

Challenges and barriers for first-year home and international students in Higher Education in the UK and Ireland: A scoping review

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Abstract

The challenges and barriers that occur when transitioning to university are widely acknowledged within the Higher Education (HE) sector (Thompson et al., 2021). Previous literature has focused extensively on the importance of breaking down barriers and cultivating a sense of belonging in order to generate student success (Daniels & McNeela, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021). There is also considerable research and literature surrounding the challenges and barriers that international students face (Gbadamosi, 2018). However, the direct comparisons between the challenges and barriers faced by home students and international students are less prominently researched. This scoping review aims to fill this gap by gathering literature on this topic and highlighting the similarities and differences between the challenges and barriers home and international students encounter.

Introduction

Entering Higher Education (HE) is a time of change for all students. Whether students are transitioning directly from second-level school, are mature students, are from diverse backgrounds, are international students, or are from a mixture of demographics, there is an abundance of newness and difference to navigate. For some students, this new experience is embraced without difficulty or concern. For others, transitioning to university presents numerous challenges and barriers, including many associated with adapting to independent living and study (Thompson et al., 2021). Previous research has emphasised the importance of facing these challenges and breaking down barriers to cultivate a sense of belonging and help lead to student success (Daniels & McNeela, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021; Tinto, 2012; Krause, 2005). Osterman (2000) identifies the connection between belonging in educational environments with positive academic engagement, and in a complementary manner Tinto (1993) links social engagement and informal support from friends and peers as critical to sense of belonging.

There is also considerable research and literature surrounding the challenges and barriers that international students face (e.g., culture shock, language and accent-related difficulties, and discrimination) (Gbadamosi, 2018). However, direct comparisons of the challenges and barriers between home and international students are less widespread, or are documented in other contexts (Sin & Kim, 2018). This

scoping review seeks to address a gap in the literature by highlighting the similarities and differences between the experiences of first-year home and international students in universities in the UK and Ireland. By discussing the patterns and distinctions in relation to the key themes of academic, personal, and social experiences, this review intends to inform best practices in the sector and aims to recommend seeking solutions that have the potential to unite home and international students.

Distinguishing between home and international HE students is often done in the context of fees, and fees eligibility based on domiciliary status. For this review, the authors are identifying *international* students as those not studying in their home countries, and *home students* as those from the UK and Ireland.

The proposed readership for this review includes, but is not limited to, HE practitioners and educators, for example, academic teaching staff, professional services staff, and students' unions. It targets staff and students with responsibility for student transition into HE, as well as institutional and sectoral policy makers.

Methodology

This scoping paper, here defined as a form of knowledge synthesis as a comprehensive summary and synthesis of the pre-existing literature to inform the current practice of our paper's topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This paper was written by a group of colleagues working across the HE sector in the UK and Ireland who are all involved with students through either academic teaching positions or professional services. This group emerged following a RAISE Network Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting in late 2022. The common research interest that emerged from the discussion revolved around students' academic experiences at university. The group initially focused on the academic experiences of first-year home and international students.

Following further discussions, the group instead decided to concentrate on the challenges and barriers experienced by first-year home and international students in their transitions to universities in the UK and Ireland. This decision was informed by the job roles and countries of residence of group members. The collaboration process took place virtually through Microsoft Teams. In this paper, the authors define first-year students as those either studying a foundation year (Level 3) or first year (Level 4) in the UK HE system and first-time first-year undergraduate in HE in Ireland.

As a group of five, the workload was split between members. The first task was looking at the current literature on the topic, focusing on international and home student experiences and their transitions to HE. Based on group members' institutional responsibilities, the workload was split accordingly for this task. HG and YC predominantly explored the current literature on international students, with KS, SG and YY focused on the literature on home students. A collaborative document was used to collate the findings. Due to the limited pre-existing literature in our research aim and objectives, the authors looked at the literature on home/ international students who transitioned into HE. The differences of experiences during that transition were

then compared between home/ international studies. The main features of existing studies were noted in a table highlighting the results and key emerging themes. A group discussion was held following this initial task to understand the current findings and help further determine the structure, common themes, and definitions.

