“Supporting GIC Students’ Transition to Year 2 on the MA Social Sciences: Acculturation Strategies, Social Media and Mentoring”

Project Leader:
Dr Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Dean of Learning & Teaching, Social Sciences (Moira.Fischbacher-Smith@Glasgow.ac.uk)

Other Contributors:
Mrs Margaret Milner, Director of Undergraduate Programmes, Adam Smith Business School
Mrs Anna MacVicar, Programme Leader, Glasgow International College
Dr Michael Mcewan, Maths Tutor, Glasgow International College
Dr Ming Cheng, Academic Development Unit, University of Glasgow
Dr Gayle Pringle Barnes, International Officer, College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow
Mr John Kerr, Learning Innovation Officer, College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow

Summary

Glasgow International College (GIC) student numbers in social sciences are now growing in line with the original pattern of growth envisaged several years ago such that we can expect around 110 students to enter the UoG’s MA Social Sciences from September 2013. Student attainment and progression figures from GIC to UoG continue to improve and exam pass rates in Business/Social Sciences compare well with other cohorts at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. There is, however, evidence that Social Sciences UG students are not attaining the required grades to progress to honours. This project therefore focuses on two aspects of growing student numbers: (1) the student experience; and (2) student retention and progression.

LTDF projects have previously examined social science students’ experiences at the UoG and their preparation for study whilst at GIC and then UoG1 and changes have been made to induction material, advising and student preparation as a consequence. The study proposed here will identify means of raising GIC students’ awareness of the challenges of entering year 2 study and strategies for meeting these challenges with a much larger cohort than has previously been possible. It will also establish interventions that will better support them during their studies on the MA at the UoG. We propose PGR student-led interviews rather than staff-led interviews to encourage openness on the part of students, piloting of open source peer-peer social networking between GIC students and UoG students, engagement of students in the co-design of a mentoring programme, and piloting of Twitter (and/or other social media) to support transition.

1 See for example: Cartmel and Pringle, 2010 “GIC Student Transition Report 2009/10”; Pringle and Fischbacher, 2009 “Examining Assessment”; Pringle and Fischbacher, 2007 “Assisting International Students to manage the transition to UK academic culture: development of an e-learning support package”
**Aims & Outcomes:** This study aims to enhance support for GIC students prior to and during their transition to study in year 2 of the MA Social Sciences. The project has been jointly designed between the UoG and GIC and all aspects of the project will be conducted in partnership, from the design of research instruments to designing and implementing interventions and disseminating the findings. We believe that this institutional partnership approach is a distinguishing characteristic of this bid and a key development in terms of developing a mutual understanding of the transition considerations and interventions. Previous LTDF-funded studies will inform this study, as will Michael McEwan’s PG studies on transition, and Dr Ming Cheng’s research on quality learning and internationalization. As GIC recruitment is expected to grow with 240 entrants on the Social Sciences and Business Certificate by 2015-16, we believe it is important at this point to establish how best to support these students. The main outcomes are expected to be:

- Enhanced understanding of GIC students’ expectations of study at the UoG
- Piloting of the role of an open source peer-peer social networking platform that can provide a framework for a tailored communication site specifically oriented towards the student transition experience
- Piloting of a dedicated Twitter account, Facebook page, and the adoption of Google Hangouts for group collaboration to support student transition through the use of familiar personal technologies. This will allow multiple forms of information dissemination to students, empowering them to choose which social media they follow and to have some control over the consumption of their transition-related learning content
- Revision of preparatory materials (form and content) at both GIC and UoG
- Co-creation of a student mentoring scheme

