

**Short-term International Students Perceptions of their Learning and  
Sociocultural Experiences in Dublin Business School, Ireland**

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**Abstract:**

This study examined short-term American and European Union international students perceptions of their learning and sociocultural experiences in Dublin Business School, Ireland. Employing case study approach, data were collected by conducting 11 semi-structured open-ended qualitative interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate short-term international students from America, France, Germany and Sweden. Resulting data were rigorously analysed and findings discussed. Findings suggests: (a) international students difficulty in forming relations with Irish students can also be attributed to shortage of Irish students in certain classes (b) plagiarism is not more prevalent amongst short-term international students population (c) native English speakers can also experience English language difficulties in another country. Students overall rating of their experience was high. However, suggestions for international students experience improvement were also proffered.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction:**

### **1.1: Brief Introduction:**

This qualitative research project examines the experiences of American and European Union short-term international students studying in Dublin Business School (DBS), Ireland. As all international students attend same classes and are taught in the same way as domestic students – experiences are supposed to be comparable. However, studies suggest that international students who are a diverse group arrive Ireland with a variety of social and cultural capital which can result in academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment difficulties. Unfortunately, these difficulties have led to over-problematization of international students experiences and downplaying of their many positive experiences.

Building on existing literature, this study aims to specifically provide an insight into international students perceptions of their learning and sociocultural experiences in Ireland. Consequently, the overarching research question for this case study was “What do international students experience when studying in Ireland?” This study aims to highlight positives of international students experiences, areas of difficulties, and international students suggestions for improvement.

## **1.2: What form will this research take?**

Recognising that international students are not a homogenous group (Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis, 2008; Bailey, 2006) a qualitative descriptive approach will be adopted. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 11 short-term international students studying in DBS. It is intended that participants will include Erasmus Programme students, and students who are required to study abroad in partial fulfilment of their degree.

The plan is for all semi-structured interviews to be kept informal, and for open-open-ended questions format to be employed in order to facilitate broader and more open data generation.

All digitally recorded interviews together with handwritten notes about participants' expressions at various times during the interview will be transcribed and examined prior to commencement of thematic analysis of the data. Themes emerging from the data will then be further analysed and discussed after which conclusions and recommendations shall be drawn from this discussion.

### **1.3: Literature Review:**

#### **1.3.1: Internationalisation Context**

**Key words:** learning experience, sociocultural and psychological adjustment, social support

Internationalisation of higher education curriculum which is interlinked with globalisation is culturally, economically, politically and socially important (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day, 2010). Despite the global economic downturn demand for international education is increasing and is expected to exceed 5.5 million by 2020 (Education Ireland, 2010). Although internationalisation necessitates significant changes and adjustments for lecturers and students, international education still provides many benefits.

International education is promoting the quality and range of programmes, contributing to financial viability of educational institutions, bringing diversity and different perspectives to education (UKCISA, 2010). International education helps developing countries and emerging markets develop their economies and countries through capacity development and technology transfer (Zweig, Fung and Vanhonacker, 2006.). Internationally educated students could be advocates and ambassadors of their host countries on foreign shores, and can provide valuable networking benefits overseas (Education Ireland, 2010).

The Irish government's efforts at internationalisation have led to significant increase in international student numbers since 2002, with majority of international students coming from America, the European Union and increasingly Nigeria. Although there is a paucity of information on international students numbers (Education Ireland, 2010; Christle and Godley,

2008), The Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform estimates for 2009/2010 suggests Ireland which is often compared with New Zealand now has 129,581 international students from 159 countries compared with New Zealand's 93,505 international student population (Education Ireland, 2010). However, despite acknowledgement of the rising numbers of international students in Ireland and the benefits that international education brings, there is a paucity of knowledge about international students in Ireland.

Growing commodification of international education and perception of international students as mere “cash cows” by host countries have occasioned concerns about the quality of international students internationalisation experience (Devros, 2003; Haugh, 2008; Kell and Vogl, 2008). Consequently, it is argued that understanding what international students experience when studying in Ireland is important not only because it informs Ireland's internationalisation plan, but because it informs the processes that improve international students educational experience (O'Reilly, Ryan and Hickey, 2010) who together with their families and or employers make a huge financial, emotional, and social investment (Evans & Stevenson, 2011). Furthermore, it is argued that “...*Experiences of international students, to a greater or lesser extent, provide an indicator of the quality of the provision of education.*” (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010, p.5)

### **1.3.2: Existing Literature Reviewed**

An international student is defined as “...*one whose normal place of residence is outside the island of Ireland but who is resident in Ireland for the purpose of study over a shorter or longer period...*” (ICOS, n.d.). International students find the prospect of international education quite exciting, and are motivated by the prospect of better academic qualifications, improved



career chances, experience of their host society's culture and global environment (Townsend and Lee, 2004; Wang, 2004). However, a review of existing literature suggests that international students contend with difficulties and experiences that are foreign to local students as a result of cultural, linguistic, social, pedagogic instruction style and weather changes (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, 2008; Andrade, 2006). International students also suffer culture shock, learning style difficulties, sociocultural adaptation problems and financial worries (Bailey, 2006; Butcher and McGrath, 2004). According to Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010, pg.12) international students concerns also include food, loss of self belonging, loneliness, powerlessness and homesickness. Some of these emotions are captured by a study participant:

Back home I had a career and a future. I was in control of my own life, but I've lost track of that now. Because I had authority [as a hotel manager]. Here I'm virtually powerless ...Sometimes I miss 'home'. Sometimes I miss my parents. Sometimes I miss my mum. Sometimes I just miss being a manager in the hotel. I miss my workplace. (Doris, Cameroon)

Reporting similar findings, Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) adds that that it is important to recognise that academic, personal, psychological and sociocultural factors, together with adequate organisational support provision are all important determinants of successful student experience.

### Learning experience

Studies of international students psychological and sociocultural adaptation, including learning experiences are well documented in Australia, the United Kingdom, and United States (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day, 2010; Townsend and Poh, 2008; Wang and Shan, 2007; Andrade 2006), but not in Ireland (O'Reilly et. al., 2010). Researchers have found that international students contend with a variety of problems including academic culture change difficulties.

Indeed challenges with reading, writing, independent learning and critical analysis expectations of western education system have been reported (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day, 2010; Beasley, 1990). Amongst the many challenges international students face, language difficulties and ‘academic culture shock’ have also been identified as major sources of concern. Although studies suggest that international students have varying degrees of English proficiency, many are disadvantaged by deficiencies in academic and conversational English (Sheridan, 2011; Townsend and Poh, 2008; Sawir, 2005). Many international students experience significant difficulties with adapting to their new academic culture, and report that academic culture adjustment was by far more difficult than sociocultural adaptation. Indeed many reported significantly increased academic concerns after arrival in the host country. Specific concerns mentioned include: difficulty in understanding and meeting academic standards, worrying over failing essays and exams, difficulty in forming relations with lecturers and fellow students, difficulty in working with local students, answering questions in class and participating in in-class discussions (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010).

