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University of Southampton

Faculty of Social, Human and Mathematical Sciences

Education

**Mexican Postgraduate International Students' Adaptation Experience in a UK
University: the First Weeks**

by

Elizabeth Margarita Hernández López

Doctor of Philosophy

July 2018

Abstract

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This Doctoral research reports on a qualitative case study conducted to explore the adaptation experience of a cohort of Mexican international students pursuing a postgraduate degree at a prestigious university in England during the 2016-2017 academic calendar. Because the early stage of the transition has been acknowledged as a critical period (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001; Brown, 2008) and a holistic understanding of the participants' experience is to be captured by considering the pre-arrival stage (Schartner, 2014), this thesis focused on the pre-arrival period and the first four weeks of the participants' stay in the UK. Additionally, although the numbers of students in international mobility have augmented considerably during recent decades (British Council, 2012), and with it research to document the international experience has flourished (Delgado-Romero and Sanabria, 2007), international students of Latin American origin appear to be an understudied population (Reynolds and Constantine, 2007). Therefore, this research aimed to redress such gap by looking at Mexican postgraduate international students in the second largest importer of international mobility, the UK (UIS, 2016). It explored the academic, sociocultural, and affective challenges faced, the coping strategies employed, and the institutional services resourced for their adaptation during their first four weeks.

Empirical evidence was gathered through a qualitative survey, a questionnaire, focus groups, and interviews. Bearing in mind the 'here and now' implementation of the instruments to facilitate the recalling of recent events (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Munn and Drever, 1990) data was collected at four different points in time. In the pre-arrival stage (early to late September 2016) 12 students completed an online qualitative survey, on arrival (early October 2016) 25 students responded in-situ an online questionnaire; in the third stage (mid October) 20 volunteers took part in three focus groups; finally, 7 student participants (end of October) collaborated on an interview. The results reveal the challenges faced by the participants seemed to be related to various elements such as the extent of pre-arrival preparations, prior experience overseas, individual, and societal characteristics. Institutional support appeared to be mainly steered towards administrative concerns prior to departure whilst on arrival little assistance tailored for their needs, as international students seemed to be provided. The presence of a consolidated group of conational fellows in the host institution acted as a buffer during the participants' first weeks in the UK.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Elizabeth Margarita Hernández López declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Mexican Postgraduate International Students' Adaptation Experience in a UK University: the First Weeks.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date:

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Prologue

This Doctoral thesis is framed as a qualitative case study and reports on the first weeks of the adaptation¹ experience of Mexican international students ²enrolled in a UK University during the 2016-2017 academic calendar to pursue a postgraduate, Master or Doctor's, degree.

The early stage of the international experience has been acknowledged as the most stressful period (Kim, 2001; Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001; Brown, 2008; Schartner, 2014).

Furthermore, it has been claimed that a better understanding of the full trajectory of the international student's sojourn³ can be grasped by studying the prior to departure stage and the first weeks of the participant's stay abroad (Schartner, 2014). Therefore, this research sets out to investigate the pre-arrival and the first four weeks of the participants' experiences in the host culture and University. First, it aims to explore and provide a holistic account of the academic, the affective, and the sociocultural challenges faced within this early period. Second, challenging the traditional view of culture shock as a passive phenomenon (Oberg, 1960) with no agency on behalf of the participants, this research endeavours to explore the coping strategies implemented prior to departure and on arrival by the international participants for their adaptation. Finally, as institutions worldwide strive to increase their intake of international students (Andrade, 2006), it intends to identify the usefulness of the support, in the form of institutional services and induction, provided by the host institution for the participants' adjustment before their arrival and during their first month of stay.

The setting for this study is a United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) institution that belongs to the well-reputed Russell Group of Universities (2016). It was recognised as one of the 20 largest recruiters of international students in the UK during the academic calendar 2016-2017 (UKCISA, 2018). Furthermore, according to Student Records from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2018), the institution held one of the largest concentrations of Mexican international students in the UK during the academic calendar 2016-2017. The postgraduate participants were one-year taught Master and Doctoral students. They were mainly enrolled in programmes in the

¹ This study will adopt the terms adaptation and adjustment synonymously although there is some debate about distinctions between the two (Schartner, 2014).

² Defined by Berry (1997) as the students of different cultural groups who have willingly migrated to a different location in order to pursue or continue their studies for a temporary period.

³ The term sojourn refers to a person's stay outside their home country for a temporary period and for the achievement of a particular aim such as pursuing an educational degree (Ward *et al.*, 2001)

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Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Qualitative data was collected at four points in time: prior to the participants' arrival to the UK, and at the beginning of their programme in early, mid and late October 2016 using an online qualitative survey, an in-situ online questionnaire, three focus groups and seven individual interviews. This rationale will be expanded in the Methodology chapter.

1.2 Chapter outline

This thesis is organised in five chapters. The remainder of this first chapter will present the rationale and background information for this research. It will be followed by the introduction of my motivations as a researcher for the development of this study. It concludes by unveiling the hoped impact and communication of this study.

The second chapter elaborates on the theoretical and empirical literature related to the research aims under study. The first section of it explores traditional and contemporary approaches of culture shock to study cross-cultural adaptation, and presents the theoretical approaches drawn on for the analysis of this study. Moreover, it will discuss the dimensions (sociocultural, psychological and academic) identified as essential for the understanding of the experience of international students as well as for their adjustment in a new environment. Likewise, it presents literature related to social integration and social support. In light of the literature reviewed, it ends by introducing the research questions emerged up to this point. The second section reviews organisational practices and support services implemented for the students' transition. It explores the rationale for the delivery of an induction, as a support service, as well as the students' impressions in relation to it. The final sub-section identifies effective and ineffective organisational practices for students in transitions. Subsequently, this section presents the research question that resulted from this review of literature. It also restates the three questions that drive this study. Finally, the chapter ends by providing a succinct reflection on the utility of the theories reviewed for the purposes of the study.

The third chapter describes the research methodology and design adopted for this study. It starts by disclosing my philosophical assumption, research positionality and purpose of inquiry. Following, it outlines the study's research design and describes its context, where the sampling strategy and the participants are presented. The subsequent section unveils the methods employed for data collection. Likewise, it reflects on the process and product of the pilot study, and presents the data analysis and interpretation procedure. Lastly, it details the ethical and methodological considerations given for the development of the study.

The fourth chapter integrates and presents the findings and discussion on a chronological framing. Therefore, pre-arrival and on arrival, first two weeks, and weeks 3 and 4 outlines the presentation of findings and discussion. Moreover, the sociocultural, affective, and academic challenges experienced and sources of support consulted are explored within the timeframe delineated above.

The final chapter retakes the research questions under study and follows that format to provide the key findings of this thesis. Furthermore, it acknowledges its limitations and likewise, provides recommendations for future research as well as for HE policy and practice. Moreover, it presents the practical and methodological contributions of this research, and details its contribution to theory. It concludes by reflecting on my own journey experience as a PhD and international student.

1.3 Rationale for the study

Although related, the concepts of globalisation and internationalisation are different. As described by Altbach and Knight (2007, p.290) globalisation is “the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century”. Internationalisation, on the contrary, can be conceived as a response from the educational schemes to meet the demands of the global academic world (Ibid.). Therefore, internationalisation of HE is used in a wide and all-encompassing way to refer to diverse “international activities or programs, such as mobility, development cooperation, research, curriculum development, or trade” (Knight et al., 2005, p.5) launched to cope with the phenomenon of globalisation. This study, however, is centred on the international mobility of students.

The results in the investments from universities in the international students' mobility have reflected a substantial increase over the last two decades (Altbach and Knight, 2007; British Council, 2012). According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS hereafter), the population of outbound international students rose from 2 million in 2000 to more than 4.1 million in 2013. The OECD Education at a Glance (2014) and the Project Atlas (2015), a global research enterprise committed to providing accurate and reliable data on HE student mobility sponsored by the United States Department of State, estimated growth of international students' mobility of 8 million by 2025. Nevertheless, the expansion of this mobility so far has been concentrated in students of Asian origin. The UIS (2016) reports that in 2013 the top 2 countries with students in mobility were China with 712,157, and India with 181,872 students abroad. According to the UIS in 2013, the three main homes to the mobile student population were the United States (US), the UK, and Australia with 19%, 10% and 6% respectively, of the total population of international

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students in mobility. Similarly, the UIS also states the top two student populations in the United Kingdom, which is the setting for this study, come from Asia (China with 81,776 and India with 22,155 students). In comparison to these numbers, a population much less represented in the UK is Latin America. The OECD Education at a Glance (2014) reported Latin America and Caribbean students enrolled worldwide in 2012 accounted for 6% of the total percentage of foreign HE students. On a similar note, the UIS, with data from 2013, reports a low outbound mobility ratio (0.9%) from tertiary students of Latin American and Caribbean origin.

According to data from the UIS in 2013, Latin America was represented in the UK on a range from 1650 to 13 HE students. Mexico (n=1650) and Brazil (1573) were the lead sending countries of HE students to the UK in 2013. While Colombia (n=932), Chile (n=656), Venezuela (284), Peru (n=284), Argentina (n=187), and Ecuador (148) sent less HE students to the UK. While Uruguay (n=63), Panama (n=54), Costa Rica (n=52), Bolivia (n=34), Guatemala (n=23), Honduras (n=23), El Salvador (n=18), Dominican Republic (n=17), Nicaragua (n=15), and Paraguay (n=13) were much less represented. Despite these low outbound mobility ratios, Project Atlas (2015) envisions growth of outgoing international students from Latin America and the Caribbean by 2025.

Based on the previous figures, the concentration of studies related to international students' mobility, has been on Asian students. Zhang and Goodson (2011) on their systematic review of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the US report that more than 50% of the studies revised explore the experience of Asian international students, especially from inland China or Taiwan. For instance, a quick search on ERIC database with the term *Chinese international students* will display a considerable list of related articles only as of 2015 and the first half of 2016, in the US, the UK and Australia. The topics concerning Chinese international students in the US' HE context are encompassing. They go from exploring the undergraduate experiences of Chinese international students (Valdez, 2015), to exploring their attitudes towards counselling services (Li et al., 2016), and their academic and social integration framed on Tinto's theory (Ross and Chen, 2015), to mention a few. In Australia, studies focused on students of Chinese origin have scrutinised strategies to seek for help and information while in their overseas experience (Ling and Tran, 2015), and influential factors in their decision-making process to pursue HE (Cao and Tran, 2015). In addition to analysing the effects of mentoring strategies to mediate acculturative stress and intercultural communication competence portrayed in Chinese graduate international students' satisfaction (Yang et al., 2015) and the preparation of Chinese international business students for their transition to HE in Australia (Lamberton and Ashton-Hay, 2015). Research in the UK context, during the 2015-mid 2016 period, has explored the readiness, challenges, and expected support for Chinese business and management overseas programme (Wang et al., 2015) and the impact of individual factors on the academic attainment of Chinese

and UK students (Crawford and Ward, 2015). Further to examining the university preferences of Malaysian and Chinese students (Kamal et al., 2016), and the Chinese postgraduate students' academic adjustment in the UK HE Sector (Quan et al., 2016), to mention a few.

On the contrary, a painstaking search seemed to show a paucity of research to document the experience of Latin American students in HE international mobility. In this regard, despite the US being the leading destination of Latin American international students (UIS, 2016), little research seemed to have been addressed to explore the studying abroad experience of this group of students. From the research found, Constantine and colleagues (Wilton and Constantine, 2003; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007) seem to be pioneers in studies involving Latin American International students in HE institutions in the US. Their studies take a quantitative stance and compare international students from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Constantine and colleagues recognise the necessity to develop more research to scrutinise the cultural adjustment experiences of students of Latin America origin. On a similar note, Foley (2013) and Tanner (2013) concentrated their PhD thesis on the mobility of students from Latin America in the US context. Foley (2013) tackled the international recruitment strategies for students from the region mentioned above. Her research approach was qualitative and interviewed counsellors at international schools in eight countries in Latin America. On the other hand, Tanner (2013), adopting a quantitative scope, explored the graduate experience of Mexican international students in Doctoral programmes in the US and documented their cultural adjustment. Foley (2013) and Tanner (2013) conclude the experience of Latin American international students is scarcely documented and therefore more research, focused in the scrutiny of the experience of international students from this region, should be conducted. As that is the case in the US, the leading destination of Latin American students, it comes as no surprise that in settings like the UK, research focused on the experience of international students from this region is even more sparse.

On a similar note, Delgado-Romero and Sanabria (2007) argued though substantial research has been developed to find out what challenges international students face to get adapted to Universities in the US and how to best advise them, this has usually grouped international students as a whole. They argue those findings might be insufficient to adequately address the difficulties international students from specific backgrounds such as Latin America, experience. Similarly, Urban et al. (2010, p. 235) assert most academic reports have concentrated on "Asian international students while grouping Latin American students in an extremely broad category of "other". The authors state such categorisation makes it difficult to construct a useful understanding of the experience of Latin American international students. Thus, it could be argued there has been vast research to document the international experience, and international

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students, as a whole, are known to face challenges in their sojourn. Nonetheless, whilst the difficulties faced while abroad might be the same or similar among the different groups of international students, their extent of impact may vary depending on cultural distance and values (Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Hofstede, 1986). Therefore, what surfaces as a main struggle for a group of international students might not necessarily be for another. Bearing that in mind, focusing on findings from a one-fits-all approach, where minority groups of international students have been grouped as “other”, to document their experience abroad might not be a sound tactic to capture cultural subtleties and their impact. Hence, the importance of focusing on international students from Latin America, as a subset of the international students population that has been understudied (Delgado-Romero and Sanabria, 2007; Urban et al., 2010; Foley, 2013; Tanner, 2013), in order to build a more solid understanding of what their experience abroad actually entails and suggest appropriate means of support.

Furthermore, although the outbound trends of students from Latin American origin are too low to be compared with students from China and India, the emergence presence of countries such as Mexico and Brazil should not be underestimated (Choudaha and Chang, 2012). Over the last few years, Latin America has earned its place as one of the world’s fast-growing markets for outbound student mobility as the numbers for postgraduate studies overseas have increased significantly; therefore, Latin America is expected to become the third largest global region for HE international recruitment by 2035 (Rushworth, 2017). On this subject, in recent years the outbound mobility of Mexican international students augmented 35% (*Ibid.*). In the UK context, Mexico has been recognised as the Latin American country with the largest number of HE international students (UIS, 2016) identifying England as the primary host country (HESA, 2018a).

Therefore, based on the notion that more research efforts should be dedicated to better document the experience of groups of students in international mobility little explored and that they are a growing mobile population, this study sets out to scrutinise the adaptation of Latin American international students by looking at Mexican postgraduate students in the UK. In addition to the previous rationale informed by the review of literature, focusing on Mexican students also emerges from the intention to contribute to the internationalisation of HE in my working context in Mexico, the second largest Public University. This is to be achieved through the identification of the challenges experienced, and the acknowledgment of effective or ineffective institutional practices to assist the international student in their transition and adaptation from the context of a HE institution with a larger trajectory in internationalisation.

Thus, this thesis intends to grasp a holistic understanding of the participants’ experience abroad by exploring the challenges the participants faced, the sources of support provided by the

receiving institution, and the coping strategies implemented to adapt prior to travelling and during the first four weeks. Moreover, this research goes beyond gathering quantitative data, which may not allow delving further into the participants' experience and unmasking the real challenges the participants encountered (Andrade, 2006), by adopting a qualitative approach, which compiled data from an online qualitative survey and questionnaire, focus groups and interviews.

1.4 **Background information**

The following section delves into the background information for this study. The first section introduces the conceptualisation of the international student experience, and in light of it overviews the challenges likely to be shared or not by domestic and international students. The second section discusses the benefits of the studying abroad experience for the international student, and the receiving country and institution. In line with this, it explores the relevance for the provision of support services by host universities based on two understandings. The last section elaborates on aspects related to international mobility in the UK, which is the context of this study. It illustrates some of the reasons for choosing the UK as the destination; it explores trends of international mobility as well as requirements to study in the UK.

1.4.1 **The international student experience**

Overall the transitioning experience of studying abroad can be regarded as a positive outcome. It reflects the achievement of the learner's interest to expand their knowledge with experts in their field of interest; in addition to, in some cases, having gained admission to highly competitive institutions and secured a scholarship for this purpose (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). This eagerness for accomplishment can place the international student as a highly motivated individual (Wright and Schartner, 2013; Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). Despite the achievement and the benefits that studying abroad embodies, the transition ⁴from one cultural and educational setting to another can also entail difficulties. In this view, it has been acknowledged while some international students find it easy to adapt to the new environment, others face some difficulties (Andrade, 2006).

In line with the latter, research has consistently stated although the domestic student indeed faces challenges in their transition to university, the international student has commonly been

⁴ Defining transition as "a passage from one fairly stable state to another fairly stable state, and it is a process triggered by a change" (Meleis, 2010, p. 11).

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identified to experience a far more uneven scenario that implies greater adjustment needs (Evans, 2009; Schartner, 2014). As Ward and Kennedy (1993, p.143) claim, “stress and coping approaches to acculturation suggest that psychological adjustment should be more problematic in sojourning, compared to sedentary, groups”. For instance, while both groups of students are likely to experience difficulties adjusting to the educational environment, pursuing studies in a foreign language is recognised as a stressor likely to interfere with the adaptation of the international student (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, international students have perceived more poorly the expectations concerning the quality and effectiveness of the institutional support services provided, which have been linked to a more deficient adaptation and higher depression levels, than by their local counterparts (Ibid.). Other domains in which international students have been identified to experience more challenges, in comparison to domestic students, are social support, feelings of loneliness and homesickness in part due to the absence of support networks and the difficulty of making friends with locals (Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

Furthermore, it has been argued the range of issues the international student face, span from everyday matters to emotional distress (Ward et al., 2001). These difficulties are related to practical concerns, such as arranging accommodation and transportation, adjusting to the different weather, educational system, and shaping the skills to communicate in a foreign language (Schartner, 2014). Inadequate language proficiency has been recognised as one of the most salient challenges international students face as well as an anxiety trigger (Brown, 2008). Lack of proficiency, in turn, can affect the academic (understanding lectures, examinations and asking questions) and sociocultural (interacting with locals and making friends) domains of the international student’s adjustment (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Schartner, 2014).

In addition to the latter, international students are considered to experience “multiple contextual transitions” (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016) given that they are to adjust to a new country, a different educational system, and a higher academic degree. Further to adjusting their interpersonal relationships at home and creating new ones in the host culture (Ibid.). Based on this notion, the international students’ learning curve to adapt to the new academic and cultural conditions is deemed to be frequently sheer (Evans, 2009). Therefore, diminishing the impact of these contextual transitions is essential for the international student to reap the benefits of their aspiration to study abroad. In line with this, the following section explores some of the benefits international students bring to the host country and receiving institutions; it similarly overviews the stance taken in relation to the provision of institutional support services to assist the student in transition.

1.4.2 Studying abroad benefits

The gains of studying abroad seem to be bidirectional. On the one hand, the international student is claimed to benefit from the experience in linguistic, intercultural, personal, and professional terms (Wright and Schartner, 2013). On the other, the receiving country and institution are considered to profit from the academic, cultural, and economic input the international student brings (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). International students by their presence provide an opportunity for non-mobile students and staff to experience a diverse and multicultural environment. In spite of this cultural enhancement, international students are highly valued by HE institution providers in virtue of the substantial financial revenues earned from the overseas student tuition fees (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007; Wright and Schartner, 2013).

The outpaced growth of international students in global tertiary enrolments over the last two decades has warranted the institutions' economic dependence on this student's segment, for a solid economy and a continued vitality (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007; Li et al., 2009; Montgomery, 2010; British Council, 2012; Wright and Schartner, 2013; Ilieva et al., 2014;). In light of this, a fierce competition to attract and retain international students by receiving countries and host universities has been in action (Li et al., 2009; Schartner, 2014). Therefore, elaborated strategies to improve the international students' experience have begun to emerge; where some of these have emphasised the immediate need to promote and foster the value of diversity in the teaching and learning spheres as well as in quality assurance groups (Montgomery, 2010).

In this regard, the provision of adequate institutional support services to assist international students has become of utmost importance on two bases. First, scholars advocate for increased awareness of the impact of the international student's transition, and therefore for an active response on behalf of the recruiting university (Andrade, 2006; Schartner, 2014; Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). The involvement of the receiving institutions is expected through the implementation of appropriate support mechanisms to reassure these students with a positive experience and achievement of academic goals (Andrade, 2006; Schartner, 2014; Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). Second, in their quest to attract and maintain their international students' numbers, universities across the globe have started scrutinising how to best support international students and developing institutional support systems at the university, and Faculties and Departmental level (Li et al., 2009; Montgomery, 2010). Nonetheless, it has been claimed that the responsibility to 'fit in' in the new, academic, and cultural milieu has primarily been placed on the student in mobility behalf with little efforts by the receiving institutions (Andrade, 2006; Schartner, 2014).

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The following section addresses contextual information pertaining trends of international students in the UK.

1.4.3 International mobility in the UK

According to Graduate Prospects (2016), a UK government-supported website recruiting students to the UK, the UK is the preferred destination to study after the US due to the rounded combination of elements it provides. Academic, professional, time length, linguistic and cultural aspects comprise the bundle of benefits. Promoting in the first place the worldwide reputation and recognition of its institutions and earned qualifications, which are claimed to facilitate work insertion after graduation. Second, the shorter length of its postgraduate programmes, wherein comparison with other countries educational systems, a Masters taught programme usually lasts one-year full time, and a PhD degree could be completed in three full-time years. Given that English is a widely used language living and studying in the UK promises linguistic rehearsal and improvement. Finally, experiencing the uniqueness of the UK culture is presented as an advantage for choosing the UK as a study abroad destination.

Concerning the influx of international students in the UK, the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, 2018) reported that for the 2016-2017 academic calendar, 13% of the students enrolled in HE in the UK, were from outside the UK and the rest of the European Union (EU). The total figure of non-UK students studying in the UK during the 2016-2017 calendar was of 442,375 with 42% of postgraduate students, belonging to a country outside the EU. Chinese students are appreciably the largest international student group in the UK; representing almost one-third of the non-EU students' population in the UK (UKCISA, 2018). Moreover, England is reported (UKCISA, 2018) as the country holding the largest concentration of international students in the UK. In regards to HE Latin American students in the UK, according to data from HESA (2018a) for the 2016-2017 academic calendar, the top five sending countries were: Mexico (n=2120), Brazil (n=1745), Colombia (n=1005), Chile (n=865) and Ecuador (n= 515). These figures show a slight increase of Latin American students in the UK compared to those reported in 2013 (see Rationale for the study). Overall, England has been accounted as the leading host country for the students from this region. Within England, London is the preferred English region by Mexican students; followed by Yorkshire and The Humber, and the South East, which is the setting for this study.