**Benefits to Students:** Students at both GIC and the UoG will benefit from this project. GIC students entering the UoG (2nd year) from Sept 2013 will be given the opportunity to reflect on their studies during the project as they participate in focus groups and the survey studies, potentially making use of the University’s e-portfolio system, Mahara, to record, collate and share their individual reflective accounts. They will also be able to contact the project researcher(s) on an informal basis throughout the project, be able to sign up to Twitter feeds that reinforce key information about their studies, and will be prompted to think about their strategies for study as they engage in social networking discussions with new GIC students. Future students will benefit if a mentoring scheme is deemed to be of value and is developed during the study. **Embedding Benefits:** The approach proposed here is very low cost and thus sustainable in the future. Amendments to preparatory materials can easily be embedded into materials in future years and all GIC students can benefit from this. We will use free social networking software (such as Facebook and Elgg http://elgg.org) and social media (https://twitter.com) so that there is little or no cost to the College / GIC or future users. The mentoring scheme is likely to require some longer-term resource to create and sustain the scheme and we’re unsure at this stage what that will amount to. We would, however, design as low-cost a scheme as possible whilst maintaining effectiveness. As the University is keen to explore the potential for mentoring (eg, in relation to widening participation students) this study would hopefully help inform those discussions and we will consider face-to-face as well as online forms of mentor-mentee interaction as well as group-based mentoring.

**Previous Work:** The need for this study has been driven primarily by the need for a research-informed and pragmatic response to support GIC students in their studies at the UoG particularly given declining progression rates to honours study. Cohort numbers to date have been very small, so numbers must be treated with caution, but the figures illustrate the current challenges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>2009/10</th>
<th>2010/11</th>
<th>2011/12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number and percentage progressing to honours</td>
<td>12 (87%)</td>
<td>25 (56%)</td>
<td>39 (34%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cartmel & Fischbacher-Smith, 2012

---

2 Michael is a member of staff at GIC and is currently studying MEd Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.
4 We are unsure ultimately which social media tools we will use; the strategy will be prepared between July and September 2013. We do expect to make use of Twitter throughout the study though.
Previous LTDF studies have drawn attention to the value of pre-arrival materials[1], the importance of UoG staff visiting GIC to provide instruction on transition, and the role of further support information[2] for students. There is also a growing body of research that explores acculturation models and their contribution to students’ psychological and sociocultural adaptation to study in overseas countries[3, 4]. Acculturation incorporates aspects such as expectations of class size based on prior education experience[5, 6], the need for certain skills for study to facilitate success[7, 8], and understanding the social hierarchy and UK culture that are embedded in HE and that differ from native HE cultures[9-11]. Understandably, international students have greater adjustment difficulties to HE than local students both academically[12] and socially[13]. Accordingly, Smith and Kahwaja[4] highlight the need to understand holistically, the range of adjustments made by international students, and the stress that they face relating to language, sociocultural factors, discrimination and practical considerations; particularly because learning is compromised through academic culture shock[10, 11] when strategies are not in place for individuals to cope with these stressors. One strategy for support is student mentoring, a strategy recently highlighted by UKCISA[14] as being increasingly adopted in UK HE Institutions. (See also: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/ISL_Induction). Another is the use of social media in the acculturation and information seeking activities of international students[15]. This is a challenging area given concerns about privacy, identify and so forth, but it is clear from the literature that Twitter has led to some improvements in student engagement with learning[16] and that there is potential for SMS (Social Media Sites) as an other online communications to shape students’ expectations. We are keen to explore how this research can inform our responses to student needs for information as the study enfolds.

Student Engagement: One of the underpinning characteristics of this study is the involvement of a PGR student(s) as the key point of contact for students and as the main researcher(s). The primary driver for this was a sense that students in previous studies may, out of respect for staff in a position of authority, have provided responses to questions that they deemed socially acceptable. The PGR student(s) would also be given project management responsibilities (thereby improving their ability to develop and demonstrate graduate attributes) and would also be involved in shaping the design of the study. We also intend to create a student reference group for the duration of the project; a group of GIC and former GIC students who can help shape the enquiry, explore the issues that arise, ‘sense check’ our interpretation of the results, and make an input into the design of social networking and mentoring interventions. The students’ input will be voluntary and they can withdraw at any time. Reference group members will not be invited to participate in the interviews or focus groups.

Methodology: The study draws on both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the key project themes: students’ expectations and experience of study at the UoG; anticipated and actual contact hours; assumptions and practice of assessment; expectations of strategies for managing class contact vs time for private study; preparations at GIC for study at UoG; information sources prior to and during study at GIC and UoG; the role of social networking sites (SNS) during their studies; and specific issues pertinent to the cohort’s stage of study (such as progress requirements and the role of the Adviser of Studies).