Unfortunately, Wang and Shan (2007) also found that passing language proficiency tests might not fully equip international students with language abilities to cope with international academic work. Similarly, research findings suggest academic problems can be related to difficulties in studying in a second language (Camiciottolito, 2010), differences in writing processes between first and second languages (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; McCarthy Guo & Cummins, 2005), and or cultural differences (Scollon, 1999; Kaplan, 1966). However this argument remains controversial as some studies have found that working in two languages can be a near seamless exercise (Woodall, 2002; Wang & Wen, 2002; Friedlander, 1990). Furthermore, Hirose (2003) findings contradicts cultural differences hypothesis. Conversely, Johnson (2008) found that academic literacy issues affect both international and domestic

students. Recognising that this is the case in Monash University, Slattery (2008) reports that Monash University have commenced English language programme aimed at equipping all students with academic and language skills necessary for university level studies (as cited in Kennelly, Maldoni, and Davies, 2010).

However, concurrent with previous studies which found that international students have academic adjustment difficulties, Bailey (2006) comparative study of Chinese and West African International students in a British university adds that international students are frustrated by linguistic constraints on their ability to contribute to class discussions, keep-up with the pace of lecture delivery, understand regional accents, academic terminology and colloquial expressions. These difficulties pressurises international students to do extra reading, and causes misconception of international students as “passive” or “quite” people. Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson and Hall (2006) also found that international students linguistic competence difficulties has also been equated with lower academic abilities, resulting in local students being unwilling to undertake group course work with some international students. Conversely, international students felt disappointed with the lack of assistance from host students who knew the form. The study suggests such tension hurts cross-cultural relationships and academic cooperation. Bailey (2006) also questions assumptions of passivity as her study findings suggest that although Chinese and West African students previous academic culture were more dyadic, passive and reproductive, the study participants preferred the more proactive, interactive and independent academic that is typical of western culture. However, some international students have complained that the curriculum does not allow input of their previous knowledge (Arthur, 2004).

Concerns have also been raised about international students critical analysis and referencing skills (Chen and Van Ullen, 2011; Wang and Shan, 2007; Barrett and Malcolm,

2006). Although a British university survey study by Bailey (2006) which compared Chinese and West African international students experience found that excluding mainland Chinese students, plagiarism was much more prevalent amongst UK students, exploring plagiarism has become a growing concern especially with regard to international students for whom poor linguistic command or 'lack of integrity' has been suggested as possible causes (Chen and Van Ullen, 2011; Heitman and Litewka, 2011). Whilst Carver, Dellva, Emmanuel, and Parchure (2011) cites 'language barriers' as possible causes of unintentional plagiarism by international students, Piety's (2002) findings implicate exposure to different, more tolerant and less rigorous academic culture (as cited in Bamford and Sergiou, 2005, pp.18).

Acquiescing, Wang's (2007) in-depth interview study of 10 Chinese students found that academic practice varies from culture to culture. Whilst Western cultures emphasises a more interactive teaching and academic referencing style, Chinese culture emphasises a more dyadic, passive style of education where in-text referencing is not expressly required. The study highlighted a need to ensure that international students understand what constitutes plagiarism, and what proper referencing entails.

Similarly, a study by Handa and Power (2005) also challenged assumptions of laziness, poor linguistic command or lack of integrity. Participants who completed a mix of closed and open-ended questions included 10 lecturers and 80 Indian students who by virtue of English colonisation are generally not classed as non-English speakers. Findings suggest plagiarism was much more correlated with previous learning culture experiences and expectations, together with misunderstandings regarding what actually constitutes plagiarism. A participant's comment illustrates such misunderstandings:

in India we were supposed to write exactly as it was written in the books; if you write according to the book you will get more marks so we write according to the

book. Researcher: it's not called copying or cheating? Student: no, because you have to remember what is written in the text book, you have to memorise and then go and do the exam.

Presenting an alternate view, Schmitt (2005) introduces the idea of 'voice'. Arguing that plagiarism by international students could occur during the process of academic language improvement, as many international students have approximately 10,000 words vocabulary compared to 40,000 local students word vocabulary. Suggesting that paraphrasing and lower critical analysis of subjects by international students might be due to vocabulary limitations. Querying concerns about comparative linguistic disadvantage, Schmitt suggests international students are not significantly disadvantaged as many local students exhibit reduced comprehension of the workings of English language, thereby limiting their ability to understand and use English language effectively.

However, despite these difficulties most international students expressed satisfaction with their learning experience. Overall, many international students said they appreciate academic staff approachability, their new teaching and learning style, encouragement to be proactive and plan ahead, emphasis on independent learning and critical thinking skills development (Evans & Stevenson, 2011; Bailey, 2006). Bailey (2006, pg. 10) further adds that *"... the generally positive experience of our interviewees and their professed ability to cope (due to their personal courage, adaptability and support from the University and friends) should serve as a warning against over-problematizing the international student experience."*

### Sociocultural and psychological adjustment

Used interchangeably, cultural adjustment or cultural adaptation is defined by Kim (1988, pg. 9) as *"the internal transformation of an individual challenged by a new cultural*

*environment in the direction of increasing fitness and compatibility in that environment”.*

International students are challenged by their new cultural environment. Adjusting to a new environment and culture can be quite stressful for international students who have to adjust and cope with diverse and conflicting demands very quickly (Lee, 2010). Exposure to diverse cultural norms, values, spoken and body language, conflict resolution methods, directness, personal space, and closure differences can be quite confusing, difficult and frustrating for international students. These differences if not properly managed can lead to cross-cultural adaptation or acculturative stress which can significantly impact on the quality of educational experience and outcome (Sovic, 2008; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1998).

In identifying the factors that impact on cross-cultural adaptation Ward and Searle (1991) distinguishes between psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment. Psychological adjustment which is based on stress and coping model concerns an individual's sense of psychological or emotional well-being in a new society. Psychological adjustment is influenced by individual's personality, acculturation strategies and social support. Whilst sociocultural adjustment which is based on culture learning model concerns an individual's ability to interact with other people, “fit in” and successfully negotiate the host culture. Successful sociocultural adjustment is influenced by language fluency, length of residency, willingness to interact, actual amount of interaction, and distance between home and host culture.

However, there is no consensus on the correlation between increased length of stay and reduced acculturative stress. Whilst some studies have found a correlation between increased duration of stay and reduced acculturative stress (Ye, 2006; Ying, 2005), a study by Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao & Wu (2007) which involved 189 Chinese international students in the United States did not establish a correlation between length of residency and reduced

acculturative stress. Wei and colleagues who examined the relationship between acculturative stress, perfectionism, depression and years of residency, however, found that maladaptive perfectionism was correlated with acculturative stress.

Psychological and sociocultural adjustment difficulties have been linked to increased rate of homesickness or acculturative stress, depression, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of: hopelessness, helplessness, sadness, anger, amongst international students (Gu, Schweisfurth and day, 2010; Sovic, 2008; Wei et al., 2007; Andrade, 2006; Cathcart et. al., 2006). Suggesting that cultural differences, racial prejudice and language difficulties were causes of acculturative stress for African student, Constantine, Okazaki and Utsey (2004) found that African students are at higher risk of depression and self-concealment behaviours than Asian or Latin American international students owing to African cultural emphasis on close interpersonal relationships and increased reliance on support from home. Furthermore, researchers have also found that some international students who experience acculturative stress are dissuaded from seeking help due to home country stigma attached to psychological or mental health issues (Vogel, Wester, & Larson, 2007; Constantine et al., 2004). Contrastingly, Mortenson's (2006) findings suggests that owing to cultural acceptance of need to seek help when required American students are more likely to seek counselling.

