s international students: US 21%, France 9%, Germany 8%, Australia 7%, China 6% and UK 3% (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011:10). However, new players on the market have implemented internationalisation strategies, being involved in a “global competition for international students”, in which “most countries now view international academic mobility and educational exchanges as critical components for sharing knowledge, building intellectual capital and remaining competitive in a globalizing world” (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011:10).

The financial aspect of internationalizing higher education shows that international students generate high revenue numbers for universities and local economies. According to Altbach and Knight (2007), countries including Australia, Canada, UK and the US recruit international students to earn profits by charging them high fees. Furthermore, more than 2 million international students are self-funded (by themselves or their families), making “students...the largest source of funds for

international education – not governments, academic institutions or philanthropies” (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Additionally, Andrade (2006) also notes the importance of international students as a source for a state’s income, in intercultural learning, leading to an increased understanding of diversity and global issues, creating international business and trade connections, political allies and promoting foreign policy interests.

Therefore, given the high revenue numbers that international students generate for universities and economies (12 billion dollars in the US alone), as well as the advantages of global mobility in relation to learning and knowledge, universities are now facing a moment in time when they should develop flexibility and willingness “to adapt to new realities in the complex world of higher education”, as well as commit to student diversity and all that it involves (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011).

Furthermore, students all over the world realize that studying abroad will enable them to gain the know-how, the skills and knowledge that they can’t acquire at home (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011). When choosing a destination, students weigh in factors such as cost and quality of higher education, value of the degree or professional credentials for their future careers, the availability of certain areas of specialization, the accessibility of the higher education system in particular, and of the respective country in general (Bhandhari & Blumenthal, 2011).

As such, “appropriate information, services and programs are critical to helping international students have positive experiences, fulfil their educational goals and return home as satisfied customers” (Andrade, 2006: 133).

II. Working Definitions and Hypothesis

Before moving on to identifying the various theoretical approaches, it is important to note that the international student identity is very complex and encompasses a variety of experiences and intersecting identity categories such as nationality, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, ability and disability, ethnicity etc. Additionally, international students come from very different educational backgrounds and are used to different learning and assessment styles. Any attempt at defining this concept in very specific terms and narrowing it down faces the risk of denying certain experiences, while making other ones visible. As such, more general definitions of this concept are preferred, noting, however, the importance of always mentioning any specificity of what it means to be an international student.

Slethaug and Manjula (2012) define international education as “intercultural and cross-cultural education that transcends the geographical and pedagogical boundaries of a particular nation”. Based on this definition, international students are those “who have chosen to travel to another country for tertiary study”. Furthermore, Andrade (2006:134) defines international students as “individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers”. Given the fact that students from the European Union do not require a student visa in the countries of the Union, the first definition will be preferred as it encompasses the experiences of more students, including the ones who are native English speakers but study in a foreign English speaking country.

Existing research notes four main categories that influence international students’ perception of the learning environment and experiences: students’ academic progress, teaching and tutoring, student services and support systems and students’ English language proficiency (Li & Kaye, 2006). According to Niven (1987, as cited in Li & Kaye, 2006), **academic progress** is the most pressing problem of international students and it is closely related to the students’ English language skills: “if his/her studies go well, then almost any inconvenience is tolerable; if, however, the students have academic difficulties, then often they will be transported into complaints about accommodation or the unfriendly atmosphere of the institution, and of course can lead to real illness”.

Academic progress can also be analysed in relation to **academic achievement** as evidence of learning through successful completion of course requirements, grade point average, satisfactory academic standing and retention (Andrade, 2006).

One of the factors that influence academic progress and achievement of international students is **academic adjustment**, “a dynamic and interactive process that takes place between the person and the environment and is directed towards an achievement of fit” between the student and the academic context (Anderson, 1994, as cited in Ramsay et al., 1999). This fit can be accomplished in relation to learning styles, study habits, educational background, culture and language proficiency (Andrade, 2006).

Adjustment is closely related to **learning processes**, “the ways in which individuals acquire knowledge and skills, essentially enlarging their personal resources to cope with the academic context” (Ramsay et al., 1999). These processes encompass emotions, moods and feelings: a stressful learning situation leads to negative emotions such as anxiety, while a supportive learning environment leads to positive experiences.

Based on these definitions and concepts, we can conclude that academic progress and achievement are influenced by the degree of academic adjustment the international student experiences, which is in turn influenced by how she goes through various learning processes such as: experiencing academic and English language skills, experiencing the teacher/tutor-student relationship and accessing support services in a foreign university. Given this connection between learning processes, academic adjustment and academic achievement and progress, it can be stated that if receiving universities engage in the learning processes of international students by providing academic support and internationalizing the academic culture, then international students will be better adjusted to the foreign academic environment and have a higher level of achievement and progress.

In order to support this argument, a closer look is needed at how international students experience their learning processes.

III. Learning Processes of International Students

When moving to a foreign country for educational purposes, international students experience a change of physical, cultural and educational environment, as well as transitional difficulties (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002). They come equipped with high expectations of degree programs, well specified career goals and a will to work hard and succeed. However, what many of them end up experiencing is unfamiliarity with the educational system, language difficulties, homesickness and a sense of isolation (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002).

In a study on the academic adjustment and learning processes of international and local students in 1st year university, Ramsay et al. (2006) found that the problems of international students were more severe in their effects and that students experienced more anxiety and stress than their local colleagues. Whitehead (2011) gives a relevant example regarding arrival at the new university:

“On the one hand you have the UK student who is often brought to the university during the day by their family. The boot of the car is stuffed with home comforts, the duvet is in there, some saucepans, maybe a telly, food, drink, you name it. And then there is the international student whose flight lands late at night. They are alone, 5,000 miles from home, with just one case of clothes in a country that is much colder than where they've come from”.

The academic skills issues that international students encounter might be similar to the ones of local students, but the factors that shape the context in which these issues are experienced are different, such as English language barriers, stepping out of one's cultural comfort zone, and feeling isolated or not having a support system relatively close by. Singh and Armstrong (2006:463) note that the experience of international students “is unique primarily because they have removed themselves

from their language and educational environment, cultural norms and traditional support and social networks”.

According to Sherry et al. (2004), international students experience additional problems than their local colleagues, “more psychological and social distress...culture shock, social isolation, conditions in the home countries, cross-cultural relationships, financial difficulties, immigration laws and accompanying anxiety, employment for self and spouse, stress and depression”.

Additionally, the issues that international students might face when moving to another country to study (both general and academic skills specific) should be analysed in connection to the expectations they have about what is going to happen. Existing research notes that students expect an “ethic of care” (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004) where their needs are addressed by “personable, connected, friendly and absolutely fair instructor[s]” (Slethaug & Manjula, 2012:185) and they receive emotional support from the academic staff. Furthermore, students expect high quality teaching and lectures, access to learning support services, mixing with local students, having clear course objectives, prompt feedback and an improved English language (Sherry et al., 2004:2).

Moreover, in an international education setting, students are not the only ones with expectations and most of the time they come in conflict with the expectation of the university in terms of level of preparation, motivation, skills, learning and assessment. Therefore, these differing levels of expectations should be taken into account when addressing the needs and issues that international students face in higher education.

In conclusion, the particularities of the experiences of international students suggest the need for strategies and solutions that are specifically tailored to their various struggles and expectations, without, however, treating them separately as a vulnerable group and marginalizing them further from their local peers. Acknowledging and validating the academic experiences of international students and the way they engage in the learning processes can impact positively and more effectively on the academic adjustment and progress of international students.

1. Academic skills / Academic literacy

The University of Essex defines academic literacy as a “composite of the generic, transferrable skills that are required of and developed by academic study and research”. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2002) relates academic literacy with “the dispositions and habits of mind that enable students to enter the on-going conversations appropriate to college thinking, reading, writing and speaking”. Academic literacy includes the knowledge of how academic discourse is produced, structured and presented, communication – “the ability to express ideas

cogently, concisely and persuasively in writing and speaking”, creative and critical thinking, independent learning and the respect for the work of others (University of Essex, 2015).

According to a recent research done on international students’ experiences in the higher education environment from Malaysia (Slethaug & Manjula, 2012), the issues identified by students were: differences in cultural communication, English language usage, critical thinking skills, technology skills, participation in group discussions and other shared learning, concerns about memorization and lack of initiative, academic literacy styles and assimilation in and out of the classroom.

Furthermore, international students coming to Western European, American or Australian universities have limited or no knowledge on the assessment styles used, such as writing without plagiarism, library skills and collaborative learning skills (Turner & Pointon, 2009). International students in Australian universities are not familiar with the various formats for presenting information (essays, reports, reflective essays, seminar preparations), critical thinking, reading as “the key to knowledge and success” and constructing an argument “based on a thorough knowledge of the relevant literature” (Turner & Pointon, 2009: 134).

Additionally, the communication styles used by international students vary across cultures and can have impacts on student interaction, class behaviour, group or pair work (Burell & Kim, 1998).

Therefore, according to existing research, the issues encountered by international students in relation to developing academic skills can be grouped as follows:

- Transition to a new educational system and academic culture;
- Academic background in the area of study;
- Academic discourse – reading, writing and presenting, constructing an argument, plagiarism;
- Critical thinking – constructing and deconstructing arguments, recursively engaging in “probative questioning, rigorous analysing, imaginative synthesizing and evaluating of ideas” (ICAS, 2002);
- Learning styles – self-regulated, independent, collaborative (group work and cultural differences in setting goals) ;
- Communication – listening, class participation, group discussions, giving and/or asking for feedback, experiencing cultural differences;
- Assessment methods – exams, essays, reports, reflective essays, seminar preparations, presentations.

Some of these issues, such as plagiarism or critical thinking, are “context-specific academic practices that need to be learned” (Montgomery, 2010: 35). According to the author, the tendency in higher

education is to associate the lack of critical thinking skills or plagiarism with international students and their academic backgrounds and approaches to learning. This tendency, however, “shifts the blame for these responses to unfamiliar educational contexts and to the individual student rather than considering how issues such as criticality and plagiarism can be designed into or out of institutional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment” (Montgomery, 2010:36). Therefore, contextualizing these issues within our own academic cultures, as well as within the academic cultures of our international students is an important first step in tackling them, creating bridges between the differences, while acknowledging at the same time the similarities.

2. English language proficiency

The issues encountered by international students when using English language on an academic level affect all aspects of their academic life and skill development. English is needed for listening (lectures, instructions), reading (textbooks, tests and chalkboards), speaking (asking questions, speaking during class discussions, presentations) and writing (for papers, exams and taking notes) (Burell & Kim, 1998). Therefore, language difficulties influence not only language production, but also the ability to understand and produce academic discourse, and contribute further to the student’s sense of self in a foreign academic environment (Luzio-Locket, 1998, as cited in Singh & Armstrong, 2006).

According to Petersen’s (Year?) analysis of international students in Claremont Graduate University, US, when studying in English as a foreign language, students have listening difficulties, as well as speaking problems related to fluency, intonation, pronunciation, word and phrase stress. A 1st year student from Hong Kong who participated in Petersen’s study mentioned that “active participation in the classroom is a problem for me. Even if I can understand the question, I cannot respond quickly to it or do not have the courage to talk in class. In most cases I feel disappointed”. Another 1st year student from Taiwan said that “it is the most difficult for international students to react immediately in English”.

Furthermore, Petersen found that students have problems with reading comprehension and speed, they have to use and get used to new vocabulary, idioms, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

When studying the adjustment process of international postgraduate students at an English university, Brown and Holloway (2008: 239) discovered that the words international students associate with using English were nervous, scared, embarrassed, ashamed, not confident, frightened, panic, confused, shy, while “for those students who enjoyed native or near-native English speaker status, anxiety over language was predictably absent”.

Additionally, the English international students prepare for is often different in terms of accents, expressions or colloquial language than the one they encounter once they arrive to the new university. Talking about international students coming to study in Australian universities, Burns (1991, as cited in Scheyvens et al., 2010:312) notes that “many students enter the country believing that they speak the Queen’s English only to find that their accent, grammar, pronunciation and that of their host do not match and both parties have difficulty understanding each other”.

Therefore, even if international students are required to pass English language examinations as part of the admission process to a foreign university, these tests don’t always prepare them for what it means to use English in the academic environment and they still encounter language difficulties during their studies. As such, universities are required to acknowledge these issues and their importance in the learning processes of international students and develop language support services in order to equip students with the skills they need to successfully pursue their education.

3. Experiencing the teacher-student relationship

Researchers in the field have found that international students and academic staff might have opposing views and expectations on teaching and learning (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004).

Lecturers tend to believe that international students have poor English language skills, poor critical thinking skills, they fail to participate in collaborative learning, have differences in cultural communication and academic literacy styles and have expectations of rote learning (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). Furthermore, although international students have different academic backgrounds and levels of preparation, many of them experience demanding lecturers who expect them to have a strong background in their teaching areas, which leads to anxiety and lower marks (Slethaug & Manjula, 2012).

The difference of perspective can be seen as well in relation to class participation. A survey done by Samuelowitz (1987, as cited in Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002) in Australia found that lecturers believe students do not take enough responsibility for their work and they act only as receivers of knowledge from an authority figure that they don’t want to question. However, some international students come from educational environments where politeness and respect for the tutor play an important part of the student-tutor relationship, which might be a barrier in asking for information or communicating with the tutor in a new environment, where this behaviour is encouraged (Turner & Pointon, 2009).

International students explain their lack of participation in class discussions by being self-aware of their English language skills, which makes them reluctant “to pronounce English words for fear of

failure in front of the evaluative eye of other native speakers” (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004:346). Some lecturers are aware of this impediment and they might tend to adjust teaching English to a lower level in order to accommodate the international students; however, this may contradict the expectations of students who want to improve their English, making them feel further marginalized in the classroom (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004:347).

As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, international students have the expectation of being taken care of to an almost parenting level by their lecturers (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). Not being aware of the faculty culture, the tripartite responsibility of teaching, doing research and providing services that lecturers have, as well as respecting office hours from a time management point of view, leads to international students perceiving their lecturers as uncaring and reluctant to meet them (Burell & Kim, 1998).

In the case of postgraduate students who come from non-Western academic environments, where the supervisor is perceived as a “mentor” who will guide them through the entire process of researching and writing their thesis or dissertation, their expectations regarding the relationship with the new supervisor are much higher. In Western academia, however, supervisors are seen more as informal advisors who require and encourage their students to think critically and engage with their learning material, which leads to disappointment experienced by international students (Scheyvens et al., 2010). Furthermore, they expect their supervisors to know everything about the topic they are researching, but “the reality is that most supervisors know only something of the area to be researched, and expect precisely to increase their own knowledge through the student’s research” (Channel, 1990, as cited in Scheyvens et al., 2010).

Dawson and Conti Bekkers (2002) identified two approaches that teachers and lecturers have towards international students. On the one hand, through the assimilation approach, teachers believe that students should overcome their past experiences and adjust to the new ones; this approach seeks to “normalize, reduce anomalies, coerce students into conformity and it operates at a time in which the student sojourner is at her or his most vulnerable, newly arrived and experiencing the early, stressful stages of culture shock”. On the other hand, there are lecturers who employ the validation approach which empowers international students “to develop strategies for negotiating new knowledge and educational experience in a way that not only acknowledges, but also actively validates their existing knowledge and experience”. Therefore, using the validation approach, lecturers can reanalyse the content presented and teaching methods used and adapt them for an international audience.

Caroll (2002) suggests that teachers can increase cross-cultural sensitivity by getting to know their students, combine group work with cross-cultural skills, lighten the cognitive load, provide accessible materials for all students and explain the process of feedback. Furthermore, lecturers should explain clearly the assessment methods, how students can plan their time for the specific course as well as how they can use the lecturer's time.

Furthermore, Caroll and Ryan (2005) suggest that lecturers and teachers should shift their methods towards teaching in a diverse classroom, where the skills of international students are explored and acknowledged, their expectations are heard and teaching takes place based on concepts such as tolerance of ambiguity, respect for difference, curiosity, cognitive complexity, humour, humility and empathy.

4. Academic Support Services

4.1. Classification

Another important group of stakeholders in the area of international students consists of student support services. The programs offering assistance to students in higher education are based on the idea that college students don't enter higher education equipped with the necessary skills for self-regulated learning. Academic support services are not only addressed to students, they can also be involved in staff development programmes that will further contribute to a better support offered to students. Simpson et al. (1997) mapped the various types of such programmes and I will present their analysis in this chapter, focusing on the ones that are relevant for this research.

According to the authors, academic support services can be inscribed on a continuum from offering reading skills (method based on a deficit that the student might have) to learning strategies (method based on the idea of learning development). These programs "emphasize self-regulated learning and generally teach students a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies deemed appropriate for college level tasks" (Simpson et al., 1997:40).

There are two approaches to designing this kind of services. The generic approach teaches general skills, separated from a specific field of studies and provides no linking between skills and content. The embedded approach, on the other hand, focuses on "teaching processes and strategies within a specific content area or domain" (Simpson et al., 1997:42). While there are views advocating for advantages of both approaches, Alexander (1992, as cited in Simpson et al., 1997:42) notes that "both are essential keys required to unlock the doors to knowledge acquisition and use". Therefore, a combination of the two methods might be required in order to ensure that the academic needs of students are met on all levels.

Another aspect taken into account when designing and implementing support services is the transfer of the strategies students learn to their own areas and academic work. The authors recommend that, in order “to encourage transfer, academic assistance programs should present students with a diverse set of tasks and texts across content areas...students should learn that there are a variety of strategies they could apply rather than one simplistic or predictable routine or recipe” (p. 44).

Furthermore, academic assistance programs should enable students to understand the tasks they will have to accomplish, gain reflectivity to analyse the demands of their courses and match their understanding with the one of their lecturer. Additionally, motivation is marked as an important aspect of self-regulated learning that includes “forming realistic and positive self-schemas or self-concepts, establishing learning scenarios, setting goals, creating learning intentions and protecting those intentions from competing forces” (Simpson et al., 1997:45).

From a thorough list of academic support programmes, I will focus on the following:

1. *Learning-to-Learn programmes* are based on a developmental model in which “students are taught how to build upon the knowledge they already possess about studying and learning” (p. 46). Although these programmes vary from university to university, their common goals are “to create flexible, self-regulated learners, who can modify and transfer strategies to new situations” (p. 46). They consist of courses that combine motivation, traditional study skills (reading, writing) and support study skills (time and stress management), offering generic strategies that can be modified and adapted to specific content.

2. *Supplemental Instruction or Paired Courses* shift the focus from students who might have a deficit to the courses that are high-risk. The authors identify three main actors involved: the Supplemental Instruction Supervisor, who identifies high-risk courses, gains faculty support, trains leaders and supervises the programme’s evaluation, the Faculty Member in charge of teaching the high-risk course and the Supplemental Instruction leader, who is the “model student” attending the course and facilitating study skills sessions (p. 51). These programmes use the embedded method and provide content specific support.

3. *Required Programmes for Underprepared Students* might be based on either a remedial approach (summer interventions, bridge courses or individualized instruction labs where students can take part in courses or individual tutoring sessions) or a developmental approach (programs designed so that students can build up on already existing knowledge).

4. *Learning Assistance Centres* can combine diagnostic services, mini-courses, workshops, support groups, tutoring, supplemental instruction, reading rate training, counselling, study skills instruction, support services for students with disabilities and faculty/staff development consultation (Simpson et al., 1997:64). The way academic help is provided must depend on the specific academic culture and requirements of the university. Furthermore, the centres are varied in their approach of teaching of skills and strategies (they might use the generic or embedded method), strategies of skills transfer, motivation and enabling students to analyse the tasks of their specific courses.

According to Simpson et al. (1997), the design and implementation of academic support services, irrespective of the type, should be thoroughly researched and focused on analysing and describing the tasks and situations that students encounter in their fields of study and classes, the strategies used to transfer the skills they learn through these programs and, lastly, but not least, investigating the motivational strategies that lay behind their personal strategies of independent learning.

4.2. Best Practices

Universities so far have developed support services that are addressed to international students directly as a target group, and/or indirectly, as part of the undergraduate or postgraduate students. Furthermore, some universities designed programmes that focus on both staff and student academic development, while others only address students. The best practices outlined below point towards the importance of having a research based approach and designing programmes that address the experiences of international students and meet their academic needs in an effective way.

Research Based Approaches – International Students in Malaysia

After conducting research on improving the learning experiences of international students in Malaysia, Slethaug and Manjula (2012) designed the following set of recommendations to be taken into account when developing academic support programmes addressed to international students:

- Survey students to discover who the international students are and to demonstrate that university accepts diverse cultural backgrounds;
- Conduct a needs analysis to discover how international students' priorities are met within the classroom and translated into staff-development programmes;
- Research and demystify the problems international students face as learners in unfamiliar academic and social contexts;

- Maintain open communication systems and feedback channels to discover the challenges for international students who participate in courses and classrooms (which may not be anticipated);
- Communication strategies between students and staff to increase cultural understanding in the ways pedagogy and practice can be mediated;
- Opportunities for academic staff to reflect on the pedagogy of international teaching and learning;
- Mechanisms to ensure that quality outcomes and student satisfaction accompany the delivery of teaching programmes.

Furthermore, Hellsten and Prescott (2004) note the importance of performing a needs analysis of international students and their backgrounds, as well as providing the staff with the opportunity to communicate and reflect on their practices in teaching international students.

Addressing Transition - Curtin Learning Support Centre, Curtin University of Technology, Australia

In order to address the process of transitioning to a new academic culture, Curtin Learning Support Centre developed a series of transition seminars that focus on the experience of academic culture shock and provide international students with tools to successfully manage this process by “acknowledging and validating both their experience of culture shock and their cultural subjectivity and identity” (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002).

Working in pairs or in groups and with the help of the facilitator, students identify aspects of culture shock that they are experiencing or have experienced in the past and discuss how these experiences can be used as learning opportunities. In this setting, facilitators “aim to create a warm classroom climate in which students feel safe to disclose, but we focus on culture shock not as a pathological syndrome, but as an interesting objective phenomenon that can be interpreted, analysed and managed rationally” (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002).

As a follow-up of these seminars, students learn the practice of structured learning and they are given possible frameworks through which to evaluate their experiences; students are encouraged to keep a structured reflection journal describing experiences related to culture shock and reflecting upon the ways they responded to them and the outcomes of their responses. As a result “one of the very gratifying aspects of these journals is to see that having articulated their experience in writing, students are more able to think through and respond to issues more productively” (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002).

Academic Skills Development Course - Queensland Institute of Business and Technology

Addressing the fact that international students were studying various topics and courses across the university, without having in depth knowledge of academic skills and the academic culture they were in, Queensland Institute of Business and Technology designed the Academic and Professional Skills Development, a credited course that international students could enrol in. Therefore, a new academic context was created based on the “literature related to the student experience of assessment” (Turner & Pointon, 2009:135).