Academic, personal, and social factors emerged as three distinctive themes among home and international student experiences in their transitions to HE. The group had another discussion to understand the rationale of current literature and how it fits into the three themes. Whilst the current literature emphasises the multiple factors contributing to students' experiences in transitioning into HE, it was clear that the topic is complex with interconnected and multifaceted factors. Considering this, and to provide a clear and simple structure for our paper, it was agreed after a group discussion between the authors to continue the writing according to the three themes. In addition, individual responsibilities were allocated in the months leading up to the agreed date for a complete first draft (YY on the academic section, HG and YC on the personal section, KS and SG on the social section, HG and YC on the introduction and conclusion, and KS on the methodology). As a result, to ensure a continued collaborative approach, subsequent meetings were held to discuss progress and email communications between meetings also took place and all groups members proofed and edited the whole paper. Overall, the team successfully cooperated on writing this paper while presenting the importance of supporting first-year home and international students in their transitions into HE.

Findings

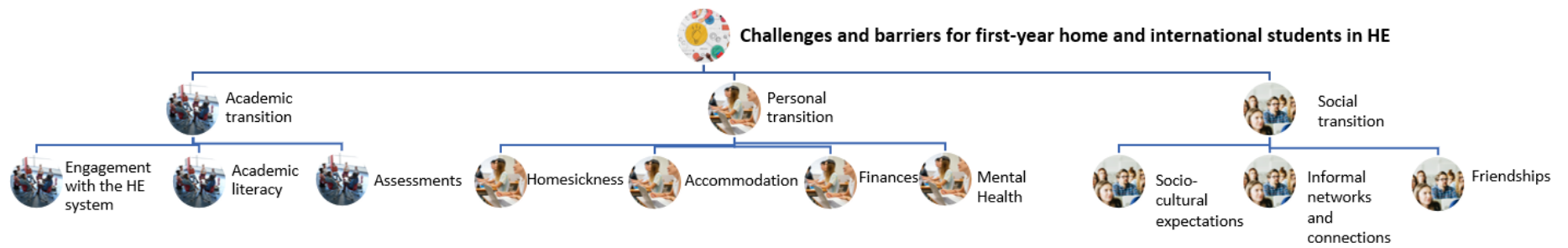


Figure 1.1 Scoping review thematic findings

The findings of this scoping review are grouped into three key themes: academic, personal, and social. These themes represent the holistic experience students have when transitioning to university life for the first time. Although findings from this review are represented by these themes, the reality of students' experiences are not as clearly aligned or separate, and there is overlap within and between these categorisations. Within each theme, subthemes have emerged which further explain and differentiate student experiences, see *Figure 1.1* above. The distinctions between home and international students' experiences are discussed within each theme.

Academic Transition

Students make great efforts to adapt to the academic HE environment in the transition period. This section will explore the topics of student engagement, academic literacy, and assessments, in order to build a picture of the main challenges and difficulties (e.g., becoming independent learners, mastering knowledge and skills) that home and international students face as they navigate the transition to HE academia.

Engagement with the Higher Education (HE) System

Both home and international students experience difficulties with adjusting to the academic environment at the beginning of their university studies. In both the UK and Ireland, HE teaching formats (lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops, etc.) are often unfamiliar to new students who are used to school classes (Ploner, 2018). As such, students are regularly unaware of HE academic expectations (Thompson et al., 2021). For instance, lecturers expect students to be active, self-governed learners; in contrast, first-year students frequently expect "lecturers [to] give extensive written notes" and/or "dictate their notes" (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Furthermore, UK university students are expected to learn 'critically' rather than simply accept or memorise taught materials. Such desirable learning outcomes may not be essential in other overseas HE systems (Cena et al., 2021). Additionally, international students who detach from previous academic environments may experience an education cultural shock (Ploner, 2018); mastering new approaches to learning can be tremendously overwhelming if the HE system of the host country conflicts with HE systems abroad (Adisa et al., 2019).

Studies (e.g., Ayala-Calvo & García, 2021; Donald et al., 2019) show that a large proportion of students engage with HE institutions that align with their career interests. Yet, selecting the academic programme that is the best fit often remains a challenge; students question whether course programmes will facilitate their career development. As a result, they welcome course profiles that clearly depict potential career pathways. Harrison (2006) conducted interview studies and found that nearly half of student participants who reported course withdrawal had the problem of mismatching career provisions and course choices.