Conversely, studies have consistently suggested that European international students suffer less psychological and sociocultural adaptation difficulties (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker and Al-Tamimi, 2004; Yeh and Inose, 2003). Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that European international students experienced significantly lower levels of perceived discrimination. These finding are supported by (Poyrazli, Thukral and Duru, 2010) who found a correlation between high incidence of neuroticism and sociocultural adaptation

difficulties amongst Asian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Latin American international students. The study also found that African students had the highest rate of acculturative stress, whilst Caucasian race or European international students who are more accepted and made friends easily suffered less acculturative stress. This situation was attributed to racism or cultural differences such as collectivism versus individualism.

Researchers have found that increased contact between international students and local students positively impacts not only on psychological and sociological adjustment of international students, but also on their overall experience (Gu, 2011; Baker, 2010; Sovic, 2008). Li & Gasser (2005, pg. 564) argues that contact with host students provides a forum for international students to “gain cultural knowledge, establish a local support network, and increase their language proficiency”. For example, Evans and Stevenson (2011) found that international students who developed stronger social networks appeared more positive about their experience and reported gaining valuable skills and wider social networks. However, the study also found that speedy psychological and social adjustment was hampered not by racism, but by language difficulties and limited chance of contact between international and host students.

Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) observed that although language difficulties posed significant problems initially, marked increase in English language mastery facilitated increased relations with local students and appreciation of host culture over a two year period. However, sociocultural adaptation was affected by host society’s particular style of English, limited understanding of host country’s sociocultural norms, values, behaviours and limited opportunities to experience the host culture. Questioning suggestions of passivity and linear intercultural adaptation, studies suggest that international students are active participants in their



educational experience, and that positive or negative intercultural experiences were also dependent on self efficacy (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Li & Gasser, 2005). Research shows that international students variously utilise and manage “...*the relative strength of their personal histories, their interactions with others and the current educational and societal environments which they experience...*” (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010, p.8).

Evans and Stevenson (2011) found that ‘chronic anxiety’ to succeed and meet the expectations of people back home informed the decision of some international students to limit social interactions with persons from the host culture. Several other studies have also found that international students attempt at sociocultural experience and adaptation is impinged upon by formation of cultural bonds or subculture with students from similar culture with whom close-knit support systems are established (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Law & Guo, 2010). Consistent with other findings, O’Reilly et al. (2010) also suggests that formation of such close-knit relations and support systems might be responsible for the significantly higher levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties reported by international students in their Irish study. However, Hou, Montgomery and McDowell (2011) found that although international students started out by forming cultural bonds with students from similar culture they soon began to form friendships with local students.

### Social support

Despite pressure to achieve a good qualification from home, international students social needs are just as important as their academic needs, as social interactions impact on their academic performance. Acknowledging that international students experience many stresses caused by dramatic changes which include changes in academic culture, language learning, social leaning, and lack or loss of social support networks, the importance of pastoral care or

social support provision has been emphasised (Butcher and McGrath, 2004). A study by Law and Guo (2011) suggests acculturative stressors are more profoundly felt by newly arrived international students. Furthermore, whilst exposure to more stressors such as personal-enacted identity gap or perception of discrimination has been linked to increased incidence of depression amongst international students (Poyrazli et. al., 2010; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007), other studies also found that feelings of social disconnectedness and lack of or inadequate social support in a host country is positively associated with acculturative stress (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Yeh and Inose, 2003).

Despite finding “... *a correlation between openness and homesickness*”, which supports Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, and Heck’s (1999) findings “...*that having extraverted tendencies is responsible for the onset of homesickness in international students...*” Poyrazli et. al.’s (2010) still acknowledges the importance of social support (as cited in Poyrazli et. al., 2010, pp. 6). Similarly, Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) who explored intercultural and academic adaptation, maturation and human development experiences of first year international student at four United Kingdom institutions over a two year period strongly emphasises the importance of an enabling social environment and support provision in determining quality of overall international education experience. Focused social support which teaches communication skills, social awareness or social skills, self-confidence building, including opportunities for contacts with host students are considered essential for new international students acculturation (Lee, Koeske, and Sales, 2004) and might help address personal-enacted identity issues (Jung et. al., 2007).

Law and Guo (2010 pp.1-14) who introduced and evaluated the impact of a semester-long orientation course on the psychological well-being of 53 Chinese first-year international students in the U.S. also found that most participants reported significant improvements after the

orientation course. Working on the premise of Wills & Cleary (1995) argument that maladaptive coping strategies increases the risk of depression, whilst positive coping strategies makes adjustment easier (Taft, 1977), the orientation course focused on familiarising participants with the U.S. culture and providing help with: communication skills, stress and anger management, positive reappraisal strategies, how to become independent, time management, social support seeking strategies and how to utilise the institutions resources. Many participants reported significantly improved psychological wellbeing and sociocultural adaptation, and said they were adjusting reasonably well to life in the U.S. after the programme. Lee et. al. (2004) also found that social support availability is linked with decreased reports of depressive symptoms.

However other studies have emphasised the importance and value of social support provision alongside informal social supports provided by students from similar culture with whom international students tend to form close-knit relations and support systems. Combination of support provision from family, friends, peers, and the institution is a major contributor to psychological wellbeing (Evans and Stevenson, 2011; O'Reilly et al, 2010; Ward et al., 2008). Ye (2006) explored sociocultural and psychological adaptation of 135 Chinese students in United States. Findings suggest that perceived support from host country, home country, and online ethnic social groups reduced mood disturbance and facilitated psychological adjustment. These findings are supported by Cemalcilar, Falbo and Stapleton (2005) who found that computer-mediated communication technologies such as the internet enabled international students to keep in touch with home country social support networks, maintain cultural identity, reduce feeling of isolation, settle into the host country and indirectly facilitates academic culture adaptation.

Correspondingly, O'Reilly et. al. (2010, pp.593-596) emphasises the importance of formal and informal support provision. The Irish study which examined the psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation of 80 short-term international students also included 44 host students moderating sample. Conceding that short-term international students rationalisation of their stay as 'only short-term' may have alleviated college stress, the study found that high level of English proficiency as many participants were from the U.S., perceived "*...higher level of social support*", living together with other international students, and sharing accommodation with fellow students from their home university was very helpful. This arrangement helped to buffer 'college related stress', reduce feelings of loneliness and enabled the study participants to generally adapt well to Irish life. However, consistent with other findings, the study also suggests that formation of such close-knit relations and support systems might be responsible for sociocultural adaptation difficulties. The study found that despite reports of having "*...significantly higher levels of social support...*" than host students, international students still experienced significant sociocultural adaptation difficulties after arrival. However, international students reported significantly improved sociocultural relations after week 12, supporting previous findings (such as Gu Schweisfurth and Day, 2010) that sociocultural relations and adaptation occurs over time.