During the first semester of their studies, international students had the opportunity to follow this course for credits and “were able to learn and practice skills within an academic context and, more importantly, learn deeply about the expectations of a Western university”. As such, students were taught basic skills for assessment (academic reading, writing, listening, collaborative learning and researching, presenting in different formats), while at the same time understanding the Australian university’s culture of learning.

The most important assessment method was writing an essay on a topic related to the student experience of assessment and support was given based on the following guidelines (Turner & Pointon, 2004:136):

- “The essay assessment is given early with ample time for development of skills
- A clear assessment guide outlines the marking criteria
- A ‘compulsory’ article is provided and help given in reading it in tutorials
- Searching of library catalogues and academic databases is built around the essay topic
- Students produce a bibliography of readings which tutors check for suitability
- Students engage in short in-class tests of their basic skills such as paraphrasing, quoting, citing and writing reference list items. A small mark is awarded (2 marks for each item) and students are able to re-submit corrected pieces for the full mark.
- An annotated model student essay is provided
- Support for developed paragraph writing is given in tutorials
- A short mid-semester examination tests the ability to write a developed paragraph using the academic literature
- Students are encouraged to use Turnitin (an online plagiarism checking tool) as many times as they choose to check that they are not plagiarising
- Students are given feedback on their essays
- Students correct problems in basic skills found in their essay in tutorial time (participation is rewarded with 2 marks)”.

Assessment was also done through a group presentation and a final test. Furthermore, it was observed how a course based entirely on the student experience of assessment contributed also to the development of English language skills for international students.

Based on the evaluations done by the course directors, the feedback received from students was mostly positive and they recognized its importance in their academic development, proving that such a course is “essential for the many international students who have a radically different prior educational culture” (Turner & Pointon, 2004:138).

IV. Conclusion

What has been argued so far is that academic progress and achievement are two main components of the international student’s experience of higher education and are closely related to the students’ academic adjustment to the foreign higher education environment. Adjustment is, in turn, influenced by the way international students engage in learning processes of academic and English language skills inside the classroom, through the teacher-student-peers relationship and outside the classroom, through the academic support services available.

In looking at learning processes, current research shows the importance of no longer considering them as one way trajectories, with knowledge being given by the university to the international student, but focusing on the reciprocity involved if universities are aiming towards reaching an intercultural dimension in communication and learning (Volet & Ang, 1998, as cited in Robertson et al., 2010:89). According to Slethaug and Manjula (2012:189) “a commitment to internationalizing the curriculum needs to be fostered and innovative solutions need to be sought to re-evaluate existing curriculum content, enhance capacity and deliver more effective international programmes while still preserving the best existing pedagogy”. Additionally, designing academic support services that are internationally aware and implementing research based approaches that are directly linked to the experiences and challenges of international students is another important aspect to be considered when transforming academic cultures into welcoming and productive learning environments for international students.

As such, through lecturers and teachers, support and admin staff, universities can engage and intervene efficiently in the learning processes of international students, enabling them to adjust to the academic culture and reach higher scores in academic achievement, as well as opening up the academic culture to an international dimension and implementing a reciprocal process of international learning.

Ultimately, academic adjustment, as it was previously defined, is a dynamic and interactive process aimed at reaching a fit between students and the academic environment. In such a context, Volet and Ang (1998, as cited in Scheyvens et al., 2010: 313) advise that educators, both lecturers and support staff, “need to move from a ‘deficit model’ that emphasises the need for overseas students to adjust to our [academic] culture, towards a model that emphasises the necessity of culture learning on both sides”. Applying such interactive pedagogies “creates a space for both students and staff to include critical reflections on their own and others’ background” (Montgomery, 2010:124), as well as exploring the methods of teaching, learning and assessment from a critical and more productive standpoint.

Internationalizing the academic culture is a timely process and requires the involvement and collaborative effort of all stakeholders within a higher education institution. However, acknowledging international students as active and dynamic actors in this process, providing invaluable input through their experiences, is a very important starting point from which further strategies can be developed in order to ensure that a reciprocal academic adjustment is reached between international students and universities.

PART TWO: SITUATION ANALYSIS

In this part I will look at the existing resources for international students in College. I will start with a brief analysis of Student Learning Development (SLD), its methodology and the kind of support offered to students. I will then provide an overview of the stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the area of international students. In the third section I will discuss international students' orientation and present the findings of my non-participant observation during three orientation sessions. Lastly, I will conduct a SWOT analysis in order to connect SLD with the other stakeholders and identify potential directions for collaboration.

I. Student Learning Development

1. SLD General Profile

Student Learning Development is a Trinity College Dublin support service and is part of the Student Counselling Service, together with Student2Student (S2S). SLD provides learning support for students to reach their academic potential, using "an inclusive and developmental approach", offering free and confidential services to all registered students of Trinity College.

According to the Student Counselling Services Annual Report 2013-2014, 3017 students received SLD support through one to one appointments, drop-in sessions, generic workshops and departmental workshops.

The direct target groups of SLD are:

- Undergraduate students
- Postgraduate students
- Mature students

The indirect target groups are:

- International students
- Academic staff
- Administrative staff

All SLD services are directed to students, while the academic and administrative staff is approached for referral and marketing purposes. The team consists of one coordinator, three learning advisors, one research assistant and two volunteers, former TCD lecturers.

1.1. Theoretical approach

As a service that combines the approaches of learning-to-learn programmes with the ones of a learning assistance centre (see p. 19-20), and as its name indicates, SLD applies a developmental model through which students are enabled to become “flexible, self-regulated learners, who can modify and transfer strategies to new situations” (Simpson et al, 1997:46). The Learning Advisors do not aim to remedy deficits, but to improve the student learning experience by centring it on the student and assisting them in developing personalized strategies of learning.

SLD bases its work ethos on the theory of self-regulated learning as a “self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into task related academic skills” and perform learning as an activity students do for themselves proactively, becoming strategic learners (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2001). Self-regulated learning acknowledges the ability of students to regulate their learning processes and

comprises such processes as setting goals for learning, attending to and concentrating on instruction, using effective strategies to organize, code and rehearse information to be remembered, establishing a productive work environment, using resources effectively, monitoring performance, managing time effectively, seeking assistance when needed, holding positive beliefs about one’s capabilities, the value of learning, the factors influencing learning and the anticipated outcomes of actions, and experiencing pride and satisfaction with one’s efforts. (Schunk and Ertmer, 2000:631 in O’Connor, 2006: 27).

Therefore, SLD’s Learning Advisors enable students to develop three types of strategies (O’Connor, 2006: 28-29), based on their academic needs and context:

1. Cognitive strategies – “assist the student in processing material for understanding and recall”. In relation to these strategies, SLD offers support on a standard set of transferable academic skills related to reading and note-making, writing, critical thinking and presenting.
2. Affective and motivational – “concerned with maintaining the proper learning environment” through preventing academic anxiety, stress management, overcoming procrastination and having a positive attitude.
3. Metacognitive strategies – “help students match the demands of a task with their resources” through self-management, planning and getting organised.

1.2. Methodology and services provided

The main activities organized by SLD for their target groups are workshops, individual appointments and drop-ins, online materials (website and blackboard module) and email support.

Through its activities, SLD applies mostly the generic approach and teaches a set of standard skills (traditional and support study skills) that can be transferred further by the students to their own specific situations and contexts. However, through individual consultations and drop-ins, the Learning Advisors address the students' specific needs and assist them in developing personalized strategies. Furthermore, together with lecturers from academic departments, SLD applies the embedded approach and delivers department specific content on academic skills.

1. **Workshop Plus Programme - generic workshops**, offered in the Seminar Room of SCS
 - a. for undergraduate students:
 - Study skills
 - Critical thinking and active learning
 - Reading and note making skills
 - Writing: essay writing, critical writing, writing in sciences, dissertation writing, literature review and thesis writing
 - Plagiarism
 - Presentation and poster skills
 - Exams preparation
 - Academic anxiety prevention
 - Time management, overcoming procrastination.
 - b. For postgraduate students:
 - PhD Module – Planning and Managing your Research and your Career, an ECTS credited course that approaches the following topics: Planning and Managing your PhD, Effective Teamwork, Careers, Develop Critical Arguments, Effective Presentations, Thesis Writing, PhD Approaches to Literature Review, Stress Management, Viva & Oral Defence Preparation. This module is organised in collaboration with the Careers Advisory Service, another student support service within TCD.
 - PhD Summer School
2. **Online Workshop Plus Programme - generic workshops (online)**, offered virtually via webinars on the topics that are considered most in demand by the students, such as reading and note-making skills, getting organised, writing in sciences, exam skills, literature review and thesis writing, essay writing and exam success.
3. **Departmental workshops (embedded)**

If contacted by class representatives or members of the academic staff, SLD provides workshops in specific departments and adapts the generic skills to the content delivered in those departments.

4. Individual appointments

Individual learning consultations with an SLD learning advisor, lasting from 30 minutes to 1 hour, on any issue related to academic study that the student might want to improve, such as study and organizational strategies, academic writing skills, managing exams and presentation skills.

5. Drop-In clinics

During term time, two days a week, students have the opportunity to have one to one sessions of 10-15 minutes with experienced lecturers on study skills and advice regarding planning and writing essays, preparing and delivering better exam answers, writing thesis dissertation, managing time and note taking.

6. Exam clinics, study sessions and exam simulations

Approximately one week before summer exams (May of each academic year) and supplemental exams (August of each academic year), SLD organizes an exam simulation, where students can practice their exam performance under simulated exam conditions.

7. Blackboard Module – Academic Skills for Successful Learning

Blackboard is an online platform where registered Trinity students and staff can access course materials. Through the Academic Skills for Successful Learning online course, students can access materials on the following topics:

- Exams: how to handle exam anxiety and stress management, exam papers and consulting past examination papers, performing, before and after exam preparation, planning and practicing exams, revision, intellectual and emotional preparation;
- Presentations: how to develop accessible presentations, planning, preparing, practicing and presenting, how to use PowerPoint or alternative programmes for delivering presentations;
- Self-management: strategies, time-management and anti-procrastination strategies, attitude and confidence strategies, handling distractions, mind and body;
- Study skills: critical thinking, learning styles, memory, note making, reading and how to use or start a study group;

- Writing: essay writing, feedback, reference and plagiarism, choosing the right writing tools.

Furthermore, they can find out information on all the other activities that SLD is offering, from the workshop calendar to the drop-in schedule.

The module also functions as a platform for academics and lecturers who want to make certain course specific study materials available to students.

8. Online materials via student-learning.tcd.ie

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as the general public, can access materials on SLD website, free of charge, on effective study skills, self-management, writing skills, critical thinking, presentation skills and exam taking on their own time and pace.

1.3. Marketing strategy

SLD uses various channels to reach its target audience: website, advertising, direct marketing, social media and events.

The Blackboard module and the SLD website (student-learning.tcd.ie) are used by SLD as tools to raise awareness, inform the target groups of its services and share information and resources.

Advertising the workshops and activities is done through various college communication channels:

- Google calendar available on the website and Blackboard;
- Including all the necessary information in Listings – hardcopy version of all future events and activities held by different departments;
- Emails sent to various TCD mailing lists (including undergraduate and postgraduate);
- Online noticeboards;
- Information screens around campus;
- Social media such as Facebook page and Twitter account.

SLD also uses direct marketing approaches, distributing various types of promotional materials: flyers, bookmarks, posters and brochures containing information about the main services SLD provides (one to one appointments, drop in service, workshops and online) and the topics SLD covers (exams, note taking, organisation, planning, presentations, writing), together with the contact details of the service.

These materials are distributed to SCS, other services, course coordinators, waiting room of the SCS and the Global Room; furthermore, the workshops program is sent to the Senior Tutor and the

Student Union Education Officer at the beginning of each term. Moreover, S2S mentors, SU and GSU representatives can refer students to the services of SLD.

SLD is also present on the website for prospective international EU and non-EU students under the Learning Support section and its materials are included in the Meet and Greet packages that international students receive upon arrival. However, it is worth mentioning that SLD and its activities are not visible in the pre-arrival process.

Furthermore, SLD also presents its services during Fresher's week and various orientation programmes for undergraduate, postgraduate and international students, as well as a lunchtime talk on "The Successful Student".

2. SLD and International Students

According to the Annual Report 2012-2013, SLD worked with 10.6% of all TCD's non-EU students and 9.8% of all EU students. In 2013-2014, SLD worked with 8.3% of all TCD's non-EU students and 8.8% of all EU students, compared to 2.8% Irish students.

International students form an indirect target group of SLD and they are seen as either part of the undergraduate or postgraduate students in all the activities and services provided. As such, they are not addressed directly on either of the marketing and communications materials. Furthermore, the online materials available on the website do not make a direct reference to international students; however, all the topics and materials available online address issues that an international student might face in relation to developing their academic skills (exams, presenting, self-management, study skills, writing).

When using the service for the first time, students have to fill in an intake form selecting the issues they want to discuss, which allows the Learning Advisors to address their specific needs. The form includes a College adjustment / Transition category, addressing issues such as Learning abroad, Language / academic English, Teaching methods and teacher expectations, My role as a student, all issues that an international student might experience.

2.1. Challenges and Issues of International Students

In July 2014 I conducted three semi-structured interviews with SLD's Learning Advisors in order to find out what were the issues that international students discussed in the individual consultations, which can be grouped as follows:

- **Academic Background and Expectations.** When coming to study in Trinity, international students have a limited understanding of what is expected of them. There seems to be a mismatch between the expectations of the university and the background of students; this was noted by one of the Learning Advisors in relation to the Nursing School, where international students (mostly coming from African countries) have a different perception of what TCD expects from them. Furthermore, international students expect more support from their lecturers, who, on the other hand, have high expectations of all students and don't give enough allowance to the international ones. Similarly, PhD and postgraduate students do not have a clear image of what is expected of them, may struggle in finding that information and might spend a long time not knowing what to do.

- **Transition to Self-Regulated Learning.** International students have no direction in the learning process compared to what they were used to in their home countries, which leads to experiencing difficulties in their studies, as well as developing a feeling of being on their own, which is difficult to manage.

- **Assessment Methods.** International students might experience a lack of understanding of academic conventions; some of them are not used to written examinations, therefore they have a hard time understanding what is expected of them in terms of writing, citations or plagiarism. Furthermore, other students (for example the ones coming from the United States) are used to different assessment programmes, such as continuous assessment instead of exams at the end of the term, which makes it difficult for them to adapt.

- **Academic Discourse.** Writing in English at a complex level and not having enough experience with this is another struggle of international students, especially at a postgraduate level. Furthermore, understanding plagiarism makes students feel unconfident to express in their own words what the source is saying. Citing, referencing and using resources are a common problem for all students in TCD, both local and international; however, according to SLD Learning Advisors, local students deal with this problem easier.

- **Academic Isolation.** For many international students experiencing struggles with their studies, asking for support from their families and friends might not be an option, which leads to having no support system while in TCD. Isolation is also related to time zones, which deepens the sense of distance – an overseas student who is 12 hours ahead or behind home and doesn't have a support system while in university has to make time to talk to her family, friends or partner during the night, so she doesn't manage to sleep and doesn't perform well in school. Nonetheless,

academic isolation is also experienced by postgraduate students who feel unable to discuss their work.

- **Supervisor – Student Relationship.** International students expect more support from their supervisors and they lack confidence when it comes to managing their expectations and asking for help. Moreover, the feedback they receive is not always very clear due to the academic language barriers, which leads to students not having enough information on how to change and improve.

3. Preliminary Conclusion

Student Learning Development is one of the many student support services in TCD. According to the SCS Annual Report 2012-2013, 52 students who had attended one-to-one consultations completed a feedback questionnaire. Over 85% said that the issues they sought help for had improved. 66% said that SLD was a factor in keeping them enrolled at Trinity and 69% indicated that SLD helped them perform better academically. 342 workshop participants gave feedback, 92% of whom felt their academic performance would improve from attending.

Although nationality was not a variable collected during feedback, one of the survey answers can be interpreted as coming from an international student: “It was really great to have an ear when I was in a time of study crisis and lost. Being away from home you lose certain vital social nets and having them here helped me pass my exams” (SurveyMonkey Feedback 2012-2013). Furthermore, one of the respondents notes the need for more initiatives targeted specifically to international students “I feel that SLD has helped students either native or international which is really good. However, I would like to see more events for helping international students as they have some difficulties with academic language” (SurveyMonkey Feedback 2013-2014).

As Trinity is becoming more internationalized and more attention is given to support services for international students, as an academic skills service provider for students within Trinity, SLD plays an important role in the design and implementation of those services. Being anchored in a network of stakeholders interested or already active in the area of international students, a closer look at this network is needed before proceeding further with the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that SLD can manage in order to become more efficiently engaged in providing services for international students.

II. Stakeholders

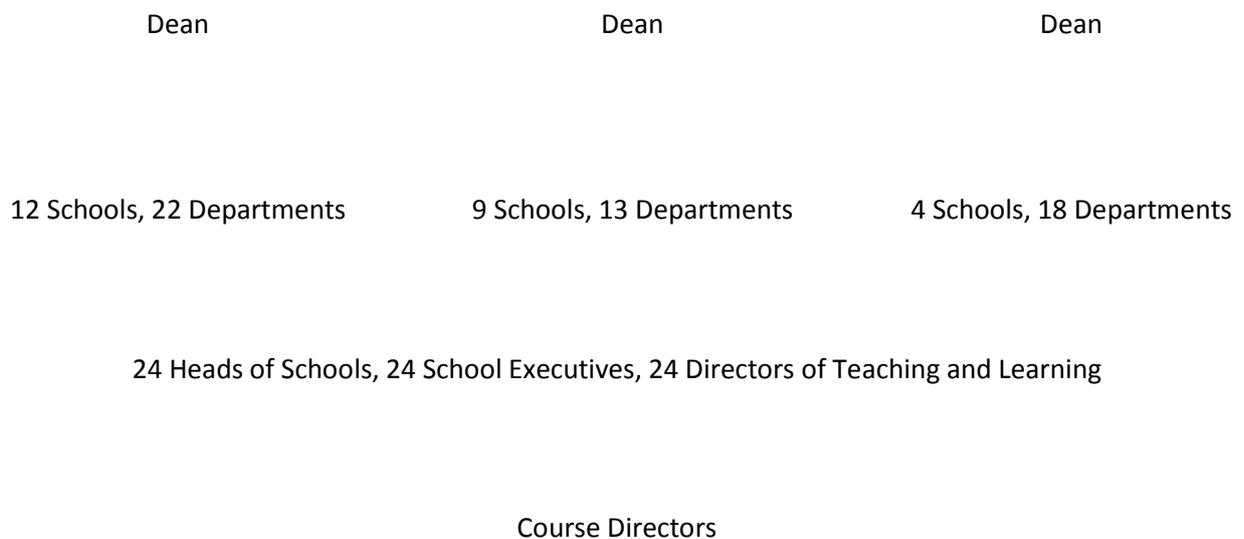
Trinity hosts a large network of academic representatives and student support services that are addressing international students directly or indirectly, on an undergraduate or postgraduate level. Apart from the support services designed specifically for international students, the rest address them as being part of either the undergraduate or postgraduate group of students. As TCD is administratively decentralized, it is necessary to map all these stakeholders and specify all the particularities of their services in order to gain a better understanding of how SLD can integrate its services in the larger network of stakeholders.

In July and August 2014 I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, lasting from 30 minutes to 1 hour, with members of the staff of the following services:

- International Admissions Team and Study Abroad, Erasmus Coordinator
- Global Room
- Global Officers
- S2S
- Students' Union
- English for Academic Purposes
- Careers Advisory Service

Through these interviews I focused on the services provided and activities organized for undergraduate students, how each service works with international students, what issues and challenges international students have as well as, where suitable, how lecturers work in relation to international students.

The information for the remaining stakeholders was obtained via TCD websites and discussions with SLD Coordinator and Learning Advisors. Similar to the interviews, the analysis of the website focused on the activities and services provided to students and how they work with international students. Lastly, the academic representatives were not addressed during the research, but mapping their responsibilities was important for the follow-up stage of disseminating the research findings and connecting SLD with the wider network of support and academic services in Trinity.



Heads of Schools Committee

- Vice Provost/Chief Academic Officer + Heads of School + Academic Secretary
- Ensures academic participation in policy development
- Makes recommendations for the University Council

1. Undergraduate Students

Academic Representatives

Senior Lecturer – Dean of Undergraduate Studies

Directors of Teaching and Learning

Course Directors

Undergraduate Studies Committee

Student Life Committee

Support Services

Dean of Students

Tutorial Service – Senior Tutor

Students' Union

Student Learning Development

Student2Student

Math Help Room

Programming Support Centre

Peer Assisted Learning

Career Advisory Services

Academic Representatives

1. Senior Lecturer – Dean of Undergraduate Studies, responsible for the design and implementation of undergraduate studies over all the schools in College.
2. Directors of Teaching and Learning – based in each school, they are in charge of the general management of undergraduate teaching programmes, the promotion of best practice and innovation and the development of policies based on existing teaching programmes and proposed new programmes. Furthermore, they work " to promote a scholarly approach to teaching including the development and use of teaching portfolios; the implementation of appropriate mentoring schemes for academic staff; the provision of advice and guidance to staff on these matters; and liaison with the Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning regarding teaching and learning development."
3. Course Directors – involved in the design and teaching of courses.
4. Undergraduate Studies Committee – meets six times per academic year and comprises of Senior Lecturer (Dean of Undergraduate Studies), Academic Secretary (or nominee), Directors of Teaching and Learning, Course Directors, Dean of Students, Senior Tutor,

Students' Union Education Officer, Student representative, Library representative and Secretary (in attendance).

5. Student Life Committee – meets once a month to discuss the student experience in Trinity and comprises of two directors of student services, two elected board members, SU Welfare Officer, President of the Graduate Students' Union, one Faculty Dean, one Head of School, Senior Tutor, Senior Lecturer, Secretary to College and Treasurer.

Support Services

1. Dean of Students – overlooks the student experience in Trinity and influences policies and support services addressed to students.
2. Tutorial Service – coordinated by the Senior Tutor, offers confidential help to students on any personal or academic issue. The Senior Tutor is also in charge of organizing and coordinating the Orientation sessions for each school.
3. Students' Union (SU) – has an elected Education Officer and an International Students Representative. The Education Committee of SU meets regularly and discusses matters regarding education in Trinity and promotes SLD and other support services. SU holds elections for Class Reps and School Convenors (coordinators of Class Reps within a School). Furthermore, SU collaborates with unituition.com, a service provider of study grinds.
4. S2S – part of the Student Counselling Service, implements a mentorship programme for all undergraduate students in Trinity and offers peer support.
5. Math Help Room – service coordinated by Maths students offering peer academic support on specific tasks.
6. Programming Support Centre – programming support for all students of Computer Science and Engineering
7. Peer Assisted Learning – peer support service for students in the School of Languages
8. Careers Advisory Service – offers support on job applications and identifying further career directions.