Academic literacy

Research highlights that students struggle to pick up terminology and jargon (Ploner, 2018), which disrupts their understanding of subject knowledge. In addition, after arriving in the host country, international students are often concerned about their language proficiency because of its significant impact on academic performance (O'Reilly, 2013). For instance, international students reported feeling overwhelmed by the speaking speed of lectures (Ploner, 2018). International students also experience challenges when trying to express ideas clearly in class discussions (Wang, 2018). Moreover, international students felt embarrassed to ask questions about academic standards in public; they praised the idea of having home-student peers as 'academic friends' to discuss their work in private (Cena et al., 2021).

According to a focus group study conducted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015), the academic challenges that students experienced primarily centred around academic writing. Students reported difficulty with mastering paragraph structure, argument development, referencing, etc. In particular, international students perceived academic writing to be one of the most difficult aspects of learning due to the language barrier (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018) and criticality in writing (Gbadamosi, 2018).

Assessments

In terms of assessments, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) found that written assignments were a challenge for 81% of respondents, critical assessment for 77%; and conducting independent research for 76%. Students also struggled to understand grading schemes because of a lack of assessment literacy (e.g., Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). As a result, they were unclear about the expectations in each grade band and unable to improve the quality of their work. In addition, groupwork, which is novel to students, has been reported as a great challenge that can put students under stress when trying to coordinate group members. Moreover, international students reported further difficulties in communicating with members from diverse backgrounds due to language barriers (Adisa et al., 2019).

Another issue related to assessments is time management, which has been a challenge for both home and international students. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) found that 88% of the survey respondents agreed that "managing your time and submitting assignments on time" was the most significant challenge related to transition. Other studies also highlight that workload is a general concern for students (Gibney et al., 2011). For instance, Hassel and Ridout (2018) found that nearly 60% of students expected to struggle with the amount of work at university.

Personal Transition

In addition to navigating a whole new academic environment, students also inevitably face personal transitions as a result of entering Higher Education. For many students, starting university coincides with significant lifestyle changes; leaving home, meeting new people, being part of a new community, and balancing different responsibilities are just some elements of the transitions regularly experienced by students. When exploring the personal challenges and obstacles faced by home and international students in this time of transition, common subthemes of homesickness, accommodation, finance, and mental health arose in the literature.

Homesickness

Homesickness is a significant personal barrier faced by both home and international students in the UK and Ireland. A major catalyst for this is culture shock.

Daniels and MacNeela (2021) carried out workshops with students, and Thompson et al. (2021) conducted focus groups and interviews, to find out more about how students view the transition to university; the research revealed that home students can have difficulty adapting to university life and often experience shock due to their lack of preparedness for domestic independence; everyday tasks and life skills, such as cooking and washing, can prove difficult for new students. At a time when many students find themselves with more personal freedom and responsibility than ever before, research shows that students struggle to balance their social life and university work on top of the challenges of moving away from home. This frequently leads to homesickness and feelings of isolation and depression (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015). Additionally, adjustment to the academic environment of university, which often involves larger class sizes and more self-directed learning than students will have experienced before, can leave students feeling lonely and isolated (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015).

International students face similar challenges regarding homesickness as they battle a lot of the same issues as home students in adjusting to a new way of life (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). However, the literature highlights that homesickness for international students is exacerbated by the added layer of adapting to a new country, such as being surrounded by different food, language, weather conditions, and learning and teaching methods; there is much for international students to contend with that intensifies the culture shock (Gbadamosi, 2018; Wang, 2018). For instance, Wang's study revealed that 9.8% of student participants (data was collected from interviews with 6 Chinese students at two British universities and questionnaires were completed by 82 Chinese students at five British universities) found getting used to the local food the most stressful and difficult aspect of early adjustment. In addition, international students report a greater sense of detachment from their homes, heightened by the fact that they are often away from their families for extended periods of time (O'Reilly et al., 2013, Ploner, 2018). To help offset the impact of the culture

shock for international students, Gbadamosi (2018) emphasised the need to support overseas students to become integrated into UK culture by supporting them with life outside of university.