The top three subject areas most sought by EU and non-EU students in the UK are, in order of relevance: business and administrative studies (exceeding by far the other subjects), engineering and technology, and social studies (UKCISA, 2018). Nonetheless, the OECD Education at a Glance (2017) reports STEM subjects is a growing field among HE international students in OECD

countries, with almost one-third of them opting for a science-related programme. Moreover, graduation in the latter subjects at the doctoral level has nearly doubled in comparison with numbers at the undergraduate level in 2015 (Ibid.) Furthermore, graduating from a STEM affiliated subject is associated with higher employment rates. Thus, according to the OECD (2017) the expected employment rate for students graduating from information and communication technologies (ICT) programmes is 7% higher than those who pursued a degree from the arts, the humanities, the social sciences, journalism or information. In line with this, the primary interest of Mexican international students in the UK is on postgraduate, research or taught programmes, ascribed to STEM subjects. Such choice seems to have an association with the scholarship opportunities available for them. The National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) has a long trajectory, as well as nation and worldwide recognition as an important Postgraduate scholarship provider in Mexico (Rushworth, 2017). The CONACYT endeavours to improve Mexico's scientific, technological, innovative, social, and human-centred abilities by fostering the development of knowledge at the national postgraduate level (Ibid.)

Regarding study-related visas granted in 2016, the UK Home Office (2017) reported a slight decrease of 1% with 207,200 Tier 4 visas conceded. Comparably, the number of university-sponsoring study visa applications increased by 1% to 167,554. It included a 6% increase for Russell Group universities (80,360). Over this period, only five non-EU nationalities represented 58% of the study-related visas granted, with Chinese students taking by far the lead with 37% of the total. Followed by students from the United States, India, Hong Kong, and Saudi Arabia, in that order.

Overall, according to UK Visas and Immigration (2018) the requirements to apply for the Tier 4 visa category in the UK involve four general requirements. It requires acceptance to a place on a programme by an education provider accredited as a licensed sponsor, and financial proof for payment of studies while duration of studies. In addition to proof of English competence; regularly by passing a secure English Language test (SELT), equivalent to level B2 of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) for HE studies. Finally, not belonging to a country that is part of the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland.

Despite the current economic reliance of HE institutions in their international students' population (Ilieva et al., 2014), the implementation of tight immigration policies in the UK has resulted in a decrease of international students and a refusal of 4,500 student visa applications by the end of 2011 (Choudaha and Chang, 2014). As of March 2009, the UK Home Office (2014) implemented a series of changes to their immigration policy for Tier 4 visas. The Point Based System (PBS) along with other stricter measures, aiming to diminish the misuse of student-related

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visas for immigration reasons, was introduced (Choudaha and Chang, 2014). As of then, Tier-4 applicants are required to be sponsored by an education provider licensed by the UK Border Agency and restrictions on post-study work were enforced (UK Home Office, 2014). This visa regime has been regarded as "damaging" given that it has harshly affected the intake of international students in UK business schools and other universities that depend on the revenue from this group of students (Collinson, 2016). In spite of the competitiveness and high recognition of UK universities, the tightening of the immigration rules is diverting investment and talent since the UK is becoming a "difficult" or "unattractive" place to study (Ibid.)

In addition to the rationale of this study to expand knowledge in a population understudied, Mexican international students, in a context of study where they represent the main intake of students of Latin American students, the UK; the following section presents my interests as a researcher for the development of this research.

1.5 Motivations as a researcher

As a former Bachelor of Arts' student studying to become an English teacher in a non-multicultural environment, I realised that there was a lot to learn beyond language. Therefore, I made an effort to engage in an international experience where I could widen my cultural knowledge of the language I was planning to teach. To do so, I went abroad for the first time to an English speaking country and pursued a Master of Arts Degree. To be in a class, as a student and teaching assistant, with students from all over the world and learning about cultural differences, made the perfect bridge between theory and practice of what an intercultural experience was. This experience triggered my interest in international education issues and the desire to update the generation and application of knowledge in this area.

Considering that my personal and academic success as an international student at a US University was attributed in part to the support provided to me by the host institution; once back in my former University, as an employed part-time lecturer, I became interested in the support international students need prior to and during the first weeks of their mobility to adjust to dissimilar environments. I informally approached administrative staff in charge of international students to inquire into the orientation process, and little support appeared to be offered. There seemed to be room for improvement in the procedures used, as well as new means of support to be implemented. I then decided to work on a small-scale research project concerning the perceptions of eleven undergraduate international students regarding the orientation process they experienced. The aim was to discover how successful the orientation received prior to and during the first two weeks of stay in the new culture had been according to their perception. The

results of such study showed lack of consistency on the type of orientation received, which was reflected in different extents of support. Additionally, the assistance seemed to derive from different areas such as academics, the office for internationalisation and the participants' home University. Finally, the international participants hoped to have received more information prior to arrival and to have access to more information on the institution's webpage. Such study unfolded new research areas that confirmed my interest to devote the development of my Doctoral studies in this area.

Furthermore, I myself have undergone three processes of transition and adaptation as a student. Firstly, I moved from a small town to the capital state city in my home country to pursue my undergraduate studies though I was a domestic student, the academic and sociocultural environment was utterly unfamiliar to me, and I needed to adjust to the new academic and non-academic environment. My second experience was as an international student at a US University while pursuing my Master's degree. Finally, the third one and the one I am currently experiencing is as a PhD international student in the UK experiencing my own adjustment to a new academic system and culture while researching the adaptation experience of other Mexican postgraduate students also in the UK. A comprehensive positionality statement, which will develop this section in richer detail, will be found in the methodology chapter.

1.6 Impact and communication

The results of this study aim to contribute to international student mobility through the exploration of the international student experience of an understudied and fast mobile developing region. Therefore, findings from this study aim to be of interest to scholars researching the international student experience of Latin American origin as a region and Mexico as a country. Moreover, they aim to be of relevance to policymakers by informing on beneficial organisational practices, which should be maintained, and on poor practices, which might need to be revisited for a smoother transition. Furthermore, this study could also be of relevance to academics interested in understanding the academic culture of their international learners. Finally, results could aid administrative staff and personnel by having a clearer understanding of the challenges Mexican international students face and the usefulness of the support services they provide, to in turn optimise the quality of the services they are offering.

Additionally, this research aims to contribute to the internationalisation of HE in Mexico through the identification of effective organisational practice in relation to transition and adaptation of Mexican students studying in contexts like the UK. For instance, it endeavours to deliver recommendations and good organisational practices that could be implemented for the

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improvement of HE mobility practices in my working context. Further, it is expected that the results of this research would not only benefit outgoing Mexican international students, but also international mobile students coming to the Mexican HE context. In this view, this research attempts to provide critical input for the provision of adequate resources, so that Mexican universities can send and receive students with a firm foundation that prepares them for global education.

Finally, the outcomes of this research seek to be beneficial for the international student's integral development by increasing their awareness about what the international experience entails, which may lead to a maximisation of the available resources and an increased consciousness of their stance in this process. The latter aiming to achieve a smoother adaptation that contributes to the achievement of their educational goals and the development of a sound relationship with the host culture.

The following chapter illustrates the guiding literature for this study.

Chapter 2 Literature review

This chapter presents my engagement with the theoretical and empirical literature of relevance to this study. It is organised into two main sections. The first section reviews traditional and contemporary theoretical approaches of culture shock to study cross-cultural adaptation⁵. It discusses the guiding theories for this study. Further, the literature of relevance to the adaptation of international students and the early period of their sojourn is reviewed. Social interaction and social support as coping strategies are then presented. The second section of this chapter explores organisational practices to support international students' transition. It reviews mainly empirical literature related to students support services, induction, the rationale for delivery, students' impressions, and identified effective and ineffective organisational practices. Each of the two sections conclude by presenting a summary of the literature reviewed and accordingly, introduce the research questions that emerged as a result of such engagement with the literature. Finally, the chapter ends by restating the three research questions that guide this study and succinctly describing the utility of the theories explored in this review of literature for the purposes of the study.

2.1 Theoretical approaches to culture shock

The result of the contact of an individual in an unfamiliar culture was initially posited as 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960). Therefore, sojourners, defined as the "individuals who travel voluntarily to a new culture, usually for specific objectives such as educational and occupational opportunities, who view their residence in the new culture as fixed and finite, and who usually have expectations of returning to their country of origin" (Ward and Kennedy, 1994, p.331), were likely to experience it.

Traditional theories of culture shock to study cross-cultural adaptation were rooted in migration and mental health viewpoints (Ward et al., 2001). These initial models had a clinical orientation and were heavily associated with medical approaches of the sojourner adjustment. Consequently, they emphasised the negative aspects of the cross-cultural encounter inasmuch as to require medical assistance. Therefore, a new perspective emerged. It posited not to conceive the cross-cultural sojourn as a taxing event that needed to be dealt in medical terms (Furnham and

⁵ In this study the terms cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment will be used indistinctively to refer to "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (Kim, 2001, p.31)

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Bochner, 1986), but more as a learning experience, where both the student sojourner and the host culture played an active role (Ward et al., 2001). This positionality allowed for the emergence of contemporary theories, where the concept of 'culture shock' was renovated to a more dynamic standpoint. The sojourner was then perceived as a proactive agent, who reacted and acted to the difficulties emerging from change. This shift was grounded in the culture learning approach and suggested, "preparation, orientation, and the acquisition of culturally relevant social skills" (Ward et al., 2001) as the appropriate course of action for sojourners. Therefore, the passive version of the sojourner, as a receiver, deriving from a harmful situation, started to be questioned (Zhou et al., 2008). Both theoretical currents, traditional and contemporary, are illustrated below in detail.

2.1.1 Traditional models

The perspectives, concerning culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation, coined by Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), and Adler (1975) are commonly addressed in the literature.

Lysgaard (1955) seemed to be a pioneer in developing research pertaining international academic mobility. His research focused on the retrospective exploration of the adjustment of a group of Scandinavians who had been in the United States, mainly for academic reasons, for periods of 0-6 months, 6-18 months, or for 18 months or over. Lysgaard's (1955) work has been prominently recognised due to his proposition of adjustment as a process over time. Based on his evidence, there was a relationship between duration and adjustment, which could be understood as a 'U-shaped curve'. Therefore, sojourners would have to pass through different stages in order to achieve 'good adjustment'. The first stage was symbolised by feelings of easiness and success in the foreign context. There is excitement for being abroad and for making new 'social contacts' even when these relationships are more circumstantial than deep engagements (Lysgaard, 1955). The second stage was acknowledged as the 'crisis'. At this point, the sojourner is in need of stronger relations with people from the host community and the inability to suffice that right away triggers feelings of loneliness and ethnocentric views (Ibid.) It is in the final stage where "one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community" (Lysgaard, 1955, p.51).

Oberg's (1960) contribution to cross-cultural research is twofold. First, he is attributed with the concept of 'culture shock'. Oberg's argumentation was focused on the adjustment of missionaries' sojourners. According to him, when in a different cultural context, travellers 'suffer' from culture shock, triggered by feelings of nervousness given the loss of "all [...] familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, p.177). Oberg interpreted the impact of cross-cultural experiences as a disease that sojourners had to suffer and for which, some could recover while

some others could not. Secondly, in resemblance with Lysgaard's (1955) proposition, Oberg (1960) identified stages sojourners go through in order to adjust. A fascination of the host culture also marks the beginning stage. He defined it as the "honeymoon stage", and it could last from a few days up to six months dependent on the situation. This superficial stage was replaced by a "crisis" stage in which the sojourner is due to experience "real conditions of life". This stage is distinguished by "hostile and aggressive attitudes towards the host country" (Oberg, 1960, p.178). The sojourner seeks "refuge" by establishing contact with fellow nationals and vents through stereotypical comments its emotions. By the third stage, the sojourner has grasped some cultural and linguistic understanding of the host culture and is more able to find their way around. This is described as the recovery stage where confidence and ethnocentric views start to emerge. The final stage is where "complete adjustment" is expected to happen once the sojourner has accepted and enjoyed the new customs, and negative feelings, such as anxiety, have overall vanished. The process of these stages seems to fit well with Lysgaard's (1955) proposition of a U-curve adjustment where sojourners initially live a fascinating experience, followed by a delicate stage, which gradually starts to pick up until reaching a final satisfactory stage for adjustment.

Similarly, Adler in 1975 proposed five stages for the understanding of the transitional experience of cross-cultural sojourners. The first four stages he proposed (contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, in that order) show substantial similarity with the conceptualisations and the adjustment trajectory presented above. However, Adler (1975) looked at the transitional experience from a different perspective. For him, culture shock should not be regarded as a negative happening; instead, it should be conceived as an opportunity for "culture learning, self-development, and personal growth" (Adler, 1975, p.14). Adler's basic understanding was that the experience of transitioning had potential for "personal and cultural growth"; thus, the process would not finish when adjusting in the "autonomy" stage to the host environment. A fifth stage, named the "independence", followed. In this stage, the sojourner had a deeper self-awareness as well as a more grounded understanding of cultures not being better or worse, but different (Adler, 1975). This discovery was expected to lead the sojourner to more skilled management of "further transitions". On these grounds, Adler (1975) did not conceive the independence stage as the end of the process instead it was expected to trigger the interest to undergo other cross-cultural experiences. Contemporary theorists later followed Adler's understanding of culture shock, as a learning process.

Concerning the traditional theories explicated above, Church's (1982) comprehensive review of the literature, related to the sojourners' adjustment (stages, curves, and types), found little support for the U curve hypothesis. Based on the evidence consulted, the U curve of adjustment was conceived as "weak", "inconclusive" and "overgeneralized" (Church, 1982, p.542). One of the

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main criticisms was that the beginning of the sojourn was not depicted as a “honeymoon” stage with an impressionistic behaviour, as conceptualised by Oberg (1960) and Adler (1975). Opposite to that, subsequent research by Furnham and Bochner (1986) identified the early stage as the most stressful period of the sojourn. Literature pertaining to the early period will be elaborated in a subsequent section.

Berry (1997) challenged the concept of culture shock coined by Oberg (1960). According to him, the term culture shock bears a negative connotation because it assumes an inevitable clash between the sojourner and host culture. Though there are relative struggles to be faced in the acculturating experience, Berry acknowledges there are also coping processes to overcome them. Additionally, he clarifies the basis of the issues experienced is due to the interaction between two different cultures, rather than conceiving as one culture provoking the shock. Berry (1997) up brings then the concept of acculturative stress and relates it to psychological patterns of stress as a reaction to environmental stressors. Even when the term of culture shock might denote a negative impact from the start, and acculturative stress might propose a more equitable understanding, the latter term does not appear to be broadly embraced by literature in the field. I value the psychological element Berry (1997) added to the conception of culture shock. Following that path of ideas, this study agrees with Adler's (1975, p.13) definition of culture shock as: "a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's one culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences". However, this thesis disregards the notion of culture shock as a negative stance with no agency on behalf of the sojourners as postulated by traditional theories and appreciates the conception of it as an opportunity for learning as proclaimed by Adler (1975).

2.1.2 Contemporary theories

Traditional theories of culture shock led to the emergence of contemporary approaches for the study of cross-cultural adaptation. They went beyond the conception of ‘culture shock’ as a negative account and aimed for a more proactive view in which participants took an active role in it (Zhou et al., 2008). These contemporary theories have been defined as the ABCs of culture shock since they consider the Affect, the Behaviour, and the Cognitions of human interaction and emphasise “the shift from the negative and reactive features of culture contact towards its adaptive, active coping aspects (Ward et al., 2001, p.39). They are namely: Culture learning, Stress and coping, and Social identification theories. The culture learning and the stress and coping frameworks have been mainly acknowledged and used as guiding theories for the study of cross-cultural adaptation (Ward et al., 2001). Nonetheless, the following section presents the three perspectives and ends by accounting the conceptualisations drawn on for this study.

2.1.2.1 Culture learning

The culture learning approach is one of the contemporary perspectives, and its emphasis rests on the behavioural part of the intercultural contact⁶ (Ward et al., 2001). It had its origins in social and experimental psychology, coined by Argyle (1969) and his work on social skills and interpersonal behaviours. He focused on the behavioural elements of the interaction and suggested: " an individual engaged in interaction is engaged in a performance that is more or less skilled" (Argyle, 1969, p.180). Consequently, a dearth of appropriate social skills may be the source of ineffective communication with individuals from different and new cultures (Zhou et al., 2008). Therefore, behavioural competence is the underpinning principle of the culture learning approach since it is believed that "culture-specific skills (...) are required to negotiate the new cultural milieu" (Ward et al., 2001, p.37).

According to Bochner's (1982) culture-learning model, intercultural contact could be either a 'threatening' or an 'enhancing' experience. It could be threatening if the sojourner was conceived as an outsider "intruding on a group's established territory, undermining the values and diluting the cultural identity of its members" (Bochner, 1982, p.37). On the other hand, it could be enhancing, if the sojourner was appreciated as an interesting individual through whom a different perspective of the world could be learnt. To this end, it was necessary to blur the division between "us" and "them" through the involvement of both groups and the enhanced learning about each other's culture (Ibid.). In addition to this, the provision of an approach that went beyond cognitive learning, where general information was not regarded to enable the sojourners to perform adequately in the new everyday life context, and that incorporated characteristics of the host culture without verging the sojourners to lose their own identity, was posited (Bochner, 1982). In line with this, one of the fundamental premises of Bochner's proposition was not to give for granted that sojourners aimed to adapt to the host culture, in the sense of being willing to abandon their home culture and embrace the new one. Instead, Bochner avowed sojourners strived to be less regarded as intruding outsiders and it was when not behaving adequately that they were most spotted in the host culture. For so, irrespective of converging or not with salient norms and behaviours of the host culture, which might be reverted once back in former culture, the importance rested on the sojourners' acquisition of sociocultural skills to navigate appropriately in the context in turn (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). Therefore, culture learning is concerned with the acquisition of sociocultural skills; hence, it is related to the sociocultural

⁶ Intercultural contact is defined in this study as "communication between people from different national cultures" (Gudykunst, 1993, p.179).

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adaptation of the sojourn. The different domains of adaptation will be presented later in this chapter.

Following the previous argument, Furnham and Bochner (1986) have been strong proponents of the culture-learning approach. The authors assert rupture in intercultural communication encounters is due to 'inadequate' mastery of the host environment social conventions. Unsatisfactory social performance could be due to unawareness of the appropriate behavioural norms for social conduct in the specific new culture or if cognizant about these rules of conduct, 'unable' or 'unwilling' to accept them (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). The authors claim that sojourners in a new culture are 'socially unskilled persons' and a set of conventions needs to be learnt to properly function given that norms of social interaction differ between cultures. In line with the previous understanding, the underlying premise of the culture learning approach is that "cross-cultural problems arise because sojourners have trouble negotiating certain everyday social encounters" (Furnham and Bochner, 1986, p.201). Thus, for the achievement of successful intercultural interaction, the identification of the social situations that are of disturbance for a sojourner in a specific context, followed by training of relevant skills, is asserted as the appropriate course of action (Ibid.) The set of skills is dependent on the sojourner's characteristics such as age, gender, social class, culture of origin, as well as their purpose for sojourn (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). In addition to other elements, but not limited to: previous experience abroad (Klineberg and Hull, 1979); length of residence in host country (Searle and Ward, 1990); general knowledge about the host culture (Ward and Searle, 1991); language and communication competence (Furnham, 1993); academic and language difficulty, adjustment to the physical environment, and living independently from family (Searle and Ward, 1990).

Additionally, culture learning rather than conceiving the sojourn as a detached event, it conceives the sojourn as an integrative component of the individuals' life (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). For instance, the beginning and the end of the sojourn are not the frames of culture learning. Rather it is alleged that prior to departure practices, the degree of competence, and extent of preparation will determine the individual's experience abroad and similarly, this will impact the sojourner's later reinsertion in their home culture (Klineberg 1981 in Furnham and Bochner, 1986). Opposite to earlier models of culture shock, culture learning approach bears the understanding that the 'difficulties' the sojourner's faces whilst abroad, are not merely the result of intellectual deficits, but they are associated with the degree of preparation (Klineberg 1981 in Furnham and Bochner 1986). This thesis embraces this notion and in line with it explores the extent of the participants' preparation for the challenges faced within their early stage.

In sum, it could be said that the culture learning perspective is underpinned by three premises: 1) the recognition that cultural apprentices face difficulties dealing with everyday social interactions; 2) the need for culture-specific skills to convey with the host environment; 3) the acknowledgement that those skills can be obtained through the learning process (Wilson et al., 2013, p.901.). In this sense, 'shock' was conceived as the drive to learn the culturally appropriate skills and behaviours to interact in the new social conventions (Furnham and Bochner, 1986) and this is the notion adopted in this study. It therefore adopts a more proactive stance to culture shock, in which sojourners can get prepared for the experience, and rejects the previous conception of it as an inevitable and static result of intercultural contact and cross-cultural adaptation.

2.1.2.2 Stress and coping

In contrast, the stress and coping framework emerged from clinical perspectives and offered a different approach for the understanding of cross-cultural adaptation (Searle and Ward, 1990). The stress and coping approach highlights the affective component of the intercultural sojourn and adaptation. Its emphasis is placed on the psychological well-being and satisfaction of the sojourners (Ward et al., 2001) and it has its roots on research by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) on stress, appraisal, and coping, and by research by Holmes and Rahe (1967) on social adjustment. From this perspective, the 'shock' emerges from the intrinsic stress that life changes pose and therefore, sojourners "need to be resilient, adapt, and develop coping strategies and tactics" (Zhou et al., 2008, p.65).

Though this approach recognises intercultural contact as a stressful event, in similitude with earlier medical underpinnings, the stress and coping model gives prominence to the implementation of coping strategies to overcome stress (Ward et al., 2001). Therefore, the focus is on appraisal and responses to stress, which can oscillate from minor distress to incapacitating nervousness, for appropriate management of the difficulties emerging from the intercultural interaction (*Ibid.*) Thus, the distinctive characteristic of the stress and coping framework, in relation to previous medical models, rests on its active stance for the implementation of coping mechanisms to alleviate the impact of stress; such is this thesis' understanding of this approach and will then seek to explore the strategies employed by the participants to cope with the inherent stress of transitions to ease their adaptation.