2. International Students

Academic Representatives

Erasmus / Visiting Students Coordinators

Support Services

Global Officers

Global Room

International Admissions and Study Abroad –
Erasmus Coordinator

S2S – New to Dublin

English for Academic Purposes

Students' Union – International Students
Representative

Careers Advisory Service

International Students Orientation

Academic Representatives

1. Erasmus Students Coordinators – in charge of module registration and advice on academic issues, equivalent of Tutor for Erasmus students.

Support Services

1. Global Officers – based in the following schools: Histories and Humanities, Nursing and Midwifery, Dental Science, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Social Sciences and Philosophy, Natural Science, Computer Science and Statistics, School of English, Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and the LIR. The Global Officers are involved in the following areas :
 - a. Admissions process, providing information to international students who are interested in applying to the schools they are representing;
 - b. Organizing Student Engagement Sessions, where students can discuss any occurring issue and where members of the academic staff or student support services are invited;

- c. Grad-Link – a service of mentoring international students through alumni or 4th year students for any kind of advice, including CV assessment and job placement; this service functions also virtually, through email or Skype;
 - d. Acting as mediators between international/visiting students and academics;
 - e. Internationalization – some Global Officers set up research collaborations with international research institutes and bring international speakers to their events. The School of Computer Science and Statistics has an internship programme through which students can travel abroad in their own countries for internships;
 - f. Conversion tours – organized for international students who have been made an offer but didn't yet accept it. The Global Officers meet the prospective students and their parents in order to clarify any issues or concerns.
2. Global Room – based in the Watts Building, a space open for all international students, where non-formal and cultural activities take place. The room is managed by a team comprising of one International Students Liaison and 14 student ambassadors, both Irish and international, who are involved in the following activities:
- a. Tours of the campus for prospective students, mostly coming from the US, India and Australia, presenting student life in Trinity, its social side and the support services, as well as providing information on specialized courses in College;
 - b. Welcome event for undergraduate international students, introducing them to key people;
 - c. Parent orientation, where parents of international students are informed of student life in Trinity;
 - d. Hosting the New2Dublin programme together with S2S;
 - e. Opening the room as a space for any student societies or support services within College to use for their own events.
3. New to Dublin programme – implemented by S2S mentors and peer supporters, consists of meet-ups and events such as Dublin tours, weekly coffee, academic workshops, connecting international students with their local peers. In academic year 2014-2015, New to Dublin took place every Monday from 5-7pm in the Global Room for the first two months.
4. International Admissions and Study Abroad – Erasmus Coordinator – offering admission and pre-arrival support on most administrative issues students might have.

5. English for Academic Purposes – in sessional English language programmes, 2 hours per week for 12 weeks for a fee of 50 euros. EAP instructors are flexible and design the curriculum according to the needs of the students, conducting a needs assessment at the beginning of the course through evaluating a written assignment of the student, thus offering as much as possible a tailored session for specific disciplines. EAP sessions also cover topics such as writing, citing, plagiarism, and reading and presentation skills. Apart from the in sessional programmes, in 2015 EAP intends to implement a Trinity English Support Pathway, offering English classes for 12 weeks during the summer.
6. Career Advisory Service – International Students Career Advisor offers various types of support for international students, such as CV and LinkedIn Clinics, one-to-one appointments, workshops on obtaining a working permit, writing a CV and cover letter, together with embedded workshops within the Masters of Development Practice and International Relations. Furthermore, the Advisor connects international students with alumni from their home countries to get more information on aspects connected to work and offers support with the Going Global Software, through which students have access to information on various job markets.
7. Students Union International Students Representative – offering personal, social and academic support to international students.

3. Other Stakeholders

1. Trinity Teaching and Learning – Quality Officer – supports the development of College policy and procedures in relation to academic quality assurance and improvement and is currently in the process of applying to ICOS for cultural sensitivity trainings for all staff members of Trinity.
2. Academic Practice and eLearning (former CAPSL) – supports academic research and teaching staff to enhance the university teaching and research experience, encourages the use of new technologies and provides information on plagiarism, as well as allows students to provide anonymous feedback on the teaching and learning experience through the Inclusive Curriculum project.
3. Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) – an external stakeholder that provides cultural sensitivity trainings to university staff around Ireland.

III. International Students Orientation

Part of my methodology for data collection was attending three orientation sessions in order to identify what kind of information international students receive, how SLD is framed and what, if any, are the gaps that SLD could fill.

In academic year 2014-2015, orientation for Erasmus/Visiting students was organized by the Senior Tutor, and the cultural orientation, together with the session for 1st year, non-EU, full degree students was organized by the Global Relations Office. It is important to add that EU students who were enrolled in full degree programmes did not have a separate international orientation and they had to attend the session of their school or department.

In the case of postgraduate students, the international orientation was organized by the Graduate Students' Union (GSU). Although my research didn't eventually focus on postgraduate students, I will include these findings here as they are relevant for the work of SLD in the area of orientation.

It is expected that in academic year 2015-2016, all Orientation sessions will be overseen by the Dean of Students.

Monday, 8th September, 2014 – Postgraduate International Students Orientation

The session took place in the Edmund Burke Theatre, lasted for 1 hour and 30 minutes and had the following information presented in this order: Trinity Global Room, bank account, visa and GNIB registration (given by the International Marketing Officer of Global Relations), health and safety regulations, the activities of the International Students Society (DUISS), the opportunities of learning Irish during their studies, as well as the services that are available for students – SCS (SLD included), EAP and CAS (Planning and Managing your Research Career).

The information about SCS and SLD was given by one of SLD Learning Advisors and it took place one hour after the session had already started. By that time, the energy level in the audience seemed to be very low. SLD was presented in connection to SCS and S2S and included the services that are available for students, without mentioning, however, the PhD Module – Planning and Managing your Research and your Career.

During the EAP slot, the students were asked by the presenter to raise hands if they were from North America, China and North Korea. More than half of the students present were from the first category, approximately 10 students from China and 3 from North Korea. According to 2012-2013 numbers, we know that there are more postgraduate students coming from the last two countries

(i.e. 89 from China), so this particular session showed the challenge of how to get more of the international students to attend Orientation programmes.

Lastly, the session was ended with the presentation of the Careers Service, where the PhD module was mentioned, but not as collaboration between SLD and CAS.

Monday, 15th September, 2014 – Erasmus/Visiting Students Orientation

I attended the second session of this orientation, addressing students whose names started with L-Z letters. There were approximately 200 students attending. The session lasted for about two hours and included the following information and services: immigration, bank account registration and module enrolment, departmental meetings for module choice, civic engagement in Trinity, College Chaplaincy, Students' Union, SLD/SCS/S2S, Sports Centre, S2S mentor, Careers Service, Alumni Office, DUIS, College Health Centre, Niteline and the Tutorial Service.

The session was interactive and students had the opportunity to engage with each other. They were asked to mention things that they are hopeful about and things that they are worried about in relation to their studies in Trinity. The presenters then tied their presentations to the answers given by the students.

As in the case of the postgraduate orientation, SLD was tied together with SCS and S2S. What I found important to notice was that no information was given to students about Trinity academic culture and what it will mean for them to study in this particular university. In other words, all services present the support that is available, but no information is given on what their transition to Trinity will entail.

Thursday, 18th September 2014 – 1st year, non-EU, full degree

This session followed the same pattern as the previous ones, covering information from GNIB registration and opening a bank account to student support services in College.

I was involved in giving out a presentation about SLD and its services for students. During this session my aim was to present in more detail what SLD can offer, as well as our workshop initiative for international students.

To sum up, Orientation sessions for international students cover the practical aspects of studying in Trinity and in Ireland, such as how to open a bank account and how to register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau, followed by brief presentations of the support services available in

College for personal, social and academic issues. The sessions last approximately two hours and take place in theatre halls, bringing together up to 250 students.

Despite the comprehensive information about the support services available in College, there is very limited or no information given on Trinity's academic culture, what it means to be an international student in such a setting, what are the College's expectations from its students and what transitioning to this culture involves. As it will be shown in Part three, this type of information is perceived as very important by international students and it influences their adjustment process and the way they will progress academically. This is a gap that SLD, as an academic development support service, could fill. However, considering the fact that Orientation sessions have become what is informally known as "information overload", more effective ways of transmitting this kind of information should be sought by SLD in order to efficiently enable international students to understand Trinity's academic culture.

IV. SWOT Analysis

After looking at SLD as a service and the network of stakeholders it is part of, I will now connect the two through a SWOT analysis, outlining the strengths and weaknesses that SLD has in the area of international students, the opportunities it could avail of, as well as the threats that should be considered and minimized when designing and implementing individual or joint initiatives for international students. Both opportunities and threats are considered in relation to the stakeholders identified. This is a preliminary analysis and it will be further considered in Part four under the Recommendations section.

PART THREE – THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis consists of eleven sections, each discussing a main theme identified through the data collected via interviews and focus group. Initially I looked at the reasons international students have for choosing Trinity and the expectations they form before starting their studies, after which I focus on more specific academic experiences and challenges related to independent learning, English as a second language, academic writing, lectures and tutorials and annual exams. Lastly, I look at some of the academic coping strategies that many international students develop and how they perceive and experience asking for help and accessing services. All these themes emerged from coding the data using an approach that combined a grounded theory ethos with the guidance given by the literature review. However, I tried as much as possible to allow the data to speak for itself and guide my analysis, defining themes and categories as they emerged from the voices of my respondents.

I. Why Do International Students Choose Trinity?

In order to gain a better understanding of the international student experience as a whole, one of the first things discussed with the participants in this research was their motivation for choosing Trinity as an academic destination. For many international students, coming to study in Trinity was motivated by wanting “a new experience” (American student, full degree) that takes them out of their comfort zone “I lived in my home town my whole life so I just wanted to see something else...that’s the reason why I came here and I’m glad that I made that decision” (German student, full degree).

However, as this student indicates, choosing Trinity is a decision in which they have to consider important factors such as tuitions and costs, moving beyond just wanting to experience something new and adventurous:

“I wanted to study abroad on this like an adventure spirit, it wasn’t like a rational decision, and then I kinda sat down and considered more like how realistic it was and how much it would cost and basically where I could go that wouldn’t leave me broke or stranded in some country where I didn’t speak the language, so it was like one adventurous part and one like pragmatic, that made me choose Trinity in the end” (Norwegian student, full degree).

Trinity’s reputation internationally makes students consider it as a great opportunity in their academic and personal development, allowing them to be part of what they perceive as a prestigious university: “Trinity has such a great reputation around the world, if you ask most people, at least where I’m from, there are three universities in the world most of them know, Cambridge,

Oxford and Trinity...so when I've gotten in it really worked out great" (American student, visiting 1 term). This is especially important for students who consider themselves as not coming from a prestigious academic background "back home my college is like, I'm not coming from a public college which are like the best in the country, it's a small college there and imagine me studying in the best of Ireland was like fantastic" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). Furthermore, having former Trinity graduates as lecturers in their home universities was another contributing factor to perceiving Trinity as a renowned university and a choice for their studies.

Academically, the main factor of choice for non-native English speakers was wanting to study in English and practice their language abilities: "I wanted to study abroad which I can speak English, so I have another country to think about study but I chose Ireland" (Japanese student, postgraduate); "I also wanted to increase my English and improve it" (German student, Erasmus 1 year); "I wanted to go to an English speaking country" (French student, Erasmus 1 year).

Although the UK was an option for many of them from a language standpoint, Ireland proved to be the cheaper, more financially accessible choice: "I wanted to study in an English speaking country and UK was too expensive" (Swiss student, full degree); "my standard of English was comparatively high and I wanted to improve it more so I decided to apply to an English speaking university, I wanted to stay in Europe so it was either Ireland or the UK and since the tuition fees in England are way too high, Trinity was my first choice" (German student, full degree).

For some students, these factors were combined with how relevant Trinity was for their overall academic needs:

"It's a good combination of quality and quantity, so my family would be able to pay for my education, plus I would receive high-quality European education, so my parents wanted me to receive classical English education in the Anglophone world, that would open new possibilities to work and study further everywhere, that's why I chose Trinity" (Russian student)

For others, the decision was influenced by having the opportunity to undertake very specific courses or programmes that they couldn't pursue in other universities: "it's really hard to find a university with German courses and I saw that Trinity had a very good Germanic studies department...then I made more searches about it and I found that it was a really great university, but first it was really for German" (French student, Erasmus 1 year); "Trinity was one of the few choices that I had because I'm studying computational linguistics" (German student, Erasmus 1 year); Trinity was "the only one that offered genetics course which I am interested in" (Lithuanian student, full degree, sat

Leaving Certs in Ireland); “I wanted really to study common law in a common law country” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 year).

It’s interesting to note how, when discussing their motivations for coming to study in Trinity and perfecting their English, some students mention employability skills and having more chances upon graduation to be offered a job or an internship based on their international experience:

“one of the things that when I go back to Brazil I know they’re gonna require at least my English, because there it’s different from here, like you should go to find a job or interview for an internship for example, they’re not gonna analyse your grades, they’re gonna see ok you studied in this place, you graduated in like x years, ok, wow, you studied one year abroad, oh Trinity, yeah I heard about that, it’s nice and stuff, but I know they would require the English and it was like my first, at least the first thing, I need to improve my English” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year)

To sum up, the reasons why international students choose Trinity vary from more general ones of wanting to have new experiences and study in a prestigious university, to more specific ones like practicing and improving English or pursuing specialized courses. When discussing these various motivations it is important to also look at how they shape the expectations that students form about their studies and academic life in Trinity.

II. What Are Their Academic Expectations?

With regards to the academic culture, some international students come to Trinity expecting to experience a Western approach to education, which they perceive as involving a university campus, clubs, societies and engaged students:

“I was also hoping to experience a bit of a more Western approach to education because I love my university, I really do, and it’s very progressive university, but it’s, especially like we don’t have a campus, and we don’t get to experience all these student unions and things because there is just no space for that, and that’s what I was hoping to see how students study in different countries... and also they are all varied students, politically engaged, and I don’t mean politics, but I mean they are taking things in their hands, they have a café and a place to say what they wanna say, I think that’s a great thing about Trinity, we don’t have that...so it fulfilled my expectations quite a bit” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 year)

Most international students expect to enter an academically rigorous system, where they have to work hard and maintain a high level of personal involvement. Academic rigour is expected to be seen in high quality lectures as well as “some sort of support like continuous demand that you study” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). As will be seen in subsequent sections, this expectation of

being continuously assessed comes in conflict with the independent learning model that Trinity implements.

For some students, this system proved to be harder and more challenging than they expected; however, it contributed to their personal development: “my expectations would be that it would be easier than this, it turned out that it’s not so easy, I thought that it would be less challenging and I, no I wouldn’t say unfortunately, fortunately I faced a lot of challenges that broadened my mind and just generally broadened my horizons” (Russian student, full degree).

The academic expectations of some of the respondents revolved around the content of the courses they signed up for “it’s exciting for me to try new, to learn new theories and yeah, just new courses” (Chinese student, visiting 1 term) and improving their skills in the academic field chosen “I wanted to improve my skills of social work in mental health field” (Japanese student, postgraduate).

Furthermore, for some students it was important to gain new perspectives through meeting and interacting with Trinity lecturers “definitely to meet other teachers because I’ve met all my teachers in my department and you are always hoping for new approaches and every new insight into what you are doing” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 term). Additionally, on more practical aspects, some respondents expected a more consistent use of technology by their lecturers: “I expected blackboard to be used by every lecturer, in fact it was I think now out of my 3 modules, only one or two use blackboard, so that’s a bit not messed up, but it’s not very uniform” (German student, Erasmus 1 year).

Nevertheless, not all international students form expectations “I didn’t really have any concrete expectations to be honest...I wanted to go to university and I applied and just wanted to see what it’s like and then just make new experiences, I didn’t have anything concrete” (German student, full degree). In some cases, this was caused by the lack of information “I don’t know, I had really no idea for an Erasmus” (French student, Erasmus 1 year) or similar experiences “there is no history of university attendance in my family, I’m the first, so I had no expectations” (Lithuanian student, full degree, sat Leaving Certs in Ireland).

In conclusion, studying in Trinity is perceived as having new experiences in a prestigious university where international students can improve their English language abilities and academic skills in specialized courses. It also means moving away from home and all support systems and stepping out of their comfort zone. In other words, coming to Trinity involves both a financial investment and an emotional one, with students forming certain expectations about what their studies will involve and how their academic life will look like. Some students expect a Western approach to education that would encompass various aspects from teaching and learning to personal development, while others

expect an academically rigorous environment, with high demands and continuous support. In such an environment, students expect to gain specialized knowledge through their courses, develop and improve skills in their area of choice, as well as acquire new perspectives from Trinity lecturers.

However, once they start their studies, some students notice how the expectations they formed were not aligned with the difficulty and complexity levels of studying in Trinity. Subsequent sections reveal how some international students make use of these challenges and transform them into opportunities for growth and change.

Lastly, forming expectations is not something that all students go through, as many of them just want to start their studies and see what experiences they will have. I explore these experiences in more depth in the following section, focusing on the academic cultural differences and the academic challenges that my respondents encountered while studying in Trinity.

III. What Academic Challenges do International Students Face?

1. Academic Culture

Trinity College has a very specific academic culture, with a unique language in comparison to other universities in Ireland. The academic year is divided into three terms called Michaelmas, Hillary and Trinity term, and students can be Junior or Senior Freshmen, Junior or Senior Sophisters. Therefore, when coming to study in Trinity, international students might face not only a general culture shock, adjusting to the Irish culture and living in Dublin, but they also experience cultural differences entering a new academic environment. This experience can be challenging and overwhelming, involving great effort on behalf of the students:

“It was definitely challenging because it was like discovering sort of a new world and I wasn’t familiar with the economic structure...even the words that people use to describe the terms and you know just the whole learning process was very confusing, so it was almost learning a new language in a way” (French student, full degree).

Coming from a different culture, with a specific cultural background, makes it difficult for some students to understand and negotiate new norms and values: “Cultural differences were hard for me to get a grasp on like just seeing everyone was like oh, it’ll be grand, don’t worry, things take time, whereas I guess part of the American culture is just like get it done now” (American student, full degree). Perceiving their peers as calm and laid back “everyone kind of had this mind-set that the first two years don’t count to your degree...it’s fine, whatever” leads to confusion and comes in conflict with the international students’ expectations: “a relaxed atmosphere that was kind of like incongruent to how prestigious I perceived Trinity to be” (American student, full degree).

This conflict of perceptions might also be caused by the fact that international students come to Trinity with high expectations, as was seen in the previous section, and they are very motivated about their studies, which can further lead to anxiety:

“In the beginning I was much more motivated, maybe because it was the first experience, like a lot of expectations, so I was like now that I’m gonna start the college let’s see how it’s gonna be, so I think the first term I was much more with a hunger of doing something, and this semester, maybe because I get too much hurried and anxious, I decided to take it easier and I’m not so motivated” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Starting to study in Trinity is also perceived as entering a grown-up academic environment that some international students might not be ready for, which increases their academic culture shock and hardens their adjustment process:

“When I came to Trinity I was 17 and I would say I was in this teenage mood where everything seems so magical and amazing...the subjects they introduced to us [were] very grown-up... I was 17 and we went straight away into semiotics and Foucault and Frankfurt and the French Schools and all those psychological Lacanian stuff and I kind of got lost because it’s too grown up” (Russian student, full degree).

Furthermore, a grown-up environment comes with grown-up decisions that students have to make at an early age regarding their choice of courses that are perceived to dictate their future careers:

“Here you get thrown in something that involves a very serious decision cuz the only thing you are going to learn in undergrad is just what you chose, which is why I chose TSM, and I think a lot of the international students choose TSM for that reason because it seems like to all, at the age of 18 to pick what you probably are going to start your career in is not necessarily expected in America, but here it seems to be more specialized that way” (American student, full degree).

In relation to these experiences it is important to consider the larger context in which international students move to a new country and learn to live on their own, some at a very early age, with no support system such as family or friends, and having to make grown-up decisions regarding practical matters from paying bills in a foreign system to preparing food. Furthermore, most international students are not able to travel home to their support system for the weekend like their Irish peers do. Having in mind this context, it can be stated that international students face additional pressures when becoming and adjusting as grown-ups to the academic culture in Trinity. Moreover, adjusting to Trinity’s academic culture and all its individual aspects takes time for international students, who feel they have to make a greater effort than their Irish peers: “it was just a lot of work, but it was obviously in comparison to people who, say Irish students, the only work they had to focus on was just studying and whereas I had to study plus sort of adjust so it was you know, it was a lot of work at the beginning” (French student, full degree).

It was interesting to see how some international students who have done a full degree programme in Trinity perceive the first two years as harder not only because of the adjustment process, but also because of the limited acknowledgment they received from their lecturers, which only increased as they advanced in their studies:

“I feel like you’re also given kinda more credit as you go further, the Trinity system does kind of like they tend to treat you better when you are higher up...when you are in first year there’s like a higher risk to change to a different course or do things differently or drop out, whereas when you’re in your fourth year you feel like there’s more emphasis on more we’ll get through this and we want you to succeed” (Norwegian student, full degree).

This feeling of a lack of support from their lecturers that some students experience can lead to difficulties in maintaining motivation through their learning process:

“In fourth year the professors are way more here for you because they know 100% of your grade depends on these assignments, so they seem way more open to discussion, but in second year these guys faced 300 students, give them one topic and whatever happens happens, and it’s no big deal for them cuz it’s not that important, so that was a big, it made learning harder, because you’re less committed to what you are doing” (French student, full degree, advanced entry).

These experiences come in conflict with what the existing research calls an “ethic of care” (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004), the expectation of international students to have their needs addressed by “personable, connected, friendly and absolutely fair instructor[s]” (Slethaug & Manjula, 2012:185) and receiving emotional support from the academic staff. However, these experiences were not noted by all the students involved in the research.

2. The College’s expectations

Research has shown that one of the pressing issues that influence the academic performance of international students is academic expectations - knowing exactly what is expected of them, how the academic culture works, what skills they will need in order to perform well, how to develop these skills, how their relationship with the lecturers/tutors/supervisors will look like. As it was noted by Simpson et al. (1999), “students’ understanding of the varying academic tasks they will encounter in college influences and mediates the goals they set and the strategies they employ to reach those goals”.

For some of the international students involved in this research, the academic expectations of the College were perceived as unknown and unexpressed:

“they definitely don’t tell you what they are expecting from you, so how can you know what you should do, you don’t, it’s kind of like, I just find it like are you lucky enough or smart enough to guess, do you have the experience to guess, a lot of them have had the teachers last year, I didn’t, I wasn’t there, and I don’t know people who had them because I was only here for one year and I don’t have many friends in my classes” (French student, full degree, advanced entry).