Realising that support provision has serious implications for students academic success and retention rates, many institutions have introduced peer mentoring schemes. Studies suggest that peer mentoring is an 'effective and sustainable' means of orienting and supporting first year students (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, and Wilss, 2008; Fox and Stevenson 2006). Mentoring helps international students develop skills that are vital for academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustments (Sewon and Toby, 2011; Urquhart and Pooley 2007; Wang, 2004). Peer mentoring is very effective for getting information about how the institution works and

helps to develop social support networks (Urquhart and Pooley 2007). Mentoring is also a reciprocal relationship which benefits the protégés, mentors and leaders. For mentors and their protégés, mentoring provides an opportunity for self development, including help with problems as diverse as research proposal writing. Kuo (2011) found that peer mentoring scheme was very useful as it provided additional academic support such as study skills, more detailed information on subjects being taught, help with assessment, language difficulties, provided a social framework and highly needed additional support system.

A study which examined the experiences of mentors of first year undergraduate students found that peer mentoring was overall quite beneficial for mentors and their protégés. Although some mentors experienced challenges and self-doubt on occasions, they were involved in helping their protégés “...develop correct writing/referencing skills, organising study groups, discussion of content, sharing ideas, finding solutions and researching information. Overall mentors reported affective benefits of positivity, wellbeing and improved study skills (Heirsdfield et. al., 2008). Similarly, an exploratory study by Kim and Egan (2011) found that establishing an International Student Mentor Association at a U.S. university was mutually beneficial for both the mentors and protégés. Mentoring facilitated international students learning, self development and adjustment to their new life, whilst rewards for mentors included a certificate to proof they were international mentors, knowledge of mentoring, development of leadership, interpersonal and time management skills, including improved understanding of: cross-cultural behaviour, cross cultural communication and adjustment processes.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology:**

### **2.1: General Introduction to Methodology**

This chapter details the methodological approach of this study. It comprises information on: materials and apparatus employed in the study, method of analysis to be conducted, philosophical underpinning, method justification, study participants, design of the study, data collection procedure and ethical considerations.

## **2.2: Materials and Apparatus:**

Materials employed in conducting this research project include:

- A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. The interview guide was drawn-up, refereed and revised to ensure conformity with ethical standards and robustness of data collection. A copy of the interview guide employed is attached. (See Appendix 1).
- DBS Meeting Rooms facilitated face to face “natural setting” interviews thus avoiding environment manipulation issues, and also minimal disruption to interviewees schedule
- Sony M-470 Dictaphone was used to record the interviews
- NVivo 9.0 qualitative analysis software from QSR International was employed for data analysis, coding and theme identification
- Sony Vaio VPCCB3P1E/B password protected computer was used to ensure data confidentiality
- Locked drawer used for hard copy data storage. When analysis was complete all such data were ethically destroyed.

## **2.3: Method of Analysis:**

### **2.3.1: Philosophical Underpinning**

The researchers conviction that human nature is “*both deterministic and voluntaristic, that is, humans are born into an already structured society, yet societal structures evolve and change through human interaction*” has ensured that intermediate philosophical approach underpinned this study. Intermediate philosophical perspective is considered appropriate as it enables matching of philosophical stance with methodology and the nature of the study (Holden and Lynch, 2004, pg. 14). Additionally, this study recognises that arguments over superiority of ontological and epistemological philosophical stance is essentially flawed (Connell and Nord, 1996; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997) as modernist and post-modernist philosophical perspective both have advantages and limitations (Bryman, 2008; Sarantakos, 2005). In order to address such limitations, researchers are increasingly advocating an intermediate philosophical stance and use of multi-method methodology (Patton, 2002; Denzin, 1989).

Due to time constraints and exploratory nature of this study, only subjectivist qualitative approach was employed in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. A quantitative study is planned to test the hypotheses generated from this study during the upcoming 2012 Masters Degree programme.



### **2.3.2: Method and Method Justification**

Studying sociocultural experiences of international students in Ireland is adjudged to require a subjectivist qualitative approach which: (a) asks why questions (b) is capable of capturing fragmentation of intercultural experiences and the five primary aspects of a thick description such as biographical, historical, situational, relational, and interactional accounts (c) facilitates more explanatory success (Denzin, 1989), rather than Objectivist approach which asks how questions, employs deterministic reductionist stance, and focuses on causal explanations and laws that explain regular human behaviour.

As the purpose of social science research which is the study of human beings, is to explore, describe and explain a phenomenon or problem (Babbie, 1989), a descriptive approach was favoured. Descriptive approach is not only considered appropriate in studies where the phenomenon is not well understood (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), but also facilitates study of individual variation. Face-to-face interviews was also employed as it: (a) enables researchers to where necessary, repeat, adapt or rephrase questions and clarify answers, (b) facilitates notation of social and non-verbal cues such as nervousness and insincerity identification (Patton, 1980; Douglas, 1985), including other body language which provides vital insights into cultural differences and personal experiences of study participants (Geertz, 1973; Sekaran, 1992).

Case study methodology commonly employed in international students research was employed as it facilitates detailed multiple perspectives and understanding of multiple accounts (Evans and Stevenson, 2011; Dunne, 2009; Townsend and Poh, 2008), including revelation of subjective meanings, actions, and views of study participants (Erickson, 1986).

Recognising that international students are not a homogeneous group as they have unique background, needs, and experiences, and also that accounts of their personal experiences which are socially constructed results from personal introspection of their individual lives and backgrounds, a constructivist methodological approach was favoured. Constructivism facilitates understanding of a phenomenon about which little is known (Evans and Stevenson, 2011; Avis, 2003), enables provision of rich detail, and seems better able to manage the complexities of social research where understanding of cultural meanings, actions, behaviours, emotions, thoughts, experiences and perceptions of the research participants is at the heart of the study (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 1989). The choice of Constructivist approach is further informed by rejection of extreme objectivist assumption that independent of human minds - knowledge, absolute truth or objective reality which is observable; ready to be discovered, transferred, imposed on, and used to determine human behaviour exists out there. However although this study recognises “...*the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understandings of subjects’ meanings*” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510), objectivist tangibility of reality is also acknowledged (Remenyi, Williams, Money and Swartz, 1998).

Face-to-face interviews which is traditionally favoured by qualitative researchers was employed for its benefits which include: enabling a researcher to where necessary, repeat, adapt or rephrase questions and clarify answers, (b) facilitation of social and non-verbal cues such as nervousness and insincerity identification (Patton, 1980; Douglas, 1985), including other body language which provides vital insights into cultural differences and personal experiences of study participants (Geertz, 1973; Sekaran, 1992).

### 2.3.3: Credibility, Dependability, Reliability and Relativism

Arguments against subjectivist qualitative approach have variously included: interaction with study participants, value-laden researchers distorting results, inability to make cause and effect explanations or generalise findings due to small sample size, and dependability issues. Furthermore, disregarding arguments that “...*absolute basis for scientific knowledge...*” does not exist (Hughes and Sharrock (1997), criticisms also include relativism, incomparability, immeasurability, lack of objectivity of statement, arbitrary and unscientific approach (Holden and Lynch, 2004). However according to Hunt (1993) renowned Subjectivists such as Weber and Kuhn have responded to these arguments by positing that researchers cannot be distanced from what to study, study participants or from the phenomenon being studied. Researchers they argue are value-laden and are generally driven by factors such as intrinsic interests, status, beliefs and values (Holden and Lynch, 2004).