Furthermore, the stress and coping approach might allow for an overarching understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation. Given its comprehensive conceptualisation, that goes beyond the adjustment of "an individual to a difficult or stressful situation" (Ward et al., 2001, p.38) and integrates personal and situational characteristics that may assist or hamper the adaptation to the

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host environment (Searle and Ward, 1990). As reviewed by Ward et al. (2001), researchers in the field have drawn on different personality attributes and situational factors such as locus of control, extraversion, degrees of uncertainty, coping mechanisms, homesickness, loneliness, quality of relationships with locals and conational fellows, among others. In addition to demographic characteristics like gender, cultural background, and job condition. Moreover, it considers cultural specific elements such as cultural distance and acculturation. The expectations of the sojourners are also considered of relevance in the stress and coping framework, since it is believed that the greater the gap between the expectation and the actual experience, the more psychological difficulties the sojourner is likely to experience (Ibid.) Concerning situational factors, social support is deemed to have a clear association with cross-cultural adjustment. Social support is then perceived as “a buffer against the psychological effects of stress” (Searle and Ward, 1990, p.451). A discrepancy in the literature is found as to what the most useful source of support for a sojourner is, co-nationals vs. host nationals. Social interaction and social support are presented in detail later in this chapter on a section of its own.

Both, culture learning and stress and coping, frameworks draw from some of the elements illustrated above for the understanding of sojourners adaptation. For example, social contact with host and fellow nationals is also believed to play a role in the linguistic and cultural competence the sojourners may master or not (Ward et al., 2001). Moreover, accurate expectations have also been interpreted to lead to an effective sociocultural adaptation given that they may enhance culture-specific skills, and encourage adequate and rewarding intercultural encounters (Ward et al., 2001). Furthermore, cultural distance understood as the perceived degree of value differences between home and host culture, is also related to the extent of sociocultural challenges the sojourners' experience (Ibid.). For instance, the culture distance postulation proclaims, “the greater the cultural gap between participants, the more difficulties they will experience” (Ward et al., 2001, p.9). Cultural distance is a principle embraced in this study for the understanding of the participants' adaptation and how distant or close they perceive the host culture, and in relation to this, the psychological or sociocultural challenges they experience (Babiker et al., 1980).

The recognition and action to cope with the challenges faced in the affective and sociocultural domains are considered to be affected by individual as well as societal characteristics (Ward et al., 2001). In agreement with that, this study appreciates that understanding different ways to communicate between home and host culture, be they verbal or non-verbal, is of relevance to comprehend intercultural misapprehensions. Consequently, principles such as low vs. high context cultures, coined by Hall (1976) are embraced in this study. As stated by Hall (1976) in a low context culture, direct contact and delivery of information is preferred and being so, there is a strong emphasis on verbal communication. On the contrary, in a high context culture, little of the

message is transmitted in the explicit verbal message by itself; instead the message is conveyed by the clues provided through the context of the situation. These different ways to communicate could be helpful to explore the source of intercultural dissonances.

Similarly, Hofstede's (1986) model of 4-D cultural differences (individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity vs. femininity, have also been regarded as relevant to explain difficulties arising in intercultural encounters. For instance, in an individualist-oriented society the bonds between its members are assumed as strong, and therefore, there is concern about the interests of the in-group. The opposite is alleged of individualistic societies where the primary interest lies in looking after oneself and the immediate family (Hofstede, 1986). The power distance dimension refers to the degree to what inequality is accepted in a society by less influential people (Ibid.). Hofstede (1986) based this construct on the understanding that 'inequality exists' in every society; however, some cultures are more accepting towards it than others. The third dimension, uncertainty avoidance, denotes the degree of nervousness to which people from different cultures react in situations that are understood as 'unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable' (Ibid.). In line with this, Hofstede (1986) categorised as strong uncertainty avoidance societies those which show more adherence to formal rules and procedures, and aim to seek security; whereas low uncertainty avoidance societies are considered to feel more comfortable in situations that are ambiguous and therefore accept more personal risks. Finally, masculinity vs. femininity refers to values associated with social roles. Societies identified as masculine are claimed to be those, which draw a clear distinction in what men and women should do. For instance, the role of the men is to look for financial success and to be 'assertive, ambitious and competitive' while the role of the women is to assist and take care of the 'non-material quality of life', as well as of the children (Hofstede, 1986). In societies classed as feminine, the roles line is more blurred, and there are no clear distinctions between the expected behaviours and actions of men and women. In that context, activities and responsibilities may overlap irrespective of gender.

Because Hofstede's dimensions emerged from data captured on work-related values at a national level in over 50 countries, caution should be taken as within one same society, different gradations of the dimensions posited could be found (Ward et al., 2001). However, overall research that individually scrutinises the individualism-collectivism constructs has found consonance pertaining the values and attitudes of the participants as presented in Hofstede's nationality classification (Ibid.). Hofstede's 4-D model of cultural differences will be drawn on in this study when considered pertinent to assist the interpretation of findings.

2.1.2.3 Social identification theories

Social identification theories on their behalf are grounded on the notion that identity is a core element for the sojourner; being so, they study “the measurement of and changes in cultural identity” (Ward et al., 2001, p.48). Based on the understanding that individuals define themselves per group affiliation, social identification theories are concerned with ethnic identity. They analyse whether ethnic identity is retained or modified, definitions and perceptions of own and intergroup contact, which can lead to the exploration of subjects such as stereotyping, in-group bias, and prejudice, and the effects of cultural difficulties reflected in self-esteem, at the group level (Ibid.) Moreover, according to Ward et al. (2001), social cognitive theories portray the influence of contemporary psychology in that they are interested in internal cognitive processes instead of external perceptible behaviours.

One conceptual framework for the examination of the relationship between culture contact and change is acculturation and identity. Acculturation is defined by Valiente (2008, p.82) as “the integrative process of awareness towards one’s own culture and others’ cultures [and] it requires interaction between the learner’s existing cognitive framework and his new environment”. This interaction is likely to prompt changes in different areas such as attitudes, beliefs, and conducts, but more importantly in cultural identity (Ward et al., 2001). Earlier conceptualisations regarded acculturation as an antagonist process where the sojourners were considered to have to decide between identification with home or host culture (Ibid.). A more comprehensive conceptualisation was posited by Berry (1997). It was equally framed around home and host culture identities; however, it jointly proposed four different strategies for acculturation. To categorise the acculturation strategies, Berry (1997) anchored his model on two salient questions. The first one was related to the individual’s ethnic, cultural, and national identity and the extent to which they aim to preserve or change it. Berry (1997, p.9) defined this as ‘cultural maintenance’, and the underlying question was: “to what extent are cultural identity and characteristics considered to be important, and the maintenance strived for”. The second question concerned intergroup relations and the perceptions and attitudes about that interaction. This premise was coined by Berry (1997) as ‘contact and participation’ and the question posited was: “to what extent should they become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves” (Ibid.). The responses to these questions would help to postulate the strategies for the acculturation an individual or group of people would undergo. Berry (1997) proposed four acculturation strategies: marginalisation, assimilation, separation, and integration.

For instance, if sojourners do not strive for retaining their own cultural identity and deem as valuable to interact actively and engage with the settling society, assimilation is the strategy likely

to be outlined. Conversely, the separation strategy is explained when sojourners grip to the own culture while simultaneously evading to establish contact and participate with target culture. The integration strategy is to be the adopted strategy when individual seek to keep a balance in regards to preserving their original culture and interacting with the society of settlement. The marginalisation strategy is described when there is neither attachment to preserve own culture or to interact with the target one. Finally, Integration is known as the appropriate strategy for acculturation; however, its successful practice and achievement require the target society's flexibility and comprehensiveness regarding cultural diversity (Berry 1997). It is then a two-way strategy, or *mutual accommodation*, that calls for active participation, involvement, understanding, and acceptance of sojourner-host different values (Ibid.).

2.1.2.4 The ABCs of culture shock

Social identification theories account therefore for the results of intergroup contact and in light of that, as asserted by Berry (1997), on the changes an individual experience in their behaviour, outlooks, and perceptions. Consequently, given the focus of this research on the first four weeks of the sojourn, exploring the outcomes of the participants' intercultural contact, portrayed in acculturation strategies, seems to be beyond the scope of this study. Thus, this study will not espouse social identification theories since it is considered that identity and acculturation outcomes could be better explored from a longitudinal study where the participants' process of change could be followed through time. Focusing on the first few weeks of their sojourn might not be a sufficient time length to observe intergroup acculturation outcomes and draw sound conclusions in that regard. Therefore, this research embraces the culture learning and stress coping approaches as the conceptual framework based on the understanding that cross-cultural transition of international students is an important life event that may be stressful and may necessitate the appraisal and action of cognitive, social and affective skills to effectively cope with the demands of the host environment, which ponder individual as well as societal characteristics (Ward et al., 2001).

2.1.3 International students adaptation

The sojourner group concerned with this study is that of international students. It has been overall defined by Berry (1997) as the students of different cultural groups who have willingly migrated to a different location in order to pursue or continue their studies for a temporary period. Similarly, Mori (2000, p.137) defines international students as: "people in transition who choose to live in a foreign academic setting to realise their educational objectives". In addition to these definitions, which denote eagerness on behalf of these sojourners to pursue academic

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goals, this study also adopts Andrade's (2006, p.134) definition of international students as "individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers (NNES)".

Westwood and Barker (1990), pertaining the transitional challenges that international and domestic students face, assert both groups undergo the same transition path. However, undertaking overseas studies and living in a different culture adds up complexities and peculiarities, international students have to deal with; difficulties emerge on arrival from having to adjust swiftly to a new culture and a different educational system with new academic demands (Westwood and Barker, 1990; Hanassab and Tidwell, 2002). Additionally, learning while improving English language skills is another task to undergo (Schartner, 2014).

Moving from Mexico to the UK to pursue postgraduate students could be interpreted as the critical life event, as posited by Ward et al. (2001) that triggered the change. In this sense, transitioning from one culture to another is not the only area that requires a passage. For instance, it has been acknowledged that the process of transition from secondary to tertiary education is complex *per se*. Although the participants in this study are not being introduced to higher education (HE) conventions, it is argued that postgraduate international students, studying abroad for the first time, are somehow freshers to the covenants of the foreign University. They are therefore required to adjust to a higher academic degree as well as to a new educational system (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). In light of this, the international student is to experience "multiple contextual transitions" (*Ibid.*) which sets them in a steeper academic and cultural learning curve in relation to their domestic counterparts (Evans, 2009).

Overall, it could be said transitioning is difficult; however what could be accounted, as successful adaptation is controversial since researchers have implemented different criterion measures and have identified different features to define it. In this regard, Ward et al. (2001) scrutinised various analytical frameworks to adaptation and concluded the different propositions made shared two core themes: "psychological well-being and satisfaction, as well as effective relationships with members of the new culture, are important components of adaptation for cross-cultural travellers" (p.42).

The latter notion recognises the psychological and the sociocultural aspects of the sojourn. Ward and colleagues have postulated this. For instance, Searle and Ward (1990) and Ward and Kennedy (1993) pinpoint there is not an integrated framework for the study of cross-cultural adaptation; in this sense, they argue cross-cultural adaptation could be best studied from the lens of psychological and sociocultural adjustive dimensions (Ward and Kennedy, 1994). Moreover, they claim although these two types of adjustment processes are interrelated, they are distinctive and

composed by different factors, and should, therefore, be studied independently (Ward and Kennedy, 1994).

Psychological adjustment is concerned with the emotional and affective extents of the sojourn (Yang et al., 2006). It pertains to the stress individuals undergo when immersed in the new culture and to the "feelings of well-being and satisfaction" (Ward and Kennedy, 1993, p.131) in relation to that. Features such as personal characteristics, life changes, and societal encouragement influence this type of adjustment where the appropriate supportive social network is fundamental for a coped psychosomatic state of being (Ward and Kennedy 1993, 1994). Psychological adjustment derives from a stress coping framework that has been embodied in studies of acculturation and adaptation (Ward and Kennedy, 1993). As presented before, this will be the approach drawn on in this study to scrutinise the psychological adjustment of the participants. Moreover, given that psychological adaptation deals with the affective states of the experience, this research will use the term affective domain to refer to the set of difficulties related to the psychological adjustment of the participants.

On the other hand, sociocultural adjustment is concerned with the skilfulness to accommodate, convey, and interact with values of the new society on everyday situations (Ward and Kennedy, 1994). It relates to the behavioural extent of the sojourning experience and to "the ability to "fit in" or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture" (Ward and Kennedy, 1993, p.131). It is concerned with difficulty to socially adjust to the new milieu and the proficiency to cope with daily social situations faced in the unfamiliar culture. Sociocultural adaptation is rooted in a social learning model, and it has been disseminated through the culture learning approach (Ward and Kennedy, 1993); framework embraced for the purposes of this study. According to Ward and Kennedy (1993, 1994), the influential factors of socio-cultural adaptation are broad cultural understanding, the extent of residence in the target culture, and quantity of contact with local people. Regarding the quantity of contact with locals I argue it is slightly less important than the quality of it. If we were talking about quantity of interactions, they are likely to happen, as sojourners need to communicate on a daily basis. Therefore, intentionally or unintentionally contact with locals would be established on a daily basis: to take the bus, ask for queries on the street, school, supermarket, library, for example. International sojourners are implicitly and continuously in contact with the host culture. Therefore, the quantity of interactions is given for granted, but the quality is not. Quality would be to interact with the culture in a way that helps to have a sense of belonging, to engage with the host culture's salient values, to understand unknown and implicit behaviour, and that is not likely to be acquainted by the number of interactions you have on a day, but on the usefulness of the contact maintained. My claim is that international students can interact with the culture *per se* many times throughout the day (e.g. in

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the bus, the store, the library) yet that does not mean they are necessarily building peer relationships.

Though Ward and Kennedy (1994) contemplate the study of the psychological and sociocultural domains as necessary for a comprehensive picture of cross-cultural adaptation, Schartner (2014) considers academic adjustment is a core dimension that should be integrated for the holistic understanding of the international students' experience. Schartner (2014) differentiates between academic adjustment and academic adaptation. For her, academic adjustment is the "adjustment to the specific demands of academic study including styles of teaching and learning at the host University such as lecture style, relationships between and staff, and assessment procedures" whereas academic adaptation is interpreted as "academic achievement" measured in the form of assessment outcomes and performance (Schartner, 2014, p.32). This study deems of relevance the inclusion of the academic dimension for a holistic understanding of international students sojourn. It will then take on board Schartner's (2014) definition of academic adjustment, but will not embrace her view of academic adaptation since it is beyond the scope of this research to follow the participants throughout their academic studies and explore their academic outcomes.

The exploration of the above three arenas seems to offer a comprehensive framework for the study of the adjustment of international students. This study then adopts the sociocultural, affective, and academic domains as the scheme to scrutinise the adjustment difficulties that a cohort of Mexican post-graduate students faced in their first weeks of sojourn in a UK University. These dimensions will be analysed using the culture learning, and stress and coping approaches described earlier.

2.1.3.1 Early period

Westwood and Barker (1990) refer to the "early period", "stage", or "critical time" of international students sojourn. They claim the needs of international students at this point are not being fulfilled. Though the early stage is accounted as crucial for the adjustment of international students, there seems to be a dearth of research that deepens into the extent of the first weeks. There seem not to be a timespan delineated. For instance, what is the length of time considered as critical? Is it the first week, first two weeks, or first month? The first six weeks? The literature available recognises the importance of the initial period. However, in spite of its impact on the adjustment process of international students, "many studies do not take into account the implications of timing" (Brown, 2008, p.7).

Brown (2008) delved into the prevalence of international students' academic-related stress in the early period of their international experience. According to her findings, the "first 4 or 5 weeks" or

"1st month" (Brown, 2008, p.13) are the threshold of academic culture shock. Moreover, her findings support the notion that "adjustment refers to a time process" (Ibid., p.20). Brown (2008) concludes by confirming the need to provide international students with an orientation course that targets academic, cultural dissonances and is imparted before the beginning of the course or for specific purposes, during the first week, "when stress is at its highest" (Ibid., p.23).

In regards to the rationale as to why the initial stage is considered the critical period, Brown (2008) claims the existence of a transitory association between culture shock and adaptation. Brown (2008, p.6) argues, "culture shock is intense upon arrival in a new country but is noted for its transitory nature". As a consequence, tension would be acute during the initial stage of their academic stay. It would lessen as students become academically and linguistically competent. I concur with the author in that stress would trigger in the initial stage of the students' sojourn, and it would diminish as they befit with the academic environment; however, I suspect there are other factors, such as personal and contextual, that might have an impact on the extent and duration of the stress international students' experience.

Moreover, literature (Ward et al., 2001; Kim, 2001) asserts sociocultural challenges are believed to be most intense at the beginning of the sojourn given the initial unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge in the host environment, and the little interaction with local nationals at that stage. These difficulties decrease as time passes and more culture skills are learnt. This trajectory was depicted as an ascending curve of learning where stability is reached (Ward et al., 2001). Similarly, Schartner (2014) in her research focusing on the cross-cultural transition of postgraduate students in the UK supported this view. Her findings indicated that sociocultural related difficulties flourished during the early stage of the participants' sojourn and diminished with time. Nonetheless, Schartner (2014) argues sociocultural adjustment was not achieved due to contact with host nationals. Likewise, there were some difficulties, which did not level off throughout the participants' sojourn overseas.

Based on the previous understanding is that this research is concerned with closely following the participants' trajectory during their first four weeks of their sojourn and better understanding what the first weeks entail.

2.1.4 Social interaction

The existing literature agrees on the benefits of social interaction to ease international students' transition into a new culture. Research in the field recognises social interactions with host nationals as the most significant for the international student's adaptation in the target culture (Bochner et al., 1977; Westwood and Barker, 1990). Nonetheless, studies, which emphasise the

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importance of the interaction rather than on with whom, can also be found. For instance, Liu and Winder (2014) concluded international students who developed social networks with other students whether international, conational, or domestic experienced a smoother adaptation process and attained a higher degree of acculturation in the host country, in this case, the UK, opposite to those who did not form relationships with others. Liu and Winder (2014) assert although their international participants were cognizant of the benefits that establishing social networks with host nationals provide for their adaptation, they isolated themselves or were inclined to befriend other conational or international students due to previous unfavourable experiences with host nationals.

Moreover, as presented by Liu and Winder (2014), it could give the impression that it was the international students' choice to limit their interactions with host nationals as well as to isolate themselves. Even though the international participants were aware of the benefits of social interaction to ease their transition, they chose not to interact with host nationals. This could give the sense that appropriate choices for interaction with local students were granted, but international students decided not to take advantage of them. Though I agree with the notion that international students might not interact sufficiently with domestic students, I disagree with the rationale behind that decision and the way it is presented by Liu and Winder (2014). Being perceived, as inept and lacking empathy seem two valid reasons not to seek further engagement. Hence, it should not be implied that a suitable environment that promoted the interaction between both groups was available.

The previous argument raises the question of the extent of involvement of the host community. Is it only the international student's responsibility to get adapted to the new culture with no efforts or interest on behalf of the host culture? I argue that while it can be stated that international students decided to entrepreneurship this studying abroad experience, the host society and receiving country equally benefit from that decision in the sense of cultural diversity, and economic benefits (Connor et al., 2004; Southall et al., 2006; Yu, 2013; Liu and Winder, 2014). Consequently, it could also be contended that despite the lacking interest of international students to interact with host national, there may also be a lack of cultural and social inclusion on behalf of the society. In this regard, Westwood and Barker (1990, p.254) assert "if sojourners are carefully introduced into a new society by close, sympathetic host-culture friends, the evidence indicates that they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to fend for themselves". This depicts a more active role on behalf of the host society since it has been acknowledged that creating relationships with host people is not an "automatic process" and "increased interaction with host nationals would lead to improved sojourner adjustment" (Westwood and Barker, 1990, p. 255).

This could be regarded as a more proactive approach for an effective transition of international students.

2.1.5 Social support

According to Wilcox et al. (2005, p.716) over time students create their new family where "friends become, in effect, surrogate family members, a key of social support, both enhancing students' general sense of well-being and belonging and providing a buffering effect when students experience difficult". Therefore, it could be argued that the creation of new relationships and compatible friendships is another challenge likely to be shared by local and international new students. As claimed by Wilcox et al. (2005), undergraduate local and international students would have to develop and maintain a new social support network, and this process can be daunting for both. Consequently, in the initial stage of their sojourn, before these social bonds are created, students might experience more feelings of loneliness and homesickness, and then, rely on old networks for emotional support (Wilcox et al., 2005). The difference here may lay on the type of support that domestic and international can access. For instance, domestic students might have more frequent and easier access to contact their old life, families, and friends whereas international students are limited to whatever contact they can get through technology. Nonetheless, domestic and international students share the need to create in the early stage of their sojourn a new social support network or a "new family" (Wilcox et al., 2005); the difference might rest on how smooth and accessible the formation of such relationships for both groups is.

Accordingly, Wilcox et al. (2005) strive to give a sociological perspective to the study of social support in the transition of students to HE. They claim social support has been vastly documented from a psychological stance, which has proved to be instrumental for the effective adaptation of students to academic life, and acknowledges that social support takes a different role depending on where it derives. For instance, Wilcox et al. (2005) differentiate between the concepts of social integration and social support. The former concerned with the structure of social relations as in the extent and solidity of them, and the latter interested in the functioning of such relationships whether the support obtained is real or perceived. Borrowing from Weiss (1969,1974), Wilcox et al. (2005, p.708) classify the functions of personal relationships in: "attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliance and the obtaining of guidance-each ordinarily associated with a type of relationship". The authors also distinguish between emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal social support. These conceptions would be helpful to appreciate the extent of social support, where it derives from, as well as its functioning for the participants' adaptation.

2.2 Emerging research questions

The above section explored the literature in relation to cross-cultural adaptation and allowed for an understanding of the evolution of models of culture shock. This study rejected the concept of culture shock as depicted by traditional models, in which the sojourner was portrayed as a passive receiver of the experience faced, and the introduction to an unfamiliar environment was perceived as a traumatic process as to necessitate medical assistance. Contrarily, it embraced the view of culture shock posited by contemporary theories, merely the culture learning, and stress and coping frameworks. These models adopted a more active stance on behalf of the sojourner, where the new culture could be learned and prepared for, and coping mechanisms could be implemented to facilitate the transition to unfamiliar cultures; these are the views espoused in this research. Moreover, it rejected the appropriateness of the social identification theories' framework, also acknowledged as a contemporary theory, for the development of this thesis given its focus on acculturation outcomes. The latter were considered to be best studied on a longitudinal study and given the intention of this study to focus on the early stage of the sojourn, also identified in the literature as the most stressful period, the integration of social identification theories was not pondered as suitable. Furthermore, this section engaged with literature relevant to international students and shed light on the challenges they face to adapt given the intricacies of their sojourn to pursue studies abroad. In line with this, the literature led to the identification of three domains (academic, sociocultural and affective), which would be adopted in this study for a comprehensive understanding of the transitional challenges of this specific group of sojourners, international students. Moreover, the review of literature allowed to identify the early period as critical for the adaptation of international students; likewise, a dearth of research that focuses on the participants' experience during this stage and a lack of specificity as to the length of the first weeks, became apparent. These discoveries aided me to delimit the timeframe of this study, the first four weeks. Finally, the section above delved into social interaction and social support to inform as to the coping mechanisms sought by international students for the process of adaptation.