This student has had previous academic experience in two other universities apart from Trinity, and when comparing her experiences she noted the importance of having expectations clearly expressed for the progress and wellbeing of students and the difficulties faced when this doesn’t happen:

“As I’ve been told what the Americans expected from me I’ve done very well, as I still don’t know what Trinity expects from me I’m guessing, I’m doing my best, but when you do your

best it's still three times harder, because first it's not your native language, then you're not used to the system and the grade matters for your degree, and you still end up with a bad grade, it's not very cheerful, so yeah definitely make expectations clear" (French student, full degree, advanced entry).

Not having clear expectations can be difficult for visiting students as well, especially the ones who start their studies during the second term and join courses that started at the beginning of the academic year:

"Here in the course they just get right into it, especially in those courses where I was jumping into the course half way through, and my political sciences courses are Irish politics and EU politics, coming here I knew almost nothing about Irish politics or the EU in general, so those were pretty tough" (American student, visiting 1 term).

The lack of clear expectations, combined with a sudden transition to a grown-up environment as was previously explained, can lead to overall negative first experiences that influence the way international students make sense of their situation and how they progress academically:

"The first module of the first term was very hard...and demanded very deep knowledge of certain issues that a person of my age, of my education and my classmates would never be able to possess, so I kind of had a moment of repulsion from the course, a moment of horror of teacher and general my first assignment I almost failed my first assignment because it was really hard and nobody explained me how to do this, nobody guided me through grammatical or essay making process, so my first academic experience was shocking and almost failing and disgrace" (Russian student, full degree).

However, for some of the students who do gain an understanding of what is expected of them, the process of adapting still remains difficult and takes time as expectations are perceived to change every year:

"To adapt to the raised expectations at the start of each new year, so I had to adapt to the raised expectations at the start of this year, I had to adapt to College expectations last year, that was the most difficult, it's definitely a jump up in standards, takes some time, most of September, maybe October, to get ready for it, to prepare for it" (Lithuanian student, full degree, sat Leaving Cert in Ireland).

As it will be shown later on, there are certain courses in College that provide information and guidelines for students regarding specific assignments such as essays or presentations. However, it is important to note that there are very limited resources that outline and explain the overall academic expectations of the College.

3. Academic background

Despite having to adapt to a different academic culture, some international students consider themselves prepared for what they will encounter in Trinity, especially in the area of independent learning and study skills:

“Secondary school in Italy is a lot harder [than the Irish one]¹ and I had more hours, we didn’t have a lot of you know, pushing from teachers, like we’d have to do a lot of work independently...and I think it prepared me better than any other Irish student, I think it was a bit less of a shock for me than it would be to Irish students” (Italian student, full degree).

When discussing their academic background, international students compare themselves with their Irish peers and perceive certain advantages that they hold:

“In our course we had a Study Skills course, so we had one hour a week sort of for ehm how to write your essay, how to cite and quote and how to do presentations and we’ve done a lot of that in high school, so I was actually surprised at how easy it was...high school was a lot more important for me than the Study Skills, because basically everything we had in Study Skills here was a repetition for me, but was quite new for people who came through the Irish Leaving Cert, they’ve never done presentations, the only essays they’ve done were basically fictional stories, so I couldn’t believe it” (Swiss student, full degree).

“I think what I did in maths in school was more advanced than what people do for the Leaving Cert here so there were at least a couple of modules that like built very directly on the secondary school curriculum that I was in a better position to start with than others” (Norwegian student, full degree).

Some international students came well prepared not only through their academic background in secondary school or high-school, but also through pursuing Foundation courses in other universities, which allowed them to become familiar with how the higher education culture is set up and develop into academically pro-active students before starting a full degree in Trinity:

“I think it was because I did two foundation courses before, like in the beginning, the first foundation course I did I was like oh, am I supposed to go to the teacher, and I am a shy person and Japanese people don’t really go to the teacher and ask questions...so that gradually made me get used to go to the lecturers, teachers, tutors” (Japanese student, full degree).

Despite these advantages, it is important to note that international students still experience academic challenges and difficulties. However, when looking at their experiences, the fact that some students have an educational background that prepared them for what they will encounter when coming into a new academic culture is important to be taken into account in order to move away

¹ This student had done 4 months of secondary school in Ireland

from a student-deficit model and get closer to understanding the complexities involved in these experiences.

To summarize, when starting their studies in Trinity, international students experience not only learning for College, but also learning the College, with its academic culture, grown-up responsibilities, intimidating yearly examinations, assessment methods and a system of lectures and tutorials that many of them are not used to. During the adjustment process, some of these students have to negotiate their perceptions of a different academic world, as well as make sense of a grown-up identity that requires them to make important decisions not only in their personal lives, but also in their academic ones. Furthermore, students are faced with having to maintain motivation regarding their studies and learn how to negotiate time. In addition, the adjustment process of some international students can be influenced by having a clear understanding of the College's expectations, as well as by being well prepared through the academic background developed before coming to Trinity.

All these aspects of experiencing the academic culture will be looked at in greater detail in the subsequent sections in order to uncover the specificities of the international students' academic experiences, as well as the difficulties they encounter in relation to the distinct aspects of the academic culture.

IV. How do International Students Experience Independent Learning?

Trinity College is one of the universities that use independent learning as an educational method. According to Forster (1972: ii, in Candy, 1991: 13), this method involves students acquiring knowledge by their own efforts and developing “the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation”, freedom of choice in determining learning objectives and “freedom of process to carry out the objectives”. Furthermore, this method “places increased educational responsibilities on the student for the achieving of objectives and for the value of the goals”. In other words, the students are faced with more responsibilities than in an educational system where they are constantly guided and directed by the academic staff. In this chapter I will look at how independent learning is perceived by international students and how it influences and determines their academic experiences.

1. Responsibility and Time Management

Firstly, without naming it directly as an independent learning educational system, students notice how studying in Trinity means “being a lot more independent, having a lot more will power”, which involves an adjustment period of time “you go to lectures, then you have to go look up the materials yourself, no one tells you to do anything, no one tells you what to read, you have to go look for it yourself, and that’s definitely something that takes a bit of time to get used to” (Italian student, full degree).

Students recognize how they are the ones who have to make the decisions regarding their studies: “here it’s kind of like how much do you really care about this course you’ve selected, your dedication is completely your own” (American student, full degree). This makes them further develop strategies to hold themselves accountable: “no one is telling me that I should be reading or studying...I just know that I have to do it myself as long as I write it in my diary and as long as I take notes in the lecture, I remind myself to do it, I can do it” (American student, visiting 1 term).

For some students, Trinity is the first academic environment where they experience independent learning and have to take ownership of their own reading and studying:

“Back in the States it’s much more like they have our hand the whole way and they say you have to read this so that you can do well on this test, and then we move on to this material so make sure you read this because you’re gonna have a test in that week, whereas here I guess it’s much more independent in our required reading and that you’re expected to do the reading and studying throughout the term and know what to study and make sure that you get it done because you’re not going to be tested on it until the very end” (American student, visiting, 1 term).

Therefore, the students' responsibility extends outside of the lecture time frame "here you have much more free time to study by yourself...a lot of the material is not given in class, it's given as an assignment, oh you should read it all for yourselves (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year) and they have to learn how to plan their studies and manage their time until the very end of the academic year, when most of the examinations take place. On the one hand, having free time for their studies is seen as a positive aspect, allowing students to cover all their assignments and tasks "you need to do the research and do the reading and you're supposed to do it while you keep up with what's going on in lectures and seminars, and for me that wasn't like...we have so much free time it's really easy to do readings and not be totally stressed out" (Swiss student, full degree). However, having free time might not be compatible with some students' idea of studying:

"I have the impression that it's more free, everything is more free, it's not really studying...in France...you have to do three dissertations [essays] per week, if you don't do it you risk to be really out of the university, and here it's more about you should read it, it's obligatory, you should do that, but nobody controls you" (Czech student studying in France, Erasmus 1 year).

In some cases, having to hand in essays or take quizzes throughout the year helped students avoid procrastination and stay more focused, which some of them prefer "I had a few essays due by reading week and thought that was good, and in psychology we had like a few quizzes and things in statistics over the year so it helped me be more focused" (American student, full degree). According to one respondent, having continuous assessment methods back in his home university helped him gain a better understanding of his level of knowledge and how prepared he was for the final exams, which is something he could not have a sense of in Trinity "here you better study as much as you can for every single thing because you never know what it's gonna be like and you have no idea if you're actually getting the material or if you're absolutely aching it" (American student, visiting 1 term). Furthermore, these types of continuous assessments also improve the learning experience for students "if I am not given any homework except like this one term assignment per class like this year, it's a lot harder to just learn, and what's the point of going to university if you are not learning" (French student, full degree, advanced entry). Therefore, having continuous assessments is important for some international students for staying motivated, keeping track of their progress and enjoying the learning experience.

In addition, studying independently requires students to develop time management skills not only related to planning their study material and staying focused until the yearly examinations, but also on a daily basis, managing their timetable and study time:

"it requires a little bit more discipline and here I have these classes that they are really quite spread among the day, so at the beginning it was quite difficult...sometimes I think I miss this

time because I can't go back to my home because if I go back I start to sleep, at the same time if I stay here I don't study the way I like" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

To sum up this point, entering an independent learning educational system means that international students are faced with taking ownership and responsibility of their studies, keeping themselves motivated and accountable and planning their workload depending on yearly exams and, in some cases, midterm examinations. However, as it will be seen in the next subsection, this system can be perceived as not providing enough guidance and explanations for students, who are left with little understanding of what they have to do.

2. Perceived Disadvantages

In the process of assuming responsibility for their studies, some international students encountered difficulties due to the unfamiliarity with Trinity academic culture and English language, as well as the uncertainties associated with this process:

"I'm a foreign person and English was not my first language, the demands for everybody were the same, whether you were English or not English speaking, and I wanted them to understand or sometimes give me more time to maybe explain me more or give me more time in terms of extension, I don't ask for special treatment but you know, give me I would say a little guidance or guidelines what do you expect of me to do" (Russian student, full degree).

These uncertainties were experienced also in relation to specific issues such as language use or writing skills, where students don't have enough guidelines on academic English and what makes a good, well written academic assignment:

"I felt very lost and very insecure, like am I doing this right, is this the way I'm supposed to be doing this, because it's not only another way of assigning things, it's in another language, so there is the insecurity of am I doing this in a language, in a speech that's formal enough, or am I being too colloquial, is this even a word so there's the language insecurity piled on with the different way that things work here, so am I actually doing this assignment right?" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year)

As it was mentioned in the previous subchapter, many students feel the need to keep track of their progress and see how well prepared they are for examinations. In that respect, the feedback they receive for the midterm assignments is perceived as very important. However, some students mentioned receiving limited or no type of feedback, which leads to experiencing an even stronger lack of guidance and support:

"nobody got any feedback, so you're supposed to just hand it in, they have a look at it, you just get it back and it was more like ok, did you do the assignments or didn't you do the

assignment so we just somehow got the impression that it doesn't really matter what you wrote, it's like practice for you, but like it's up to you if you want to do like well in the assignments it will profit you, but if you don't we don't really care" (German student, full degree)

The limited feedback, combined with the difficulties encountered when becoming accountable for their own studies, leads to experiencing difficulties in maintaining motivation: "there's no incentive for me to actually do the work that I am assigned to" (American student, full degree), which can be perceived as daunting by some of the international students who come to Trinity equipped with a strong desire and motivation to study and grow academically.

All these aspects of independent learning that Trinity is known for can discourage students from choosing it as an academic destination "for a lot of people that I know, that was one reason that they didn't wanna study abroad at a difficult university like Trinity because they knew they wouldn't be able to handle the independent study system" (American student, visiting 1 term).

To conclude, in the process of becoming independent learners, some of the international students' experiences showed the importance of information and a supportive environment. Limited or non-existent guidance and support can make some students feel insecure, frustrated and discouraged, which can lead to unpleasant learning experiences and, in some cases, even drop-out. Furthermore, in order to become independent learners, international students consider that they need to be told that this is one of the expectations of the College: "I'm not saying it's bad, it helps with independence, which is good, but probably you need to be told that kind of stuff as well" (French student, full degree, advanced entry), so that they can adapt their own expectations and strategies for studying. As it was mentioned before, international students come equipped with high expectations of their own, motivated to study in a prestigious university, and not having these expectations met can lead to difficulties for both Trinity and the students themselves.

3. Perceived Advantages

It was interesting to see how, despite experiencing difficulties, some students noted the advantages of having an independent learning system for their future:

"in some ways the system that we have here applies a lot better if you wanna do graduate work or especially going into career world and careers after this because a lot of time the whatever business you work for isn't going to do the hold your hand system and they're going to expect that you know what you're doing and you're going to do it on your own, so in that sense I guess it's much better for after College, but I still miss the system back home" (American student, visiting 1 term).

Furthermore, in some cases, taking ownership of their own time and studies is preferred by students “well in France in the first year it was the same like it was a big university and the teachers don’t have to spend too much time with every student so I’m used to doing things on my own, I think I prefer that than someone always telling me what I have to do and how” (French student, Erasmus 1 year).

Lastly, assuming responsibility for studies means that some students can also allow themselves the time to enjoy the international student experience in Ireland, as well as focus on their own projects and academic needs: “I have the time to discover Ireland, I can walk here and I have time for myself, for my project, and I don’t feel stressed and it’s really fine, I have the impression that maybe, it’s not like I learn less, I learn differently, and especially English I can speak fluently now, so it’s great” (Czech student, studying in France, Erasmus 1 year). However, it is important to point out that these aspects were noted by visiting students, whose experience is limited to a maximum of one year in which they also want to discover Ireland and be part of social and cultural activities. This experience differs in certain aspects from what full degree students go through once they move on from the initial curiosity and wish for cultural discovery and settle into Trinity’s academic environment for pursuing a degree that lasts four years.

In conclusion, Trinity implements a system that allows international students to become independent learners, responsible for their own studies and academic choices, managers of their time and motivation. It also equips students with employability skills and grants them the time for themselves and discovering their new country of residence. Despite noticing the benefits of such a system, some students experience difficulties due to uncertainties and frustrations regarding their academic progress, and feel they do not receive the guidance and support needed in the process of becoming responsible students. Therefore, taking these difficulties into account when implementing targeted measures to support international students in this process can be a way of ensuring that international students become the independent learners that Trinity expects them to be.

V. How do International Students Experience the English Language?

1. English Language Requirements

In order to study in Trinity, international students who are non-native English speakers have to present an English language qualification such as IELTS or Cambridge. Students have to obtain a score of at least 6.5 in IELTS (or 7 if they want to pursue Dental Sciences, Clinical Speech or Languages), where 6 represents a “competent user” who “has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings, can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations” and 7 represents a “good user” with “operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning” (IELTS-9 Band Scale, 2015).

Despite passing these tests with good results, international students with English as a second language perceive the academic environment they enter as different than what they were prepared for: “I was passing IELTS and I passed it quite well, but it’s very different to what you encounter when you come to the environment, so it was quite hard to comprehend what they say” (Russian student, full degree). Studying in Trinity means that students have to put all their listening, speaking, writing and reading skills in practice, while getting used to various accents and specific course related language, which can lead to confusion:

“before I came here I studied IELTS to get to meet the requirements, it was very hard for me to get it and to meet the requirement so when I came here I feel more difficult to understand because when I’m in a class teachers and classmates talk very fast and I am not familiar with accents, at least accents, so yeah it makes me confused” (Japanese student, postgraduate)

Furthermore, some international students feel that a high level of English comes also with limited English language support for them to improve, as they are already expected by College to perform well: “Trinity...requires a very high level of English, so if you do get into Trinity you’re not gonna get any sort of facilitation because that’s the level you are required, which is pretty much being bilingual, so they’re not gonna give you any sort of, you know, help or anything” (Italian student, full degree). Therefore, international students have to negotiate the formal language requirements into their own complex experiences in order to reach a level that allows them to perform well both academically and socially.

2. Language Barriers

When studying and living in an English speaking university, international students struggle with language barriers “the language barrier was always a challenge” (French student, full degree) and have difficulties with academic uses of English “the biggest barrier was having it applied on a learning environment” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). In some cases, the first experiences with language can be shocking for students and make them feel unconfident: “the first day of school I was shocked because I didn’t understand English and there were many domestic students, I couldn’t find international students, so I was very nervous and I thought I made mistake to choose this school...I didn’t have confidence to survive in this environment” (Japanese student, postgraduate).

For some students these uncertainties go away once they accommodate and start practicing the language “after first few days I found another international student and I talked to domestic students and they made me feel eased to talk to them and ask questions so yeah, I’m getting used to studying here” (Japanese student, postgraduate). Furthermore, some students realize that the language barriers are only mental ones, which they are able to overcome “it’s more sort of mental barrier than an actual one, like I think oh god no, English isn’t my first language, I can’t do this, but in fact I can do it and it’s just because I think it that makes it more difficult” (Swiss student, full degree). Such mental barriers are overcome by students in time, by gaining more familiarity with their new environment “I think even like making a phone call in first year was challenging, I mean you feel like people are gonna judge you because your English is not perfect and in fact it took me some time to realize that people are used to hear foreigners speaking English and they don’t really care” (French student, full degree).

However, for other students such first experiences can have more long term negative consequences, impeding them to progress in their studies:

“first of all I faced language barrier, I would say psychological and language barrier, I had no explanation why I had faced this ordeal, but I had, I couldn’t speak for I would say 2 or 3 months, not like on a domestic level, but I couldn’t interact with my classmates during seminars and lectures, and our course requires certain amount of, it requires an ability to be able to express yourself as it is a very expressive and emotional course, and I couldn’t, I don’t know why...I find it quite weird as I know a lot of my international friends do not face the same issue” (Russian student, full degree).

Moreover, not being able to express ideas and emotions as easily as in a native language can make international students experience a sense of not belonging to the new environment and culture:

“R: international students feel shy sometimes because they probably feel they don’t belong here like there’s this sense of, I don’t really know, that’s how I felt...”

I: but where do you think that sense of not belonging comes from?

R: ehm I think it's mostly the language barrier, I think it's something that people really underestimate here" (French student, full degree)

Furthermore, this sense can extend to feelings of uncertainty making students question their own choices and abilities "you start to wonder whether you're in a good place, whether you're meant to be here or not, and it makes you wonder if you know you really can produce something good here, that was challenging" (French student, full degree).

As these experiences show, when coming to study in Trinity international students experience not only a culture shock, but also a language one, which strongly influences the students' sense of self in a foreign academic environment. Therefore, the impact that language has on the academic progress and wellbeing of international students is an important aspect to be taken into account when designing methods to reduce the language shock and enable students to have a satisfying overall academic experience.

3. Self-Conscious About Language Use

When starting to use English on a regular basis, in daily interactions as well as for studies, international students might be overly aware of how they are employing grammar or syntax: "at the beginning I felt very self-conscious of my accent or do I use the wrong word or my sentence structure was maybe not perfect, so I was a bit inhibited by that" (Swiss student, full degree).

Despite this sense of awareness, or maybe even because of it, students show resilience and continue to practice: "it sort of stopped bothering me" (Swiss student, full degree), "I feel like I think I made a mistake again, but I just keep talking to improve...I'm trying to learn more formal vocabulary in order to avoid my English to be too general" (Japanese student, postgraduate degree). As additional efforts need to be made in order to perform at the required levels, this kind of experiences support the argument made by many international students regarding the English examinations they have to pass to enter Trinity and how they do not fully prepare students for what they will encounter in the academic environment.

Being self-conscious is not only related to the use of language, but also to the quality of their academic work and how that is influenced by not being native English speakers and not having access to all the language tools needed to develop and express ideas and arguments:

"I think my level of English was OK, but ehm I don't know if it was good enough to sort of produce the kind of work that I wanted to produce, so sometimes I felt like I was ehm, the paper that I was writing or the stuff that I was producing was not good enough and wasn't

reflecting what I knew and wasn't reflecting what I could have done in French...so that was something that was a bit frustrating in fact" (French student, full degree).

This is an area where some international students consider that they have a disadvantage compared to their Irish peers: "I know my English will be for example less good than for an Irish student" (Czech student, studying in France, Erasmus 1 year). This perception influences not only their assignments, but also their class participation "sometimes the professor asks, I know the answer, but I don't know how to explain it in English, so I'm just...I know this, but I don't know how to explain it, how to phrase it" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). This difficulty encountered by many students was captured by existing research (Samuelowitz, 1987, as cited in Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002) as leading to a conflict of perceptions between students and lecturers: on the one hand, the limited participation of students is caused, in many cases, by facing language barriers when wanting to express thoughts and ideas; on the other hand, some lecturers consider that international students are just not interested enough to participate. Therefore, making the students' experiences with English as a second language more visible and nuancing the particularities are important factors in demystifying this conflict of perceptions.

Lastly, language awareness is experienced by students continuously, in various degrees during their academic life "in second year I was a bit more frustrated with it because I knew I was good enough and I was like oh I am making all these mistakes...they say something a bit too quickly or a word you don't know and it's like back to kindergarten level" (Norwegian student, full degree). In other words, getting comfortable with using the English language in different situations doesn't prevent international students from experiencing difficulties and challenges along the way.

4. More Time and Attention

As Trinity students have to do a lot of work on their own as independent learners, reading various materials is a very important part of their assignments. This can be difficult for all students, but non-native English speakers face additional challenges:

"when I was in my home university we read a limited number of English essays or papers ehm and here it's like every week I have to read 5 or 6 for one course, papers, and like there are so many academic words that I don't know so I have to check online and then it takes me a lot of time reading those materials so maybe it's just, it's the process of learning English, first you have to spend time just to be careful about every word, but I think maybe like two months later I can read them faster" (Chinese student, visiting 1 term).

Many students have to understand and make use of difficult language "it did require a lot of reading that most of the times was really very specific, so it would be like difficult language and I did have to have a dictionary near me when writing assignments at all times" (Italian student, full degree). In

these situations, students consider that they need more time for their assignments than their native-speaking peers “I’m very slow to read documents and also I’m not good at writing assignments, so I think I take more time to understand what they are talking and what I want to write, more than domestic students” (Japanese student, postgraduate degree). This can be especially difficult in peak periods when assignments are due and students need to prepare for exams:

“it’s always a bit difficult at the end of term because we have many different essays and exams start coming up and I feel like it takes me probably longer than Irish students or students from the UK or people who have English as their first language, and it takes me longer so it’s definitely more challenging, I need more time to research and write my essays and that’s the only challenge really, I know I can do as well as they do, but it takes me longer” (French student, full degree)

Furthermore, extra attention is needed when attending lectures and making sense of the information passed on by the lecturers: “I had to definitely pay more attention to what they were saying and I tried to infer from context, a lot of inferring, it was like ok, I don’t understand what this means right now, but judging on what he’s writing on the board or showing on the slides, it should be this” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). Some international students experience difficulties also in relation to certain technical terms or numbers which might distract their attention as they make efforts to understand the difficult words, but lose track of the flow of information presented “if you can’t understand the key words then the whole thing doesn’t make sense” (Italian student, full degree). In these situations, students note the importance of having lecturers who are aware of the presence of international students in their lecture halls and help them understand the specific language used in the course “if lecturers were more aware of the proportions of internationals, cuz I mean it does really make a difference to give a small explanation if it’s like a very crucial word, if it’s like very specific to the module” (Italian student, full degree). This need that many international students have of being seen, acknowledged and helped extends, in many cases, beyond the use of language “sometimes I think the teacher doesn’t really notice that there are Erasmus students and maybe they are not used to this system” (French student, Erasmus 1 year).