On the subject of relativism, incomparability and lack of objectivity Rosenau (1992, p. 22) argues that reality is not homogenous for all humans and communities. Reality though equal, is subjective, different, “...*personal and community-specific...*”. Regarding unrepresentative sampling producing non-generalisable findings, Merriam (1988) argues that working towards findings that can be generalised negates the very purpose of qualitative research which is to explore “*unique interpretation of events*” (as cited in Creswell, 1994, pg.159). Furthermore, Gordon (1991, pp.604) maintains research findings are not absolutely certain and should be viewed as an aid to our ‘*cognition of the world*’ (as cited in Holden and Lynch, 2004, pp. 14). Cronbach (1975) further adds that generalisations should be considered as working hypotheses rather than conclusions.

However, in an attempt to negating apparent disadvantage of the small sample size and facilitate obtaining data that is rich, deeper and with shared aspects of the phenomena purposive maximum variation sample as described by Patton (1980) was employed. Regarding credibility issues, this study's credibility was enhanced through member checking, as participants were asked to read and confirm accuracy of transcriptions. Provision of thick description was facilitated by inclusion of participants quotes which also improves dependability (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) and ensures transferability so that the findings could be applied to other researchers study (Merriam, 1998).

Hayes (2000) inductive thematic analysis procedure was employed in data analyses, and was supported by NVivo 9 computer-aided qualitative data analysis system (NVivo). Inductive thematic analysis procedure ensured that identified and coded themes are strongly linked to the data set, and that the study was not theory led nor influenced by the researcher's theoretical interest or analytic preconceptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). NVivo also aided manageability of data, identification of similarities and difference, provision of rich detailed and robust account.

## **2.4: Participants:**

All eleven international students interviewed were drawn from DBS Erasmus and Study Abroad Programmes. Employing maximum variation sampling method, participants included six females and five males varying in age from nineteen to twenty nine years. Participants included three American, three French, two German and three Swedish students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate Business, Cultural Studies, Marketing, Social Science and Psychology Programmes. All the American participants were from different institutions and states in America.

With permission from Student Services, participation was elicited via student notice boards. Students that seemed to fit the sampling criteria were also approached in Castle House Student's Common Room.

All participants were not only informed of the research nature, but were also informed that the project was in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BA (Hons) in Social Science. All participants willingly participated and were not recompensed in any way.

## **2.5: Design:**

All interviews were conducted for forty minutes using the same questionnaire during February and March 2012. However, although individual participant's responses and researchers probing for clarification led to slight variability in direction at times, the interview proceedings generally followed a standard format.

After transcription of recorded interviews, participants were asked to check and confirm accuracy and also to fill in areas that were unclear during transcription. Once confirmation was received, NVivo 9 computer software was employed to facilitate thorough thematic analysis. Results and discussion of dominant emergent themes, including experience improvement recommendations are contained hereinafter.

## **2.6: Procedure:**

Suitable participants were either approached in DBS Common Room in Castle House or identified through responses to notice board adverts for study participants. The notices were put-up on the notice board with permission from Student Services

The nature and purpose the research project was clearly communicated to participants prior to arrangement of interview schedule and again on commencement of interview. Before commencement of interviews, participants were duly informed of their right to discontinue the interview at any stage, refuse not to answer any particular question or indeed withdraw their consent up until the data is published. Data protection and security steps which include use of password protected computer, secure locking of hard copy data and use of pseudonyms to ensure ethics and confidentiality compliance were also explained. Once understanding of the terms of participation was ascertained, in compliance with DBS ethics committee stipulation participants were also asked to complete a consent form. A general information form was also completed. Copies of both forms are included in Appendix 2 and 3 respectively. All interviews were conducted in DBS Meeting Rooms in Dames Street.

Although all interviews generally followed the same format, the very nature of qualitative inquiry, use of open-ended questions, coupled with the researchers aim to clarify repeat, adapt or rephrase questions in order to gather robust data meant that the order of questioning were not exactly the same.

## **2.7: Ethics:**

All study participants were assured that any information given will be treated in strict confidence, and that all data will be stored in password protected computers or kept securely locked. The researcher explained that pseudonyms will be used throughout the research process even when direct quotes are used to underscore a point, to ensure anonymity.

In conformity with DBS ethical standards, all participants were informed verbally and in writing of their rights to refuse to answer any question, stop the interview at any stage or to withdraw from the study at any time up until the data is published. Participants were also advised that they could access a copy of the finished report on request.



## **Chapter 3: Results:**

### **3.1: General Introduction to Results**

In this chapter, the most significant and recurrent themes emerging from the eleven interviews will be outlined and illustrated with participants quotes. Hereinafter, the results will be analysed and discussed in Chapter 4. For ease of reference the results are grouped under these theme headings:

1. Academic Adjustment Difficulties
2. English Language Difficulties
3. Plagiarism
4. Sociocultural Experience
5. Rating of Overall Experience

### 3.2: Academic Adjustment Difficulties

For many of the participants, undertaking a Study Abroad programme in Ireland necessitated a series of significant adjustments not only to their learning styles but also to their academic and pedagogic culture. Indeed when all study participants were asked about how they have found academic life in DBS, ten out of eleven reported noticing a marked difference in academic and pedagogic culture or learning styles between DBS and their previous educational experiences in their countries of origin. For seven students, such differences underlie their academic adjustment difficulties. Indeed for some, independent research and work originality expectations together with pedagogic instruction differences proved quite challenging:

“For me not having textbooks to reference... instead of going to the library... or just getting a reading list where the teacher says you can use these as references, and like that has been an issue for me - because am used to like outlining chapters and taking notes, and now I don't have an actual book to reference, am having issues... Then the teachers teach differently than what I am used to, that is difficult for me.” (Irene)

For some participants, changes in performance assessment mechanisms from their customary frequent in-class tests and an exam, to DBS's system of one essay or one in-class test and an exam is disconcerting and difficult to adjust to:

“Am not sure if I have adjusted yet to the classes. I guess because back home we have a lot of tests – usually three weeks into your classes you get hit with tests so you have no choice but to get into a sort of mode. Here that hasn't really happened for me because am not used to having one paper or one test that determines your whole grade, it's kind of difficult.” (Harry)

However despite these challenges, most international students have successfully adapted, coped and report achievement of their core objectives such as increased English proficiency, including appreciation of the merits of their host cultures academic system:

Like I am used to being a three minute walk from my library, it is things like that that makes you put a little more effort in order to get things done. So I guess that benefits my learning because it makes me want to do a little bit more. (Harry)

Yes. I already have to right reference, but here it is more strict, but it is a good thing and you can understand it. And people can usually find the reference and use it easily.  
(Carla)

### **3.3: Linguistic Difficulties**

International students for whom English is a foreign language (EFL) overwhelmingly identify English proficiency issues as both a reason for studying abroad and a significant contributor to academic adjustment difficulties. For such students conversing, learning and writing in English is seen as a major challenge, particularly early on in the programme when basic communication was considered problematic and stressful for some:

In my class we are mixed. When we first come they speak me. I don't understand, I speak - I don't get you. Now it is better. (Bella)

Working in English, it takes me more time than in French. In French it is very easy for me. (Carla)

All nine participants who reported that English was their second or foreign language said they had attended classes prior to commencement of their programme. However, whilst most participants acknowledged that attending an English course either in their home country or upon arrival in Ireland was beneficial, most felt that they were inadequately prepared for conversational and academic work English. Furthermore several participants felt that lack of opportunity to use English in their home country further detracts from the benefits of attending an English course in their home country:

Yes we take English class... It is good but not for everything in academic work. (Karl)

Of course it helped a little, but not much – not enough. You don't have opportunity to practice in Germany. (Janette)

For some EFL students sources of academic adjustment difficulties include difficulty in understanding some lecturers' accent or understanding lecturers who speak too fast:

The language or pronunciation of the Irish people is a bit different for me because it is not the same as American English or Britain's pronunciation of English, for us it is difficult to understand sometimes... (Karl)

Some is okay. Some is gbrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr. Too fast. (Bella)

Surprisingly, although American students cohort posses English linguistic social capital, they inevitably arrive in Ireland with facets of American social and cultural capital which are divergent from Irish ones. Consequently, some American students have reported experiencing difficulties with understanding lectures:

I think it's just kind of being in the class and experiencing differences between being in an American school and being in an Irish school. Just like... it's funny when I was in my first class, I was just taking down notes and noticed it was like so different here with the accents... and trying to figure out what they are saying... they use like different words than we would, and you are thinking what are you trying to say.... (Irene)

### **3.4: Plagiarism**

When questioned about awareness of plagiarism prior to commencement of their programmes, all participants said they were well aware of plagiarism before commencing their programmes. Whilst eight participants reported having same referencing culture as DBS, the three remaining participants who reported having a different referencing culture expressed difficulties working with the new referencing culture:

Because in France it is forbidden and in all countries – but here it is forbidden, forbidden. Referencing – totally different, because in France you just take the link – they don't care. But here, you have the Harvard referencing, and that take a lot of time, you know- just to prove that you read the book, but it is not annoying, but it is difficult. (Anna)

Although most participants report being careful to avoid plagiarism, one participant particularly expressed heightened concerns about working in a second language, suggesting that

plagiarism could easily occur amongst EFL international students who are experiencing linguistic command issues:

Yes we have to do that in Germany, but here we can't write like a native speaker... it is a problem when we are trying to write in another language you can easily make mistake of plagiarism. For example, if I want to write in Germany I know it is easier to avoid plagiarism. For me it is not too bad, but I know for people whose English is not better like my English - it is a problem. (Karl)

### **3.5: Sociocultural Experience**

Data collected suggests that participants' sociocultural adjustment which refers to culture learning and ability to interact with other people, and psychological adjustment which is based on emotional wellbeing and sociocultural adjustment, proved easier than academic culture adjustment. However, most participants reported experiencing significant sociocultural and psychological adjustment difficulties initially largely due to conversational English difficulties, pricey, substandard accommodation and long tenancy issues, including difficulty in negotiating the local transport system. Only two participants reported experiencing homesickness which they felt was ameliorated by being nearer home or accessibility of communication technology:

I have boyfriend so I won't like to go very far - so Ireland is nearer... (Bella)

I think every once in a while I get home sickness, but I guess that is like just from being so far away from everyone, but I think definitely with things like Skype it makes life a lot easier to help you adjust and be able to talk to people - but also have a good life here. (Irene)

All participants reported contentment with their social life and social support networks. When questioned about what it was like to make friends in Ireland, all participants reported making friends with other international students quite easily within two weeks, mostly during Orientation class, in the lecture rooms, on school trips or with their Roommates:

I think within the first week, but by the second week I had many friends that we go out for coffee... (Erika)

Very easy... very quickly on the Orientation class I met American, Russian – so many and we become friends from that time. (Karl)

When participants were asked if making friends with Irish students have helped them to adjust to life in Ireland, most participants reported that these relationships have been beneficial, as these responses illustrate:

Yes, they've showed me where to find stuff for my assignments... (Irene)

My English is getting better faster because I have more opportunity to speak English. (Carla)

It was easy to make new friends, meet new people, learn new culture and to go out and see how Irish people live in Ireland. (Janette)

When other participants who did not have Irish friends were asked to discuss the factors militating against such relations it emerged that not having Irish students or only one Irish person in their class were the main reasons followed by Irish 'sticking' together, or international students 'sticking' to students from their home culture were the main contributory factors:

I have a lot of French student in my class and I regret that because we have only one Irish guy in my class – for cross-cultural exchange it is not really good. I hope to meet other Irish because we have Spanish, German and Sweden. The fact that we are a lot of French is not really good because we are together... (Carla)

Irish students are in a group by themselves... (Fred)

When the three respondents who self-reported not having Irish friends were asked how they felt about not having Irish friends, all three respondents felt it had not negatively impacted on their experience. The following statement probably encapsulates their feelings:

I don't really feel it affects me... It really hasn't affected my intercultural experience here because I have interacted with international students from many other countries – it is just that it's not with the Irish. (Don)

### **3.6: Rating of Overall Experience**

When asked if they were finding it hard to adjust to life in Ireland, ten of the eleven participants either replied ‘No’, or ‘No, not really’. Only one participant who had earlier mentioned that “*I have no pleasure in coming here because I have a boyfriend in France*” reported having difficulty adjusting. She opined:

My body is here, my heart is in France (Bella)

When asked if they had needed counselling services, all participants replied ‘No’. However, seven participants reported contacting Student Services about various concerns and found them quite helpful:

When I have needed help with anything Student Services are always friendly and willing to help me. (Irene)

I know when we were making our schedule and there was all sorts of conflicts it was easy and nice that we could just rely on Elizabeth to say okay don’t worry about it we are going to get this figured out – don’t worry have a good weekend... I definitely think that has made the trip a lot easier. (Harry)

All participants were impressed by the ethnic diversity in DBS and in Ireland generally. Most participants were particularly pleased with Irish hospitality, warmth and willingness to help. For many, the level of intercultural contact they have experienced is quite remarkable:

Yes, there are some differences. People are more welcoming. (Carla)

I found people to be very friendly, I would say probably friendlier than in Sweden... (Don)

In France, foreign students don’t mix. Its fine here there is mixing. (Anna)

When asked to sum-up her international student experience, one participant who said that she had not made Irish friends admitted enjoying her experience:

I think it’s great, I really like it. I don’t think I am going to stay more when am done with my studies... I will like to stay because I really like it... meeting people... and the way they teach here is much better than in Sweden – I think, and I like the level here, I think it’s really good. (Erika)

For the interviewees, motivation to study abroad includes a need to improve their English, learn a new culture or have sociocultural experience. For many, despite academic, linguistic and sociocultural adjustment difficulties experienced their aim of achieving increased English language proficiency and having sociocultural experience have been realised:

It was easy to make new friends, meet new people, learn new culture and to go out and see how Irish people live in Ireland. (Janette)

My English is getting better faster because I have more opportunity to speak English. (Carla)



## **Chapter 4: Discussion:**

### **4.1: General Introduction to Discussion**

This chapter will interpret and discuss the results presented in chapter 3, with particular emphasis on the research question and existing literature on international students experience. As is customary with all research, the limitations of this research will be identified and reflected upon. Conclusions shall be drawn, and experience improvement recommendations made. Implications for future investigation shall also be proposed.

### **4.2: Research Question and Aims of the Study**

The overarching research question for this case study was “what do international students experience when studying in Ireland?” The aim was to examine, understand and elucidate international students perceptions of their learning and sociocultural experiences in DBS, Ireland. It was also intended that not only will positive and negative aspects of their experiences will be highlighted, but also that students recommendations for study abroad experience improvement are brought to the fore.