Therefore, the above review of literature informed about the need to explore the challenges, in its three domains: academic, sociocultural, and affective, Mexican international students, who are the focus of this study, face within the first four weeks of their sojourn. This represents the first research question of this thesis. Moreover, acknowledging the participants' active stance for their process of adaptation, this study sets out to provide evidence for the coping strategies implemented for their adaptation for the studying and living abroad experience. Thus, the two research questions that emerged from the above review of literature are:

- 1) What are the challenging areas this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced to adapt during their first four weeks of stay in the UK?
- 2) What are the coping strategies implemented for the adaptation of their studying and living abroad experience?

Nevertheless, the contemporary perspective of culture shock adopted in this study, as informed by the literature, does not only imply an active stance on behalf of the sojourner, but also on behalf of the host culture. Thus, the transition of the specific group of sojourners concerned in this study, international students, needs to involve and explore the sources of support provided by the recruiting HE institution for a holistic understanding of their transition and adaptation. How host universities support this group of sojourners and what organisational practices have been deemed by the literature as effective or ineffective are the themes explored in the following section of the review of literature.

2.3 Organisational practices

This section reviews the literature, mainly empirical studies, pertaining the institutional support catered for international students in HE. It defines what support services are, and as part of these transitional services, it scrutinises the rationale for the implementation of an induction, and it argues the extent of the difference between an induction for undergraduate and postgraduate international students. Moreover, it explores students' impressions about the delivery of inductions and scrutinises the components of effective and ineffective organisational practices.

2.3.1 Student support services

Although provided for online and distance learning, Tait's (2000) definition of student support might well fit the conventional campus-based form of instruction. He defines it as: "the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners" (Tait, 2000, p. 289). Consequently, "student services are (...) a response to the individual student, rather than a standard or product" (Ibid, p.290). Based on this conception Tait proposes three interrelated and interdependent functions of student services:

1. Cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;

2. Affective: providing an environment, which supports students, creates commitment, and enhances self-esteem; and

3. Systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems, which are useful, transparent, and overall student-friendly (Tait, 2000, p.289).

According to Tait (2000), student support as an effective organisational practice should be comprised of each and all of the three components mentioned above. This proposal seems to cater for the academic and administrative related matters of the programme and new institution through the cognitive and systematic functions, and for the affective difficulties of the student's adaptation. However, this consideration of student support, not tailored to the needs of in situ international students, does not contemplate assistance given for the sociocultural needs of the students.

2.3.2 Induction and orientation

Induction and orientation, as part of student support services, are two concepts indistinctively used by Forrester et al. (2005) and Cook et al. (2006). The terms refer to the conventional campus-based "series of planned activities developed specifically for the purpose of acquainting students with new systems, procedures, formalities and regulations of a particular institution"(Forrester et al. 2005, p.293). According to Forrester et al. (2005), induction has been widely seeing as a 'one-off event' comprised of mainly the diffusion of administrative procedures and basic academic information. Billing (1997, p.125) provides a slightly similar definition for students' induction, for him, it is "a period (...), during which structured activities assist [students] to become comfortable with their new environment, friends, intellectual challenges, expectations and study requirements". Moreover, Billing stresses such period is not fixed and varies from place to place. This study agrees with Billing's conception, which seems to provide a more comprehensive account of an induction; one that contemplates the integration of activities aiming to foster a sense of belonging with the new environment and people.

Additionally, 'Freshers' week', or 'Week 0' in the UK, as described by Simons, Parlett and Jaspan (1988), refers to the programme of activities laid on for first-year students for a few days or even a week before the academic term begins in full on Week 1. I will embrace this term accordingly to refer to the activities launched for new undergraduates. However, for this study, similarly to Forrester et al. (2005) and Cook et al. (2006) I will employ indistinctively the terms of induction or orientation to refer to the activities set up for international students. Nonetheless, I will differentiate between the inductions provided for this group of students at the institutional or at the faculty's level. For instance, I will refer to University's induction as the activities institutionally

arranged for international students whilst referring to Faculty's induction as the introductory sessions given at the faculty and departmental level to new students, regardless of their status as international or domestic students.

Cook et al. (2006) in the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) Project, differentiate between early and extended induction. The former related to "those events that occur immediately on the arrival of a new student" whereas extended induction refers to "a longer-term assimilation of new students into the ways in which the institution operates, particularly as it relates to its teachings and learning methods" (Cook et al., 2006, p.7). Wilcox et al. (2005) have recognised an extended induction as one of the most solicited strategies to reduce attrition. Nevertheless, the focus of this study is on the early induction.

2.3.3 Induction's rationale

According to Hassanien and Barber (2008, p.36) "induction programmes seek to facilitate the establishment of friendship networks, and as retention and relationships appear to have a reciprocal relationship, it is important that HE institutions present a positive induction programme". Induction is a component, which relevance has been augmenting over the last years given that it "plays an imperative role in the development, progress, retention and socialisation of higher education students" (Hassanien and Barber, 2008, p. 41). Therefore, the authors place the emphasis of induction on the maximisation of resources for the holistic experience of students in HE. It is to be said, on the integration of new students into the social and academic life of the institution. For Forrester et al. (2005) the relevance of implementing induction procedures should go beyond the systematic transmission of administrative and academic information; it should bear into account the specific needs of its increasing enrolling students coming from a vast majority of backgrounds. This is a view embraced for the purposes of this study.

The authenticity of the intentions of HE institutions to deliver inductions has been challenged. For instance, Billing (1997) questions whether it is for the institutions' sake and interests, or is it a legitimate interest to assist unconfident students yet keen to start their educational path. Billing claims that orientation should be offered for the students' sake rather than to benefit from it institutionally. In line with this, Hassanien and Barber (2008) question whether the institutional motives to deliver induction aiming to ease students' transition into HE, since the initial stage of their studies is known as the most vulnerable time, is indeed achieved or not.

Other authors have contended the impact of induction on student retention as well as on its focus on academic support. For instance, Billing (1997, p.126) asserts that being induction a vital element that directly impacts students' retention, " it is medullar to identify if there are any

components of dropout that can help to gain a better understanding of what are the critical elements of “the first few weeks”. In line with this, Edward (2003, p.227) claims although induction is a crucial element that “can ameliorate or exacerbate the student’s predisposal to withdraw” little has been researched in regards to the transitional induction process. On their behalf, Wilcox et al. (2005, p.709) attest that most of the research conducted on the students’ first-year experience has been devoted to the study of social support in the academic sphere leaving less room for the exploration of the students’ social support in the broader out-of-the academia scope. Thus, scrutinising the impact of social support for the sociocultural and affective adaptation of the participants is one of the aims of this study.

2.3.4 Graduate and postgraduate induction

Concerning the importance of induction as an organisational procedure and practice of HE institutions, Hassanien and Barber (2008, p.35) assert orientation is arranged to introduce “new students with new systems, as well as new people”. They argue an unknown scenario with new people can be a taxing experience for new students, and therefore, it is essential for induction to call for a sense of belonging in which participants can build new relations and companionships rapidly. This, in turn, might help students to reduce anxiety and augment easiness with the environment (Hassanien and Barber, 2008). Similarly, for Cook et al. (2006) induction has the pivotal role of assisting students to familiarise to a dissimilar living and working environment considerably rapidly. Likewise, Boyle and Boice (1998, p.87) state first-year graduate students “go through a cultural learning or enculturation process in which they learn to act as productive members of their graduate department”. Therefore, for Boyle and Boice (1998), induction plays the instrumental role of enabling students to function in the new academic environment effectively. Bearing the statements above into account, it could be argued that international postgraduate students, who had not studied in the host culture before, might equally be regarded as a group of “new” students that need to be introduced to the new conventions of the receiving institution as well as to the “new” people, in a similar way as first-year undergraduate students. Postgraduate international students, with no previous experience in the host context, similar to new undergraduate students need institutional assistance to familiarise themselves to the new living and working environment, aiming to ease disquiet and build new relationships as soon as possible. Based on the understanding that orientation for first-year students and new postgraduate international students hold similar core motives and given the lack of literature, to the best of my knowledge, specifically focused on induction for postgraduate international students, this study will also draw on literature regarding induction for undergraduate students for the purposes of this research.

2.3.5 Students' impressions of induction

From the literature consulted, induction is claimed to be especially influential for the formation of the students' impressions of the institution as it is the first contact pre-graduate students have with it (Edward, 2003, p.226). In line with this, induction could also be accounted as new postgraduate international students' first encounter with the host academic system and premises. Additionally, the orientation *per se* is perceived on many occasions as an unreceptive and tedious event (Edward, 2003). It is even sometimes referred to as 'a waste of time' (Mortimer and McLaughlin, 2006, p.15) given that induction activities are commonly directed towards administrative procedures (Cook et al., 2006). This conventional approach to induction is claimed to possibly bewilder and discourage students more than to advise and inspire them (*Ibid*). As a result, crucial importance needs to be given to the planning of induction as "the experience of students early in their course leaves a significant impression that may influence later decisions" (Cook et al., 2006, p.10) for institutional permanence or not (*Ibid*, p.9). Additionally, it might trigger feelings "of confusion with many seemingly unrelated tasks being completed rapidly and then punctuated by periods of inactivity" (Cook et al., 2006, p.11) during the first weeks.

In addition to that, Billing (1997) highlights students entering HE, experience feelings of disorientation. These feelings emerge as there are local, administrative, societal and academic changes to which students have to adapt. Additionally, a mismatch in these students' expectations and lack of appropriate preparation for their study field can augment feelings of uncertainty (Billing, 1997). In this sense, it could be argued postgraduate international students, whose first encounter with the new academic and culture is this, might face and need to adapt to these same dimensions and therefore, likely to experience similar feelings of disorientation.

Concerning the extent of the students' awareness about the institutional services available, Cain et al. (2007) exploring the views of a group of graduate distance students, showed that majority of the participants did not make use of the academic and personal support services provided by the institution. This was because the students did not feel a strong need for assistance or they were unaware of the resources available to them. Nevertheless, the distance participants recognised the need for psychosocial and academic support coming from their online peers and the instructor respectively. In this respect, students might have obtained the support they required through the use of institutional services; however, due to lack of awareness, it was missed. This account highlights the importance of enhancing awareness about the institutional resources planned and accessible to facilitate the students' insertion to the new setting.

2.3.6 Effective organisational practices

In line with the previous arguments, the organisational practices identified as effective in relation to student support transitional services are presented below.

Boyle and Boice (1998) in their study of first-year graduate students' enculturation revealed the best practices conducted and shared by effective graduate departments were characterised by aspects of: 'collegiality, mentoring and structure'. Additionally, all these exemplary departments reinforced the process of its graduate entrants with a departmental induction; being aware of the usefulness of it to familiarise students with the department, its norms, requirements and expectations, and to introduce students to academic and administrative personnel, staff members and advanced graduate students.

Cook et al. (2006) on their behalf assert good practice of induction is one that promotes activities for the students' academic and social integration. The aim of the orientation would be to make new students socially and academic integrated prior to their entry in order for them to be "better prepared to meet the challenges of the institution they chose to attend" and early upon arrival for them "not to feel alienated from their new institution at the outset" (Cook et al., 2006, p.9-10) and consequently, augment their institutional commitment and persistence. Cook et al. (2006) recommend a balance in the provision of social and academic activities for the swift and effective integration of students. Similarly, Hassanien and Barber (2008) considered in their evaluation of one induction programme in HE, with mostly domestic students, the integration of social and academic elements allow for a balanced induction. Hassanien and Barber (2008) identified anxiety and emotional stress as feelings that hinder students' transition, and consequently, they contended induction should aim at diminishing these sentiments. In this sense, Forrester et al. (2005, p.294) argued the psychological dimension of the orientation, related to personal and affective matters has been little explored. Given the need for new students to adjust "domestically, administratively, socially and intellectually" (Billing, 1997, p.125), fostering the provision of socio-emotional support within the first days of the students' entrance to the new academic and social conventions might be a sound path to undertake.

White and Carr (2005) implemented a practical induction to pre-graduate and masters' students pursuing engineering degree programmes, where one-third of the participants were international students. Among the aims of this induction were to provide students with opportunities to develop a greater sense of community, enhance group work, social learning and promote achievement. The authors concluded the provision of such induction with a greater emphasis in social activity as enriching and beneficial for the social and academic integration of these

students, and therefore they advocated for the running of a specially tailored induction programme that meets the needs of students from different backgrounds.

Borrowing from Barton (2001), Forrester et al. (2005, p.294-5) assert a successful induction is one guided by a student-centred approach in which students are meant to take a higher degree of responsibility for their education. Also supporting the implementation of a student-centred approach to induction, Hassanien and Barber (2008) assert:

Interestingly, students felt that induction does not only provide a welcoming environment to them, and assist their transition into HE, but also plays a critical role in their socialisation into education and university culture. With the spectrum of students entering HE widening each year, it is imperative that an induction programme is a student-centred one. Departments, schools, and universities need to look at reducing the anxieties of their students and provide them with many opportunities to socialise with their peers and quickly feel at ease in their new environment (Hassanien and Barber, 2008, p.41)

As stated before, aiming to diminish the anxiety new students face and facilitating the creation of social networks, on the students' first encounter with the University, whether it is at the pre-graduate or postgraduate level, seems to be a shared aim for the delivery of an induction where the learner is at the centre of the planning.

In line with this, Edward (2001, 2003) developed and conducted a novel approach to induction which advocates for the delivery of an induction in context, in the form of more student-centred approaches such as an activity- based induction or with constructivist ideals. In the quest to reformulate the orientation undergraduate students received at a UK Mechanical and Engineering School given the high dropout rates during the first weeks of study, Edward (2001) distinguished between an old and new approach to induction employed in the institution. An old approach described as a passive and acontextual event in which students were “directed *en masse* to a lecture theatre where over the course of a day they were addressed by a series of speakers who informed them of course-related matters, support services provision, student association activities and information service provisions” (Edward, 2001, p.429); and the latter being shaped on a constructivist model in which students played an active role in their learning process. For instance, students were expected to be “actively involved in seeking out the support services available in the University and what they provide at the sites of provision” (Ibid.). This form of induction also aimed to cater students' learning styles by the provision of different “activity (ies), guidance and hints from facilitators and experts, practical contextual demonstrations of techniques and short talks and hand-outs” (Edward, 2001, p.432). Regarding the new approach,

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the findings state that although helpfulness cannot be immediately measured and it might be unwise to attribute the little personal and academic progress entrants attained, to this approach to induction, students did express enjoyment from this type of induction. Therefore, the conclusions consider this form of induction as effective since “students have settled quickly into the system and show more confidence in approaching staff” (Edward, 2001, p.439). In light of this, a contextualised and tailored induction programme appears to offer greater gains to ease the students’ transition to the new academic environment.

Cook et al. (2006) suggest little importance has been given to the rite of passage of students from Secondary to Higher Education. The authors highlight how Higher Education institutions excel at transitioning students, after completion of their studies, from HE to the job market. Cook et al. (2006) bring to attention the proper schema Universities have built to support students with insertion into the job market and graduation, which is sumptuously celebrated. Their claim is "Universities are less good, however, in organising and celebrating the rites of passage associated with joining the institution" (Ibid. p.8). I would argue a similar scenario applies to postgraduate students joining a foreign institution for the first time. These learners equally would benefit from a rite of passage to get acquainted about the conventions of the host institution. In this sense, Cook et al. (2006, p.14) claim a good induction practice should acquaint students with the new surroundings, school and its support services; promote the enhancement of independent study habits and encourage the construction of a proper channel of communication between staff and students.

Billing (1997) aiming to provide constructive input for the delivery of induction in UK HEIs produced a comprehensive list of DOS and DON'TS. From the guideline he proposed, I value responsiveness to diversity as especially relevant, yet uncommonly approached in the literature. According to Billing (1997) responsiveness to diversity has to do with identifying and recognising the different skills of the individuals, considering their different educational context and cultural background, and in line with this, enable staff to cope with this diversity and provide a tailored induction. Billing's (1997, p.132) claim is that “different categories of students have different needs in relation to induction” and international students are usually found as a group where little efforts have been devoted for the provision of a specialised induction.

To conclude, Hassanien and Barber (2008) recognised the need of joined efforts and responsibilities by different academic and non-academic members in order to warrant the success of an induction programme. The authors acknowledged induction is a ‘multi-faceted process’ that requires the clear flow of communication among the different components of an institution. This is an element that will be considered in this thesis to appreciate if effective communication (or

lack of it) could influence the outcome and effectiveness of the participants' first weeks at the university (Hassanien and Barber, 2008).

2.3.6.1 Ineffective transitional student support

The result of "an unsuitable transitional experience can increase the probability of early departure" (Edward, 2003, p.228). In other words, the provision of a poor transitional induction to HE can lead to attrition (Edward, 2003). In this regard, Hargreaves et al. (1996 as cited in Edward, 2003, p.227) deemed as necessary the consideration of three areas for a transitional induction:

- Student anxiety about the transition;
- The process of adjustment to the new context;
- Continuity between the previous and new curricula.

Although the focus of this study is on the first weeks of transition of a postgraduate group of Mexican international students, the three dimensions proposed above seem to offer a suitable framework for the provision of an induction course for the group under study. The three proposed areas could be equated with the three dimensions, affective, academic and sociocultural proposed in this study. For instance, student's anxiety could be translated as the psychological well-being of the student in transition whereas the adjustment to the new context is *per se* the adjustment to the new social and cultural environment, and finally, the continuity of previous and new curricula could be interpreted as the aspects involved in the academic domain. Hence, an effective induction for international students could aim to cater each of these transitional elements by contemplating the insertion of psychological, academic, and sociocultural dimensions.

Edward (2001) highlighted the prominent abandonment of undergraduate students in their first year and a lot of these occurrences happened during the first weeks of their study. Among the causes expressed by first-year students for dropping out in a UK engineering school, as reported by Edward (2003), 40% per cent of the deserters stated to be due to a poor induction and another significant proportion referred to aspects concerning induction. Disparity between expectations and experiences was also found to be an essential issue for the students' decision to drop out.

Wilcox et al. (2005) support the claim that students' dropout in the early stage of HE is attributed to a lack of social integration because students struggle to develop friendships or they feel homesick; inherently, they have no social network to lean on when troubles come. This assertion relates to the 'direct effect' premise from Mackie (1998) in which the perceptions of others will boost the person in trouble self-esteem and give a greater sense of control over the situation (Wilcox et al., 2005). In this case, social support might act as a buffer in moments of strain

between the incident and the person experiencing it (Wilcox et al. 2005). Similarly, Cook et al. (2006, p.8) alleged, "different impressions are formed on entry during which activities are often dominated by administrative rituals associated with enrolment on courses and the payment of fees". On entry, students are faced with many activities that demand their concentration. For instance, inspirational talks given by institutional directors and informative talks led by academic and administrative staff deliver them with an overload of information. Additionally, freshers' are introduced to the students' unions, clubs, and societies. At the same time, they have to face the solitude and bewildering feelings of being apart from family and friends in a new environment. Consequently, the planning of activities and the delivery of them by staff members and senior students can have an impact on the new students' degree of commitment to persist (Cook et al., 2006). As a result of the information's plethora given to new students in the first week, the remaining query is how much of the transmitted information is genuinely digested (Ibid.). For some students, the course of the first weeks has influenced their decision to quit university during the first 6-8 weeks of their studies. This seems to suggest fortifying the social dimension and balancing the amount of information provided during the early days might be an approach worth considering for the implementation of a more successful induction.

2.4 **Emerging research question**

The above review of literature explored organisational practices related to the transition of students to HE. The educational transition to HE is acknowledged as a difficult process that necessitates institutional support services to introduce new students to the new academic and social systems. Thus, effective organisational practices are encouraged to integrate cognitive, affective, and administrative-oriented elements. Nevertheless, the literature recognises the assistance provided varies from place to place and often the induction or orientation offered, as part of the institutional support services, is focused on the delivery of administrative procedures and basic information. In this sense, two types of induction were recognised, early and extended induction, being the former the one concerned with the focus of this study. The initial stage of the students' transition is pinpointed as critical and for so early inductions are imperative to introduce students not only to the academic conventions, but also to assist students to develop friendships and maximise the use of resources available. This is deemed as important to reduce anxiety and augment easiness with the environment. In spite of this awareness, the empirical research analysed demonstrated that the students perceived the orientation as an uninteresting and unwilling event mostly directed towards the delivery of administrative information, and sometimes perceived as a waste of time. Likewise, the literature informed the services available are sometimes not used either due to perceiving them as unhelpful or lacking awareness about them.

In this sense, the aim of the induction appeared to have failed to advise, properly guide, and promote a sense of belonging in the new milieu. Opposite to this view was the implementation of practical inductions, which were deemed as inspirational and helpful to actively engage new students. These practises encourage new students to seek out support through the provision of different activities and guidance that could suit more than one learning strategy. This type of tailored induction seemed to be more adequate to guide the learners during the transition, and diminish anxiety and stress. In this view, the literature also argued about the need to response to diversity by taking into account diverse needs of the students enrolled and such is a notion adopted in this study.

The previous arguments are concerned with the educational transition from Secondary to Higher Education. However, a dearth of research that focuses on the transitional support of international students at the postgraduate level, delivered by the host institution, was found. Nonetheless, it is an argument of this thesis that the transition of these two groups of participants, new students entering HE and international postgraduate students pursuing studies abroad for the first time, is similar in that both groups need to be introduced to the academic system as well as to the social environment.

Therefore, this section of the review of literature led to the emergence of the third and final research question that drives this study:

- 3) What are the participants' experiences concerning the support received by the host institution for their adaptation to the new environment?

2.5 **Research questions**

Overall, the three research questions that emerged from the review of literature and that will guide this thesis are:

- 1) What are the challenging areas this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced to adapt during their first four weeks of stay in the UK?
- 2) What are the coping strategies implemented for the adaptation of their studying and living abroad experience?
- 3) What are the participants' experiences concerning the support received by the host institution for their adaptation to the new environment?