In contrast, there are international students who feel their language needs are met by their lecturers and they receive help when in need “teachers said if his English was very fast for me, so my class coordinator always pays attention to me if I’m ok so yeah, they are very helpful” (Japanese student, postgraduate). Furthermore, being acknowledged by lecturers is something that students appreciate:

“I feel like most of the professors are aware of international students because a lot of the professors were once international students so they are quite aware of that, one of my

professors he actually came up to me and the clusters of Brazilians that were in his class and asked if his diction was ok, if we had problems understanding him, so he was very concerned about us being able to understand him...and I thought that was very nice of him to actually concern himself about this” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year)

It is important, however, to provide further context for these experiences. The Japanese student was the only international student in her postgraduate course that encompassed a total of approximately twenty students. The Brazilian student was part of the Science without Borders group which includes a total of around ninety students taking classes in various courses in the Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics and Science, therefore they are visible in their courses and some lecturers are informed and aware of their presence. This might not be the case in programmes such as BESS (Business, Economics and Social Studies) where the total cohort reaches three hundred students and the chances of international students feeling lost or unseen are higher, unless, as it will be shown later on, students are proactive and engage with their lecturers on their own initiative.

5. Proofreading

With English as a second language, international students are constantly learning how to employ it in an academic context, struggling to make sense of grammar and syntax rules and continuously improving. In this context, receiving feedback on their use of language is something that students noted helped them to understand their mistakes and progress further:

“I did the English for Academic Purposes course so I was able to sometimes just bring assignments and the lecturer, the instructor, would just have a look at it and just give me feedback on it and that was really helpful cuz there’s always some mistakes that you tend to do, not only once but like which you always do and it’s just helpful to have someone who tells you ok, you don’t say that, you wouldn’t use this construction, you’d say it differently, cuz otherwise if nobody corrects your mistakes you’re gonna do these mistakes over and over again, so I think that’d be helpful if there was like more of this support for like non-native speakers” (German student).

This type of feedback is important for students to be able to monitor their language development and progress: “I received feedback for one essay and it stated that my language was good, which gave me confidence, so I knew I wouldn’t have to focus on improving my language” (German student, Erasmus 1 year). Furthermore, it also helps students identify the areas where they need to pay more attention: “academic English is so difficult for me, but I asked like the senior students and she helped me to like look over my essays and she’s like you need to pay more attention on different notes because I never used that, so that helped me a lot” (Japanese student, postgraduate degree).

Trinity College doesn't have an official proof reading service that students can avail of. However, students do find informal ways to get their works proofread "fortunately I had my dad helping me, well he wouldn't really help me, he'd just proofread for me, but that was definitely a big help...but I did need help, so if I didn't have my dad I don't know what I would have done because I needed someone to proofread them for me, just like grammar wise" (Italian student, full degree). It's interesting to notice how the students who did have a proofreading opportunity from family or friends considered themselves fortunate or lucky in comparison with their international peers:

"I was lucky I have a great proof reader, but I don't think everybody is that lucky and I've read some of the essays from my class mates and they were terrible, like I mean I could tell there were so many mistakes in them and it's just all over the place and I'm not surprised they got bad marks...and they just never gave it [essay] to anyone because they either don't know or didn't feel comfortable enough about it so I suppose something where something that is created just in order to proof read would probably help not just international students, but Irish ones as well" (Swiss student, full degree).

Proofreading is important for international students because it provides them with feedback on their language use and it helps identify mistakes, improve and become more confident with their language use "I want to have a proofreader, if there is a proofreader I want he or she to check my assignment and give feedback on what is wrong my structure of sentences, if I'm done it I have more confidence" (Japanese student, full degree). Furthermore, while Irish students might have their parents or friends willing to give them feedback on written assignments and correct potential grammar mistakes, international students do not have that privilege:

"the dream would be to have someone that you can sort of submit your essays and they could sort of tell you what's wrong with ehm the structure or if there are some words that are not you know...just someone to proofread your essays and have sort of ehm someone reading them for you, I know most of my friends when they need to submit like a long essay and it takes them a long time to do they usually give the essays to their parents and they give them feedback, but it's something that I cannot do with my parents because they don't speak English" (French student, full degree)

Therefore, feedback is a very important aspect in the experience of learning and using a new language in an academic environment, providing international students with the chance of not only to improve, but also to gain confidence and ultimately, achieve better grades and succeed academically.

In conclusion, international students who have English as a second language face additional challenges when studying in Trinity. Despite the fact that they have to pass standardized tests that prove their language abilities, most international students noted how these tests did not prepare

them for life in College. The first encounters with English language led to feelings of shock, lack of confidence and questioning the choice of coming to study in an English speaking university. Furthermore, international students experienced a strong sense of not belonging to their new environment of study, which was intensified by having limited access to language tools for expressing their thoughts, ideas and arguments.

English makes students self-conscious of the way they employ the language and some of them feel inhibited and expect to be judged by the native speakers. This increased awareness also makes some international students question their quality of work and academic potential. Moreover, students feel they need to spend more time and attention with reading, writing and listening, and note the importance of receiving support and feedback in their language development.

Therefore, all these different aspects of experiencing English as a second language show the complexities of the international students' realities and challenges and suggest the need for more targeted actions that would support non-native English speakers in their academic endeavours in a manner that is directly linked to their language experiences.

VI. How do International Students Negotiate Writing?

1. Cultural Differences in Writing

When starting to engage in written assignments in Trinity, international students have to negotiate cultural differences in writing and get used to a certain academic style required:

“The way of what we want to say is very different because in Japan we say ehm firstly we say, mmm, how can I say, mmm we usually say conclusion is, ehm not conclusion, result is the very last, but here we say the result is very first, yeah, so it’s a very different style to explain the things yeah, so I need to, the construct of structure, what I want to say in first place and then write down” (Japanese student, full degree)

This can be difficult for some students, as they are unsure of how their essays should look like and what rules they need to follow compared to what they were used to in their home universities. Furthermore, some of their struggles come from trying to understand certain written assignments that are not common for them, such as reflexive essays “to write four thousand words from my heart on the importance of people management engineering is crazy, and we don’t have this in Brazil” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year), or reviews “the very first essay that I got was not really an academic style essay, it was like a review on a movie, so I was like what is academic, what is not academic” (Japanese student, full degree).

However, it was interesting to see how for some students, despite the cultural differences in writing, the style required in Trinity was perceived as allowing them more freedom compared to what they were used to before, an aspect which was especially noted by the respondents with prior academic experience in France:

“I was obviously used to different methodology in France, we were expected to produce essays that were really ehm, you had to have a particular structure and if it was a little bit different, if you didn’t do exactly what was expected from you, you could fail, there was no flexibility, we had to say have an introduction, first part, second part, and two parts in each sort of part, so subparts, whereas here you can start with your argument and go on, you don’t have to say yes and no, you can just say whatever you want so that was kind of liberating” (French student, full degree).

“Teachers are more open to accept any method if it’s really constructive” (Czech student, studying in France, Erasmus 1 year).

Furthermore, regardless of the difficulties in written assignments, some international students note the benefits of these methods in their learning process:

“Japanese education focused on examination, yes, so if I want to pass the, I mean I want to get credit, I need to pass that test, so I just studied to pass these tests and after having tests I

forgot this knowledge of lectures because I studied it too short time yes, so it was easy to forget it, however in essays in Ireland I think I need to work more than one month for one assignment and I think it will mmm more remain in my brain” (Japanese student, postgraduate degree).

Therefore, understanding the academic norms of writing in Trinity and distancing themselves from the writing habits and styles required in their home universities is an important first step for many international students who have to hand in written assignments as part of their studies. As I will show in the subsequent sections, this experience is further complemented by additional challenges and struggles that some students go through in the process of writing.

2. Writing Challenges

Entering the academic environment with no experience in academic essay writing can lead to some students experiencing difficulties when trying to understand what an academic essay is and how involved the student’s voice as a writer should be:

“third year, first essay, when the teacher gave us five subject of essays which should include literary review and then plan an argument and a case study and I found it hard to distinguish between an argument and literary review, and how can I apply certain theories into this subject and how can I shape it in a very linear and coherent manner, so I think my major ordeal was always to write a coherent piece of work and balancing emotional, my own part, and critical part, because I tend to overwhelm the essay with my own view rather than just supporting it with critical essays of academic people, that’s what I find hard, balancing the academic and the non-academic” (Russian student, full degree).

Therefore, students have to learn the rules of academic writing and how to apply them “I had to learn how to do a literature review, how to apply and give an argument, how to back-up my argument, how to write a conclusion, how to make a right introduction, where I should outline all the purposes of my essay and where I’m going” (Russian student, full degree). As will be shown in the following subsection, in some cases, students learn all these aspects on their own, with little information or guidance from the academic staff.

What is also unique for international students who are non-native English speakers is having to construct and express arguments in a language that is not their own “it’s generally hard because I don’t think in English, I still think in Russian, that’s I think that makes it even more difficult” (Russian student, full degree). Furthermore, writing in English requires confidence which, as it was shown in the previous section, not all students have “if you’re writing an essay in a language which is not your first language I think it’s like even more difficult so it’s just really important to feel as confident with the situation as possible” (German student, full degree). Therefore, some international students not

only struggle with understanding the rules of academic writing, but also with applying those rules using a second language.

Academic writing means also citing and referencing the material used, which can be something new for many international students “my second major discovery was citing, the citations, footnotes or notes, the Chicago or the Harvard, and I’m still struggling, I still haven’t learned how to do it, I still have to go to a manual or brochure and check all those things” (Russian student, full degree).

However, it is important to add that the students involved in this research didn’t mention citations very often as an issue they had to struggle with, and most of the respondents were aware that they were required to cite all their sources. Therefore, the challenge for some might have been with the style used, and not with understanding plagiarism and referencing and why it was necessary.

Students in various science courses are also required to attend laboratories and write lab reports. For some of them this might be a difficult task, especially if they perceive they don’t receive much guidance or have limited contact with their classmates:

“it was very hard for me to do a lab report, we had a hydrology lab, it was about fluids, we had a lab and we had to make a report and it was not what I expected, I mean when they told me that the report was expected to have at least 10 pages I really freaked out and I didn’t really have much contact with my classmates so I just really relied heavily on what was written on the proposal and I tried to do my best...but it was very hard for me to take the assignment” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year)

Lastly, time is another issue that many international students feel they must take into account when planning and developing their written assignments “I generally find writing really hard, it takes me two or three weeks to write an essay” (Russian student, full degree), “each essay will take me at least two weeks’ time” (Chinese student, visiting 1 term). Furthermore, some students also have to consider the need to practice and to verify that their assignments are in accordance with the requirements of their courses “I read many times my assignments compared to the guidelines” (Japanese student, full degree).

In experiencing all these challenges, the international students involved in this research discussed having departmental guidelines on writing, the consequences of not receiving enough information or support and the usefulness of detailed feedback in perfecting their assignments and writing skills.

3. Writing Expectations

The ways in which lecturers express their expectations of students regarding the writing assignments vary, but influence nevertheless how these students perform. In some cases, students are offered comprehensive information and support with writing “we had special lectures just on the essay

writing, they invited people from the library, I think we also had someone from Student Learning Development who came over and gave a lecture on how to structure the essay, what you have to think of, and that really helped a lot” (German student, full degree). In other cases, the information that students receive is not detailed enough for them to understand the expectations they have to fulfil:

“they mentioned the essays at the first lecture, said there is an essay due on that date, the information is in the module outline so just have a look at that, but the information in the module outline wasn’t really helpful because it was only like ok, it has to be 1200 words, you have to footnote, so just some plagiarism information, and it’s due on that date, use Turnitin to submit the essay and that’s it, like no real information about like how to write an essay, how to structure the essay” (German student, full degree).

Not having enough information and guidance can harden the writing process for international students and can lead to serious consequences for some of them, influencing the way they perceive their assignments:

“I almost failed my first assignment because it was really hard and nobody explained me how to do this, nobody guided me through grammatical or essay making process, so my first academic experience was shocking and almost failing and disgrace, that’s why I think I carry a trauma of hate in writing essays because my first encounter with academia was really bad” (Russian student, full degree).

As was mentioned before, many students are not familiar with essay writing “I don’t know what a good essay looks like, I’ve never seen one...for the most part, nobody teaches you how to do it at first” (American student, full degree) and have to learn the rules of academic writing on their own “through receiving bad comments on my essays and penalties” (Russian student, full degree).

Making these discoveries on their own also means that students have to become proactive and be the ones to ask for additional information “each of them [lecturers] are very different and they have different understandings of what is official or non-official writing, so you have to ask each lecturer about their expectations and they surprisingly never say about their expectations, you have to ask” (Russian student, full degree). This lack of expressed expectations is perceived as caused by lecturers assuming that students have the necessary background required for their assignments “they always suppose you have to know how to do it” (Russian student, full degree), which, as has been shown, is not always the case.

On the one hand, due to the variety of requirements, approaching the lecturers is not an issue for students “it’s very easy to talk to your lecturer and to know exactly what is expected of you, but I wouldn’t say that there’s one type of essay that is expected in general” (French student, full degree). Furthermore, some lecturers provide their students with information and examples of written

assignments, which helps students understand the expectations and improve “some of my professors put like a previous assignment on the blackboard and they give you like a paper like that with the description, what are the goals that you have to achieve, and some they put like a previous assignment to see how it’s supposed to be” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). It is important to note, however, that there can be departments that provide clear writing expectations to their students, but the information might not reach them until later in their studies “in the political science department they are actually clear about their expectations, but then again, I found out about this guiding book of the political science department this year, not two years ago” (French student, full degree, advanced entry).

On the other hand, the information that is given to students can be perceived by many of them as insufficient, making students put additional effort into their assignments:

I would say they were all very dry, they give you what, but they never give you how, they give you a very dry skeleton of what you should have, but how you can achieve this, how you can make it linear, coherent, flowing, they never tell you this, so you have to learn how to accommodate all those what into something comprehensive” (Russian student, full degree).

Therefore, the variety of experiences that students have with essay writing is also influenced by the way expectations are communicated by the academic staff and understood by students. A limited understanding of these aspects can lead to negative experiences for some international students who might feel confused and frustrated with their results in comparison to their peers “I think I looked at how my classmates got very nice marks and how they joyfully write their essays and it made me feel absolutely stupid, it was just a struggle, one long linguistic struggle to make it, to do it, to overcome bad marks” (Russian student, full degree).

4. Feedback

When students are not very familiar with academic writing, the feedback they receive on their first assignments is perceived as very important for improving their writing skills and performance “one was about my general content which was very helpful, they helped me to improve my critical thinking and my linear thinking, which is also very important” (Russian student, full degree).

Furthermore, feedback can be perceived as a confirmation that the student understood what is expected and is in the right direction “writing my first essay and getting the results back sort of proved to me that I can do it” (Swiss student, full degree), while the lack of it can lead to uncertainties “others in assignments didn’t give any feedback, so you didn’t really know like was that good or was it not” (German student, full degree). Feedback is especially appreciated by students

who are non-native speakers of English and are unsure of their use of language in an academic assignment:

“I think especially when you are not a native speaker and if you want to improve your English it’s really helpful if you get feedback on them, some of the TAs give feedback both on the content, and some of them also correct the essays if there are any grammar or spelling mistakes, and that was really helpful” (German student, full degree).

However, the feedback that some students receive in relation to written English can be perceived as vague and unhelpful:

“Second kind of comments were regarding my grammar, but those weren’t really helpful as they only said “please pay attention to your grammar” which is not really helpful because it’s not like I’m illiterate, I’m just not aware of this aspect because it’s very detailed grammar, it’s not like putting I don’t know, a colon, those were more important and different signs of grammar that I missed” (Russian student, full degree).

Lastly, another aspect that some students struggle with is the grading scale used for their written assignments. It is very rare for Trinity students to get awarded with more than II.1. (60-69%) for an essay. This grade generally means that the student had a very good performance on the subject. However, not being able to get the maximum grade for their assignments makes some students feel frustrated and confused regarding the requirements they need to meet in order to get a higher score:

“It’s good but it’s not good enough, but I never know there’s this idea that oh, 2.1 that’s great, that’s great, and I’m like yes, but I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong...there is just like a strange reluctance to award a first that is frustrating to me cuz like you work so hard and you don’t, it doesn’t make sense, you feel that you’re on power with the level of work expected from you but then you just don’t get the best grade” (American student, full degree).

In conclusion, studying in Trinity means also adjusting to an academic culture where the writing requirements and types of assignments are different than what most international students had experienced before. For some of them, these differences are perceived as liberating, allowing for more exploration, while for others they can be hard to understand and implement without further explanations or support from the academic staff. Additional challenges may be faced by students in relation to using English as a second language in a manner that is academically accepted and managing their time accordingly. Through all the written assignments that students have to hand in, many of them not only expand their knowledge on certain topics, but also learn and develop writing skills. Receiving accurate and clear feedback in this learning process is perceived as very important and helpful by many international students who consider that feedback allows them to gain a better

understanding of the academic expectations, improve their writing and English skills, as well as follow their progress and maintain themselves in the right academic direction.

All these various experiences provide more insights into the complex ways writing is negotiated by international students, bringing us closer to understanding how targeted support can be designed in order to respond to students' needs and challenges.

VII. How Is It to Attend Lectures?

Attending lectures is one of the main academic activities of all students in Trinity. In this section I will look at how international students experience going to lectures, how they perceive their lecturers and the relationship with them, as well as whether these aspects influence the way international students perceive their own positioning within Trinity's academic culture.

1. Teaching and Learning method

Compared to the methods of teaching and learning in other countries, Trinity is perceived as "difficult and different" involving more effort and concentration from students who "have to be more creative, you have to think more about the subject" (Chinese student, postgraduate). Moreover, the process of learning in Trinity is perceived as involving more initiative on the part of the student and less guidance from their lecturer "in China we are given everything, all the important points, and what we should do is just print out...here maybe you are given just a picture and you have to find all the things by listening ... so it's quite different and more challenging" (Chinese student, postgraduate).

Having lectures complemented by tutorials, together with the availability of the lecturers and teaching assistants through office hours is another aspect that some students have to adjust to: "the structure of the modules and tutorials and seminars, that's not something that I was familiar with" (French student, full degree), "I got into the routine of lectures, tutorials, office hours and all of that, it took me a while to actually benefit from all of this...to actually start going to TA office hours, which were very useful and I wish I had done that from the very start" (Italian student, full degree).

Many international students have to get used to attending lectures in a language that is not their own, develop their skills of listening and writing and applying them simultaneously "it was both challenging in terms of language as to comprehend and understand and write simultaneously, because I usually as I listened I wrote, if I write something from the slide I tend to miss what the lecturer says, and if I listen I miss a slide, and sometimes spoken words and written words are different" (Russian student, full degree).

On the one hand, some of the lectures involve interaction, making students practice their speaking skills in front of their peers, which can be perceived as intimidating by some "I need to talk my opinion in a small group and one of my group had to present in front of my classmates, but I've never been the person to present in front of them because I was nervous to speak English" (Japanese student, postgraduate), or frustrating for others "I just need like two more seconds than the others to answer and then someone is already talking....I'm like frustrated cuz I'm like yeah,

that's what I wanted to say but I just don't have time to say it" (French student, Erasmus 1 year). On the other hand, some students are enrolled in large courses where discussion is something they miss "it's a much different system than what I'm used to...we have pretty much all small classrooms and a lot is just discussion based, so I'm still getting used to the big classrooms and lectures and then tutorials and seminars after that, so the different system gets a little bit some getting used to" (American student, Visiting 1 term).

Furthermore, Trinity lecturers might use teaching or assessment methods that some international students are not familiar with, such as powerpoint instead of whiteboard for calculations or asking students to solve questions on the board in front of their peers. Additionally, the practical aspects of the assessment methods is also a difficulty that some students face: "adapting to the way that people do assignments here was challenging for me, and the way you hand in sometimes you hand in both on blackboard and physically, and a hard copy and a soft copy, and sometimes I get confused with all that" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Lastly, students have to adapt to other practicalities, such as being in large lecture halls which "are kind of intimidating at first" (American student, visiting 1 term), finding their way around campus and getting to their lectures on time.

2. Lecturers Perceived as Engaging Experts in Their Fields

Trinity lecturers are perceived by international students as more engaging and relaxed "I think here the teachers, although they are more engaging, I think they are more relaxed and they have like body languages, but in China teachers normally don't have this kind of engaging gestures" (Chinese student, visiting 1 term). This method of teaching can increase the focus and interest of students in relation to the material presented "I think the students here in the courses are more focusing on the course...so here as soon as the lecturer starts to speak, everyone just tends to focus, I think that's great" (Chinese student, visiting 1 term). The lecturer is perceived by many international students as no longer an authority figure, but as someone who invites students to constant dialogue "in China it's more about what the teacher is saying...here...you have to ask the professor and the professor is going to ask you...in China the professors sometimes they will push you away" (Chinese student, postgraduate).

Furthermore, the high level of engagement on the part of lecturers can make a significant difference for the international students who are struggling and questioning their place in the academic culture of Trinity:

“the academic [aspect] was the only one that kept me here, a lot of times I considered transferring or moving back home or taking time off to see if university was right for me, and just the level of engagement you know, and maybe it was just the classes or the professors I was fortunate to have, but they were so, I mean engaging is the only word, I would go home, sit on the bus and might not have a friend to talk to but in my head I’d be thinking wow, that was so cool what we just learned, I’m gonna go research it some more on my own, and I felt really like active with the learning (American student, full degree).

Moreover, many Trinity lecturers are perceived as experts in their fields, which contributes to positive and fulfilling academic experiences for international students “I’m very lucky to find that there are two lecturers that are teaching African politics, for example the Democracy and Development course is all about Africa, so the lecturer is specialized in Kenya, and that is what I am focusing on in my thesis, for my Master thesis, so I was quite lucky” (Chinese student, visiting 1 term).