The argument for providing greater support for international students outside of the academic sphere is further substantiated by other literature which draws attention to the extra difficulties that international students face. For example, O'Reilly et al.'s study, which is based on interviews conducted with staff from a large Irish HE institution, discusses how international students experience actual and perceived discrimination that results in isolation and proves to be a major barrier to studying in Ireland. This perspective of there being more barriers for international students is also emphasised by Ploner (2018), who highlights how bureaucracy and visa procedures are often found by international students to be complicated and obstructive, which contributes to feelings of discrimination and makes it more difficult for students to develop a sense of belonging in their new environment). For instance, international students have to prove that they have enough money to support themselves when applying for a visa (Gbadamosi, 2018; Gov.UK, 2013).

It has also been found that there is a considerable amount of confusion during international students' first weeks at university as they adjust to new cultural and academic environments; some students report feeling 'lost' and confused about who to speak to and the next steps to take (Ploner, 2018). To help combat this, Ploner (2018) and Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi (2018) stress the importance of inductions in ensuring a positive arrival and transition process by providing social spaces to meet other students and learn about everyday activities. It has also been found that international students positively recognise universities' gestures of hospitality, such as events, welcoming them at the airport, and having people around to help at university sites (Ploner, 2018). However, students who arrive late can miss inductions, which typically makes their transitions more confusing and challenging (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). Therefore, other recommendations which champion student-to-student support and cultural awareness training to help international students settle into their new surroundings may be vital mechanisms to help support late-arriving students if they take place throughout the academic year (Gbadamosi, 2018).

Accommodation

For home students, accommodation problems can largely be linked to many of the points raised in the section above, as students struggle to adapt to independent living in a new environment (Daniels & MacNeela, 2021). In addition to this, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) identified that students who stay further away from university premises and commute for their studies report this to have a negative impact on their ability to engage with university activities and with their peers.

Similarly, international students also struggle to adapt to local accommodation and settle into a new environment (Gbadamosi, 2018; Wang, 2018). However, one of the

main problems they experience is securing private accommodation in the first place, particularly if they are bringing family members or dependents (Cena et al., 2021). A lot of the time, international students are treated differently to home students: for example, international students can be required to pay six months' rent in advance for private accommodation (Cena et al., 2021). Moreover, many international students have reported that there are not enough accommodation options available in areas surrounding universities, which can lead to them staying in temporary accommodation or living much further away from university sites (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018); these scenarios often restrict students and limit their ability to engage with university activities.

Finance

The literature on first-year experiences for home students has also highlighted that money impacts student experience (Daniels & MacNeela, 2021). It explains that, as many students are not sufficiently prepared for domestic independence, it is not uncommon for students to find it difficult to develop the skill of money management in order to successfully cope with their lifestyle and responsibilities (paying for food, rent, funding a social life, etc.) (Thompson et al., 2021). Thompson et al. (2021) reported that students feel pressure to meet the demands and expectations of being able to deal with their own finances and fend for themselves, particularly if they start university at 18 having only ever lived with their parents. However, it is worth noting that students who experienced domestic independence before university reported coping well with money and finance on the whole (the ages of participants in Thompson's sample ranged from 19 to 28).

Like many home students, international students experience significant stress due to financial hardship (O'Reilly et al., 2013). However, international students typically face more challenges when securing employment due to additional barriers, such as visa regulations; for instance, student visas restrict international students from working in certain jobs alongside their studies and limit the hours they are able to work whilst on the visa (Cena et al., 2021; Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018; Gbadamosi, 2018; Gov.UK, 2023). Cena et al. (2021) have also highlighted that there is a general lack of understanding amongst international students about the UK job market; international students often struggle to find employment and frequently encounter discrimination whilst searching for jobs. Moreover, international students have expressed feelings of anxiety about seeking employment due to their perceived lack of local cultural knowledge (Cena et al., 2021). Considering all of this, there is a consensus that there is a need for better communication and employability support (that does not just focus on the graduate market) before they travel to their host country (Gbadamosi, 2018).