Interview, focus group and survey methods will be used to collect data from 3 student cohorts:
1. Semi-structured interviews with around 8 Social Science UG students who previously studied at GIC and who have completed 2nd year (cohort A), to explore their study experiences at the UoG and their adjustment to that study.
2. Focus groups with around 30-36 of the 110 GIC students entering study during year 2 at UoG (cohort B) in September 2013 (3-4 focus groups). These will be undertaken at 3 points in time (twice in Semester 1 and once in Semester 2).
3. Focus groups with 30-36 of the GIC students entering GIC in Sept 2013 (cohort C). These will be undertaken at 2 points in time (once in each semester).
4. An online questionnaire will be designed based on the findings of the interviews and focus group. The remaining 80 2nd year MA (former GIC) Social Science students will be invited to take part in this survey to share their perceptions and experiences of their transition to study at the UoG.

---

5 We may recruit more than one student so as to share the responsibilities and to cover in the event of illness or particular peaks in study demands for any particular student.
A dedicated Twitter account will be created to remind students about the project, and we will use Twitter and other social media to further engage students in discussion about their views on their experiences of study at GIC and UoG. We plan to explore with current students and staff over the summer of 2013 which of the SNS available would be most appropriate, but meanwhile, have highlighted some possibilities here.

The PGR student(s) would be responsible for recruiting participants and managing the data collection and analysis. They will also be responsible for the mechanism of anonymising participants: participants will be informed that staff will not know who took part in focus groups/interviews, nor what individual contributions were⁶ and we hope this approach will encourage students to take part. The applicants will form a project group to support and advise the researcher(s), and to bring our respective perspectives and expertise to bear on the study design and each subsequent stage of the project. We think this is an ambitious project and it will require careful project management to meet the timescales (see below). The lead applicant (MFS) will work closely with the PGR team member meeting on a weekly/fortnightly basis as required, particularly in the initial phases, to ensure that the project is on track. **Ethical Application:** We have not yet sought ethical permission to undertake this study. If this application is successful, we will seek ethical approval from both the UoG and Kaplan International to ensure coverage for both institutions’ student groups. We would like to publish from the study and will disclose this to students. All participation will be voluntary and contributions will be anonymised, except, on request, by those members of the student reference group whose input we would wish to acknowledge in any publication / report.

**Applicability / Transferability:** Although this study will focus on Social Science students, we fully expect many of the issues raised to be applicable to other programmes of study in the University. As such, the insights gained from this project in terms of international students’ preparations for study at GIC and/or the UoG, their use of SNS, their information gathering activities, and their adjustment to study at the UoG, should be applicable to other parts of the University and indeed, to other of Kaplan’s institutional partnerships. Moreover, any SNS, Twitter or other such intervention would be applicable institutionally. As we intend to use only free applications/software, then there are no significant financial barriers to transferability. Any revised preparatory material (printed, web-based or other) might also be amended within and across both institutions where appropriate. Finally, proposals for a mentoring scheme would not be proprietary to social sciences students.

**Dissemination:** In addition to the LTDF interim and final reports, and the LTDF seminar presentation required by this funding programme, we intend to disseminate the project findings to other UoG Colleges and to GIC staff, using short report distributed through Campaign Manager (an e-marketing tool). We also intend to share the findings at the University Learning and Teaching Conference 2014, and to share proposals for the mentoring scheme at the College of Social Sciences L&T Committee and with colleagues in RIO and careers who are also exploring opportunities and options for mentoring. Insights will be included in the PGCAP teaching, (eg on the Inclusive Curricula unit) and on the training programme delivered to Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). Participants will also follow up on induction-related issues to ensure that staff are aware of any key messages, materials or actions that might be addressed in induction activities.