3. Lecturers Perceived as Approachable and Accommodating

Many of the international students who participated in the research discussed the approachability of lecturers and how easy or difficult it was to interact with them. I will first focus on their approachability in this subsection and then discuss the challenges that students faced in the following subsection.

Whenever students have questions or difficulties, it is expected from them to take initiative and ask for more clarifications from the relevant academic staff “if you want an answer you have to ask, otherwise you don’t know it” (French student, full degree). This can sometimes be discouraging for some of the international students who are not used to opening a dialogue with their lecturers. However, many of them prove to be proactive and engage easily “I never sort of felt intimidated or anything, lecturers are really flexible and really willing to help you and you can contact them via email and they will respond really quickly and you can talk to them after the lectures and they’re always really nice and I never felt like I was asking too much” (French student, full degree).

Therefore, in many cases, once contacted, the lecturers are perceived as accommodating and helpful by the international students “when asking lecturers I found it totally fine, I didn’t have any problem, neither face to face after the lecture or before the lecture, nor via email, that was generally quite well handled, also the response was almost always very quick, very fast” (German student, full degree). Furthermore, the process of finding out the availability of lecturers and contacting them is seen as accessible by many international students “I have already made an appointment with the lecturer in political science and I think it’s quite smooth the whole process, and on their syllabus

they have all written down their office hours so I think it's quite convenient" (Chinese student, visiting 1 term).

The availability of lecturers is perceived as a very helpful support system by international students when it comes to understanding the academic culture and the requirements they are expected to fulfil:

"He was very kind, he was like I know you are from an international background, so you don't really know, but almost everyone is also at the same situation, they really don't have experience writing essays, so it was like kind of counselling me at the same time, explaining the question that I asked him, so he was really helpful" (Japanese student, full degree).

This kind of support helps students feel more knowledgeable about the College's expectations, which also allows them to be more relaxed and in control "I didn't know at first how to cite and how to quote and how to do your bibliography but lecturers and fellow students gave me sheets with information about that so I could just look it up, so I didn't really have problems with knowing nothing about what to do, so it was quite relaxed" (German student, Erasmus, 1 year).

Furthermore, receiving support and clarifications from the lecturers contributes to international students improving their skills and perfecting their assignments "I'm in contact with my teacher of Legal English and she's really nice and she answers in 10 minutes so when I had a problem with my essay she said ...we can meet and I will explain you a bit, and then when I wrote the essay it was perfect in terms of the structure and notions and all that" (Czech student, studying in France, Erasmus 1 year).

One of the respondents also noted the importance of having international lecturers who were perceived as more understanding and aware of the international experience than the Irish members of the academic staff: "then I had a different teacher, she was foreign herself, she was Italian and she was really helpful and she understood what it means to be a foreign person in an anglophone environment, so she was really attentive and completely understanding and quite loosened her academic demands" (Russian student, full degree). In the case of this student, having this type of support and understanding from an international lecturer helped her develop and perfect her academic skills, which she couldn't do in previous courses "now I'm in my stage when I'm enjoying creative and I would say high writing, very good in terms of grammar and content and form" (Russian student, full degree).

To sum up, many international students perceive their lecturers as easy to contact, approachable, helpful and accommodating with their needs and questions. Furthermore, the feedback they receive is considered very important for their academic development and successful results in assignments.

There are, however, international students whose experiences of contacting and interacting with lecturers were less positive and influenced the way they perceived themselves in the academic culture of Trinity.

4. Lecturers Perceived as Intimidating and Unapproachable

International students coming from an academic environment where classes are smaller and the relationship with the lecturers is informal may experience an academic culture shock in Trinity:

“I came from the American system, I went from a class of 20 to a class of 300, that was hard and impressive, there was absolutely no contact with the professors which is also something that was unusual for me, so no help, like in the US they give you their personal email address and their office hours and literally their phone number sometimes, while here is more like go to your TA, and the TA is like someone who is 1 year older than you, so you’re like how are you going to teach me that” (French student, full degree, advanced entry).

Furthermore, getting to know their lecturers is perceived by some students as not only a personal advantage, but also an academic one, that helps them understand better how they will be graded and how they should prepare their assignments, as well as keep track of their progress. Because of the limited contact some of them have with the Trinity lecturers, this advantage is perceived as lost:

“I like to get to know the professor back in my home school and that really helps because I don’t only get to know them well, but you get to know them in terms of what kind of person they are, how they are going to grade your test, what they are looking for in a discussion, you get to know how you are doing in class so far, so I’m not really sure how to make up for that lost advantage here” (American student, visiting 1 term).

There are international students in Trinity who experience both types of settings, where the contact with lecturers is very limited and formal, as well as where the lecturers are close to their students:

“Sociology is like really huge, 200 people and the lecturer, there’s like no really personal contact, so I just attended, go and then leave, but like for the religious structure it’s like combined with the tutorial and the lecture at the same time, so we really know what the lecturer is like and I feel like they’re really taking care of me, so it’s like a more home atmosphere than the sociology course” (Japanese student, full degree).

Therefore, having in mind that many international students have an expectation of being taken care of in the new academic environment (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004), closer contact with the lecturers may be preferred and perceived as more beneficial in their academic development.

It is also important to note how some international students perceive the relation with lecturers as intimidating, which influences the way they position themselves in the academic setting: “it’s a bit intimidating really because you’re going to ask a question to somebody who is probably very busy

and...I realize how very tiny I am here and that sometimes keeps me from actually asking what I want" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). This feeling may be especially strong for students who do not have other international peers in their courses:

"it made me consider oh, I am the only international student who's chosen to come here, I think I kinda chose to make myself smaller in a way in first and second year cuz I didn't wanna stand out and I didn't approach lecturers as much so like I don't know, obviously it was like an irrational fear and I didn't want them to think like oh, why are you even here I: and what changed?

R: oh I don't know, I went on an exchange last year to Montreal and basically there are a lot of international students at that university, in a way I fit in more, or you don't stand out as much, because there are so many international students, and then also because of the system you are forced to interact more with like lecturers and everyone (Norwegian student, full degree).

Therefore, being the only international student in her course made this respondent choose not to stand out in front of her lecturers. However, it is interesting to see how, once she had an international experience that included more interaction with lecturers and international peers, she gained the confidence needed for Trinity.

Furthermore, because students perceive the communication with their lecturers as more formal "I feel like here we have more titles and more embellishment when it comes to the teachers" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year), they put in more effort when contacting them "I always use overly formal language when writing emails to professors, and I wrote my queries and I thanked her for the assistance and I apologized for any inconvenience" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). This can lead to further disappointment or confusion for students if their emails are not answered or if they don't receive the support needed, making them wonder if they are acting in the right or expected way.

Lastly, lecturers might be perceived as unapproachable also through the content they are teaching. Two of the participants in the research discussed how they struggled with understanding the cultural references included in their courses:

"sometimes lecturers tend to back up their arguments with certain, for example we are studying Irish theatre, they tend to back up their arguments with Irish facts, facts from Irish history or Irish theatre history, same in film, that I'm ignorant in, so I find it really disengaging because I have no knowledge in certain Irish aspects or indigenous aspects, or maybe just general Anglophone aspects for example from history or if they just make a joke and I don't understand, or idiom, so I would say those historical, cultural and social comments they make regarding indigenous history and humour, that's what I missed" (Russian student, full degree).

As this student mentions, many international students do not share the same cultural background, humour, history or popular culture with their Irish lecturers and peers. Not understanding the comments related to these aspects can make students experience not only disengagement, but also a sense of not belonging to the new academic culture they are in, which can also extend to daily, out of classroom interactions. Therefore, as some of these examples show, negotiating their position in the Trinity academic culture is another challenge that international students experience and it is not only influenced by language, as it was explained in a previous section, but also by attending lectures and by how students perceive the relationship with their lecturers.

In conclusion, international students have various experiences when it comes to interacting with lecturers. While for some it can be an easy process to engage in, for others it can encompass frustration or confusion. Furthermore, many students have an expectation of establishing personal contact with their lecturers, which can lead to disappointment when this expectation is not met, especially in the cases of international students who are part of larger courses (i.e. BESS). However, it is important to note that, while for some a large course is perceived as intimidating and leads to no personal contact, for others it can have fewer barriers, which allows them to engage with their lecturers in a more relaxed way. Therefore, on the one hand these findings might point out the need to better explain and clarify the academic culture and the role that Trinity lecturers have in the teaching and learning process of international students, in such a way that the students' expectations and perceptions can match the ones of the College. On the other hand, it is also important to understand and incorporate the students' various experiences, open up and adapt the academic culture in such a way that the expectations of the College match the ones of the international students. In other words, employing a two-way relationship in which College and international students shape each other.

VIII. How Is It to Attend Tutorials?

Most courses in Trinity comprise of a lecture and a tutorial. The purpose of the tutorial is to provide clarifications or go into in depth discussions about the material presented during the lecture.

Tutorials are usually moderated by Teaching Assistants (TA) and sometimes by the lecturers themselves. They are organized in smaller groups compared to the lectures and encourage students to interact with each other and engage with the study material.

Tutorials are perceived as a space for discussion and dialogue “they create sort of a space where you can discuss about the lectures and the modules, so it’s a really good space for people to talk and share information...that’s really good I think” (French student, full degree). Putting an emphasis on dialogue and interaction can lead to students having different experiences. On the one hand, students are aware of the benefits of participating in tutorials and engage easily “in seminars I always try to speak because I think that’s the only way to show the lecturers and teaching assistants that you’ve done the reading and that you know what you are talking about and if something isn’t clear you can get clarifications” (Swiss student, full degree). Furthermore, such a space that encourages discussion may be perceived as welcoming by students who are not used to dialogue and interaction “I’m very shy, I have all these anxiety issues as well and here suddenly I feel more comfortable talking, somehow I don’t know why, but the whole environment seems generally towards discussion and I’m not afraid to say anything even if it’s not the brightest idea that crossed my mind” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 year).

On the other hand, active participation in tutorials can be a process that takes time, as students have to get used to speaking in English in front of their peers:

“I think being an international student and not a native speaker at the beginning I was a bit more reserved and maybe didn’t feel as comfortable as Irish students in this situation, it was new to them as well, but like there was new to me not in a way that was like university, but that it was also an English speaking university” (German student, full degree).

Furthermore, apart from the language barriers, students might also feel less confident with the study material, especially in the case of Erasmus students who join courses that some of their full-degree peers have been studying for a longer period of time:

“I’m a little bit afraid about talking in tutorials even if we are I don’t know, ten or twenty, its great and I prepare all the time, I prepare my work, but I’m too scared of talking before everyone, and I know that they study business classes for two years and me I’m just a student for three months, so I encourage myself like next time you’ll try, but it’s just inside me” (Czech student, studying in France, Erasmus 1 year).

In addition, there are situations where participation in tutorials is very limited from all students, which makes some of the international ones feel confused regarding what is expected of them “I don’t think it’s the fact of asking the question itself, it’s just that no one else does, so obviously I’m from somewhere else, I come here, no one asks questions, so I wouldn’t ask questions, but then after a while just, you know, for my benefit, I started asking questions” (Italian student, full degree). Furthermore, some of them might feel disengaged from the study material if they perceive a lack of involvement from their peers “most students don’t care, they don’t contribute, and they don’t make the subject go further, and so you’re literally just being given this page with questions, you go to the tutorial, you are given the answers or part of the answers, done” (French student, full degree, advanced entry). It is interesting to note that both of these students were studying in the same course, which is one of the largest in the AHSS Faculty.

To sum up, tutorials are perceived by international students as a space for dialogue and discussion, where additional clarifications and information about the study material can be gained. Such a space encourages students to engage with each other and with the content, but it can also bring additional pressure, making them negotiate barriers with English language, study material and academic culture by perceiving themselves in relation to their peers. Some students overcome these barriers, while others are scared to put themselves in a vulnerable position. Acknowledging these various experiences that international students have with tutorial participation helps us better understand their learning processes and how they negotiate their positions in such settings, which can further lead to transforming tutorials into open spaces in which all students can engage and discuss freely, beyond any barriers and anxieties.

IX. How do International Students Experience Trinity Exams?

Exams in most schools in Trinity usually take place at the end of the academic year, during the Trinity Term. Students start this term with three weeks of Revision, when they no longer have classes and can dedicate all their time to studying for the exams and revising all the necessary materials. After that there are four weeks of examinations, followed by five weeks in which papers are marked, results are published and appeals can be made.

This system of final year exams may be perceived as a very different assessment style by students who come from a background where they were continuously examined “I was quite surprised that we didn’t have any exams in January... it was definitely a different routine and lifestyle, so here you have to think long term, you have to work constantly during the year but you know that it’s all in the end, whereas I had to study every week, so it’s definitely a different lifestyle here” (French student, full degree). Therefore, many international students have to adapt to a new system where they have to employ a different studying discipline that extends in time and demands them to prove their knowledge and academic abilities at the end of the academic year.

Even in the cases when students only have a module in the first term, with very few exceptions, the exam for that module will still take place in Trinity term. This can lead to some students having difficulties with maintaining an active knowledge of the topics that they studied and keeping themselves motivated “this break that you take between first term and exams I think that will be, that lets you forget about many things that you already learned, I think that’s kind of a challenge” (German student, full degree). Therefore, annual exams are another aspect of Trinity’s academic culture that many international students have to get used to.

1. Revision

The three weeks of revision are experienced differently by international students. For some of them, it is a time that they can successfully use for studying and allows them to go back to past materials and refresh their memory regarding topics studied in the first term:

“I’ve always been a huge fan of the three weeks study break before exams, it suits my style of studying very well, so that was fine, it became a bit more challenging in second year, we had more modules that didn’t build on each other, so at that point you do have to go back and look at what you did three months earlier” (Norwegian student, full degree).

In other cases, however, having three weeks for revision may seem unusual, especially when students who were used to continuous assessments observe their fellow peers either travelling

abroad and going on vacations or studying for eight hours a day. This can lead to experiencing further confusion for some international students:

“I didn’t understand why you need 3 weeks, maybe that was part of the reason why people weren’t studying because they knew they had such a long time to study, whereas in the States your lectures would be right up the week before exams and then there’s a week of exams and then over, but here it was like 3 weeks of people going on vacations or studying really hard, like some science students I talked to the day after the Trinity ball they were like hitting the books for 8 hours a day and I was shocked by that, and some people were not concerned at all...might have been better, more of a motivation, to have known you must study all along the way” (American student, full degree).

Furthermore, when coming from a different academic culture, some students might not be familiar with the terms used in a system where exams take place at the end of the year. Therefore, if these terms are not explained to international students, they will have a limited understanding of what to expect:

“I don’t know what revision week means, are we supposed to simply not have any classes, study on our own or will there actually be revision sessions conducted by the lecturer?...like there are a few people who are actually planning to travel during the revision week and I’m like don’t you have classes or will we have classes, so it’s not very clear on that at all, I couldn’t find any information on that” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Therefore, the experiences that students have with revision may vary depending on their academic background as well as their level of understanding in relation to the three weeks of preparation, what is expected of students during that time and how they can manage this period on their own.

2. Preparing for Exams

When studying for exams, students can consult past exam papers in order to see what topics were assessed in previous years and gain experience by practicing and preparing their responses on those or similar topics: “it was good to have all the past exam papers online to get an idea what it was going to be like, do a few practices and stuff like that” (American student, full degree). Furthermore, some students organize their own exam simulations to also go through the experience of sitting an exam:

“when it came to exams I think it’s really helpful that you have past exam papers online so at least you know how the questions will be like and you are able to take the exam papers and just sit down and say ok one hour I’m going to write the exam questions like the year before me wrote, so that was really helpful for me, to just like simulate the exam situation” (German student, full degree).

However, it is important to note that students can only see what types of questions were asked in previous exams, without having access to sample responses, which can make exam preparation more difficult for some students: “it’s very difficult to prepare for it, I’ll say that, your lecturer says well here is the exam, you can look up papers on the internet, but it’s like you’ve never seen a sample response, you don’t know which makes a good response and what makes a bad one” (American student, full degree). Furthermore, some international students consider that they don’t have enough guidance from their lecturers building up to the exams “in matters of tutorial and exercises...that the professor should aid us, like this is what you’re going to find in the exam, that also doesn’t happen in most of the modules I’m taking, it’s like they give you the subject but they do not in any way tell you how are they going to ask you for it” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Thus, when it comes to exam preparation, students are expected to be proactive and work on their own initiative, consulting and practicing past exam papers, organizing their own exam simulations and reactivating all their knowledge during the revision weeks. In other words, they are expected to put all their independent learning skills into practice in order to successfully go through the exam experience. However, not all international students are fully aware of these expectations, which can cause them difficulties in the way they study and prepare for exams. In many cases, this can further lead to stressful and anxious experiences.

3. Exam Pressure and Anxiety

Many international students who come to study in Trinity do not have previous experiences with sitting a written examination in a hall filled with hundreds of other students “it’s a big unknown at this point” (American student, visiting 1 term). Coming from a continuous assessment academic background can make some international students perceive yearly exams as intimidating “it was a different set up to the way American college is run in terms of like barely getting any homework during the year and then having it all right on the exams, which was definitely a very scary thing in first year” (American student, full degree).

This type of assessment can put a lot of pressure on some students, especially when the exam is the only method of being graded “I am just worried about the exam because the examination here is quite intimidating and most of your grade depends on a single examination, not very reassuring at all” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). This pressure that many of them feel can lead in some cases to further anxiety noted especially by the two visiting Brazilian students that participated in this research “I’m definitely scared of the exams, I think they will be very hard...the fact that the assessment is only in the summer makes me anxious”, “here this idea of annual exams is quite scary, I was taking some previous exams and I saw that there were all open questions so I got quite scared

because it was really long answers". In the case of one of them, the anxiety associated with the exams made her access the Counselling service. Furthermore, considerable pressure is experienced also by students of Law, who have to struggle with studying large amounts of cases for their exams "what affected me was that I've never had to study three hundred cases for a two hours exam, the amount of pressure is unlike anything before, and that is huge, there's so much stress" (full degree student, origin undisclosed to prevent identification).

Additionally, international students feel anxious not only because of the unfamiliarity with the exam experience or the fact that it is the only type of assessment determining their grade, but also because they take into account added costs associated with them potentially failing the exams:

"once the exams were all around it was stressful just because of the unknown aspect of like, I never sat a written exam before and yeah I just didn't really know what to expect and it was very daunting to me to have everything writing on your performance in one day or like 60% or 70% of whatever that was, how was I supposed to know if I get really nervous and blink that day and I knew I couldn't come back to Ireland for the resets because not like just like the cost of the resits, but like I planned coming back in September and then I would have had to come back at the beginning of August and by the time they let you know it's failed I felt that the prices of flights would have been exorbitant and it would have been a really big problem for my family, so I was very stressed about the idea of failing" (American student, full degree).

Despite this pressure and anxiety, once students go through the initial and sometimes shocking first experience, they become more familiar with the exams and, in some cases, their results improve: "I realized after my second or third exam that I just got used to the situation, I knew what it was like and I felt more comfortable with the whole situation and I was more confident and actually the grades I got in the exams in my third, fourth or fifth exam were actually better than my first exam" (German student, full degree). However, it is important to note that this adjustment with the exams and potential improvement of results is experienced by some full degree international students, but it can be limited for the visiting ones who sit yearly exams only once in Trinity, after which they go back to their home universities.

In conclusion, exams are experienced differently by international students in Trinity. This experience is influenced by the students' academic formation, style of studying and discipline, as well as how clear the College's expectations are not only communicated and explained by the academic staff, but also understood by the students themselves. Furthermore, yearly examinations represent an assessment method that has the potential of putting pressure on students and leads to some of them experiencing feelings of anxiety and stress. As a result, all these various implications show that preparing and taking the exams is yet another complex experience that international students go

through when studying in Trinity, one that is to be taken into account in the design of activities and support services directly addressing this cohort of students.

X. Academic Coping Strategies

Experiencing challenges and difficulties makes many international students develop their own coping strategies once they identify the area where they need to improve or make more effort.

1. Language

When struggling with English, many international students consider they need to practice more in order to improve “I said I have to study more and I have to learn more and I finally stopped blaming myself and allow myself more creativity” (Russian student, full degree). Furthermore, additional exposure to language outside of the academic environment is perceived as contributing to perfecting their language skills:

“first of all learning, reading articles, you know those Google articles, how to write if or not if, you know all these little grammar things, plus talking to native people and they helped me to choose my grammar, the correct grammar, not just employ the colloquial words, they helped me to flow on this road of grammar, then reading feature literature, watching films in English, listening to music in English, you know all those not educational but linguistic things and yes, entertainment things involving language” (Russian student, full degree).

In order to get more clarifications, many international students decide to overcome the language barrier by engaging directly with their peers and asking them questions:

“the Irish students that I was in the group project with they’re from Dublin and they have quite a thick accent, but I just asked when I didn’t understand and they replied and explained to me so that was no problem for me, scientifically when it comes to topics and expressions I just asked and they paraphrased what one expression meant and what the other meant” (German student, visiting 1 year)

Therefore, a direct and prolonged exposure to English language and asking for clarifications whenever in need are strategies that many international students find successful for developing their language abilities.

2. Reading

In order to prepare for tutorials, assignments and exams, students have to go through a lot of reading material, which can sometimes be overwhelming:

“well I still have a problem catching up with the reading, like every week there’s something new, and I’m like I didn’t even finish the one before, and I just keep going on and like look up the dictionary and see, like I think I start to understand what it’s about, like if I don’t really have time I just watch the topic on YouTube or listen to a podcast, because I feel like listening is easier for me” (Japanese student, full degree).

Therefore, many students find ways of coping with the amount of reading material and apply strategies that make their learning more efficient or allow them to focus on the aspects that are of interest: “I was just trying to pick an overview of the book and then, for example just read some, how to say, the review of the books and just pick anyone I was interested in” (Chinese student, visiting 1 term).

3. Tutorials and Presentations

As it was discussed in the previous section, tutorials create a space for dialogue where students can engage with each other and the study material. Many international students are not used to this type of system, which makes them develop their own strategies in order to understand better what is expected of them. Such strategies might involve observing their peers and how they interact, which helps students become more confident for class participation:

“in the first few weeks I’d say in tutorials I was a bit reserved because I was like, I didn’t know what was like, how everything was like, I just had to get used to it, so I just like observed everything and just watched how it is, what the others say, what the TA expects and then just like it took some time and I knew how it worked and I just became more confident and it wasn’t like I didn’t say anything at all in the beginning, but I definitely said less at the beginning, so like at the end of the year I’d say I was quite active in tutorials and didn’t have any problems to like interact with the TA or have discussions with other students in tutorials” (German student, full degree).

The same strategy of observation is applied by some international students also in relation to giving presentations in front of their peers “we always could pick and I never picked the first one, I always wanted to get the feeling and see one of the first presentations before I felt confident going into that kind of thing” (American student, full degree).