Mental Health

Papers discussing the challenges and barriers experienced by both home and international students have frequently cited mental health as a significant topic. In most

cases, mental health is shown to be inextricably linked to many other factors, including the other personal challenges mentioned so far in this review.

For home students, the literature around challenges and mental health reflects how lots of students feel fear and anxiety in their first year at university (Daniels & MacNeela, 2021). Notably, students are commonly focused on the fears of not feeling comfortable in their environment and not making friends (Gibney et al. 2011). Such anxiety can also be amplified when coupled with the difficulties of coming to terms with the gap between students' prior expectations of university life and the reality once they arrive (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Furthermore, students often experience depression and lack motivation; these feelings are frequently heightened as a consequence of the added responsibilities referred to previously in this paper, such as domestic and financial independence (Daniels & MacNeela, 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2013). Moreover, O'Reilly et al. (2013) reported that, in some cases, students' difficulties with mental health can lead to serious further struggles, such as substance abuse and attempted suicide. All of this literature points to the necessity of continuing to focus on and assess university support mechanisms and intervention systems for mental health.

Similarly, international students often experience psychological difficulties, such as anxiety and depression, that can lead to harmful behaviours (Cena et al., 2021; Ploner, 2018). Like home students, international students' mental health issues often stem from feelings of lack of preparedness, isolation, and helplessness (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Strikingly, Adisa et al. (2019) highlighted that 35% of international students in the UK have been found to have developed mental health issues because of the various challenges experienced in their new environments. Hurley et al. (2022) also explore the topic of the challenges of mental health for international students and recommend a focus to be placed on improvements in communications between universities and students. Additionally, Hurley et al. (2022) encourage increased promotion of the support available to students. On another note, O'Reilly et al. (2013) suggest that peer mentoring programmes should be developed to make them more appealing for host students to facilitate engagement and interaction in creative ways that help home and international students to support each other; one suggestion was to organise workshops for home students planning to go on an exchange, which would put them in contact with international students and allow the home students to learn about some sociocultural differences. Cena et al. (2021) also identified this type of cross-cultural interaction as having a significant impact on supporting the growth of students' knowledge, skills, social interactions, and confidence when settling into new environments and navigating the challenges of transitioning to university.

Social Transition

As previously noted, moving to a new country or institution in pursuit of higher education can bring many challenges. A key part of any student's transition is their ability to interact socially, access support mechanisms, and build friendships and peer groups. The subthemes that emerged from the social transition theme included socio-cultural expectations, informal networks and connections, and friendship. When

assessing these subthemes for international and home students, it became apparent that some issues are specific to the individual cohorts whilst others are experienced by both home and international students.

Socio-cultural expectations

From a socio-cultural perspective, when international students move to a new country, despite the move being driven by the desire to improve their educational profile and career prospects, there are life factors that can negatively impact their experience. O'Reilly et al. (2013) found that staff working with international students reported sociocultural and psychological difficulties as the most problematic for new students. Specific references were made to difficulties adjusting to the new culture, overcoming religious differences, and loneliness; moving to a new country can leave international students with diminished or no social support. As students often travel overseas alone, not being able to make friends in their host country intensifies feelings of loneliness and homesickness (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Cena et al. (2021) found that, in addition to being without social support in their new country, international students have often left important familial and social relationships in their home countries. This will often be a defining feature between home and international students' experiences of transition, where home students may have access to a personal support system, made-up of friends and family during this transition, international students will be a significant physical distance from equivalent supports.

Parker et al. (2017) focus on ethnicity when examining home students' challenges encountered in transitioning to university; these authors emphasised the importance of recognising the unique difficulties faced by students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, students' expectations, and sense of belonging are prominent areas noted by Ploner et al. (2018); they found that those from an ethnic minority background had a poorer experience than their white counterparts and that they tended to stay in their friendship groups for socialising unless wider university social interaction was planned. Due to the lack of effort on the part of some institutions to facilitate social interactions, ethnic minority students felt less supported.