**Evaluation:** This is a challenging project to evaluate. Ultimately, success will be a function of improved GIC student performance in year 2 of the MA Social Sciences but there are other variables affecting such performance. Nonetheless, we will continue to monitor GIC student progress during year 2 of the MA Social Sciences and will compare their performance with previous years’ students, with international students generally, and with the whole of year 2 on each course. We will gather student feedback on the SMS interventions (through a short student survey) and will monitor the extent to which Twitter feeds are followed and students follow up on the issues in discussion with the PGR student(s) in focus group discussions. We should, as a minimum, be clear about whether students are better informed about their studies and we will gather feedback from Advisers of Studies on this issue. We do not have formal baseline

---

⁶ As part of the ethical application, we will ensure that guidance is provided to the PGR student on how s/he should respond if any student discloses problems that might require some support (eg, anxiety, other mental health difficulties, or academic support such as support from Student Learning Service).
data on student awareness of information pertaining to honours, progression requirements etc, but we will seek qualitative feedback from Advisers of Study. We will also issue a survey to all participants at the end of the study to ask whether their involvement in the project has helped them consider and positively address acculturation and transition issues.

**Timetable & Milestones:**

**Phase 1: July – September 2013.** Develop job description and recruit PGR team member(s); development of research instruments and applications for ethical approval; investigation of appropriate social media tools to encourage engagement between GIC and UoG students; creation of Twitter account and agreed protocols on Twitter usage. Time will also be made available for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the GIC / UoG programmes, existing approaches to student support, and previous LTDF studies. We will also recruit our student reference group and develop a project plan that addresses the activities in Phases 2 and 3 below. **Key milestones:** Submission of ethical approval by end July 2013. Appointment by end August of PGR team member. Recruitment of the student reference group by end September.

**Phase 2: September – December 2013**. Phase 2 represents the initial data collection and analysis phase. Cohort B focus groups will meet twice to ensure coverage of initial transition considerations, acculturation strategies and information seeking behaviour. Cohort C focus groups will meet once during this time. As many interviews as possible will be conducted with Cohort A students during this phase. This is a busy period but is essential in ensuring that we really understand the considerations at this crucial point for Cohorts B and C in their studies. **Key milestones:** successful organization and data collection by Dec 2013.

**Phase 3: Jan – April 2014**. Phase 3 will see a final focus group meeting for Cohorts B and C and the development and completion of the online survey for Cohort D. A key feature of discussions will be the potential for a mentoring scheme. Initial proposals for which will be discussed with the student reference group before the April/May exam diet. Any selected L&T Conference paper would be presented in April and would provide an overview of the results and initial plans for mentoring. **Key milestones:** Completion of data collection by March 2013; outline proposal for mentoring scheme by April 2014.

**Phase 4: May-July 2014.** Phase 4 allows the project group time to reflect further on all the data and to prepare plans for implementing the mentoring programme (if this is to be pursued) and to seek resources where necessary. **Key milestones:** Completion of data analysis and mentoring proposals; submission of final LTDF report.

**Funding Requested:** We are requesting funding for the PGR staff costs from 1st Sept 2013 – end July 2014 and associated costs only, not for any UoG staff buyout. All applicants will contribute to this project within the context of their respective School/College responsibilities. A budget is proposed for lunch with students participating in a focus group to encourage attendance. A cost has been identified for possible external hosting of server space (eg, for Elgg or similar). This cost may not ultimately be incurred.

| PGR Student(s) | 43 weeks @ 0.2 FTE - RA 6 Scale incl. employers’ NI and pension costs | £5350 |
| Digital recorder | 2 (one per PGR student) | £180 |
| Transcribing | Interviews & Focus Groups (8 semi-structured interview + 4 focus group = 16 hours on tap and each hour transcription cost is £70-90) | £1400 |
| External Hosting Services | For Elgg or similar | £2000 |
| Consumables | Paper, printer cartridge etc for PGR(s) | £200 |
| Focus group lunches | At £8 per person (UoG catering) and for 36 participants at 5 meetings over cohorts B and C. | £1440 |
| **Total Funds Requested** | | **£10570** |

**Approval**

Should this application be successful and be granted funding, we give consent for this application to be published on the Learning and Teaching Centre website.
References