#### **4.3.1: Academic Adjustment Difficulties**

International students quest for self improvement is sometimes fraught with difficulties necessitating significant adjustments in order to succeed in their host country. Necessary changes can include learning style changes, and academic and pedagogic culture adaptation. Faced with a change from the familiar to the unfamiliar, international students can experience ‘academic culture shock’. Most participants of this study reported experiencing varying degrees of academic culture shock and adjustment difficulties owing to factors such as difficulty in understanding the local accent, lecturers speaking too fast, and different course assessment or scheduling format. These findings are in consonance with existing literature which suggests that international students can experience academic culture shock and academic culture adjustment difficulties (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman, 2008; Poyrazli and Grahame, 2007; Andrade, 2006).

However despite these challenges, data collected suggests that many participants have adapted. Their adaptation has been facilitated by students adaptability, determination to succeed, availability of social support such as supportive lecturers and fellow students, Student Services, including Moodle, library and databases provided by DBS. This supports previous findings that international students agency and determination to succeed, including availability of social and institutional supports facilitates adaptation and success (Sheridan, 2011; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Lewthwaite, 1996).

#### 4.3.2: Linguistic Difficulties

Five participants who reported having a poor standard of English on arrival, report that gaining English proficiency was a major motivation for studying in Ireland. Although all now report increased proficiency, on commencement of their programme they mostly felt that linguistic proficiency issues placed them at a disadvantage and aggravated their academic adjustment difficulties. This findings corroborates Andrade's (2006, pg.131) observations that international students "*Adjustment challenges are primarily attributable to English language proficiency and culture*". Schweisfurth and Gu's (2009) study also support findings that international students standard of English improves over time.

However, data collected contradicts assumptions that linguistic difficulties are largely restricted to students with English language proficiency issues (Townsend and Poh, 2008; Wang and Shan, 2007; Sawir, 2005). Findings suggest that despite possessing English linguistic capital, American students also reported experiencing varying degrees of linguistic difficulties which impacted on classroom learning, primarily resulting from Irish accent and divergent American sociolinguistics capital. These findings again raises the issue of over-generalisation of findings across entire international students population without due consideration for cultural capital variability (Sodowsky and Plake, 1992; Wang, 2004). Although the findings relate to a very small sample, it highlights the need for further investigation of American international students academic experiences in Ireland, especially as "*the USA remains the single most important country of origin for international students in HEIs in Ireland...*" (Education Ireland, 2010, pg15). After all, Peelo and Luxon's (2007) study observed that our method of reasoning, perception and contextualisation of knowledge is culturally and socially grounded, therefore relative.

### **4.3.3: Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a very contentious subject in the academic world. Existing literature overwhelmingly suggests a near consensus that plagiarism is more prevalent amongst international students, with researchers variously suggesting unfamiliarity with host academic culture, poor instruction in new academic culture, rote learning, lack of integrity, employment pressures and poor linguistic command issues as possible causes (Chen and Van Ullen, 2011; Heitman and Litewka, 2011; Maxwell, Curtis, & Vardanega, 2008; Wang and Shan, 2007; Handa and Power, 2005; Biggs, 2003).

Contradictingly, results of this study reveals that interviewees who are from divergent academic cultures, including some with varying degrees of linguistic issues had a clear understanding of plagiarism, were well aware of the moral, ethical and academic implications of plagiarism - all reported non-involvement in plagiarism. Extensive search of existing literature located only one citation which supports this finding. Although unclear if their data included short-term international students, University of Wolverhampton Conduct and Appeals Unit, found that during 2004/5 academic year plagiarism was more prevalent among UK students than international students (as cited in Bailey, 2006).

This finding albeit relating to a small sample, indicates a link between not having employment pressures, understanding of the implications of plagiarism and non-involvement of short-term international students in plagiarism.

#### **4.3.4: Sociocultural Experience**

Interviewees cited fifteen instances of cultural differences between their home country and Ireland such as: young people in the US have more house parties versus going to pubs or clubs regularly, so if you are in a bar late at night the general assumption is that you want to get drunk; and getting used to walking instead of driving your car everywhere like in Germany. However, all interviewees felt that the differences were not hugely significant as they still shared the same western culture with Ireland. Yet, all interviewees experienced significant sociocultural and psychological adjustment difficulties initially. However, perception that their home and host cultures were not too different, including readily available social supports might have reduced the impact of acculturative stress and facilitated speedy sociocultural adaptation reported. Indeed, these findings suggest a link between availability of social support, being able to make friends within two weeks and speedy psychological and sociocultural adaptation of the interviewees.

Above results are consistent with Ye's (2005) findings that smaller cultural gap is negatively correlated with acculturative stress. Other findings also suggest a negative correlation between sociocultural and psychological adaptation difficulties and availability of social supports and general perception of social connectedness (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Yeh and Inose, 2003). Furthermore, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) reported that European international students suffer less psychological and sociocultural adaptation difficulties because they experience insignificant levels of perceived discrimination.

Data collected provides very weak support for Irish studies conducted by Sheridan (2011) and O'Reilly et al's (2010, pg 594) which suggests that international students suffer

*“higher levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties than have previously been reported”*

largely owing to difficulty in forming relations with host culture students. Participants of this study reported significant reduction in sociocultural adaptation difficulties 2 weeks after arrival compared with O'Reilly et. al's (2010) 12 weeks findings. All, bar three students, had made friends with Irish students by week 2. The American cohort particularly report that Irish students were enthusiastic about making friends with them and 'curious' about American culture.

Importantly, this study's findings that international students difficulty in forming relations with Irish students was largely caused by shortage of Irish students in certain classes, an arena where such friendships mostly begin, extends existing literature on possible causes of international students difficulty in forming relations with host culture students. This finding suggests a link between smaller class sizes in DBS and bonding facilitation, as previous findings relate to students in much larger institutions with larger class sizes.

#### **4.3.5: Rating of Overall Experience**

Data collected suggests that the interviewees arrived in Ireland with a variety of social and cultural capital which resulted in varying degrees of academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment difficulties. However, despite these difficulties all interviewees rated their overall experience highly. For most interviewees, personal adaptability, willingness to succeed, together with Irish hospitality and willingness to help, high level multicultural interactions and friendships formed, increasing mastery of English language, increased knowledge of Irish and other cultures, including learning new ways of seeing and doing things have all been part of what has made their time in Ireland remarkable. These findings are echoed

by Bailey (2006, pg.10) who cautions against over-problematization of international students experience as her study participants generally reported positive experience based on “...*their personal courage, adaptability and support from the University and friends...*”

#### **4.4: Limitations of the Current Study**

Besides limitations addressed in the Methods Justification section, the following issues are noteworthy. Firstly, the original research plan to conduct a comparative study of international students studying in an independent and non-independent institutions ( Dublin Business School and Dublin Institute of Technology respectively) was abandoned when Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) Student Services intimated that: (1) their long-term international students were predominantly Asians (2) a group study of Asian students was not feasible as there are significant cultural differences between Chinese and Indian cultures for example. Furthermore, several DIT Erasmus students approached were not wholly committed to participating as they worried about scheduling interviews between classes, especially as the interviewer was not a DIT student.