An issue unique to international students' social experiences is the difficulty integrating with home students. Hurley et al. (2022) found that this was a key factor that negatively impeded students' progression in their academic programmes. As well as this, O'Reilly et al. (2013, p.364) found in their work from the Irish HE setting, that international students had "difficulty making Irish friends" and explained that Irish students could appear "uninterested in engaging with international students" or that they sometimes had "negative perceptions" about international students. Studies have also found that this problem has been associated with language and communication barriers, including struggles to understand accents, colloquialisms, slang, and local jokes (Cena, et al., 2021, p.819; O'Reilly, et al., 2013). In addition, insufficient language and literacy skills in the language of instruction contributes further to a lack of understanding about host country learning cultures and expectations, which can often prevent independent learning and autonomy at university and contribute to students

missing classes due to feelings of isolation (Adisa et al., 2019; Ploner et al., 2018). This finding is supported by Cena et al., (2021), who report that international students felt distant because of language barriers, causing an inability to interact "normally" with home students. This affected their psychosocial wellbeing and sense of confidence and connectedness.

A mixed methods study about Chinese students' academic adjustment to the UK found social factors to be the most stressful and difficult aspect of their early adjustment. These difficulties included 'going to social events/ gatherings/ functions' (23.2%); understanding the local accent/ language (10.9%); understanding cultural differences (9.8%); and making friends with British people (7.3%) (N82) (Wang, 2018, p. 16). It was also found that access to supportive relationships (for example, spouses and relatives), helped to mitigate negative impacts for international students (Gbadamosi, 2018, p. 135). As the literature has highlighted, there is no doubt that effective communication and support is imperative in helping students with their transitions to HE. There is a need to consider a review or revision of some orientation/ induction/ welcome activities that may not be achieving a sense of belonging, on some level, for international students.

Informal networks and connections

The development of informal networks and connections for new students has a significant impact on the initial transition phase to HE. Previous literature has ascertained that social support and sense of belonging are associated with student engagement, motivation, retention, and performance (Bovill et al., 2008; Gibney et al., 2011). Thus, when students struggle to form networks and connections, their university experience can drastically suffer. To help prevent this, effective social support put in place by institutions is cited as one key recommendation; mentoring schemes, first-year seminars, and orientations are all examples of activities universities often run to help students settle in to HE and form meaningful connections (Gibney et al., 2011). Moreover, as students' attitudes and behaviours contribute to developing new networks and connections, there is a need to consider students' motivations to engage with their peers and institutions and these motivations should be considered when universities are planning events and activities.

In a more recent study, Thompson et al. (2021) reported positive feedback from home students about the value of new support systems, such as, friendships at university. Students explained the importance of finding like-minded people with whom they could share their problems. In line with this, it was also reported that living with other students was a positive experience overall, despite the challenges that came with adjusting to living away from home. Some negative experiences that were highlighted by students included the consumption of alcohol and the clubbing culture; some students stressed that they risked being "marginalised" if they didn't engage in these "typical student activities" (p.1401-1404). Research by Gambles *et al.* (2022) about the use of alcohol in the transition to university reinforces some of these perceived social norms. This study shared the normalised attitudes of drinking alcohol as part of university life; the role of alcohol consumption particularly in the initial weeks of university when new

social connections are occurring; and intentions about heavier alcohol consumption when at university, for example, 'preloading' which is drinking privately before going out socially, and 'drinking games' (p.251). A longitudinal study about non-drinking among young people provides countering evidence which demonstrates an increase in non-drinking amongst the 16-24 years cohort from over a third in 2005 to half in 2015 (Ng Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018, p. 5). The evidence about alcohol in university points to the need for inclusion of social activities that do not centre around alcohol, for example, when planning students' union events, freshers weeks, and clubs or societies socialising. There could be a focus on planning without alcohol, to cater for those who are not interested in alcohol, and as an alternative for all students.

Insights on feelings of belonging and inclusion amongst students who are black and minority ethnic students, and white students, showed distinct differences (Parker et al., 2017). Black and minority ethnic students felt more included and that they belonged in the earlier stages of their education, i.e., at school or college, rather than at university (80% v's 68%) (N316). In comparison, white students felt more welcome and part of their community at university than in their earlier education (82.8% v's 72%).