2.6 Utility of theories

This final section aims to describe succinctly the utility of seminal theories of adjustment and culture shock as well as of contemporary ones like, culture learning, stress and coping, and cultural distance drawn on for the purposes of this study.

In relation to traditional models of culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation, Lysgaard's (1955) proposition of the adjustment process as a "U" curve does not seem to have much applicability for this study given that according to his conceptualisation, adjustment is a process of time and this study only focuses on the early period of the sojourn, the first four weeks. However, Lysgaard's theory could be useful to ponder, within this study's timeframe, the suitability of the duration and adjustment relationship he proposed. In that sense, whether adjustment is in relation to time or to other conditions, such as the acquisition of skills as posited by the culture-learning framework (Ward et al., 2001). Correspondingly, given this research focus on the early weeks, Oberg's (1960) theorising on culture shock will be drawn on to evaluate whether the participants depict the first stage of their sojourn as a "honeymoon". In addition to analysing if Oberg's proposed adjustment cycle (the honeymoon, the crisis, the recovery and the complete adjustment) is actually followed, and if so, how far into this process the students get by their first four weeks. Adler's (1975) addition of a fifth stage, "the independence", for sojourners' adjustment is useful for this study in order to scrutinise how the self-awareness and increased understanding of other cultures supposedly achieved by this stage could have influenced the skills management of the students with previous experience.

Furthermore, the contemporary theories, culture learning, and stress and coping, will be useful to illuminate whether the participants embraced change to the UK as an active process, where learning about the host culture would reduce the impact of culture shock (Ward et al., 2001). In this respect, these theories could be of benefit to observe if there were any adaptive and coping mechanisms applied by the participants to respond actively to their transition. Moreover, culture learning, and stress and coping will be drawn on to scrutinise the early period, depicted by their proponents as the stage, where more problems are faced and stress is at peak. Another utility of culture learning, as posited by Furnham and Bochner (1986) will be to observe the soundness of the claim that the beginning and the end of the sojourn are not what frame the experience. Rather prior to departure practices, degree of competence, and extent of preparation are what will determine the individual's experience abroad.

Finally, cultural distance is a principle embraced in this study for the understanding of the participants' adaptation, and how distant or close they perceive the host culture in relation to own culture, and based on this, the psychological or sociocultural challenges they experience

(Babiker et al., 1980; Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Searle and Ward, 1990). Thus, this term will be helpful to study the assertion that claims the larger the gap, whether perceived or real, between home and host culture, the more difficult it would be to adapt (*Ibid.*).

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Having presented the theoretical and empirical background that guides this research in Chapter 2, this chapter aims to present the methodological design chosen for this study. It discloses my philosophical positionality and based on that, justifies the research decisions I have undertaken for the development of this research as well as the ethical considerations for it. It seeks to explain the why and how the methods employed were pondered as the suitable course of action for the objectives of this study(Clough and Nutbrown, 2012).

It starts by presenting my philosophical assumption, research positionality, and purpose of inquiry. These are the first topics to be presented, as they are the core for what I have decided to investigate and how I have decided to do it. My philosophical assumptions aims to provide the reader with an understanding of what my worldview is and how that may have influenced the research decisions I took. My research positionality discloses who I am and how that interrelates to my research topic. Likewise, the purpose of inquiry attempts to explicate how the research questions are in association with the paradigm embraced.

The subsequent section presents case study, as the design adopted for this study. It sets out to address why the focus of this study constitutes a case by explaining its contextual characteristics and participants. This is followed by a presentation of the methods chosen for the development of this research, as well as of the pilot instruments that assisted the reshaping of the research design introduced. The following section presents how data was analysed and interpreted. This chapter concludes by presenting the ethical and the methodological procedures taken into account to preserve the integrity of the participants as well as the quality of the research.

3.2 Philosophical assumption

Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.195) defined paradigm “as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator”. It is comprised by: “ontology, epistemology, methodology, and, methods” (Scotland, 2012, p.9). Hence, my ontology acknowledges that realities are created and they are reliant on the individuals or groups embracing “the construction” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Thus, “constructions are not more or less “true”, in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated” (Ibid., p.206). Therefore, “knowledge and meaningful reality are constructed in and out of interaction between humans and their world are developed and transmitted in a social context” (Crotty, 1998, p.42 as cited in Scotland, 2012, p.12). In this view,

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meaning of the situation under study is made by delving on the participants' point of view (Creswell, 2014). Thus, constructions are prompted and developed by the constant interaction between the participants and the researcher (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Similarly, Cohen (2011, p.17) claims that to attain integrity of the circumstance being scrutinized, "efforts (...) to get inside the person and to understand from within" are needed. Hence, given my research interest to investigate the adaptation experience of a cohort of Mexican international students, the best way to approach this, is to get the inside perceptions of the participants "through a process of deep attentiveness, [and] of emphatic understanding" (Miles and Huberman 1994, p.6-7)" that might lead me to an understanding of these students' own reality.

Furthermore, I espouse the belief that "value-free knowledge is not possible" (Scotland, 2012, p.12) and agree with Haraway's (1991 in Mullings 1999) notion in that researchers bring to the research table their "map of consciousness" moulded by their own attributes. Thus, my desire is not to set aside my own baggage, but to contemplate it in the methodological construction of my research by committing to a critical and on-going process of reflection to unveil my own values; and to acknowledge its impact in the development of this research to enhance trustworthiness. In line with this, I present my research positionality in the following section.

3.2.1 Research positionality

According to Mullings (1999, p.337), the researcher's positionality is the "perspective shaped by his/her unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers". Along with time and space settings, which would influence his or her worldview and interpretation of it. Therefore, in this section, I present my biography in order to appreciate how it could have shaped my research interest and interpretation of findings.

Mercer (2007, p.4) distinguishes between some of the features of the researcher's identity that are "innate and unchanging" such as ethnic origin and gender whereas some others are "innate but evolving" like age or personal characteristics. Based on this, my positionality is delineated by the attributes of being a Mexican, middle age, single female, who has strived to advance her education in spite of sociocultural and financial constraints. The result of those efforts is my experience as an international student in two occasions. First, as a Master's student in the USA and this second one, as I pursue my PhD studies in the UK. Both realisations have been possible thanks to scholarships granted by the US and the Mexican government, for each degree respectively. Accessing undergraduate studies was not a taken for granted path for me either. HE studies did not seem a suitable choice for me as a young female raised in a somehow conservative environment and in a small city without a HE institution. Nonetheless, determined to pursue higher education studies, I intensively sought my parents' approval and finally moved to live and

study to the capital city. These experiences have allowed me to become more sensitive in relation to the efforts and implications involved, in some cases, when desiring to study and that not being a given. Furthermore, through these experiences, I learnt that individuals could play an active role in the pursuit of their goals and creation of their reality.

In addition to this, my first experience as an international student triggered my interest to study in depth the process of adaptation of international students, and the sources of support consulted and facilitated for that purpose. I acknowledge that my personal and academic success as an international student at a foreign University was attributed in part to the support provided to me by the host institution in the induction period. This interpretation is also delineated by my personal context at that point, since I had never travelled alone, never been overseas, nor even taken a plane. Therefore, I conceive myself as completely naïve at that stage and wonder if I would have succeeded without the institutional guidance provided during my first weeks.

My professional background and its relation to my research is also of importance. Currently, I am a full-time lecturer on study leave at the second largest Public University in Mexico. Thus, there is an implicit desire to contribute with some insights for the HE international, outgoing, and incoming, student community in Mexico by learning from a context with a larger trajectory on internationalisation. These represent some of the perceptible characteristics of my identity that have profoundly shaped the person I am now, the way I perceive and understand the world, and what I have decided to study.

The distinction to research “not the strange, but the familiar” (Mercer 2007, p.3) arose in the second half of the 20th century and with it the concepts of the insider and the outsider. Merton (1972, p.21) conceives insiders as: “the members of specified groups and collectivities, or occupants of specified social statuses. Outsiders are the non members”. Based on the previous positioning, it could be argued that in this study I play the role of an insider since I share the same nationality as my participants and I am also an international student pursuing postgraduate studies in the UK. Notwithstanding, Merton (1972, p.22) equally contended, “individuals do not have a single status, but a set of status”, and Mercer (2007, p.5) asserted, “human beings cannot be so easily categorised”. For instance, I am cognizant that circumstances relating a diversity of values will surface, distinctive statutes will emerge and boundaries will permeate (Merton 1972); thus positionalities are not “fixed across time and space” (Srivastava 2006, p.231), they will fluctuate.

In this regard, Mercer (2007, p.1) conceives the insider/outsider antagonism as “a continuum with multiple dimensions, and that all researchers constantly move back and forth along a number of axes, depending upon time, location, participants and topic”. I converge with this conception and in light of it, I am aware though as an insider, I will experience varying degrees of insiderness depending on different elements throughout my research (Mercer, 2007). Although I share ethnic

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affiliation, aims to be abroad, and concerns as an international student, there were also a couple of circumstantial elements that set me on a less intimate insider position in relation to my participants. First, I did not share the same financial sponsorship as them; hence, the financial procedures and perhaps challenges faced in this regard were likely to be different. Second, I arrived to the UK two weeks after the beginning of the academic year in 2014. Therefore, my beginning (although two years earlier) could have been different from the onset to that of most of my participants since I missed any guidance given by the University or faculty level due to my late arrival. However, while engaged with some of the dynamics of HE since I have worked in the academia in Mexico for a few years before pursuing PhD studies, because the UK is a new cultural and academic setting for me, I hold a higher degree of insiderness, as a student, in relation to my participants. For me, the UK is a different culture and educational system with different values and practices compared to the ones I had exercised before. By the time the study was conducted, I was already familiar with some of the *modus operandi* of the British culture, in comparison to my participants, yet I still had to adapt to different aspects on a daily basis.

Overall, the insiderism I possess by being a Mexican postgraduate international student myself offers me the possibility of creating "positional spaces" (Mullings 1999, p.340) of sympathetic understanding between those to be researched and me. These positional spaces might help to "engender a level of trust and cooperation" (Mullings, 1999, p.340), which could grant easier access to the participants' insights by being regarded as "one of us" (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjokert, 2008). Another recognised advantage of an insider position is the inherent awareness of the context and its subtleties (Shah 2004; Mercer 2007), including the verbal, the colloquial and non-verbal language of the participants (Unluer, 2012). On the other hand, there are also disadvantages of insiderism that deserve careful consideration. As claimed by Mercer "greater familiarity can make insiders more likely to take things for granted, develop myopia, and assume their own perspective is far more widespread than what it actually is" (Mercer 2007, p.6). Being aware of this, and aiming to confront my blind spots I adopted the writing of a reflective research journal to monitor and critically reflect on my own insight, and where they stand in regards to my participants (Hellawell, 2006, p.492). This methodological procedure is presented in the Methods section of this thesis.

To conclude this section, I would claim my role as a researcher, is as an insider with higher or lower degrees of intimacy depending on the circumstances and stages of this study (Hellawell, 2006.)

3.2.2 Purpose of inquiry

The aim of this study seems to be in alignment with the principles of constructivism in that it tries to understand the meaning that a cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students give to their adaptation experience in the UK, during their first weeks. It aims to comprehend such construction and make an interpretation of it by taking into account the participants' point of view and rationale (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002). The interpretation of how the participants perceived their adaptation during their first weeks is sought by understanding the challenges they faced, the coping strategies they implemented and the institutional support services used. For instance, the three research questions that drive this thesis are:

- 1) What are the challenging areas this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced to adapt during their first four weeks of stay in the UK?
- 2) What are the coping strategies implemented for the adaptation of their studying and living abroad experience?
- 3) What are the participants' experiences concerning the support received by the host institution for their adaptation to the new environment?

Furthermore, understanding that "the criterion for progress is that over time, everyone formulates more informed and sophisticated constructions and becomes more aware of the content and meaning of competing constructions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p.211); the methodology of this thesis contemplates approaching the student participants, and eliciting their information and recollections in several occasions, prior to their departure and throughout their first four weeks. Moreover, in alignment with constructivist principles, my role in the research process is as a facilitator who is reconstructing her interpretation and that of the participants (Ibid.). Similarly, it is acknowledged that an understanding of the participants' reality could be achieved by getting their perceptions from the inside. Consequently, the aim is to make meaning of the situation being studied by delving on the participants' point of view (Creswell, 2014) through the implementation of semi-structured instruments. The utilisation of these techniques has been recognised (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002, p.489) as little invasive reason, "for which they allow a more spontaneous and genuine access to the real world of the individual". In addition to helping to create a more intimate environment between the researcher and the participants (Ibid.). The following section elaborates on these methodological insights and presents the Research Design adopted, seeking to provide evidence to answer this thesis' research questions.

3.3 Research design

In an attempt to get a holistic understanding of and looking at the situation under investigation in detail, a case study was chosen as the framework for this study (Thomas, 2016). The case that frames this study is the analysis of the adaptation experience of a cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students in a UK University, during their first weeks. This holistic understanding is intended to be achieved by delving into the challenges the participants faced (RQ 1), the coping strategies they implemented (RQ 2) and the institutional services used (RQ3) prior to their departure and within the first four weeks of their stay in the UK.

The distinctiveness of the case (Stake, 1995) rests on its context, which is bound by two elements (Yin, 2003): the participants' characteristics (Mexican post-graduate international students), and the setting (a UK University with a large presence of Mexican postgraduate international students). As well as on its analytical focus (Berg and Lune, 2012) in this instance, the scrutiny of the adaptation experience of the participants during their first weeks. The in-depth understanding of their adaptation is believed to be achieved by exploring the challenges, the coping strategies and the institutional support services, the participants' faced, implemented and used, within their first four weeks, which are the queries that drive this study.

A case study was selected as the research's frame since it is believed that a whole understanding of the event under investigation can be achieved through a detailed examination of multiple techniques and sources of data (Baxter and Jack, 2008) and these are attributes that case study allows. Therefore, it was chosen due to its ability to combine the flexibility of data collection with the elicitation of extensive and profound information, nuances, patterns and elements that might be otherwise neglected by the use of other methods (Berg and Lune, 2012). Thus, it was considered that data emanating from the combination of a pre-arrival online qualitative survey, an in-situ online questionnaire, focus groups and interviews would allow for a holistic and comprehensive understanding (Punch, 2014) of the participants' adaptation experience by exploring the challenges, the coping strategies, and the institutional services they experienced during their first weeks. Therefore, this study does not strive to evaluate, but rather to deeply understand the adaptation experience of an understudied group of international students.

The development of this study takes a qualitative approach. The decision for the approach chosen is twofold. Firstly, it is given that qualities are essential to comprehend the nature of things (Berg and Lune, 2012). Consequently, to understand the emotions, motivations, definitions, descriptions, symbols and meanings, participants assign to their experience as international students, their perception is essentially needed (Berg and Lune, 2012). Secondly, the review of the literature demonstrates a wide variety of quantitative studies that have been developed to record

the international student's experience. Therefore, even when there seems to be a recent increase, there appears to be a need to contribute to more qualitative research in the field (Schartner, 2014). Consequently, the pursuit is to contribute to knowledge from a less explored scope.

In relation to the timeframe for this research, the review of literature identifies the most stressful period for the students in cross-cultural transition is the early stage or the first weeks of their sojourn (Ward et al., 2001); however, little specificity is found as to the length of those first weeks (Brown, 2008; Schartner, 2014). In light of this, upon arrival, this study is framed around the first four weeks of the participants stay in the UK in an attempt to unveil what is meant by the first weeks and how adapted the student sojourners feel in the host environment by the end of the first month. Therefore, aiming to capture a more precise occurrence of the participants' adaptation and considering that different areas hold precedence at different points in time during the students' transition (Wilcox et al., 2005), the participants were approached at multiple points in time during their first four weeks of stay in early, mid and late October. They were initially approached approximately ten days upon their arrival, subsequently in week 3 and finally in week 4 of their stay in the UK. The rationale behind these timings will be explained hereafter.

Also related to the timeframe of this research and equally informed by the review of the literature, which suggests a dearth of research that integrates the pre-arrival stage and the first few weeks of international student experience (Schartner, 2014), this study contemplates the pre-arrival stage as the beginning of the sojourn. Grasping an understanding of the participants' context while they were still in their home country and on their last two weeks before embarking to live and study abroad, seemed vital to conceive a rounded understanding of their experience. Therefore, data was also collected prior to the participants' departure. This will be explained in detail in the paragraphs to follow.

Data was collected by different methods, in different periods of time and by different sources in an attempt to get a holistic understanding of the case under scrutiny (Thomas, 2016). For instance, data was collected by means of an online qualitative survey and questionnaire (namely pre-arrival and in situ), three focus groups, and seven interviews with the student participants. Empirical evidence from three administrative personnel was also collected in the form of interviews. The choice of methods is presented in the Methods section of this study.

3.4 Context

This study has been framed as a case study given its distinctive focus (Stake 1995) and several considerations for its selection were taken into account (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). First, it

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focuses on an understudied group of students in international mobility, those of Latin American origin (Delgado-Romero and Sanabria, 2007; Foley, 2013; Tanner, 2013). Moreover, it specifically looks at Mexican students since according to data from the UIS; Mexico has been identified as the Latin American country with the largest group of HE international students in the UK. Furthermore, it has been recognised as a fast growing population of outbound mobility (Rushworth, 2017). In addition to the previous decision informed by the review of literature, focusing on Mexican students is also grounded on the intention to contribute to the internationalisation of HE in my working context since I am a lecturer in the second largest Public University in Mexico. This University is on the process of internationalisation; thus the identification of the challenges faced and the acknowledgment of successful or unsuccessful sources of support to assist the international student in their transition and adaptation, from a context with a larger trajectory in internationalisation, could be of use to inform adequate practices.

In relation to the rationale for selecting the setting for the study, although studies exploring the international experience of students of Latin American origin are still limited in contexts like the US, recognised as the main destination country for Latin American HE students (UIS, 2016), research concerning this segment of participants in the US seemed to be slightly more documented in comparison to the UK, acknowledged by the UIS as the second importer of international students. Therefore, the UK was chosen as the host country for the study in light of the dearth of research devoted to document the living and studying abroad experience of students from Latin America.

3.4.1 Sampling strategy

According to Creswell (2014a) in qualitative research, sites and individuals are purposefully identified. In this sense, several purposive sampling strategies were applied. First, critical sampling was applied by selecting a research site that would represent “an exceptional case and much can be learnt about the phenomenon” (Ibid., p.230). In this sense, the UK institutional setting for this study was chosen due to its reputation since it forms part of the 24 Russell Group Universities (The Russell Group, 2016). Moreover, it has envisioned becoming a top global institution through the implementation of an international strategy, which among other objectives aims to attract outstanding staff and students, provide them with a fruitful international experience and praise their diversity (University’s website information, published 12 May 2016). Furthermore, it was selected due to its recognition as a genuine international institution with the presence of international students from over 135 countries, as informed by the institution’s website.

In addition to the wide array of different groups of international students, this University was purposefully chosen as the suitable setting to study the adaptation experience of Mexican students since it is one of the favoured destinations for Mexican students to study in the UK. Based on HESA Student Records (HESA, 2018) in recent years the institution has held one of the largest concentrations of Mexican international students in the UK. During the 2014/2015 academic calendar, the setting of this study was the leading HE provider for Mexican international students in the UK with 145 enrolments. While during the 2016/2017 academic calendar, when data for this study was collected, the University was the fifth host receiver of HE Mexican international students with 100 registrations. Moreover, the institution has recently developed new strategies for the recruitment of international students from Latin America, and in light of that, it recently inaugurated an international office in Mexico (University's social network site on March 13th, 2016 confirmed with personal communication from university administrator, June 17, 2016). In addition to the previous rationale, the fact that I was pursuing my PhD in this University added an element of convenience to my choice. However, I applied to this institution for my postgraduate studies because I was well aware of what I wanted to study and that this setting would provide me with solid foundations for the development of it.

Furthermore, the decision to focus on Mexican postgraduate students was grounded on homogeneous sampling. Based on this purposive strategy, participants were chosen due to possessing similar characteristics and membership to a group (Creswell, 2014a). Therefore, the participants were all of Mexican origin and the rationale for selecting students at the postgraduate level is as follows. According to data from HESA (2018), full-time postgraduate programmes in the UK, and in England, have a significant representation of international students whereas undergraduate studies tend to be a small proportion of this group of students. In line with this, funds and scholarships for Mexican international students seem to be more accessible for postgraduate studies (Rushworth, 2017). Correspondingly, according to figures provided by the international office of the University under study, the majority of Mexican students enrolled in this institution attend to pursue postgraduate studies, while attendance of Mexican undergraduate students is very limited. Moreover, the contexts of these undergraduate and postgraduate students seemed to be different in several accounts. Funding is one them, since Mexican postgraduate students in this institution mainly fund their studies through scholarships granted by different Mexican government bodies; especially through CONACYT (personal communication with university administrator, September 1, 2016; Rushworth, 2017), whereas the two Mexican undergraduate students identified during the 2016-2017 academic calendar were self-funded. Different sources and means to fund their studies abroad might set the students in different contexts, which in turn may influence their experiences. Age is also accounted as a

possible element that could also influence the adaptation journey of the participants. For instance, bachelor's students possibly fit into the 18-20-age group whereas postgraduate students might belong to a more mature aged group of learners, and such might set a difference in relation to the participants' aspirations. Additionally, homogeneous sampling considered the participants sharing the same mother language, in this case Spanish. Likewise, it took into account that they were all of new arrival and enrolled in the 2016-2017 academic calendar in the premises under study.

Having applied principles of homogenous sampling in order to focus on participants' groups, it was equally important to capture multiple perspectives within the population. To do so, maximal variation sampling was employed (Lofland, 2006). Therefore, diverse perspectives were elicited by purposefully selecting Mexican postgraduate students that differed on characteristics of trait (Creswell, 2014a). These features were related to: age (mature and non-mature aged), gender (females and males), different regions of origin in Mexico, pursuing Master's or Doctoral degrees, enrolled in different subject areas, different places of accommodation in the UK (private vs. university), and having had or not previous experience abroad.

The participants' profile is presented in the following section.

3.4.2 The participants

The subject for this study was a cohort of Mexican international students attending a UK University to pursue a post-graduate degree (e.g. Master's or Doctor's) within the 2016-2017 academic calendar to be approached pre-arrival, 10 days after the University's suggested date of arrival, and three and four weeks after their arrival to the host city.