Furthermore, some of the students who struggle with class participation and feel that they don’t have enough time to formulate their responses and react to the questions posed become proactive and inform their lecturers or TAs about the situation, which in some cases improves their situation “I told it to the teacher and sometimes he is trying to like look at me and let me speak so it’s ok” (French student, Erasmus 1 year).

Therefore, observing their peers and discussing with the lecturers about the difficulties encountered is another strategy that some international students employ in order to overcome the initial barriers experienced in relation to participation and presentation in tutorials.

4. Time Management and Preparing for Exams

Having annual exams means that students have to keep themselves motivated all throughout the year and maintain an active knowledge of the various topics studied until the exam period. This makes students develop time management skills that allows them to meet all the assignment deadlines and be prepared for exams: “I definitely knew that I needed to tackle this in like a new and more structured way, like for me and my own studying style, so I just had a big white board with a calendar on it and I said you will know this by this time, and just checking off the dates and stuff like that” (American student, full degree). Furthermore, many of them start preparing for exams during the year by taking notes “well I have studying strategies, I tend to write notes during lectures and I look through those notes” (Lithuanian student, full degree, sat Leaving Certs in Ireland), consulting additional materials on the topics they are particularly interested in “I would read papers around the topic or watch documentaries even” (Lithuanian student, full degree, sat Leaving Certs in Ireland), practicing with past exam papers and setting up deadlines for their preparation:

“I definitely really consulted the past exams papers from the beginning, created a plan and had like really like I made myself a lot of deadlines of getting certain information down into notes and most of my ehm lecturers had like explicitly said “this will be on the exam, there will be a question on this”, so I also focused on those topics more than others, and by going through the past exam papers really seeing that there were a lot of very specific questions” (American student, full degree).

Hence, despite the various difficulties that international students experience due to annual exams, many of them find efficient ways to adapt to this system and prepare accordingly.

5. Discussing with Peers and Reading Emails

Another way for international students to understand the academic expectations of Trinity and adjust their performance is through discussions with their peers, especially the ones from previous years:

“we had the chance to meet with other students who were staying here during the summer on internship and doing projects for College, and we could meet this group of ten, fifteen students and they give me some of their work, some tips oh this is a nice model, this is not, some tips about what they did and they give me some assignments of theirs to see how it works so I think this was nice to have these previous students” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Furthermore, because Trinity students receive a large amount of emails from College, actually getting the chance to read those emails and staying informed is something that not many students end up doing “my friends they make fun of me because they say that I’m the only one that reads the

emails that Trinity sends, about the programmes here, the researches they are doing, the College, so if they wanna know something that's in their inbox they ask me" (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). Therefore, reading emails is a strategy that allows them to stay informed not only with the College's initiatives, but also with the support that is available for students.

In summary, in order to minimize their difficulties and adapt to Trinity's academic culture in a way that allows them to perform successfully, many international students employ various personalized strategies, tailored specifically to their experiences. As such, they try to reduce their language difficulties by practicing and exposing themselves to English in different academic and non-academic settings, they apply reading strategies to stay in control of their large reading lists, they observe their peers' behaviour in academic settings that they are not familiar with, such as tutorials or presentations, they ask questions when additional clarifications are needed, they develop time management and studying strategies in order to prepare for exams and, lastly, they read emails to stay informed. However, the same students that discussed these strategies also had some of the various experiences presented in the previous sections. In other words, it is important not to assume that the coping strategies that students develop eliminate their difficulties and challenges, which would put all the responsibility on the students themselves, but to see them as part of the international student experience, in which both students and College play a role.

XI. Asking for Help and Accessing Services

1. Asking for Help

Trinity College has an academic culture that includes an extensive network of support services that students can go to, tailored to specific needs and experiences, from the academic and psychological ones, to preparing for a future career and becoming an alumni of the College. All these services offer different types of help or solutions to students' problems. However, many international students that come from cultural backgrounds where such services are unusual may face barriers when understanding how these services work and negotiating if and how they should access them:

"I would say people coming from North America or European countries they wouldn't have such a barrier because they grew up in a very different environment than me or an Asian person, Koreans, Chinese, they [Europeans and North Americans] tend to be more open and they grew up in an open environment where you have small talks, chats and "hey, how are you doing", I come from a very, I would say Russian people are very reserved, plus I come from an Asian part, which is like double reserved, people they tend to keep their problems and issues to themselves and don't get along with people that easy, and plus I have a very introverted nature, so I think my main issue was that I grew up in an environment that taught me to solve my problems myself, that's why I haven't asked for help, it's only now I'm adjusting my nature that I can go and ask for help, but before that it was first of all the cultural context, which is major" (Russian student, full degree).

Furthermore, the possibility of their English not being understood or thinking that they have to interact with native speakers makes many students anxious and stops them from asking for help "for academic things if you don't understand you have to ask again and again and maybe for you if I ask you something and you don't understand I'll say again but then if you ask me the fourteenth time I think how stupid I am" (Chinese student, postgraduate degree). Therefore, many international students in Trinity are not used to discussing their problems which, combined with the language barrier, can prevent them from reaching out:

"In Chinese culture we don't interfere with other people's personal problems, with studies it's easier, but if it's something outside studies we don't interfere...you can ask "what happened?", if they want to share it is ok, if they say no, then they are fine (...) don't ask too much, normally Chinese students are shy and most of the Chinese are not talking also because of the culture and language barrier they don't want to share experiences with you especially when they first come here" (Chinese student, postgraduate degree).

The cultural barrier is not the only aspect that international students have to negotiate when it comes to asking for help. Many of them perceive themselves as not having enough confidence, an issue that they don't want to make visible in front of others, peers or staff:

“Being in first year everything is new, you don’t really have the confidence, I mean me personally I don’t really have the confidence to like go somewhere, asking for help, I think many people experience the same thing because you are very lost, you don’t want you know to be seen like you are...in fairness it was a bit overwhelming” (Italian student, full degree).

Furthermore, some of them consider that asking for help is a reason to feel ashamed “I always thought it would be a shame for me to say that I am incapable of comprehending what they say” (Russian student, full degree).

Lastly, experiencing cultural and language barriers might make students perceive a lack of understanding from their academic departments, which further leads to students isolating themselves and not asking for help when needed:

“I at least hoped for a certain degree of understanding that I’m not an English speaking person and it’s my first encounter with total English thing, but I never met this understanding and that’s why it made me a little, I wouldn’t say depressed, but disappointed, and then I said ok, nobody cares, I won’t ask” (Russian student, full degree).

In many cases, the students’ first experiences define the way they relate to a culture where asking for help is recommended for identifying solutions “my first encounter wasn’t pleasant, so I think I was left with a little scar...he [lecturer] was like a linguistic authority for me and I was scared of that authority so I projected my fear to other linguistic authorities and facilities in university, including this, student learning” (Russian student, full degree).

Therefore, cultural and language barriers, together with experiencing little confidence and not wanting to be perceived as vulnerable by others can influence the way international students perceive and negotiate Trinity’s academic culture of asking for help and receiving support.

2. Accessing services

2.1. Knowledge about the services

When it comes to using the support services available in College, there seem to be three different types of experiences that the international students who participated in this research had: knowing about the services, not knowing about them at all and, lastly, being confused about a decentralized network.

Firstly, there are the international students who consider they have enough information about the support services and they know how to access them if needed: “I read the emails and I know that if I encounter a problem I would probably go and check my emails and see which service would best fit my problem, but I haven’t so far made any effort” (Swiss student, full degree). Reading emails is one

of the most important ways of staying informed, but comes with the difficulty of going through a large amount of information that students receive via e-mail “I am the kind of person that is aware of these things, I know about them and I notice them and my friends make fun of me because I read the emails” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year).

Secondly, there are many international students who are not aware of the support system in place, which prevents them from receiving the help they might need “I wasn’t fully aware of what was available to me...had I known that there were more services available and people willing to help you, I would have definitely asked for help I think” (French student, full degree).

Lastly, probably the most important experience is that of the students who are aware of the various services, but are overwhelmed and confused “the entire Trinity website network is very disorganized, confusing, and there is a million different services and I have no idea what half of them do, when I can go meet with them or see them or how they’re supposed to help me” (American student, full degree). Therefore, students are unsure of where to start when solving specific academic or non-academic issues “the network is very much decentralized so that you have all these people taking care of different things and if you really need one person to tell you how to solve an issue, how not to solve an issue, I wasn’t sure who to contact” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 year). Furthermore, some services overlap with each other, making students choose one instead of another “there are many similar services around there so...if I get involved here or another place it’s kind of the same to get experiences, I think that’s the reason not to come here [SLD]” (Japanese student, postgraduate degree). Moreover, these similarities can lead to further confusion “it’s like you are in the supermarket and you have twenty yoghurts and you don’t know which one to buy” (Czech student, Erasmus 1 year), and present the risk of increasing the students’ confusion “all these things are here and students are still lost in the system” (French student, full degree, advanced entry) or of making them decide not to choose a service.

Another issue that was discussed by some of the students was the difficulty of locating the services “how to find it, if it’s outside from campus, some might feel like a little bit intimidating, like can I actually make it to this place” (Brazilian student, visiting 1 year). Therefore, the actual location of the services can be another barrier for many students when it comes to access “last year I remember reading emails and it would be in buildings that I have never been into so hardly going to go to something where I don’t know anyone, it’s the first time that I go, I don’t know where it is, big chance of getting lost in the way” (Italian student, full degree).

To sum up, there are various ways in which students relate to the support services available in College: some are aware of the network and know how to access it, while others have very limited

information at hand. In addition, there is a large number of students who seem to be confused by this network and are not aware who to contact and how. Furthermore, many international students perceive Trinity campus as very extensive and have difficulties in getting to unfamiliar places.

2.2. No need of the services

Several of the international students involved in this research felt that they either didn't need any services in their academic progress, or that many of the services didn't respond to their needs. For some of them, tackling academic issues on their own was more important for their confidence than asking for help

"I myself I try to figure it out myself in the first place, and when I figure out that I have a problem I'll try to get help, but in the first place I usually just try to see how it works and try to do it myself, I think that's the reason why I haven't used the services so far, and that worked out quite well, I feel quite confident now, so I really don't feel that I have the need" (German student, full degree)

Furthermore, looking towards employability and life after College, students consider it more important to learn how to solve problems on their own and become more independent "when I get to the real world there's not gonna be these services anymore, so I might as well get used to being on my own and I know that there's plenty of services here available especially for international students, but I guess I'm more like I can handle everything on my own" (American student, visiting 1 term).

Moreover, there are also students who perceive some of the academic services as not responding to their needs. This perception is formed either after attending certain services "I didn't want to get back...I was shown a method for doing it essentially and that method just doesn't work for me, so somebody else was there and explaining, it was fine, but the moment I went back at home I scrapped it all, it was good for starting, but it wasn't a method that I would use" (French student, full degree), or before, as a reason not to access them:

"I think part of the reason I haven't done more is cuz I feel like in general those courses and what not that you do it will be maybe 45 minutes and it will have 20 minutes worth of things that you really enjoy, or 15 minutes that you find really helpful, and the rest is just a waste, like you're sitting there and it's like 15 minutes of usefulness out of 45 minutes sessions, that's why I was always weary of going to those like lunch talks" (Norwegian student, full degree).

In conclusion, Trinity has put in place a system where students can ask for help and receive support with certain issues they might experience. However, in order to do so, many international students are faced with having to step out of a comfort zone where problems are not discussed and negotiate

cultural and language barriers. In addition, this attitudinal aspect is complemented by the knowledge and perceptions students have of the services available to them, which influences whether they access these services or not. In other words, on the one hand College provides students with a support system, it informs them via emails and direct marketing (posters, leaflets) and waits for students to ask for help. On the other hand, many international students are not used to such a system, they face cultural and language barriers, some of them are informed, but many others are confused, uninformed, or consider that accessing services is not what they need. As was discussed in a previous subsection, many international students succeed by either developing their own coping or study strategies, or by negotiating successfully all the barriers they face and accessing the services they need. However, looking at the gaps between the College's services and international students' experiences can be a good place to start when it comes to designing more efficient and targeted services and offering effective academic support to the international students that want and need it.

PART FOUR: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. TRANSITIONING TO TRINITY

Discussion

The international student experience, in its entire complexity, starts long before students arrive in the new academic environment. It can be argued that this experience begins from the moment students consider the decision of choosing Trinity as an academic destination and form certain expectations about how their studies will look like and what they will entail. The aspects that motivate their decision, together with the expectations that students have can influence their transition to Trinity, the way they will adapt to the university's academic culture and the challenges they face along the way. Therefore, it is important that any initiatives in this area are backed by an in depth understanding of how students negotiate their expectations, identities and academic challenges.

The reason for choosing Trinity was one of the first aspects that the respondents discussed. On the one hand, academically, most of them are driven by the motivation to study in a prestigious university, where they can pursue specialized courses, some unavailable anywhere else, as well as practice and improve their English language skills, a motivation noted by all non-native English speakers. This is further supported by the fact that many international students find Trinity more financially accessible than other English speaking universities, mostly in the UK. On the other hand, many international students also want to embark on a new adventure, where they can step out of their comfort zone and have new experiences. Therefore, choosing Trinity as an academic destination is not a decision taken lightly, as students have to consider practical and financial aspects when determining where their new academic adventure will start.

For many international students, such financial and emotional investments come with certain expectations of what their academic life will entail. Most of them expect to enter an academically rigorous system, where they have to work hard, be involved, attend high quality lectures, receive continuous support and experience a continuous demand to study. Furthermore, they expect to pursue new courses and learn new theories from their lecturers. A Western approach to education was another expectation of some students, perceived as encompassing a university campus, student societies, and engaged students who discuss ideas and are involved in shaping the student life. However, there are also students who do not form any kind of expectations, either because they prefer to start their studies directly, or due to a limited understanding of what academic life will

entail. This can be the case for students who pursue a certain type of degree (i.e. Erasmus exchange) or who have no prior academic experiences to relate to (in their family or group of friends).

Once they arrive in Trinity and start their studies, many students notice how some of their expectations come in conflict with what they encounter in the new environment. Firstly, they enter a culture that uses a very specific terminology when defining itself, so students have to make sense of the language used to describe not only themselves, but also everything around them.

Secondly, international students who come in for a full degree programme right after graduating high school find that they enter a grown-up academic environment, with difficult study materials, and are required to make grown-up academic decisions regarding their choice of courses. Therefore, when entering Trinity's academic culture, many international students have to negotiate a grown-up identity and make sense of where they are positioned in an environment that is new and often different than what they were used to before. Many students go through this process with a limited understanding of this academic culture and Trinity's academic expectations. This can lead to experiencing frustrations, a lack of care and support or negative first encounters that further lead to academic isolation.

The expectation of a prestigious academic environment perceived with a continuous demand to study comes in conflict with the independent learning approach that Trinity implements and with a relaxed atmosphere that students perceive among their peers. In such a context, students notice how they have more will power and more responsibilities in relation to their studies, as they are the ones who have to make decisions and hold themselves accountable. Furthermore, in an academic culture defined by yearly examinations in most courses and limited continuous assessment, international students notice the need to negotiate time and maintain motivation until the end of the academic year. In some cases, this prevents students from keeping track of their academic progress or enjoying the learning process, influenced also by the perception that the feedback they receive is limited.

As it was noted by some respondents, independent learning is something that they discover on their own, without having it presented as one of Trinity's expectations. This proves to be a challenging process for some students who experience feelings of insecurity and frustration, which also leads to difficulties in maintaining motivation for their studies.

Furthermore, some students might also have a limited understanding of what their lectures and tutorials will entail, how they should get in contact with the lecturers or teaching assistants (TAs), what kind of assessment methods will be used, as well as how they are expected to perform. This

limited understanding, combined with their own academic background, can lead to students forming different perceptions that will influence the way they position themselves in relation to lecturers and TAs. Some will find them approachable and accommodating, while others will perceive them as authority figures, intimidating and unapproachable, perception that prevents students to ask for clarification or support. Moreover, some students expect to establish personal contact with their lecturers, which can lead to disappointment if that expectation is not met.

Furthermore, as a large part of their assignments will involve writing, many international students have to negotiate cultural differences when understanding the various types of assignments required by their lecturers, as well as the rules of academic writing and integrity. In this stage, understanding what is expected is perceived as vital in order to perform well academically.

Lastly, another important aspect of the academic culture students have to get used to in their transition stage is the wide network of support services, which encourages all students to ask for help with any issue they might experience, from personal to academic. However, as many international students come from cultures where problems are not openly discussed, they have to negotiate both cultural and language barriers, as well as feelings of shame or lack of confidence in order to adapt to Trinity's culture of asking for help. Furthermore, this network of services is perceived by some students as confusing and overwhelming, which prevents them from having a clear image of where to go for specific issues they might struggle with.

All these various aspects show that, once they start their studies, many international students are faced with not only learning for College, but also learning the College. Adjusting to the new academic culture is a process that is perceived as both time and energy consuming, where students have to simultaneously negotiate their previously formed expectations, as well as their perceptions of the academic cultural differences.

Our findings point towards a gap between the expectations that international students form before or at the beginning of their studies, and the expectations of Trinity, which students discover on their own through a variety of experiences. Therefore, there is a clear need for intervention in the area of academic expectations and challenges in order to enable international students to form realistic and informed expectations prior to arriving and starting their studies, as well as supporting them in their transition to Trinity's academic culture. It is important that such interventions are timed to cover the pre-arrival stage, when students start forming their expectations, and continue through Orientation and the first weeks of transition and adjustment to Trinity. There are various methods of expressing the College's expectations and academic culture in a clear and comprehensive manner, from

information materials to online resources. These methods will be outlined below, with an individual implementation and dissemination plan.

In order to progress and perform academically, international students have to adjust to the new academic culture they are entering. By actively engaging in this adjustment process, Trinity in general and SLD in particular, will play an important part in the College's internationalization, opening up and responding to the real needs and experiences of its international students. In order to do so, the following recommendations are made for SLD:

- 1.1. How to Study in Trinity. A Guide for International Students
- 1.2. International Students Section on SLD website/Blackboard module
- 1.3. Pre-arrival bridge programme/initiative – Animated Video
- 1.4. SLD Orientation and Faculty Orientation
- 1.5. SLD information stand post-Fresher's week

Recommendations

1. How to Study in Trinity. A Guide for International Students

Based on the literature review conducted as part of this research, we organized a general international students workshop on Trinity's academic culture at the beginning of Michaelmas term. The workshop was called "International students exploring academic expectations" and it took place on September 25th in Teaching Week 1. The initiative was repeated for the Science without Borders Brazilian students in October 2014. Despite the fact that both workshops were well attended, a careful evaluation (see Appendice) led us to the need to gather more data in order to understand and decide what type of activity or resource would best fit the international students' need to understand the academic culture, as well as reach a large number of students, especially the ones who are unlikely to attend workshops or group activities.

Therefore, based on the preliminary findings of the research and best practices identified at the Academic Skills Unit of the University of Melbourne, Australia (see Appendice), we created a comprehensive and informative brochure on Trinity's academic culture entitled "How to Study in Trinity – A Guide for International Students" (see Annex). The brochure covers the following sections:

- Settling in
- Getting prepared
- Building up language skills

- Independent learning
- Understanding the role of the lecturers
- Becoming a critical thinker
- Reading with a purpose
- Academic writing
- Plagiarism and referencing
- Group work, tutorials and projects
- Exams
- Trinity's grading system
- Further College resources

Each section consists of two parts: an explanation and contextualization of the topic, together with specific resources that international students can avail of in order to get more information or support in that particular area. The guide was created to be used not only as a once-off reference, but also as a resource that students can return to whenever they need more clarification or support regarding an issue they are struggling with.

Dissemination of Brochure

STUDENTS	Orientation sessions for international students	Hardcopy via Global Relations Office
	SLD Office	
	Global Room	
	International students – full degree, Visiting and Erasmus	Electronic version Email to be sent from SLD address to undergrads email list
STAFF (September 2015)	Course Directors, Directors of Teaching and Learning	Electronic version Email to be sent from SLD address to email list (see App.) / Academic Secretary Office – Senior Lecturer ➔ Ask to include the material on their websites and course handbooks
	Erasmus Coordinators	Electronic version Email list from Erasmus Programme Coordinator – Catherine Williams ➔ Ask to include the material on their websites and course handbooks
	Tutorial Service	Electronic version / Hardcopy Email to be sent to Senior Tutor to forward to all Tutors
	Senior Lecturer	Electronic version

		Email to be sent directly from SLD address
	Support Services	Electronic version Email to be sent from SLD address to email list (see App.)

2. International Students Section – SLD Website and Blackboard

Based on our data, we can draw several conclusions. Firstly, there are certain experiences that are specific only for international students, defined as students who travel to another country to pursue higher education courses, and some that are typical only for a particular sub-group - international students who are non-native English speakers. These experiences differ in intensity depending on various personal, social and academic factors that each student negotiates in a unique way. As existing research points out, validating these experiences and acknowledging their importance in shaping the realities of international students can contribute greatly to the students’ sense of belonging in the new academic culture. Furthermore, due to these specific experiences, some students might feel the need not only to access international spaces and resources on campus, but also to see that they exist and that their particular needs are visibly addressed. Therefore, validation and visibility are two important aspects to have in mind when designing support services for this cohort of students.

Secondly, many international students don’t always want or need to be addressed separately from their local peers, but want to be part of the greater undergraduate or postgraduate group of students, thus accommodating to the culture. Therefore, an opposite aspect to consider is integration.

Having in mind the first two aspects – validation and visibility, we recommend adding a separate International Students section on SLD’s website, where only specific international students’ experiences will be addressed. Considering the integration aspect, for any information about study skills, students will be able to check the Undergraduate or Postgraduate sections, where the information provided applies to all students, irrespective of country of origin or academic background.

The content of each sub-section of the webpage is in a draft version and should be further developed during the following months. The same content will also be added to the Blackboard module “Academic Skills for Successful Learning”.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS SECTION	
CATEGORY	CONTENT
Get Used to Trinity's Academic Culture / Find out Trinity's Expectations	How to Study in Trinity. A Guide for International Students Pre-arrival/promotional video (see below)
What do Lecturers want?	Advice from Trinity Lecturers SLD volunteers: Alan Tuffery, Ruth Torode A short survey should be designed and sent to academic staff through the College Secretary, asking them to fill in their advice for international students
Advice from international students to international students	Quotes gathered through the research Separate categories – personal, social, academic
English as a Second Language	Proofreading strategies and support
	ESL resources
International Students Research	Informative articles based on each section of thematic analysis
	Executive report

Any other initiatives for international students	To be added to this section
Links to other international support services on campus	Tutorial Service, Library Global Room, Global Officers EAP
STAFF SECTION	
International students expertise	Link to research in International Students Section

Dissemination of International Students Section

1. Launch of SLD website – to be included in a larger scale event (see subsequent section)
2. Information about SLD’s direct work with international students to be included on the following websites, with a link to the specific section on SLD’s website:
 - a. Study at Trinity www.tcd.ie/study - EU and International students – contact person Olivia Waters, International Marketing Coordinator, Global Relations Office
 - b. Orientation <https://www.tcd.ie/orientation/services/international.php> - contact person Kevin O’Kelly, Dean of Students
 - c. Orientation - additional information <https://www.tcd.ie/orientation/add-int/>

If the website is finalized before the beginning of the academic year 2015-2016, it should be promoted and disseminated together with the study guide as part of SLD’s initiative to provide more support for international students. This should be done following the dissemination method outlined in the previous section. Furthermore, ideally, they will be both launched during a larger scale event (see below).