Friendships

The development of friendships and friendship groups for international students is another reported issue. In particular, Gbadamosi (2018) found limited opportunities for interpersonal relationships to create a significant challenge for international students. Research by Cowley and Hyams-Ssekasi (2018, p. 124) reinforces this, as they highlight that the use of enrichment activities by HE institutions, for example, employment, which has a multiplier impact by providing international students with the chance to build friendships with other students (both home and international) at university.

The struggle of making friends is not unique to international students though; home students frequently struggle to make friends at university. A sector-wide study (N1,579) undertaken by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Ireland (2015) discovered that 61% of respondents found social integration and relationship building challenging. The same study reported that 66% of students found it difficult to engage with university life outside of the classroom. Moreover, Daniels and MacNeela (2021) uncovered that home students reported 'friends/loneliness' as a barrier to resilience and motivation in their first year at university. It would be beneficial to new students to have a peer-to-peer support initiative available to them. This support could be designed for either academic or social engagement, ideally at programmatic level, to share and support one another at a time of heightened transition.

Conclusion

This scoping review has explored the challenges and barriers experienced by first-year home and international students in Higher Education in the UK and Ireland. The findings have recognised the similarities between the challenges and barriers that home and international students face, whilst also highlighting that the transition to university is often more complex and multifaceted for international students, as revealed through the exploration of the academic, personal, and social themes.

Academic factors displayed similar challenges for both home and international students in their first year of study, with the key similarity being the struggle to adjust to the HE academic environment. A notable added difficulty for international students was the language barrier. A further level of complexity for international students often occurs when trying to grasp terminology, keep up with the pace of lectures, express ideas clearly, and collaborate with peers on groupwork tasks.

Regarding personal factors, all groups of students were found to experience varying levels of homesickness and culture shock. Home and international students alike also shared challenges of struggling to settle into accommodation, manage their finances, and cope with their mental health. For all these challenges though, international students typically reported to suffer to a greater extent as a result of having to adapt to a whole new country. For instance, international students were frequently found to face more barriers when trying to secure accommodation and employment.

Social factors revealed that both home and international students experience difficulties when adjusting to new socio-cultural settings; for instance, acclimatising to cultures with different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and adjusting to living with less social support proved challenging at times for students from all demographics. As a consequence of finding social integration and relationship building difficult, loneliness was reported a significant amount for both home and international students.

Whilst this scoping review has helped to shed light on the nuances between the experiences of first-year home and international students in the UK and Ireland, there are limitations to this paper. Firstly, the selective nature of this paper as a scoping review (and the limited timeframe given for completing this review) means that all the papers available surrounding the topic could not be captured; therefore, it is possible that the findings and results of this review could be skewed, or that other existing literature could contradict some of the findings. Secondly, it was difficult to find papers solely focused on the first-year experience, which could again hinder the findings and results. Considering these factors, it is recommended that this topic is explored in more detail to delve deeper into developing a holistic understanding of first-year challenges and barriers for home and international students in the UK and Ireland. For example, this scoping review could be extended into a systematic meta-analysis by including more rigorous research methodologies and critical analysis of the literature.

Overall, this scoping review underscores the importance of nurturing an effective and inclusive environment to facilitate the successful transition of both home and international students into university life. Identified recommendations in the review provide actionable strategies to support first-year students. Firstly, developing student-to-student support mechanisms, such as peer-mentoring schemes, is a key recommendation to help students learn, support each other, and form connections. Additionally, providing events and activities to welcome all students and help them to socialise and integrate is advocated, especially when the events (such as culture workshops) bring together home and international students, as these can be instrumental in breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the findings of the review have stressed that the provision of coherent inductions and orientation periods for both home and international students is paramount; this ensures a smoother transition, equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive not only in their first year but throughout their entire academic journey. Moreover, a strategic approach by institutions is advised to promptly identify, address, and tackle challenges. This involves continuous support throughout the academic year, transcending the initial weeks following enrolment and stretching across the whole university experience. For international students in particular, pre-arrival support and clear communications are also vital to set expectations and prepare them for the nuances of HE in their host countries. In essence, these recommendations collectively form a holistic approach that, when adopted by universities, can significantly enhance the overall student experience and contribute to the creation of inclusive and supportive university communities.

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