The participants were Mexican international students to pursue postgraduate studies in a University in the UK. Their length of stay in the host environment had not been longer than four weeks, except for two participants who were in their fifth week at the time they participated in the focus groups. Males and females took part in the study; however, more males than females participated in it. According to Richardson (1994), most of the students belonged to the mature-aged group of students since they were 25 years or older at the start of their postgraduate studies. Equally, there were Master and PhD students involved, though the former group was larger than the latter. Their expected length of stay ranged from one year (for Master's students) and more than three years (for PhD students). They were enrolled in different programmes, being the STEM disciplines their main interest. This seemed to be in relation to the financial support granted by Mexican government bodies, such as CONACYT, to pursue studies in these areas (personal communication with university administrator, September 1, 2016) in the quest to

enhance Mexico's scientific and technological development of knowledge at the postgraduate level (Rushworth, 2017). Majority of the students were living in university accommodation whilst the others lived in private accommodation. Finally, there were participants with and without previous living and/or studying abroad experience. The participants who had previously studied abroad had been in countries such as: Brazil, USA, Canada, Japan, Finland, Spain, France, and the UK.

Given that the participants were approached at different times and that, I was not aiming to constraint their willingness to take part; on the contrary, I was targeting for the richness that input from different sources would allow (Thomas, 2016), the responses from the different instruments emanated from diverse participants, in some of the cases. Nonetheless, nine participants, out of the twelve who collaborated in the pre-arrival online qualitative survey, took part in the three methods implemented (pre-arrival online qualitative survey, in situ questionnaire, a focus group or an interview). Twenty-one out of twenty-five participants who participated in the in situ questionnaire collaborated in the following data collection stage by means of a focus group or interview. Finally, five students, who did not share any insights in the online qualitative survey or the questionnaire, voiced their experience in a focus group or an interview. The data collection section presents a description of the participants that took part in each of the applied instruments.

3.5 **Methods**

The choice of methods was based on the following rationale. The first instrument, the pre-arrival online qualitative survey, aimed to seek evidence to answer the three research questions under study by gathering the participants' insights prior to departure. Therefore, it intended to gather contextual data would allow for a broader understanding of the participants' social context. As well as collecting qualitative data that could inform about the participants' expectations, envisioned strategies, perception of the British culture and awareness of institutional services, in order to analyse how those elements could have had an impact on the challenges the participants faced (RQ 1), the coping mechanisms implemented (RQ 2) and their experience with institutional services (RQ 3). Thus, gathering data prior to departure could allow for a comprehensive understanding of what would emerge on the first four weeks of the participants' arrival. The implementation of an online qualitative survey was therefore considered a suitable instrument to gather the 'here and now' insights of the participants prior to departure aiming to facilitate the recalling of recent events (Munn and Drever, 1990; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and to collect data that was fresh. Moreover, the provision of the pre-arrival qualitative survey on an electronic

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format was deemed a convenient tactic since it could reach the participants even when they had not arrived to the UK.

The second instrument implemented was also an online qualitative questionnaire applied in situ. This in situ questionnaire set out to provide data mainly to answer the second and third research questions under study; namely, the coping strategies implemented and the institutional services used. In addition to enquiring about contextual information, it intended to grasp an understanding of the participants' use of institutional services during their first days of stay and their extent of usefulness for their adaptation. Moreover, hoping to recollect fresh insights concerning the pre-arrival stage, the second instrument inquired about the main sources of support consulted prior to departure and on arrival. The rationale to adopt an online questionnaire as the second method for data collection had a logistical consideration. The potential participants were expected to attend an institutional event planned especially for their region of origin, approximately ten days after the institutional advised day for arrival, and this represented the first opportunity where I could personally approach the participants and elicit their participation. This meant my initial intention to follow this group of students' process of adaptation right from the beginning and as of the first couple of days of their arrival was not doable since there was not another event where they could be easily identified. Yet there was the possibility to reach them in that event tentatively after a maximum of 10 days, since their arrival in the UK. Given that this was meant to be mainly a social event and aiming not to disrupt their plans, an online questionnaire where they could share their views in electronic devices, such as IPads, facilitated by me seemed to be a suitable choice.

Meeting the participants for the first time in the former event allowed me to elicit their participation in the following data collection stage to happen a week and a half, or two weeks and a half after that initial encounter, depending on their choice of participation. For instance, there was a participatory element in the design of my research by asking students whether they would like to participate in a focus group or an individual interview dependent on whatever made them feel more comfortable. Because I was unable to run both sessions, focus groups and interviews, simultaneously, and I aimed to follow their adaptation process in weeks 3 and 4, focus groups were scheduled to happen in week three, and the interviews were scheduled for the fourth week.

The rationale for the implementation of focus groups and interviews as the third and fourth research instruments is grounded on several accounts. First, they were regarded adequate under the conception that knowledge between humans is often generated through communications (Kvale, 1996 in Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, the exchange of outlooks that could take part, among the participants in a focus group or between the participant and the researcher in an

individual interview, was pondered as a useful resource to prompt rich data from their participants and a closer understanding of their worldview (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, they were deemed as appropriate to drill down into the participants' perception (Thomas, 2016) as well as to redress any possible superficiality that could have resulted from the online survey and questionnaire, and the inability to ask for immediate clarification (Munn and Drever, 1990). The focus groups and interviews elicited data that aimed to inform the three research questions under scrutiny (the challenges faced, the coping strategies implemented and the institutional services used) with an open approach that would allow for rich and descriptive data, as informed by the pilot study.

Focus groups, also known as group interviewing, were chosen because it was acknowledged that group interaction could prompt and facilitate data that could not be otherwise obtained (Punch, 2014). Therefore, learning from the experiences of other newly arrived Mexicans could promote a high level of interaction among the participants, which in turn could unveil views and perceptions not previously surfaced pertaining the three research questions under investigation. Targeting to go in-depth, semi-structured focus groups (Appendix C), led by a set of guiding questions with no pre-established categories for responses (Punch, 2014) were selected.

With the intention, as with the focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the participants lived experiences, individual interviews (Appendix D) were chosen as the appropriate method for data collection (Hatch, 2002) due to its uniqueness to learn "what is in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 2002, p.341). Moreover, individual interviews were pondered as a suitable alternative method for those participants who might not feel comfortable sharing their views and opinions in a group, and preferred an individual face-to-face exchange. In addition to that, the insights of the participants on their fourth week of stay, in relation to the research questions, needed to be captured in-depth. Consequently, semi-structured individual interviews directed by a set of open guiding questions (Hatch, 2002), which could be modified as the interview unfolded, were deemed as the appropriate instrument that would allow to delve further into the participants' adaptation experience at the end of their first month of stay in the UK.

Each of the methods is explained in more detail in the subsequent sections.

3.5.1 Pre-arrival online qualitative survey

The pre-arrival online qualitative survey (Appendix A) aimed to be completed by the students prior to travelling in order to capture their insights before arriving at the target culture and University. The qualitative survey was comprised of 16 questions. Because qualitative research is concerned with understanding the complexities of the case within its context (Punch, 2014), the

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first section of the pre-arrival online qualitative survey aimed to gather contextual information pertaining the participants. Therefore, data about as age, gender, expected length of stay in the UK, degree pursuing, the programme of study, e-mail address, and English as a mother tongue were mainly inquired by means of closed questions with categories of responses (Munn and Drever, 1990).

The categories were determined as follows. The age group categories followed Richardson's (1994) definition that a student is considered matured-aged when entering pre-graduate school at the age of 21 or older whereas a mature postgraduate student starts postgraduate studies at the age of 25 or older. Therefore, the 21-24 and the 25-29 years old were the two core categories that helped me identify whether the participants in this study were considered matured learners or not. Two other categories, on each side of these, were provided. The 18-20 age group aided to detect any possible pre-graduate respondents whilst the 30+ category attempted to inform the gap's length before retaking postgraduate education. Female, male and other, were provided as categories for gender. The respondent's nationality was asked to confirm suitability for the study. The expected length of stay in the UK was determined in accordance with the possible choices for study. For instance, one academic semester was offered as a possibility to filter those students likely to participate in an exchange or language programme; one academic year potentially to be Master's degree students; one up to three academic years considering the students pursuing PhD studies and finally, another length of stay was also provided as an alternative. In order to confirm the respondents were postgraduate students, the categories of degree pursuing were: none, Bachelor's, Master's, Doctors, or Other. To grasp an understanding of the main disciplines to pursue, the participants' programme of study was elicited. Although the participants were to be approached personally for the following data collection stage, the respondent's e-mail address was requested to identify and track participation throughout the different instruments and points of data collection. Whether English was the participants' first language or not was also asked. The rationale behind this last question was to discard any possibilities of the participants' being native English speakers due to the geographical proximity between Mexico and the USA, which could have permitted for a different lived experience.

The second section of the survey elicited qualitative information by means of open questions about the participants prior to departure expectations, institutional assistance, and awareness of services. In addition to enquiring about their prior to travelling planning, and envisioned strategies to adapt on arrival to the UK. Furthermore, it elicited information about the respondents' pre-departure perception about the British culture and about how different they consider it was in comparison to own culture in order to appreciate the perceived cultural distance between home and host culture (Kim, 2001). At this stage, the awareness about

resources in the institution was also asked by means of a multiple-choice question, where the respondents' could select more than one choice. This list included: Student Services Centre (e.g. admission, enrolment, tuition payments, ID card, etc.), Accommodation Team, VISAS team, Enabling services, University's website, International Office, Meet and Greet Service, Pre-arrival Online Course, Induction Talks/Workshops, Faculty Office, and provided Other (Please specify) as a choice to elaborate on their response. Moreover, it aimed to find out the participants' awareness about where to look for information, advice, or guidance, and in view of this, gather their insights about how to get the support they needed.

Finally, the online qualitative survey was written in English. However, considerations were given to help the participants feel at ease and freely express their opinions, without the possible limitations that writing in a second language could bring. Therefore, the participants were prompted to answer in the language of their preference, be it English or Spanish. Because of this, some references were translated into English for the results section of this study.

3.5.1.1 Pre-arrival data collected

The pre-arrival online qualitative survey was alive from September 5th to September 25th, 2016 just one day before the beginning of Week 0. Twelve students completed it. The online qualitative survey was filled in approximately two weeks before the institutional advised day of arrival (September 21st and 22nd, 2016) by half of the students. Two students completed it a week before travelling, and one student just a day before. Although the online qualitative survey advised participants to complete it before their trip, three students wrote in their answers within the first two days of their arrival. The qualitative survey was still alive at that point since Fresher's week started on September 26th, 2016, and the instrument was set offline on September 25th, 2016. This was done in the quest of possibly hearing the voices of any latecomers (students who were still in Mexico just before the beginning of Fresher's week). Though the expectations of these three respondents could not be captured untouched as they had already been in touch with the target culture, they had not been in the host environment for more than a couple of days nor had they started their programme of study. Additionally, their sharing offered the possibility to scrutinise any possible dissonances with participants who had shared their view before their departure.

3.5.2 In-situ online questionnaire

The in-situ online questionnaire (Appendix B) aimed to collect qualitative data to address the second and third research questions under study: the implemented coping mechanisms, and the use of university services and extent of helpfulness for the participants' adaptation. The

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questionnaire was composed of 20 questions, two sections and it aimed to be filled online. The first section gathered contextual information mainly by means of closed questions with categories of response (see **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**).

Contextual data was collected for two reasons. First, it is believed that appreciating the wholeness of their adaptation experience; it is necessary to look at the context, in which it happens (Thomas, 2016). Second, the review of literature highlighted previous experience abroad (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Kim, 2001) as an element that could facilitate sojourners' adaptation. Therefore, it was deemed important to inquire about the participants' context and within it, about their previous international mobility and use of English. Consequently, in addition to inquiring about the same contextual information as in the pre-arrival online qualitative survey, (e.g. age group, gender, nationality, expected length of stay in the UK, degree pursuing programme of study, English as a first language and e-mail address), this instrument sought for data related to the students' international mobility. Previous stays in the UK for periods longer than one month were elicited as a yes or no answer. Followed by a question, which enquired about visits to foreign countries for continuous periods of more than one month with categorical responses of 0,1, 2, 3 or more countries visited, and it queried about their purpose for visit with study, work, travel, and other (please specify) as choices. The language for communication while in these place was elicited with Spanish, English, and other (please specify) as categorical responses. The same type of responses was offered to specify the language for completion of previous degrees. Finally, grasping knowledge about the students' activity prior to embarking to the UK for studies was deemed as an important component to ask in order to appreciate how mobile the participants were and to what extent their previous activity could have influenced how they undertook the experience abroad. For so, study, work, and other (please describe) were provided as categories. Finally, university vs private accommodation were the choices offered for the stay while in the UK.

The second part of the questionnaire elicited information about the participants' perception of the usefulness of institutional services with their planning preparations as well as upon their arrival. These data was elicited by a Likert type of question, based on the idea of usefulness ('Not useful at all' to 'Extremely useful'), followed by an open question to elaborate on the insight given. Complementing the latter question, the institutional services consulted up to that point were asked. Understanding the participants were already in the institutional premises and could have accessed other services, in addition to the ones possibly consulted prior to arrival, the list of services included: Personal Academic Tutors, Health Service, Students' Union and the Mexican Society. Other (please specify) and "None" services consulted were also given as a choice. The "None" response prompted another question, which asked as an open question, why information, advice, or guidance from the institution had not been sought. The instrument equally enquired as

open questions about the participants' main sources of support in both stages, pre-departure and upon arrival. It urged the participants to mention, "all resources consulted (not only University provided)" in order to glean a broader understanding of what their main sources of support had been.

This second instrument was an online questionnaire uploaded in English. However, in the welcome message it prompted students to complete in whichever language they felt more comfortable with, English or Spanish, being the latter their mother tongue. Thus, references translated for the analysis are indicated alongside the participants' pseudonym.

3.5.2.1 First in situ data collected

Twenty-five Mexican postgraduate students answered the in situ online questionnaire in early October 2016. At the time the questionnaire was answered two participants had been in the UK for less than a week; 21 had been between one, and two weeks, and two students had been three weeks in the host environment. Concerning the extent of familiarisation of the participants with the host environment, four had visited the UK for a period longer than a month before the present stay. In regards to the students' international mobility, half of the students had been in a foreign country for continuous periods of one month whereas the others had not. The main rationale stated for their trips was studying, followed by travelling, and finally, work purposes. While in those trips, English was the language used for communication by most of the sojourners. Spanish was also resourced to communicate in a few cases. Portuguese, French, and Japanese were also a means of communication for a couple of participants. Spanish was the language for completion of first and subsequent degrees. Although, two students manifested English had been part of their previous academic formation. Most of the participants revealed work as the previous activity before studies in the UK whereas the others claimed study as the previous activity.

3.5.3 Focus groups

The focus groups (Appendix C) were scheduled to happen on the third week of the participants' stay. Focus groups were chosen, as the aim was to delve further into the participants' adaptation experience, "as members of a group" (Bryman, 2016) during their first three weeks. In light of this, focus groups have been recognised as a method which emphasis rests on the interaction between the participants and hence, in the shared construction of meaning that it allows (Ibid., 2016). Therefore, listening to other Mexican's experiences to adapt during the first three weeks, and agreeing, debating or challenging their outlooks, could permit the revision and refinement of own views. This in turn may lead to a more genuine interpretation of their adaptation experience as collectively constructed by the participants. To this end, the focus groups followed a semi-

structured format, guided by a set of open questions, which could be adjusted as the discussion unfolded. There were nine open questions, with some sub-questions on the site, to be resourced from. These questions were to elicit the participants' views, as a group, in regards to the challenges, the coping mechanisms, and the institutional services resourced up to that point. Therefore, the questions aimed to be fairly unstructured and so they asked how the participants had felt since their arrival; what they had done to adapt; if their expectations for what they considered was going to take them to adapt were matched; what had been the easier and most difficult areas to adapt; what their perception about the institutional support received was; what recommendations for other Mexican students and for the University to better assist its international students would they give. It wrapped up by taking on board any insights the participants would like to add and taking into account any feelings that could have emerged from the activity.

3.5.3.1 Focus groups data collected

Twenty Mexican postgraduate international students participated in three focus groups in mid-October 2016. The focus groups took place in the institutional premises and lasted between one hour, and an hour and a half each. The first focus group was comprised of five students, six in the second one, and nine on the third one. The focus groups took place in the third week upon the arrival for most of these students. However, one participant was in the middle of their fourth week, and two students were in their fifth week of stay in the UK at the time this data was collected. Regarding the latter students, one came under the Erasmus scheme for which she had first arrived in Spain five days before travelling to the destination of studies in the UK, two weeks before the institutional advised arrival date and was to stay for a semester. The other student had arrived a couple of weeks earlier with her father with whom she had travelled in Europe before the beginning of her studies. The contextual characteristics of these participants have been described in the first in situ data collected given that they were gathered in the in situ questionnaire.

During the running of the focus groups and as students arrived to the premises, rapport was intended to be built by greeting and thanking them for their collaboration. Moreover, attempting to gain trust, I started the session by introducing myself as a fellow conational postgraduate student, and by explaining the dynamics of the activity. I was not to take a direct part in it instead my role was more as a facilitator, who would sit aside and only supply the questions. Therefore, my participation was minimal. The participants then organised themselves and agreed on raising their hand, and passing on the recorder, when willing to participate. The first two groups seemed to have run smoothly; however, achieving balance of interaction featured as a shortcoming in the

third and largest focus group, with nine people participating in it and with the limited interaction of a couple of them.

Furthermore, aiming for a successful outcome of focus groups that could result in rich data, a set of considerations was taken into account (Punch, 2014). For instance, the focus groups were conducted in Spanish in order to make the students feel comfortable and grant them with the same opportunities for participation regardless of their level of English and confidence in it.

3.5.4 Student interviews

The individual interviews (Appendix D) were scheduled to happen on the fourth week after the participants' advised day of arrival. They set out to get a holistic understanding of the participants' adaptation experience up to that point by finding out the challenging areas faced, the mechanisms employed to cope and the perception of the institutional support received through a flexible interview's design. Thus, the interviews followed a semi-structured format, which was guided by a set of open-ended questions that worked as an outline, but that could be modified to follow through the interviewees' replies (Bryman, 2016). Consequently, this format was adopted given the room for spontaneity it provides as well as its flexibility to go in depth or ask for clarifications if needed (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, it enables the discussion of interpretations and the communication of personal points of view (*Ibid.*). Likewise, collecting data through verbal communication allows the participant to put into words aspects of their personal life and through this be aware of them (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002). Therefore, the guiding questions ranged from asking the interviewees to describe how their first weeks as international students had been; how they had felt during those first weeks and how they would have liked their first weeks to be; what they would have done differently; how would they describe their adaptation with the new environment; what had been the easier and most challenging areas to settle in; what had helped to adapt; how they perceived the support the University had given; and what recommendations would they give to the institution and to other Mexican students to come to the same University. Likewise, interviewees were asked if there were any insights they would like to add and ended by asking how they felt by the development of the activity. This list of questions aimed to cover the three research questions under study as well as to give the participants flexibility on how to reply (Bryman, 2016).

3.5.4.1 Student interviews data collected

Seven Mexican postgraduate students took part in the individual interview in late October 2016. Master's degree students mainly formed the focus groups whereas the individual interviews primarily captured the views of the PhD students who took part in this study. Although the

interview was scheduled to take place at different points during the fourth week after the institutional advised day for arrival, two of these participants were on their second and third week of stay, respectively, due to late arrival. This did not affect the methodological design of this study as I could gather fresh insights as to the challenges, services and coping mechanisms experienced up to that point.

Special considerations were taken into account for the adequate development of the individual interviews. For instance, aiming to gain trust, I started the interview by exposing my language and culture affinity through the introduction of myself as a Mexican PhD fellow. Moreover, the interview took place in the institutional premises under study. To establish rapport, I asked where the participants would like to sit, offered something to drink and whether the interview should be led in English or Spanish. All the participants opted for it to be carried out in Spanish. The interview lasted approximately one hour each aiming not to exhaust the participants and respect their time.

3.5.5 Reflective journal

Reflexivity has been identified as essential in qualitative research to understand the research process and the phenomenon under study (Watt, 2007; Berger, 2015). Continuous reflection on the researcher's behaviour and thoughts is to assist the awareness of how these elements may impact the generation of knowledge (Ibid.). Furthermore, the qualitative researcher is conceived as the instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Watt, 2007; Richardson, 2018). Considering these viewpoints, keeping a journal has been acknowledged as an influential tool to increase reflexivity by trailing the "researcher's thinking, judgement, and emotional reactions" (Berger, 2015, p. 222). In this regard, Richardson (2018) claims the writing voices of the qualitative researcher need to be honed and nurtured. She argues writing is a form of language through which an interpretation of reality and the self can be created. Therefore, articulating thoughts in paper allow making thoughts conscious and realise about things the researcher did not realise were there (Watt, 2007). Moreover, rereading entries previously written permits deepening the understanding of insights (Ibid.). Another recognised benefit of journal writing is the opportunity it grants to make the research process transparent (Ortlipp, 2008). Since the internal dialogue between the researcher and the research entries might allow for a clearer understanding of "what they know and how they think they came to know it" (Watt, 2007, p.84). Moreover, journal writing is to assist the maintenance of "balance between the personal and the universal" (Berger, 2015, p.220,) and increase the trustworthiness of the interpretation of findings (Ortlipp, 2008) since at the core of knowledge construction, in this study, was personal interaction with the participants by means of an individual interview or a focus group.

Based on this rationale, and given my personal positionality, as an insider, and the nature of my research, qualitative, I adopted from the beginning of my doctoral studies, critical self-reflection as a methodological strategy; by keeping a research journal to document my process both as a student and as a researcher, and to reflect on them.

I handwrote my journal entries throughout the different stages of my PhD (Appendix E) except for the data analysis stage for which I was using Nvivo, and it provided a memo tool (see Appendix F). At that stage, I chose to write my reflections, as I was engaging with the data and I could open both files simultaneously to trail my thinking. Keeping a journal assisted me in different ways. It helped me not only to trail my research process, but also to re-design approaches I had envisioned to take (Watt, 2007). Furthermore, it helped me to consider useful strategies to implement for the effective interaction among the participants.

3.6 Pilot study

The initial instruments were two questionnaires, a vignette and individual interviews piloted with Latin American and Caribbean students during their first month of stay, in the 2015-2016 academic calendar, and in the same premises under study. The pilot helped to clarify the research objectives, discard previously planned approaches, and implement new research procedures.