3. Pre-Arrival Promotional Video / Animation

Existing research points out that bridge programmes help students become better prepared for their studies. However, when it comes to international students, aspects such as time, cost, availability and interest to take part in such a programme should be taken into account when designing the proper method to get the necessary information across and to enable students to form realistic expectations. As both an educational and a marketing tool, we recommend the creation of a short

animated video that would briefly outline some of Trinity's academic expectations in an interactive, engaging and international student friendly manner.

The video should last no longer than 5 minutes and cover information on some of the aspects included in the "How to Study in Trinity" guide, without, however, going into details regarding the support services. The idea of the video is to provide an overview of the academic expectations, referencing the study guide or SLD's website for further information. Therefore, the content should be adapted in the following months for this specific purpose.

The recommended software for the animated video is Powtoon (www.powtoon.com) as it contains a wide array of diverse characters to use and it is specifically designed for educational purposes. The current (05.06.2015) monthly plan for this software is \$59/month. There is a free option available, but the access to resources is limited.

Dissemination of Animated Video

Once the animated video is finalized, it should be disseminated as follows:

1. Upon Completion
 - a. International Students Section – SLD web and Blackboard
2. Pre-arrival stage of academic year 2016-2017
 - a. Non-EU students – access to email addresses / send through Global Relations Office – contact person Erika Doyle, Global Officers Coordinator
 - b. Erasmus students – access to email addresses / send through Erasmus Coordinator – contact person Catherine Williams, Erasmus Programme Coordinator, Academic Registry
 - c. EU full degree students – send through Central Admissions Office – contact person Gillian Fitzpatrick, Executive Officer, Undergraduate Admissions, Academic Registry

4. SLD Adapts to International Students – College-Wide Launch

We recommend that the three tools that SLD developed for international students – website, brochure and video are launched in a coordinated manner through a College wide event – presentation or networking lunch.

Location

The preferred location for this event is the Global Room, Hamilton Building.

Participants

Personalized invitations should be sent to direct and indirect stakeholders in the area of international students. Careful attention is to be given to the stakeholders that will help SLD disseminate its resources and increase its visibility among Trinity international students and academic and support staff (see Dissemination sections above). Furthermore, SLD should also invite student representatives such as S2S Mentors or Peer Supporters who work with international students and Global Ambassadors.

Time and Date

The date of the event depends on when the materials will be finalized, but it is recommended to take place during term time, avoiding Fresher's week, Reading/Study week or the overlap with any other initiatives.

Promotion of resources after event

A newsletter will be sent through College Secretary to all academic and support staff outlining SLD's new initiatives in the area of international students.

This newsletter should be time coordinated with the separate dissemination of each resource, allowing, where necessary, for enough time between the two. A more schematic planning is outlined below.

Furthermore, SLD should also modify its marketing strategy to include all the resources designed for international students by updating its weekly emails, Facebook page (About section), leaflets, posters and brochures.

5. International Students Orientation Sessions - SLD

Our findings from the non-participant observation sessions conducted in September 2014 showed that there was limited information presented to students in the area of academic expectations. During these sessions, SLD, like many other support services, has about 3 minutes to present its array of services. However, despite this time limitation, it is recommended that SLD adapts its slides to the cohort of students they are presenting to, both full degree and Erasmus/Visiting. Furthermore, when going to Faculty specific sessions, which are addressed to the entire group of undergraduate students, SLD should also include information that is directly related to international students and refer to the specific section on its website.

SLD should emphasize its expertise in the area of academic experiences of international students and present its staff as friendly and culturally sensitive, with rich experience in working directly with international students.

International Students Sessions – non-EU and Erasmus/Visiting students

- A slide should be added to cover some aspects of Trinity's academic culture and to outline potential challenges of international students and how these challenges can be overcome
- Specific SLD resources should be outlined, e.g. brochure, video, website
- SLD should emphasize that it works with international students on a regular basis and has expertise in the area

Faculty Sessions – covering EU full degree students who are not addressed in any other session

- A separate slide should be added to address potential challenges of international students and outline the specific services and resources that SLD has in that area
- SLD should emphasize that it works with international students on a regular basis and has expertise in the area

Given the fact that SLD is usually presented together with S2S and SCS, these slides should be uploaded to SharePoint and made available to any staff that will give the presentation on SLD's behalf.

6. Academic Information Stand – Post-Fresher’s Week

In order to facilitate the academic transition of international students in the first teaching weeks, it is recommended that SLD organizes an information stand once a week where students can come for information and advice.

There are two possibilities of implementing this initiative. Firstly, it can run on its own, as part of SLD’s strategy to accommodate the needs of international students, following the structure outlined below.

Where? – Global Room, Watts Building, contact person Caitriona McGrattan, Global Room coordinator

When? – Lunchtime, 1-3pm, Week 3,4,5,6, the day will be agreed upon by SLD team, but preferably Mondays and Fridays should be avoided

Who? - One member of SLD team

How?

- Each student can come and ask questions or discuss any academic issues, maximum 10 minutes slots if busy
- Distribution of SLD materials

It is important to introduce this activity as an information stand, and not a drop-in clinic. It will be a place where students can ask for clarifications or discuss punctual academic matters, but for more detailed advice and support they should be referred to SLD’s other services.

The stand should be displayed in a friendly manner, encouraging students to come and ask questions, including the ones who are not aware of the initiative (i.e. students who come to the Global Room for their lunch). It is recommended that SLD uses its roll-up for visibility purposes.

It is also advisable that the SLD team member who will be involved in this project familiarizes themselves with the direct and indirect stakeholders involved in the area of international students, in order to be able to make referrals when the students’ concerns are out of SLD’s remit. This information can be found in Part Two of this research, under chapter “Stakeholders”.

Promotion

- The event will be announced on SLD’s website and Facebook page, where weekly reminders will be posted

- An email will be sent to students from SLD address to the general undergraduate email list with the subject line “Calling all international students!”
- An email will be sent to S2S mentors, Global Officers and Students’ Union Education Officer to be forwarded to students via their channels of communication

Alternatively, this initiative can be coupled with the New2Dublin programme implemented by S2S mentors in collaboration with the Global Ambassadors of the Global Room. This programme was created for academic year 2014-2015 when one day a week in October 2014, for two hours, students who were coming from outside of Dublin, both Irish and international, could go to the Global Room and ask questions on a variety of topics, from personal and social to academic and administrative. Each week was covering a particular subject announced in advance through the www.meetup.com website. Because of this wide reach of content, the academic aspect of being “new to Dublin” was only approached during one week of this project.

If this approach is preferred due to resources and time limitation, SLD should liaise with S2S and participate in the session aimed to cover academic life in Trinity.

However, in order to reach a wider cohort of international students, it is recommended that SLD follows the first approach of organizing the information stand, being mindful of the New2Dublin programme when deciding on the date and time, as well as when promoting and advertising. Resources permitting, it would be ideal if SLD could also liaise with S2S and get involved in delivering the session covering Trinity’s academic culture.

Conclusion

One of the areas of intervention identified through this research was transitioning to Trinity, defined as starting from the moment international students choose Trinity as their preferred academic destination and form their expectations and continuing with entering the environment and negotiating new identities, cultural differences and perceptions. By developing specific tools – brochure, website, animated video, and becoming more active and involved in the first teaching weeks, SLD will be able to better support international students transitioning to Trinity, making them a direct target group of its services and resources.

Therefore, it is expected that these interventions will not only strengthen the relation between SLD and international students, but will also enable the latter to have a smoother, less challenging transition to Trinity’s academic culture.

II. EXPERIENCING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

Discussion

International students who have English as a second language form a specific subgroup as they face additional barriers and challenges compared to their peers who are native speakers, despite having to pass standardized tests that are meant to prepare them for an academic life in English. As the data shows, many students experience a language shock in various degrees, from perceiving self-imposed mental barriers and being self-conscious about language use, to negative consequences preventing students to interact and perform well academically. According to the respondents, overcoming language barriers is perceived as their own responsibility, through constant practice and exposure to language, while at the same time gaining more familiarity with an environment perceived in time as welcoming for non-native speakers.

However, many students experience certain challenges that are more difficult to overcome, such as having limited access to the language tools needed to develop and express ideas and arguments both in writing and in class participation. Furthermore, many students also note the need for more time and attention to comprehend the information that is passed to them through lectures and reading materials. The difficulties experienced in relation to comprehension, writing and speaking can make students feel doubtful, uncertain or not belonging to the new academic environment, which can affect not only their academic progress and perception of their work, but also their sense of self.

Lastly, proofreading was an aspect discussed by all the respondents, perceived as a need for feedback on their use of English in order to improve and gain confidence. Therefore, proofreading was not perceived as a service where students could go and get their papers corrected prior to the deadline, but as a way of making sure that they are fixing their mistakes and using the correct and appropriate academic English. Considering that practicing and improving their use of English is one of the main expectations of ESL students, this is an area where additional support is recommended in order to enable students to perform well academically and, ultimately, meet their expectations.

As it was identified through the Situation Analysis, Trinity has one dedicated English language support service called English for Academic Purposes, offering a 12 weeks in-session course that students have to sign up for. Apart from direct English language support, EAP also covers essay writing, presentation skills and other academic skills that are related to the use of language. This partial overlap between SLD and EAP makes some students choose one service over the other for addressing their needs.

Therefore, these findings show the need for additional, but also more coordinated support for ESL international students. In order to address this need, we recommend that SLD extends its remit to English language support through the following approach:

1. SLD resource development
2. Coordination between EAP and SLD

These recommendations will be outlined below. Additionally, we recommend widely disseminating the findings of this research to academic and support staff in order to increase awareness of the experiences of international students. Dissemination will be addressed separately in a subsequent section.

Recommendations

1. SLD ESL Resource Development

Based on our findings and on the previous recommendation of developing a separate international students section on SLD's website, it is important that specific support is offered to the subgroup of non-native English speakers. Therefore, we recommend the following

- **"English Language Support"** subsection, International Students section, SLD website/Blackboard with:
 - o Resources and tools that students can use in order to improve their language abilities - This can contain a list of links to other universities that have online support accessible to the general public, as well as books and other materials useful for ESL students (see Appendices for provisional list).
 - o Proofreading strategies - Acknowledging the students' need for proofreading, but also having in mind the College's objection to promoting such a service, this aspect should be addressed directly and alternative solutions should be given. Therefore, we recommend informing students of strategies of proofreading their own work together with additional resources, as outlined by the University of Sydney, Australia (see Appendices).
- **Writing Group for ESL students**

During Hilary Term of academic year 2014-2015, SLD developed a pilot writing group for ESL students in the Science faculties. Due to time limitations and limited coordination, this workshop was organized in an unsuitable period of time, when most of the students had already handed in their assignments or were away on fieldtrips. SLD should implement this

pilot initiative again during Michaelmas term of academic year 2015-2016 and open the group to all ESL students in College that are interested in participating. As part of SLD's remit, this writing group will respond to the identified challenges of ESL students when it comes to written assignments, from negotiating the cultural differences and the rules of academic writing to constructing arguments and structuring essays in a non-native language. See Appendices for more implementation details.

- **1-to-1 Appointments for ESL support**

As the EAP service offers a 12 weeks in-session course, SLD could address the once-off needs of ESL students through 1-to-1 appointments. However, there are several limitations in this area, such as SLD's resources and staff, or a perception of an overlap that might confuse students and not be accepted by the College's administration. If SLD decides to implement this approach, further internal discussions and coordination with EAP and other stakeholders are recommended.

2. SLD – EAP Coordination – Joint Workshops

As it was already mentioned, in order to avoid the overlap between the two services, further coordination and more collaboration in terms of service provision is recommended.

A way of approaching this matter is by having both services involved in the implementation of the Writing Group for ESL students. Alternatively, based on best practices from University of Sydney, Australia, SLD and EAP could jointly organize and deliver a proofreading workshop in order to enable students to identify and correct their own language errors, thus addressing both English and writing skills in the same context.

Conclusion

When coming to Trinity, many non-native English speakers face an additional language shock that can influence their academic progress and their general wellbeing. Therefore, English language support is another area of intervention identified through the findings of this research. In order to address these needs, it is recommended that SLD extends its remit through developing additional resources, providing more visible support and actively collaborating with other stakeholders in this area. Despite its limited resources, we believe that implementing these recommendations will enable SLD to have a more comprehensive approach to the international students' academic experiences and needs.

III. ACADEMIC AND SUPPORT STAFF

Discussion

The interaction with academic and support staff through lectures, tutorials, email, office hours or accessing services is an important part of academic life in Trinity and can influence the way international students perform and progress academically.

Lecturers are probably the most important academic figures that international students have to relate to, and their perceptions of these figures vary greatly. On the one hand, many students perceive their lecturers as experts in the field, which can be connected to their expectation of meeting prestigious lecturers and learning new theories from them. Furthermore, students see how Trinity lecturers are more engaging, constantly inviting to dialogue and providing inspiration, which can contribute, in some cases, to preventing drop-out. Lecturers are perceived as approachable and accommodating with the international students' needs and their availability is recognized as a helpful support system by the students who struggle, as well as a way of gaining more understanding of the College's expectations. Lastly, international lecturers specifically are considered by some students as more empathic due to their direct international background and experience.

On the other hand, there are also international students who perceive their lecturers as unapproachable and intimidating. This perception is common among students who come from academic backgrounds where classes are smaller than the ones they are taking in Trinity, thus encouraging a closer relationship with the lecturers and influencing the students' expectations of Trinity. When this expectation is not met, students can experience disappointment, as well as a lack of control over their academic progress. Furthermore, when it comes to communicating with lecturers, some students perceive this process as very formal, which makes them be more polite and put more effort into expressing their needs. If communication is not reciprocated, these students can feel disappointed, confused or uncertain of whether they are acting in the right or expected way. Lastly, there are students who perceive their lecturers as intimidating, especially in classes where they don't have other international peers, which influences the way they position themselves in the larger academic context as not wanting to stand out or feeling small.

When it comes to attending lectures, some international students who have English as a second language note the difficulties they have when adapting to simultaneously taking notes and listening in a foreign language, while also trying to make sense of certain cultural references or understand technical terms and numbers. In these situations, students recognized the importance of having lecturers who are aware of the international students' experiences and who acknowledge and help

them not only understand the material that is being presented, but also the overall academic system. Consequently, as many international students are not familiar with Trinity's academic culture or with the types of assignments used, they find it important that their lecturers communicate the expectations of their courses, explain the required assignments and provide students with appropriate and detailed feedback, as well offer guidance in this process or refer them to the appropriate support services. As was pointed out by the respondents, having a clear and comprehensive understanding of what is expected for each course can positively influence students' academic progress and performance.

Lastly, class participation is often a requirement in some lectures and tutorials. While acknowledging it as an opportunity for discussion and gaining clarification on certain issues, many international students feel additional pressures due to feeling intimidated by native English speakers, or because they need more time and attention to formulate and express their thoughts, which often makes them miss the opportunity to do so. As existing research points out, this can lead to a conflict of perceptions between students and lecturers or teaching assistants – while the students' struggle to participate makes them lose momentum, some lecturers might interpret such limited participation as a lack of interest for the course material.

In addition, many international students have to negotiate barriers and cultural differences also in relation to accessing services and support staff. While they cannot avoid attending lectures, these challenges can prevent students from going to appropriate support services and asking for the help they need.

Therefore, as shown by all our findings, an important part of internationalization is having an academic and support body that is aware and informed of the international students' experiences, thus opening up to and incorporating their specific needs and requirements, such as communicating expectations and providing support, while at the same time empowering them to become independent and well-adjusted learners in Trinity's academic culture.

Recommendations

In order to address academic and support staff, we recommend a wide dissemination of the research findings, outlined below.

1. Individual Meetings with Key Stakeholders – Summer 2015

Based on the Trinity College Strategic Plan 2014-2019, we can identify several areas in which the current research can be considered relevant:

- A.1. Strengthen Community -> A.1.2. Internationalization
- A.2. Promote Student Life -> A.2.1. Transition to College
- A.3. Renew Trinity Education -> A.3.1 Curriculum
- B.4. Activate talents -> B.4.3. Teaching, learning and research academy

Having these areas in mind, we recommend the dissemination to the following stakeholders. It is important to emphasize the students' experiences with academic and support staff when disseminating the research findings.

1.1. Academic Practice and eLearning (CAPSL)

One of the support services in College for both students and staff, CAPSL is a key stakeholder in various College wide initiatives, such as the Trinity Education Project or the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum (TIC) - <https://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/> . Furthermore, according to the Strategic Plan 2014-2019 (p. 44), "CAPSL will be reformed to create a Teaching, Learning and Research Academy". One of the objectives of this project is "promoting excellence in teaching and research by providing career development opportunities for all academic staff". Therefore, CAPSL's position of working with academic staff will allow SLD to have a wider reach when disseminating its research findings. It is recommended that, working closely with CAPSL, SLD organizes a lunchtime event on the academic experiences of international students, thus opening up the discussion among academic staff, bringing new perspectives and creating a space for sharing knowledge, experiences and initiatives.

Furthermore, we believe that establishing a close collaboration with this stakeholder will enable SLD to become actively involved in the implementation of some of the College's strategic objectives, as well as ensure SLD's visibility as a dedicated academic skills provider among the wider network of Trinity's academic, support and administrative stakeholders.

1.2. Global Relations Office (GRO) – Global Officers Coordinator

The research findings have already been partially disseminated to the GRO and a close collaboration was maintained all throughout this research project. As Global Relations is one of the most important stakeholders involved in the Internationalization Strategic Objective and in the Trinity Education Project, it is recommended that SLD maintains the close relationship established through the Global Officer Coordinator, Dr. Erika Doyle, and continues to disseminate its final findings, recommendations, summary and executive report in order to ensure not only the visibility of its research, but also its involvement in the implementation of the College's strategic objectives.

1.3. Dean of Students – Dr. Kevin O’Kelly

The Dean of Students is an important stakeholder in the implementation of strategic objective A.2.Promote Student Life, and is involved in coordinating the Orientation programme and overseeing the Student Life Committee. Therefore, an individual meeting with the Dean of Students is recommended for disseminating the research findings and outlining the recommendations that SLD will implement, including the importance of raising awareness among academic and support staff of the international students experiences. Indirectly, this meeting will also contribute to SLD reiterating the importance of its own services for students and the expertise that it brings in the network of stakeholders.

1.4. Director of Diversity and Inclusion – Tony McMahan

It is recommended that SLD disseminates its research findings to this stakeholder in order to contribute with the international students’ academic experiences to the wider discussion of diversity and inclusivity, as well as identify areas where it might be able to get involved and contribute with expertise.

1.5. Dean of Undergraduate Studies / Senior Lecturer – Dr. Gillian Martin

To ensure its reach of academic staff, it is important that SLD disseminates its findings directly to the Senior Lecturer, with an emphasis on the complex experiences and perceptions of international students with their lecturers and teaching assistants.

Furthermore, lecturers were identified as important sources of information and referral for all students. Therefore, establishing a relationship with the Senior Lecturer will be a very important step if SLD wants to be recommended to students by each lecturer.

1.6. Senior Tutor – Dr. Claire Laudet

Through the Senior Tutor, and through a close collaboration with the Student Counselling Service, it is recommended that SLD disseminates its findings during the Tutor Training organized by SCS at the beginning of the academic year.

1.7. School of Education – prof. Andrew Loxley

In order to conduct this research, SLD obtained Ethics Approval from the School of Education. Therefore, we believe it is important to disseminate the findings to this stakeholder and aim to organize a larger presentation for its academic staff.

2. Committees Representation

After meeting with stakeholders individually, it is recommended that SLD has a permanent representation in two committees once the new academic year starts:

1. Undergraduate Studies Committee
2. Student Life Committee

It is important that SLD starts by disseminating its research findings, and continues by being involved in various initiatives and collaborations with the other stakeholders.

3. Support Services

In the course of this research, and especially when conducting the Situation Analysis, SLD met with various representatives of stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the area of international students. Therefore, we recommend that SLD organizes a lunchtime event and invites these representatives, together with others identified as relevant, and disseminates its research findings. Such an event would open or continue the discussion in the area of international students support and allow for more networking and strengthening the relationships between the stakeholders active in this area.

Conclusion

Academic and support staff was the third main area of intervention identified through the findings of this research. Although working with staff is not directly within SLD's remit, we believe that a wide dissemination of its research findings, with an emphasis on the ones directly related to academic and support staff, will allow SLD to be actively involved in raising awareness within College on the complex and diverse experiences of international students and bring new perspectives to the already existing discussions. On the long run, this approach will also enable SLD to strengthen its position in the wider network of stakeholders as a dedicated academic skills provider, with a newly gained and extremely valuable expertise in the area of international students. Ultimately, we strongly believe that incorporating the findings of this research not only in the work of SLD, but also more widely within College, is an important steps in achieving an internationalized learning environment, where international students and staff understand and shape each other.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This research started as a quest for understanding.

It was a well-known fact that Student Learning Development had been offering support to many international students, sometimes even more than Irish students. Despite our numbers, however, we often felt we could only respond to the needs they were bringing to the consultation room and, once they left, we were left wondering. What was the context of their experiences? What were the specificities of their challenges? How could we improve our own approach in order to be better, more efficient for these students?

We didn't have the bigger picture, and we needed to know more.

We discussed with representatives from Trinity, academic and support staff that helped us put the pieces together. Most importantly, we went directly to the source and we were allowed access to the diverse, complex and always interesting experiences of the international students who chose to participate in this research. We are grateful for their trust and willingness to share their stories.

Now, a year into this project, the picture turns out to be very big. But, like any other picture, it has a focal point – the transformative potential of international students, recognized in our work in SLD, as well as in the general academic culture of Trinity College.

We came very far. We now understand that, from the moment we decided to ask the research question, we took upon us the responsibility to learn and adapt to a new paradigm in which international students are drivers of change and where close collaboration and reciprocal learning between students and College is the only way to go forward.

Mobility among international students will only increase. It is up to us to keep up the pace!

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