Secondly, although there are no known reasons why interviewees would not be totally honest with their responses, total reliance on interviewees account of their experiences, feelings and perceptions during an interview is another noteworthy limitation of this study. Furthermore, five participants displayed linguistic difficulties at various times which evidently limited coherent articulation of certain experiences.

It is acknowledged that coding processes are subjective and interpretive, and as such no two researchers will code, analyse, interpret and draw conclusions from the data in exactly the same way. However, although generally seen as a limitation, it is also a core feature of interpretive inquiry (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Lastly, as discussed in the methods justification section, it is worth remembering that the relatively small sample size of this study precludes generalisation of its findings to entire international students population in Ireland.



#### **4.5: Implications of this Research**

This study indicated that linguistic difficulties significantly impacts on international students experience. Surprisingly, language difficulties were not restricted to students with English language proficiency issues alone as some students with English linguistic capital also reported experiencing linguistic difficulties resulting from Irish accent and divergent sociolinguistics capital. Consequently, ameliorative suggestion that lecturers should speak a little more slowly in classes where international students are present was proffered.

Findings that this study's interviewees had not been involved in plagiarism not only highlights a need for caution about perception of international students as a homogenous group, but also highlights a need for employment of larger sample in comparative investigation of plagiarism amongst long, short-term international students and Irish students, especially with regards to ascertaining a link between not having employment pressures, understanding of the implications of plagiarism and non-involvement in plagiarism.

Future research examining the experiences of international students from different parts of the world with particular regards to the impact of smaller class size on intercultural relations, including the impact of ethnocentrism or racism perception on psychological and sociocultural adjustment would be also be beneficial.

#### **4.6: Experience Improvement Recommendations**

Findings of this study highlighted a need for Peer Mentoring Programme. Interviewees pointed out that since they have a much shorter time to adjust to their new environment, peer mentoring which is proven to significantly facilitate speedy academic and sociocultural adjustment should be an integral part of their programme (Urquhart and Pooley 2007; Wang, 2004).

Although interviewees found the induction classes beneficial especially for establishing friendships, they also noted feeling “*bombarded back to back and a lot of it we didn’t retain - and some of it would maybe have been helpful to us*”. Interviewees suggested that instead of sitting for hours at a time, induction classes should be split over several more days with particular emphasis on: (1) how to travel around, especially by bus (2) time-management to facilitate adjustment to the new academic culture (3) introduction to DBS’s various buildings and resources, such as which computer labs are freely available.

Additionally, all interviewees noted power-points for charging computers in-class were in serious short supply. Several participants also complained about persistent foul smell in Balfe Street.

#### 4.7: Conclusion

In analysing the academic experiences of short-term international students in DBS, data collected supports assertion that international students experience varying degrees of academic culture shock, and academic adjustment difficulties. However, availability and accessibility of strong social supports coupled with students agency facilitated successful adjustment for most interviewees. This finding again highlights the essentiality of good social supports and students agency in achieving successful experiential outcomes (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010).

Examination of sociocultural adaptation which is dependent on factors such as culture learning and ability to interact with other people, and psychological adjustment which is based on emotional wellbeing and sociocultural adjustment, revealed that despite enumerating several instances of cultural differences students perception of cultural differences as minor, ability to make friends within two weeks, including readily available social supports significantly facilitated speedy sociocultural and psychological adjustment. Core objectives of studying abroad which generally includes increased English proficiency and culture learning were also achieved, consequently all interviewees report having a good experience overall. These findings are echoed by Bailey (2006, pg.10) who cautions against over-problematization of international students experience as her study participants also generally reported positive experience based on “...*their personal courage, adaptability and support from the University and friends...*”

This study mostly corroborates existing literature on international students experience. However, its scope is extended by findings that international students difficulty in forming relations with Irish students is significantly influenced by shortage of Irish students in certain

classes, an arena where such friendships mostly begin. It highlights the need for compensatory measures to be put in place to facilitate such friendships.

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## **Appendix1:**

### **Interview Questions:**

Can you tell me the story of how you came to study in DBS?

Can you talk me through what you did to prepare for starting college? ie. making any changes in your life, negotiating with other people for the time to study  
What were your expectations prior to arrival?

What was it like for you when you first arrived in Ireland?

What has been difficult?

What has been easy? Or what are the things that made it easier for you in starting here?  
Are there significant social and cultural differences between your home country and Ireland?

Tell me about your experience as an international student

How have you found mixing with other students? (international and domestic students)

OR tell me about your college friends?

What was it like to make friends in Ireland?

Tell me about your relations with Irish students?

What would have been contributory factor(s) that has stopped you from making Irish friend?

Are you working part-time? If so, how do you think it has impacted on your adjustment?

Could you talk me through how some of these relationships developed? ie. did it take time?

Has making friends with domestic students helped your adjustment to life in Ireland, and academically?

Are you finding it hard to adjust to life in Ireland? if yes, have you sought and received help from student services ie. Counselling Services

How do you think adapting to living in Ireland has impacted on your learning?

What processes do you think should be in place to enable international students adjust to their new environment?

Why did you choose DBS?

How have you found academic life in DBS?

Did you have to take a language proficiency course? If so, did you find that it fully equipped you for the academic work you are now undertaking?

Can you talk me through any difficulties you've experienced? And what helped at the time?

Could you describe some of the things you have found helpful in your academic work?

Tell me about the best part of your study?

Have you ever experienced difficulties with understanding or following a lecture? if so, please talk me through some of the issues

Would you say any part of your academic work is challenging, if so, could you talk me through those challenges?

How have you found in-class discussions and group work?

Plagiarism is a big issue in the academic world, did you know about it prior to starting here?

Can you describe your understanding of what plagiarism means and how you have dealt with it?

What is your view of the learning process and learning provisions in the college?

Have you got any suggestions about how your learning experience can be improved?

Did you have a formal or informal peer mentor? If so, please talk me through the experience  
How significant would you say mentoring was for you?

Would you say that time management skills etc. would have made your transition to life in Ireland easier?

What would you say were your major source or sources of concern?

Is there anything important that has not been covered that you would like to add?

### **What do international students experience when studying in Ireland?**

My name is Jacqueline Wise, and I am conducting a research to explore American and European Union short-term international students perceptions of their learning and sociocultural experiences in Ireland.

You are invited to take part in this study. Participation involves an interview that will take approximately 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part, you do not have to answer any question that raises any difficult feelings for you. You can also choose to stop the interview at any time.

Information provided is strictly confidential. Only pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored or stored on a password protected computer. However, if after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research findings are published.

**It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.**

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact Jacqueline Wise on [jwise2009@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jwise2009@yahoo.co.uk)

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Are You:** Male ☐

Female ☐

**Address:**

**Are You Living:** with Parent(s)/Guardian(s) ☐ with Partner/Flatmates ☐ independently ☐

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of Children:**

**Ages of Children:**

**Number of Children still living at home:**

## **EDUCATION**

**Highest level of Education Attained:** Leaving Cert. ☐ 3<sup>rd</sup> level Cert. ☐ 3<sup>rd</sup> level Diploma ☐  
Degree ☐ Postgrad. ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Name(s) of Educational Institute(s) attended:**

**Current course being undertaken:**

## **OCCUPATION:**

**Are you currently employed?** yes ☐ no ☐

**Number of hours a week worked:**

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

**Phone Number:**

**Email:**