It helped me to re-focus the study's audience. For instance, based on my review of literature, I had initially contemplated focusing my study on students of Latin American and Caribbean origin as an understudied population of international experience. However, by piloting the instruments, I realised I was treating this group as homogeneous and such was not the case. Although they came from the same region, there were significant differences among them. For example, the pilot participants did not share the same mother tongue. Among the volunteers, there were Spanish, Portuguese, and English native speakers. The language was then considered as an element that could set up the participants in different contexts for their experience to adapt. In addition to that, through the pilot, it was learnt that the largest majority of students from this region were of Mexican origin. The findings above helped me to research more and narrow my research focus to Mexican international students. The rationale for this decision is explained in the context section of this study.

The pilot study also aided me to realise about the unsuitability of the instruments I had intended to apply. The questionnaires applied provided valuable insights. Overall, the open format questions of the first questionnaire were mainly left unanswered, and the responses provided were out of focus. This led to the reformulation of some of the questions to a combined format of structure (Likert scale, for example) followed by open-ended questions; aiming the respondents

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could elaborate on their answers instead of leaving them in blank. I also realised about the inappropriateness of the tight structure of the second questionnaire piloted. The questionnaire was adapted from the longitudinal and large-scale study developed by Klineberg and Hull (1979) concerning international students' coping and adaptation. It presented the participants with a list of 34 'difficulties' and enquired which ones they had experienced since their arrival to the UK, who had advised them in regards to those problems encountered and the extent of usefulness of the Information, Advice and Guidance received. The questionnaire's overall design was considered inappropriate due to its tendency to perceive the adaptation of the participants as negative. In addition to not providing a more open design where the participants could openly express their opinion. These findings seemed to demonstrate the rich data I was anticipating to get would most likely not be attained by means of these questionnaires. However, once redesigned, they could still be useful to establish initial contact with the participants and gather some contextual and qualitative data. Moreover, applying the questionnaires allowed to fine-tune the questions asked, in agreement with my research aims, since due to their implementation I realised the strategies the participants may bring in for their adaptation were not being considered. Furthermore, the pilot of the questionnaires also assisted me realising the participants' views prior to arrival could be captured by means of a pre-arrival online qualitative survey.

Concerning the vignettes, the pilot volunteers were provided with two extreme ends vignettes, and they were prompted to select the description that best suited their adaptation or alternatively, to create their own. Although the feedback received from the pilot of these vignettes was positive, it was appreciated that what students liked the most was the freedom they had to create their own statements. This reinforced the need to explore other research methods that would be in alignment with my research objective, and that would not constrain, but allow the participants to express their opinions in a more open and unstructured way. Therefore, I decided to consider the vignettes as a supplement instrument that I could draw on if more prompts for interaction were needed whilst collecting data. However, this resource was not needed since there was active engagement from the participants. Furthermore, piloting the interviews was helpful to refine the guiding questions accordingly. The interviews were piloted several times until the questions seemed to be clear and prompted data in relation to the research aims. The interview proved to be an instrument that would elicit the participants' view in a less structured and more open way.

3.7 Data analysis and interpretation

Data from the online qualitative survey and the questionnaire were downloaded from the online institutional platform as excel spreadsheets. Data from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed. Thematic analysis was chosen as the appropriate approach for data analysis because I was in search of themes that would allow me to explain what the participants were trying to convey in relation to their adaptation experience (Bloomberg and Volper, 2012). A theme is defined by Boyatzis (1998, p.4) as "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon". The lack of research efforts to report how themes were discovered is frequently criticised in the literature (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Consequently, aiming to redress such methodological limitation, the following section provides a detailed account of my own process of thematic analysis.

The development of the themes process started by doing manual coding (Saldaña, 2013). The data gathered was entered into Nvivo 11, as a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for coding sorting (Appendix I). To examine the data, a coding framework based on the three research questions under inquiry (the challenges, the coping strategies and the university services) was used. Within this coding scheme, the participants' insights were categorised as positive, neutral, negative, and challenging. For instance, positive comments showed clear support or assistance for the participants' adaptation (See a coded node example Appendix J). Neutral remarks were interpreted as general statements of the topic under discussion and did not appear to have an impact on the students' adaptation. Negative comments were associated with elements identified as lacking and that could have probably been of assistance to adapt. Moreover, the challenging comments included the elements explicitly identified by the participants as a struggle, a challenge, or a hindrance to adapt. In addition to that, informed by the literature (Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Schartner, 2014), the data pertaining the challenges was categorised into academic, affective, and sociocultural dimensions, for a deeper exploration and identification of the types of challenges. Lastly, this study adopted a combination of deductive (previously informed by the literature) and inductive (emerging from the data) coding categories (Berg and Lune, 2002). This was chosen based on the understanding that successful empirical research emerges from a combination of rationally derived assertions as well as those, which arose "serendipitously" (Merton, 1957). Therefore, having been guided by the review of literature for the development of this research, there were some "anticipated patterns and relationships" (Berg and Lune, 2012, p.369) born in mind. However, the aim was not to impose those patterns but to seek out for themes of meaning in the data (Hatch, 2002). Being

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so, inductive coding took precedence over deductive given the interest to mainly let data speak by itself

Aggregating codes under the corresponding categories, previously explained, allowed for the identification and emergence of major themes. It is worth noting that allocating a code under a specific category required iteratively going over the data with several coding attempts. Moreover, the student' participants data was coded in the language collected in this case, Spanish.

After I had identified the major themes, I started to translate into English the codes I had selected and write the narrative, using the research questions as the frame. However, I realised some of the findings overlapped across the three foci of my study. I then needed to look for another way to present them, so they were intelligible to others (Boyatzis, 1998). Given the objective to grasp an understanding of the participants' adaptation experience over time, coding the data in chronological order could be a suitable approach. I, therefore, applied a chronological frame to the corpus of data already coded under the research questions' outline. At this point, I started coding data manually. I did so because having the data in a word document allowed me to appreciate the broader picture, which I was unable to get whilst using Nvivo 11. Moreover, at that stage, the volume of data was already manageable, and I was already familiar with it. Therefore, I used the research questions codes as the basis to build on the level of analysis. I did so by adding a layer to what I already had coded rather than creating a new parallel set of codes.

Consequently, I intertwined the elements, so that my arguments had integrity, and took time (pre-arrival, on arrival, first days, first two weeks, and weeks three and four) as my narrative framework. This chronological framing converged themes from the challenges, the coping strategies and the university services based on time. This is how the findings and discussion are presented.

Finally, as I was moving along, I was documenting my thoughts about the analysis process by the use of the memos tool whilst I was using Nvivo 11, and afterwards, I wrote them manually. Additionally, quotes are provided to illustrate the discussion of the findings. They are presented to exemplify the argument being made. A description of the codes selection will be found in the introduction of each Findings and discussion sub-section.

3.8 **Ethical considerations**

Given the qualitative nature of this study and aiming "to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the informants" (Creswell 2014, p.208), ethical considerations regarding access and acceptance, informed consent, and anonymity and confidentiality were taken into account. First, this research abided by the regulations stipulated by the Ethics and Research Governance Online

(ERGO) system of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University under study. Ethical approval and access to the participants were attained.

Prior to arrival, the participants were reached via the social media page of the Mexican students' group as part of the University's union and invited to participate. On arrival, access to the potential participants was gained through support from institutional gatekeepers, who were advised in written about the aim of this research. The stakeholders helped by mentioning my study to prospective participants in their invitation correspondence to an institutional event, to happen approximately ten days after arrival, where I intended to personally recruit the participants for the on arrival stage of my project.

Aiming to inform the participants about what the study and their contribution entailed, an information sheet (Appendix G) and a consent form (Appendix H) were made available (Cohen et al., 2011). For the pre-arrival online qualitative survey, both documents were accessible and requested approval prior to completion of the online instrument. In the case of the in situ questionnaire, the focus groups and the interviews the participants' information and consent forms, in that order, were personally distributed and collected before the commencement of the data collection process.

The information sheet, in addition to providing the participants with precise information about the study and their role in it, explained the considerations given to safeguarding their identity. For instance, it clarified, though full anonymity could not be promised as the focus groups and interviews involved face-to-face communication, names would not be asked, and responses would be anonymised by the use of pseudonyms when reporting results. In line with this, more than assigning pseudonyms as a precondition of research ethics; careful thoughts were given to decide what names to use as pseudonyms (Guenther, 2009). Therefore, the aim was to protect, but also to respect the participants' identity by taking into account the cultural context of the participants. Being so, currently popular Mexican and English names for people of similar age, correspondingly, were browsed-by means of an Internet search engine. For that reason, the naming decision in this study is contextualised within the parameters of the research (Guenther, 2009)

Moreover, specific considerations were given to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Pertaining the student participants, although names were not requested, their e-mail address was. E-mail addresses could, in turn, lead to deduce the participants' identity. Therefore, their e-mail address was only used as an identifier for myself and is not displayed on the results of the study. Finally, the name of the institution is not disclosed.

3.9 Methodological rigour

Guba (1981) differentiates between the terminology used for describing the strategies implemented for ensuring rigour in quantitative and qualitative research. While quantitative research uses the terms internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, qualitative researchers on the other hand observe criteria like credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba, 1981). The latter will be the terms embraced to refer to the quality of this research. Thus, the criteria applied to ensure this study's trustworthiness are described hereafter.

During the research process, triangulation of data from different sources and methods was employed to enhance the credibility and the confirmability of the findings (Guba, 1981). For instance, the data collected reflects the diversity of views from different Mexican postgraduate international students, who participated in one or more of the (4) data collection stages.

Methodological triangulation was also used as a strategy to maintain trustworthiness. Different methods of data collection (e.g. qualitative survey, questionnaire, focus groups and interviews) were implemented as a means to corroborate evidence from multiple stances (Ibid.). This use of multiple methods was also set out to reinforce the dependability of the data. Therefore, several methods were applied to compensate any possible limitations of using individual ones and harnessing the potential of multiple ones, where a method could counteract the limitations of another (Guba, 1981).

In the pilot process, member checking was taken into account to strengthen the credibility of the data. This was done by receiving feedback from the pilot participants through a cognitive interview about the methods to be implemented, which in turn led to improve their quality (Guba, 1981). Likewise, collecting data at different points in time allowed verifying the authenticity of the information by checking with the participants the accuracy of the themes that were emerging, and in line with that, disregarding or substantiating their description (Creswell, 2014a).

Keeping a research journal throughout the research process was also a practice exercised to heighten the credibility, the confirmability, and the dependability of the study (Guba, 1981; Creswell, 2014a). For instance, in regards to credibility and confirmability, by keeping a continuing journal, I was able to scrutinise my own thinking and how my insights were developing as the research progressed, which in turn encouraged reflexivity during the research process itself. Relating to dependability, writing a journal worked as an audit trail that allowed documenting the research process, along with the changes that were occurring and their reasoning.

Moreover, relating to credibility in the process and bearing in mind the risk that prolonged involvement with the participants could bring (Guba, 1981); I consciously reduced sources of influence by not becoming an active member of the Mexican society and by not accepting social media invites from respondents. Besides, regularly exposing my thinking to supervisors' critiques and to different perspectives through their questioning enabled me to revisit and reconsider my growing insights throughout the research process.

Furthermore, aiming to ensure credibility in the product, different voices and contradictory views of the same theme were chosen and reported (Guba, 1981). This was done in the hope to provide a holistic interpretation, which included possible explanations for the shown contradictions (Ibid.).

Aiming to ensure the transferability of the research, and produce findings that are context relevant and represent the diversity of views, the participants were purposefully selected (Guba, 1981). Thus, the maximal-variation strategy was implemented by selecting participants, who could distil different perspectives in terms of age, gender, regions of origin in Mexico, postgraduate degrees pursuing, choice of accommodation, and having had or not previous experience abroad. Likewise, in the product, "thick" descriptions of contextual elements were provided, so that the case could be situated and possibly enable transferability to other relevant contexts (Ibid.).

Finally, concerning confirmability, being aware of how my epistemological assumptions could have an impact on the research, and hence how they could influence the decisions I took throughout the study; in addition to acknowledging that my own biography could have shaped the interpretation of findings, my positionality was disclosed from the outset (Guba, 1981; Creswell, 2014a).

Chapter 4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Introduction

Given the intention of this study to identify the challenges, the coping strategies and the university services, the participants' experienced, implemented and used in specific points in time, prior to arrival and within their first month of stay in the UK (late September to late October), this chapter on findings and discussion follows a chronological framing. The chronological framing was adopted after realising that structuring the findings' discussion under the research questions was not a suitable narrative since findings overlapped across the three foci under study. However, the research questions will be employed to provide structure for the concluding chapter.

The findings and discussion chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section is formed of two parts: the pre-arrival data and the on-arrival findings' discussion. The pre-arrival segment draws on data concerning the students prior to departure expectations, their intended agency to adapt, main sources of support prior to departure, institutional assistance with planning, and extent of own preparation. The on-arrival, on the other hand, elucidates on the participants' experience from the moment of arrival to the UK, their first day in the host city, and until the delivery of the University and the Faculty induction during the first academic week. The second section contemplates the challenges the students faced during their first two weeks; they are analysed into three strands: academic, sociocultural, and affective, and presented in that same sequence in this second section. Additionally, each strand delves into how the participants navigated through those difficulties and explores whether there was any reliance on university's assistance or on own coping mechanisms for resolution. The third and final section of this chapter unravels the challenges, the coping mechanisms and the institutional services the participants experienced in weeks 3 and 4 of their stay. Although, the three strands previously mentioned will still be revisited in weeks 3 and 4, at this point the affective difficulties were not strongly identified *per se*, rather they were implicated within the academic and sociocultural challenges the students' were facing and the coping strategies they employed. Consequently, the last section is presented in two components, academic and sociocultural, whilst inherently scrutinising the affective domain.

In addition to the chronological framing, the narrative of the findings and discussion chapter follows a top-down approach. This means that I will break down the data, and refine it in greater detail as time and the discussion move forward. For instance, I will unpack and fine-grain some of the data presented in the pre and on arrival section, and some of consequences that emerged

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from it, in the first two weeks, and weeks 3 and 4 findings' discussion. Thus, I will come back to data presented in multiple occasions; nonetheless, the actual content and relevance of the same shifts. Therefore, the pre-arrival stage will provide a panorama of the participants' pre-departure expectations for institutional assistance and their extent of preparation. While the on-arrival phase will present an overarching view of the participants' initial interaction with the new academic conventions and use of institutional services. The implications of the previous findings will then be unwrapped in the following sections. Consequently, the two weeks capture the struggles related to procedural practices in the British context and the academic challenges starting to emerge, whereas the affective section delves into the sources of stress and support during the first couple of weeks. Finally, weeks 3 and 4 present in far more detail the longer lasting academic and sociocultural challenges identified, as well as the students' level of confidence with some of the new academic and sociocultural conventions. Thus, the implementation of a top-down approach may help to explicate the expanding length and depth of each section as the discussion proceeds.

Another clarification worth making is regarding the retrospective freshness of primary data. In an attempt to report data in real time, data was collected as early as possible. In some cases, this was achieved. For example, the expectations for university support and the participants' intended onus were gathered, from the online qualitative survey applied, prior to the participants' departure to the UK. In some other instances, the data derived from the instrument applied closer in time to the situation in query, like the main sources of support consulted for preparations, and obtained approximately 10 days after the students' arrival. However, there were some other cases (e.g. Usefulness of university's assistance with planning), in which the data to be collected, in spite of being elicited closer to the real time of occurrence by means of the in situ questionnaire, mainly emerged from the focus groups and interviews that took place in weeks 3 and 4 of the students' arrival. This represents the largest time length from the moment the data was gathered to the moment it is reported. Therefore, even though in some cases I am reporting retrospectively, the comments elucidated are still fresh, as they are only referring to a maximum of 4 weeks later.

Concerning the language for the data collection instruments, although the pre-arrival online qualitative survey and the in-situ questionnaire were written in English, the participants were given the choice to reply in Spanish if they felt more comfortable. In this sense, the direct quotes for the participants, who decided to respond in Spanish, were translated for the presentation of findings and such is indicated next to each corresponding quote. Moreover, in relation to the participants, who expressed their insights in English in the qualitative survey or the questionnaire, their direct quotes are reported as received, including any errors, be they typographical,

grammatical or any other type, as the reader might realise. The other two instruments for the student participants, the focus groups and interviews, were conducted in Spanish. Therefore, the quotes deriving from any of these two instruments were equally translated into English; this is indicated alongside the corresponding quote as well as the source of data.

A final remark concerns the dated use of literature, in some cases. A systematic search by the use of key words in various databases, such as ERIC and Google Scholar guided me towards relevant literature. Some of the found literature was dated; however, it proved to be still relevant since it was very specific and ad-hoc my research and it would allow me to do the meticulous discussion I was hoping. This was in comparison to the more general and non-context specific that other more updated articles would allow me to. One example of this is the study by *Simons et al. (1988)* engaged for the discussion on the Faculty induction. The authors similarly explored the students' expectations for university support within the first few weeks; they equally scrutinised the students' perception and usefulness of the Faculty induction having the UK as setting. The focus specificity on the students' insights within the first few weeks of their use of institutional services was something I failed to find in other more updated research. Nonetheless, I did find more updated and broader empirical research, and still relevant and applicable to my study. This literature was mainly developed by Australian researchers in relation to the provision and utilisation of university services by international students in Australia, and so I equally engaged with it for the findings' discussion.

Finally, a brief introduction is provided at the beginning of each section in an attempt to help the reader navigate through this chapter.

4.2 Pre-arrival findings and discussion

This first section refers to the pre-departure occurrences in relation to the participants' preparation and the university's support with planning for their living and studying abroad experience. Its structure reflects the themes that emerged in relation to the pre-arrival stage. Therefore, it unpicks the participants' expectations for university support, the envisioned onus for their process of adaptation, their main sources of support with travel preparations, the perceived usefulness of university assistance with preparations and the implementation (or not) of prior to departure preparation strategies.

The direct quotes in this section were selected taking into account the explicit reference made to a specific theme (e.g. adaptation, source of support) and that the rationale for the insight was explicated within the same quote. In some cases, the quotes chosen introduce the theme and subsequent comments elaborate on the idea and explain its reasoning. Concerning the section on

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pre-arrival own strategies reported as pre-departure insights, but gathered after arrival, in addition to the previous selection considerations, time markers that pinpointed when the activity happened were looked for in the quotes. Moreover, the recall of pre-arrival assertions expressed later in the focus groups of interviews' interaction, were drawn on since they denoted a deeper level of reflection and sometimes a different understanding on how the participants' perceived the reality prior to departure. Furthermore, some quotes echo the overall views of the participants, but in some other instances, they reflect the uniqueness of an individual's opinion.

In relation to the participants' expectations for institutional assistance upon arrival, the intention was to capture their genuine outlooks prior to departure; hence, data to answer this section comes from the online qualitative survey applied before the participants' arrival to the UK.

Though their goal for going abroad was to pursue studies, it was found their hopes for on-arrival assistance were not on academic matters. Rather their expectations were on activities that would assist them with the sociocultural and the emotional part of their sojourn. This is then the first theme presented. Whilst exploring the participants' expectations for university support, the level of anticipation depending on personality, emerged as a new theme. Thus, the participants' intended onus is the second finding presented in this section.

Although referring to the main sources of support utilised prior to travelling, the question ought to be asked after the students' arrival. The data for this theme derived then from the questionnaire applied in situ, approximately 10 days after the institutional advised dates for arrival, and which was my first contact with the participants once they were in the UK. The main sources of preparation support were the university's overseas agents and the students' own planning. For instance, the students with no previous experience seemed to have relied more heavily on the agents' assistance whereas the students with overseas' antecedents appeared to depend more on previous acquired knowledge.

While the usefulness of the university's assistance with planning was enquired in the in situ questionnaire, closer to the students' arrival, the data for this sub-section mainly developed from the focus groups. Pre-arrival e-mails, the university's website, and the international affairs' office featured as useful services with preparations. In spite of the perceived usefulness of pre-departure information, the way in which it was circulated did not seem to be the most effective possibly due to organisational practices and to cultural differences to convey information.

Data from the pre-arrival online qualitative survey, the focus groups, and the interviews allowed to explore the participants' implemented (or not) pre-arrival strategies. It was found that there were some students, regardless of having had experienced or not, who endeavoured to prepare for their trip and implemented a combination of informative and practical tactics. It was equally

found that the students who did not envision preparing for their sojourn were those whose first experience studying abroad was this. The understanding was that there was not a need for pre-departure preparation. The latter finding is followed up on the first on-arrival section given that after arrival the outlooks of the students with no previous experience and who did not seem to prepare, seemed to have changed.

4.2.1 University services expectations

Findings indicate there were two specific types of support, which students were expecting to receive from the University for their adaptation upon arrival. These were the provision of information to be acquainted with cultural practices, in order to deal with everyday life situations and campus premises, and the organisation of events aimed to meet people and establish new social networks:

Organising welcoming reunions. Providing spaces to allow students interact with each other. Providing students with information about [host city] and the campus. (Paloma, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Regarding the type of information to be received, the expectations were for systemic help that would provide them with information to guide them through processes. The focus of this support was not only on administrative procedures, but also on practical aspects that would allow them to come to an understanding of the host culture's way of doing. Thus, there was awareness about the unfamiliarity about to be faced, and that even "simple" things were done different:

Likewise, providing important information like suggestions as to where and how to buy clothes and food, and basic things and general recommendations that could facilitate the adaptation. (Mateo, translated, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Concerning the support to be received upon arrival by the Institution, literature calls for a balanced integration of academic and social activities (Mortimer and McLaughlin, 2006) for an appropriate introduction to new systems and new people (Hassanien and Barber, 2008) that would lead to an effective integration of the students into the academic and social arenas (Wilcox et al., 2005). In this view, the expectations of the participants were for the delivery of information about the host city and the campus, as well as for the organisation of events to socialise.

Emphasis on these expectations might derive, in accordance with the culture learning and the stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al., 2001), from the participants' need to feel more sociocultural and emotionally confident upon arrival by knowing how to appropriately perform UK everyday tasks and by diminishing feelings of loneliness through meeting people. Concerning the

provision of activities to socialise, Hofstede's (1986) individualism vs. collectivism dimension might also help to allow for a deeper understanding. For instance, coming from a collectivist society, like Mexico, where developing and maintaining relationships with others is recognised as a core value for wellbeing, the participants' recognised the need to develop social networks and feel connected upon arrival at the basis for getting adapted. Therefore, as recognised by Wilcox et al. (2005), the participants believed that the creation of new social networks was central to their integration into the new society, as new friends would help overcoming those difficulties.

In summary, the expectation for institutional support perceived as needed for their adaptation was to emanate from: 1) the delivery of information to deal with everyday aspects and the university's premises and 2) the organisation of events aimed to socialise and meet people. Although the ultimate goal for going abroad was to pursue a UK academic degree, the emphasis of pre-departure concerns and the hoped institutional support were not placed on the academic sphere, but rather on aspects that would boost the participants' adjustment to the sociocultural and affective domains of their sojourn. Lacking an understanding about the new academic system did not seem to be a pre-departure stressor; however, not having an overall understanding about the host culture and a dearth of social network upon arrival were indeed anticipated fears. These two factors seemed to be drive to hope for the provision of post-arrival information and socialisation activities on behalf of the host institution. This finding might have important ramifications for the type of induction, whether academic oriented or not, delivered by the institution, and the participants' expectation for a more sociocultural and emotional type of support upon arrival.

4.2.2 The participants' intended agency

In relation to the students' intended agency in order to adapt to the new environment, findings indicate there were different degrees of involvement. The concept of the individual's "personality" posited by Kim (2001) could help to explicate these varying extents. Understanding personality as: "the routinized ways in which individuals respond to environmental stimuli" (Kim, 2001, p.172); inner characteristics seemed to play a role in determining the agency students would take for their adaptation. Thus, the "adaptive drive" varied from person to person (Kim, 2001). Prior to arrival, some of the participants showed initiative and drive towards their process of adaptation whereas the sense of agency of others' was more passive. For instance, the students' expectations for the support to be received by the host institution for their adaptation ranged from aiming to receive systematic guidance to believing that the responsibility to adapt rested in oneself, as illustrated by the contrasting quotes below:

To provide me clear information of all the process I have to follow. (Pablo, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

To introduce me to their facilities so I can adapt myself as fast as I can and get the best of everything. (Esteban, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

I expect the university to be helpful however I don't think its their full responsibility to make me feel adapted. (Roberto, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

These different intended degrees of involvement allowed to realise that age did not seem to correspond with the extent of activeness intended by the participants. For instance, mature-aged students have been recognised as a group of students more prone to actively engage with their learning process (Richardson, 1994; Devlin, 1996; McCune et al., 2010); it could be then argued that a similar scope of responsibility would be expected in relation to own process of adaptation. However, in the references above, different to Pablo and Esteban as mature-aged participants, Roberto, a non-mature aged participant, reflected a deeper sense of responsibility for the process to experience. Thus, the degree of agency among the participants seemed to be based on the individual's personality, as claimed by Kim (2001) rather than on other characteristics, such as age.

4.2.3 Main sources of support prior to travelling

The main sources of support identified with planning for living and studying abroad were: study abroad agencies, and own strategies. On behalf of the host University, the guidance was provided by overseas agencies, which offered free advising and counselling to undergraduate and graduate students aiming to study in the UK:

I received free advice and guiding by an [agency name] assessor. (Armando, in situ questionnaire)

The support reported was on practical tasks such as visa application, the purchase of airline tickets and sponsorship issues. The views in regards to the quality of this support differed. On one hand, the advising was deemed as very useful and there was the feeling of being taken care of:

(...) The people were always very attentive, and they helped me so much in the part of the visa, [sponsorship], the purchase of the flight (...). (Roberto, in situ questionnaire)

Similarly, the help received on administrative matters was perceived as comprehensive. Although, there was the understanding that the support provided aimed to get the students to

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the city of studies and it focused on technical aspects, this was considered as “everything” that needed to be planned for the journey:

(...) [They] helped me with everything related to my arrival to [place of studies], they were basically my support for everything, where to go to check prices, etc. (Isabel, in situ questionnaire, translated)

Contrasting those views, even when the efforts to help were recognised, the advice of the agents was considered not very helpful. Hence, there was reliance on own strategies for a better planning:

There's an agency on Mexico that works for the University, (...), they tried to help me on different issues, but they were not so helpful so I mainly planned everything on myself. (Antonio, in situ questionnaire)

Having being abroad was also acquainted as a main source of support for the preparations to study and live abroad. Due to that experience, there was confidence in knowing what and how to prepare for the study abroad experience:

Mainly previous experience from being an international student in Japan (...) during my bachelor's studies. (Daniel, in situ questionnaire)

Overall, overseas agencies and own strategies were identified as the main sources of support prior to travelling. As encouraged by Dean (2012) the Institution appeared to have taken advantage of its international agents operating in Mexico to assist its recruited overseas students. The help reported was on administrative aspects that would get the students to the venue of studies and the participants perceived this support differently. Although, there were some students with previous experience abroad that considered the advising provided as useful, the students who did not consider it “so helpful” were those who had been international students before. The latter assertion goes in line with findings by Menzies et al.’s (2015) research, which identified previous experience and living independently abroad had equipped postgraduate international students for a “smooth” transition in an Australian HE institution. As accounted by Kim (2001) previous experience abroad served as a preparedness strategy since some students felt capable for the planning of their experience.

4.2.4 University's assistance with planning

The usefulness of the assistance provided by the University with preparations was summarised to the delivery and availability of timely, clear, and concise procedural information through different

institutional services. Being the latter: pre-arrival e-mails, the university's website and the international affairs office. For instance, information disseminated via e-mails was regarded as "helpful" when it was perceived as comprehensive and concise and when little room was left for uncertainty on what pre-departure tasks should be borne in mind:

The University (...) sent me an email with 9 steps to follow before you travel. It included the most logic and the basic things (...). It gave this type of things that you don't know you would need (...) (Andrea, FG 3, translated).

In contrast, excessive delivery of institutional e-mails was perceived as "a little confusing" when they were sent from different areas of the University and were giving several instructions on administrative processes, such as registration and enrolment, to undertake upon arrival. This approach seemed to have been ineffective, as the student had to look for face-to-face clarification of instructions upon arrival:

(...) at the end of so many emails that the University had, I didn't know what was where, at the end I had to go to student services. (...) it was so much information they wanted to give that (...) it all got me confused, they didn't give it concisely. (Eduardo, FG 3, translated)

Availability of information on the institutional website and promptness to respond to e-mail queries were considered very useful tools with travel preparations and the different processes to undertake (e.g. visa, lodging, registration, fees) upon arrival. The website was perceived as very complete and "well-structured" given that it allowed students to access "specific" information about "everything"; hence, gave a sense of the resources available:

All is very well documented on the website and there is extensive information in each one of the processes (...) (Diego, in situ questionnaire)

Regarding the usefulness of the institutional website, even though it was proposed by Dean (2012, p.216) as a useful marketing strategy "to inform, engage and convince international students", in this study it served its purpose to assist the participants with pre-departure procedures. In the students' quest to prepare for the experience to come, the official webpage became a significant support. Students were satisfied with the information provided on the institution's website for their preparation. Therefore, availability of clear and comprehensive information on the University's page was considered a useful resource.

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Personalised information and contact with personnel from international affairs was also deemed as helpful. The officer in charge of the Americas region appeared to be aware and understanding of the bureaucratic process prior to arrival:

Emily really helped me out since the application, extending deadlines (...). They are always very willing to help, and they understand all the complications you can have, and that it doesn't depend on you. (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

In sum, the availability of clear, personalised and concise information disseminated through the institutional: e-mails, the University's website and the international office appeared to be a channel that facilitated the planning of these students' journey.

The latter findings raise relevant links with previous empirical research and important implications for institutional practice. First, in common with Brown and Aktas' (2011) research, of Turkish international students, the present study identified the pre-departure support offered by the receiving University, via emails, as a helpful resource for the students to prepare for the trip and feel more confident about it. Additionally, research by Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) found that Australian exchange students deeply resented lacking this support. Nonetheless, the content, source, and timing of the delivery of pre-arrival information played a role in how useful it was perceived by the participants. For instance, in this study it was acknowledged as useful when the content was applicable for the specific stage they participants were going through and when this information emanated from only one source of communication. But in alignment with research by Roberts and Dunworth (2012), which explored international students' perceptions concerning support service at an Australian University, the provision of pre-arrival information was considered confusing due to the overwhelming amount of information given all at once, and at a time in which was not going to be relevant to immediate needs. In this study, another source of bewilderment found was the use of various institutional sources to circulate the information. Different areas of the University would send their relevant information from their particular email address, which would add to feelings of confusion.

Although the delivery of pre-departure information seems a useful resource to guide the participants into unknown processes, findings suggest there could two aspects that might prevent harnessing its potential. First, the delivery of information all at once does not seem a viable approach. Fragmenting the information depending on the stage (e.g. pre-arrival information, on arrival, first three days, etc.) and on relevance of content might help to have at hand the information that is of immediate applicability. Second, disseminating information simultaneously from the different components from the University only seems to add bewilderment. The students are unfamiliar as to the different parts of the university and what specific services

involve (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012), and receiving information from many different offices does not offer a clear path to follow regarding the different academic and administrative procedures to deal with before or after arrival. Therefore, developing a timelier and centralised plan in which different university components agree on the time and content for the delivery of information might minimise the chances of students feeling bombarded and confused with all that myriad of information and benefit from the value of availability of it.

Additionally, understanding the relationship between the way in which the information was institutionally disseminated and how the participants received it from a cultural lens may also prove beneficial. For instance, a possible underlying cause for the unproductive delivery and reception of information could be a conflict between a low (UK) and a high (Mexico) context society (Hall, 1976). For instance, in a low context society, the expectation is for the delivery of vast written information endeavouring to avoid misunderstandings whereas in a high context society little reliance is given to written communication and more on verbal exchanges (Hall, 1976). Thus, this could help to understand why concise information was valued as very useful whilst extensive information emanating from different sources was confusing, and personalised assistance was deemed as useful. This finding, in line with culture learning motives (Ward et al., 2001), seems then to call for an enhanced institutional awareness and training about the cultural values of its recruited international students in an attempt to convey information in a way that is more effectively received.

Moreover, based on the participants' recounts, the institutional help received prior to arrival seemed to be on procedural aspects for them to make it to host city and institution. There did not seem to be recollections that reported support received to cater for the affective, academic, and sociocultural disturbances likely to be encountered upon arrival. Led by the latter claim and previous encouragement by one of the University's staff interviewed:

it's a good site for you to have a look at, it has like a step by step thing of everything that you need to do. (Sophie)

I explored the University's welcome website in relation to the support provided by the University before the participants' arrival. As pinpointed by one of the participants, it was found that indeed there were nine steps, all with an administrative focus except for guidance about university accommodation, which advised new international students to follow before arrival. Therefore, emphasis appeared to be in getting the participants to the host city and University, and in line with that, administrative guidance was provided.

4.2.5 Pre-arrival own strategies

Regarding proactive actions in preparation for studying and living abroad, two themes were found. On the one hand, there were the participants who took an active stance and through different pre-departure tactics, these students prepared for the experience to come. They equally envisioned strategies to apply upon arrival in order to help their adaptation. On the other hand, there were the students, who did not foresee any pre or upon arrival strategies to assist their adaptation.

Concerning the former group, there were five areas, including arranging accommodation, of pre-departure concern and exercise. Their strategies were focused at minimising the impact of the difficulties they feared to face upon arrival. Those concerns were related to sociocultural and affective aspects. The participants' dynamic attitude did not seem dependent on having had or not experience studying abroad before, since the assertions came from both, experienced and non-experience travellers.

For instance, language was an area of anticipated concern. There was awareness that British English could represent a challenge; therefore, there was exposure to it by means of social media resources:

Before coming here (...) I watched some British YouTubes (...) every day I watched their videos (...) (Isabel, FG 1, translated)

Sleeping disturbances due to the change from West to East time zone were also expected. In an attempt to minimise the impact of jet lag upon arrival to host country, sleeping habits were adjusted before travelling:

I had already done the experiment in Mexico (...) instead of sleeping at night; I slept in the afternoon (...) (Mario, interview, translated)

The weather was equally anticipated as an area that would require efforts to adapt; hence, the approach taken to endure with this difficult change was willpower:

(...) the cold, I knew it would be cold. I prepared mentally (...) (Antonio, FG 2, translated)

Expecting feelings of loneliness and unfamiliarity upon arrival to the environment seemed to have been the drive to establish contact with flatmates prior to arrival:

(...) before arriving (...) I identified one of the girls that was going to live with me (...) (Ariana, FG2, translated)

Based on the references above, before travelling, the participants prepared for the experience to come by exercising the areas they considered would be the most difficult to transition to (Kim, 2001). The students made use of a wide range of resources in the bid to get prepared for their move. Their strategies were versatile, as they were not focused on grasping theoretical knowledge about the host culture, but on applying it. Their planning ahead contemplated practical exercises, establishment of social networks, and building on mental resilience.

Envisioning strategies to be applied upon arrival as an aid to adapt were also found. Joining groups with similar interest, participating in institutional events and interacting with locals featured as thought tactics to foster the socialisation dimension of the sojourn.

Join a society, attending to [university name] events, talking to local people. (Paloma, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Upon arrival, there was the intention of taking an active stance to meet people even when this could imply challenging the student's own personality. Likewise, it was expected that the institution would provide events for international students to promote interaction:

My strategy would be not being ashamed to talk with others. Also I try to assist to every event that uni has for international students. (Natalia, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Apart from getting involved with groups alike to minimise the chances for lack of socialisation, there was the stance of being well equipped for the experience by arriving earlier, and being informed about institutional duties, rights, and opportunities:

I have several things on mind: 1) Arriving early (22nd of september). 2) Read and understand all the regulations, policies, etc. 3) Identify and look for all the university support services.4) Join different societies. (Diego, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Regarding the considerations for the application of tactics upon arrival, the participants equally showed their intention to get actively involved in their process of adaptation by foreseeing practical (e.g. "talking to locals") and theoretical (e.g. "Read and understand all regulations") opportunities to integrate into the host culture. This may be in accordance with Kim's (2001) proposition that sojourners who prepare for their trip do it comprehensively.

Arranging accommodation prior to travelling was also found as a preparedness strategy. Deciding on the type of accommodation to choose, private vs. university lodging, did not seem dependent on this being the students' first experience abroad or not, rather the decision was mainly made in relation to the cost of it. For instance, Daniel who had previously studied abroad decided to avoid

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the hassle of finding accommodation and opted for university housing; however, the only criteria for his selection was price:

I didn't want to get in trouble and applied for the halls (...) The one I chose, I didn't even see where it was, I just checked which one was cheaper (...) (Daniel, FG 1, translated)

Contrarily, Natalia, whose first experience studying abroad was this, initially aimed to save the trouble of looking for accommodation and applied for university lodging; however, she declined it due to considering it unaffordable and used own resources to find suitable choices:

The University offered me a hall, but this was very expensive. So, I had to look for one by myself and I found the union's website. (Natalia, in situ questionnaire, translated)

For the development of this thesis, a dearth of studies, which explore the pre-departure concerns, and strategies of International studies became evident; however, the findings of this study resonate with those posited by Brown and Aktas (2011) in which the “fears” of a pre-departure group of Turkish international students were investigated. Some of the participants of this study equally anticipated struggles with the host language, feelings of loneliness and accommodation; thus, they took a proactive stance by getting prepared for the challenges to face. The participants aimed to familiarise with British English, to build a social network prior to arrival and to arrange accommodation before arrival by exposing themselves to the host language, establishing contact with future flatmates and looking for accommodation.

Although participants in Brown and Aktas (2011) study and in this one shared pre-departure concerns about accommodation, the source of preoccupation was different. For instance, Turkish students' fears were about the quality of student housing. Feeling at home was an important aspect; hence, inadequate accommodation was believed to affect their sojourn experience. Opposite to that, the participants in this study, with pre-departure concerns, rather than being worried about matching the parameters of comfort at home residence; had the worry about not having accommodation upon arrival. In this sense, no emphasis was given to the quality of housing, but to the cost of it. For instance, the decision to choose accommodation, student vs. private housing, was bound to the price of it. From these two contexts, it can be seen that in the case of Turkish students, finding accommodation was not a problem as it might have been allocated as part of their exchange program; therefore, concerns were about the comfort and cosiness of it whereas students in this study were not tight to selecting a specific type of housing. However, the selection of it was subject to price. This shows how prior to departing money played an influential role. It interfered and limited the students' choices.

Though the type of accommodation was determined by the cost of it, the approaches students took to sort the situation out differed. Previous experience did not seem to influence the stance taken rather it seemed to be influenced by personality (Kim, 2001). For instance, there was the easy path reaction by selecting whatever was the cheapest offer by the institution even when this was not the first experience abroad and there was possibly knowledge about other factors, apart from money, to consider when choosing accommodation. Contrarily, there was a more active response to try to find suitable accommodation, within own financial limitations, even when this was the first experience abroad. This might indicate that although previous experience counts as a preparedness strategy (Kim, 2001), personality takes precedence when making certain decisions such as this.

The participants' pre-departure activeness in relation to their process of adaptation seems to be in dissonance with "traditional" views of culture shock, where the sojourner plays a passive role on their adaptation and is the receiver of a series of unsatisfactory events due to unfamiliarity with the new environment (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960). Nevertheless, the participants' active stance seems to be in consonance with contemporary theories of culture shock, such as culture learning, and stress and coping approaches (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Ward et al., 2001), in that they took a proactive attitude towards their adaptation. Thus, in light of the dearth of research in relation to exploring international students' pre-departure concerns and implemented strategies, and of this research evidence, in which some of the participants seemed to have taken an active pre-departure stance, this seems to be an important research line for further exploration.

Opposite to the previous views, there were participants, who did not anticipate any strategies, to adjust to the new environment. This outlook came from students with no previous experience abroad. In these cases, adjusting to the new culture was not perceived as a task that needed to be taken care of prior to departure. There was reliance in sorting things out upon arrival:

Honestly, I have not thought about that, I just will figure it out once I am there. (Lucia, pre-arrival online qualitative survey)

Similarly, there was high confidence in own ability to adjust based on life experience:

Not really, I've never had a problem adjusting to new places so I do not expect this to be the exception. (Carlos, pre-arrival online qualitative survey, translated)

The outlooks of these students, who did not consider pre-departure readiness was necessary, could be explicated taking into account not having had previous experience abroad and personality attributes (Kim, 2001). For instance, there is convergence with Kim's (2001)

proposition that prior experience serves as a preparation strategy since the students who did not see any relevance for getting prepared were those whose first experience abroad was this. Further explanation in regards to this perceived lack of preparation is presented in the following section (4.3.1 Pre-arrival preparations post hoc reflection).

4.3 On arrival findings and discussion

The on-arrival findings and discussions section intends to illustrate the immediate after arrival experiences of the participants. This section follows a sub-chronological outlining that walks the reader from the participants' post hoc reflections on pre-arrival preparations to their first week's experiences and introduction to the UK academic and non-academic contexts. The selection of the direct quotes contemplates the identification of time pointers (e.g. before you come here, I arrived later, I didn't arrive in time, the first night), the clear exposition of a point of view and its rationale, and the expression of feelings that denote the extent of (un)happiness with the situation illustrated. Overall, the first quote introduces the argument in matter and is followed by assertions that elaborate in that regard. Additionally, a further consideration to selecting the pre-arrival preparations' quotes was the presence of bridging thoughts that illustrated the participants' prior to traveling perspective and how that changed upon arrival. In this regard, although elucidated upon arrival, the recalling of pre-arrival preparations was considered since they emerged at a recent time, at the latest four weeks from the participants' arrival to the UK, and arose as spontaneous and deep reflections from the participants on how the situations had unfolded upon arrival based on pre-arrival own circumstances. Thus, these views could not have been collected in the pre-arrival stage, as they liaise pre and on arrival stances, and reflect how the participants had refined their outlooks through time.

Therefore, in an attempt to bridge the views, gathered pre-arrival, pertaining the students with no previous abroad experience and their unperceived need for pre-departure planning, this on-arrival section starts by presenting the participants' post hoc reflection concerning their efforts for pre-arrival preparation and the impact of it upon arrival. The participants, whose first experience abroad was this, seemed to realise that preparedness for their journey would have helped.

The subsequent sub-section endeavours to explore the participants' occurrences on their first day-night in the host city. This emerging theme allowed for a fine-grained account of the University services' utilisation and the participants' emotions right on arrival. Having taken the airport service seemed to have positively influenced the students' emotional state. However, it was found that the service had been under-utilised and that students, whether having taken the

service or not, had to deal with negative feelings such as, emotional fatigue, loneliness, and stress, as well as with the inability to suffice some essential necessities such as hunger and coldness, just upon arrival.

The following segment presents the students' impressions in regards to the University induction, which took place a day or two after the students, who had taken the airport service, had arrived. University induction, in this study is defined as the series of activities planned at the institutional level to introduce its new international students to the academic and daily life contexts. Findings indicated that the majority of the participants, irrespective of having arrived in time or not, did not attend the induction day. The reason seemed to obey, mainly, to different levels of awareness about this event. Although not giving a lot of emphasis to their claims, the students who attended reported to have benefited from the provision of information to open a bank account, as well as from the city and campus tours to familiarise themselves with the surroundings. The consequences for having missed the induction day would be unpicked in the corresponding first two weeks or weeks 3 and 4, findings and discussion section.

The last on-arrival section relate to the Faculty induction that took place during the participants' first week in the new context. Faculty induction in this research is defined as the series of activities prepared at the faculty and departmental level to introduce new students into their subject specific dynamics, and the participants' perception of it. Findings suggested Faculty induction was delivered in various schemes reason for which some students were appreciative for the length and comprehensive organisation of their Faculty induction whereas some other participants were disappointed about their short length, perceived lack of organisation and dearth of social integration activities as part of their Faculty induction. This represents the last part of the on-arrival findings and discussion.

4.3.1 Pre-arrival preparations post hoc reflection

As post hoc reflections the students who did not spend efforts preparing for living and studying abroad and whose first overseas experience was this, realised such decision had had a negative impact on their experience. There was consciousness of not having properly anticipated the implications of studying abroad. For instance, a sense of awareness of what being an international student entailed emerged upon arrival:

(...) you don't visualise it until you're here, it doesn't dawn on you (...) (Armando, FG 2, translated)

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Therefore, upon arrival lack of preparedness was realised. Planning for the experience abroad had been on “applying for the scholarship”. At that moment, the possibility of studying abroad had been perceived as “something unreal”. Other than possible language challenges, there were not foreseen considerations for what adjusting to the host environment would involve:

(...) I didn't really think (...) it'd be a reality (...) so, before coming here, (...) the only thing that distressed me was the language and I didn't even think about life, I mean, that kind of things. (Natalia, FG 2, translated)

Being “carried away” by the emotion of travelling and studying in a foreign country drifted students’ attention from preparing and considering what the experience involved. A sense of realisation about the actual implications came about as a shock and bewilderment upon arrival:

You let yourself be carried away a little by the emotion (...) suddenly you forget all that it implies (...) You come here with all the excitement, so you arrive, and OW! You have so many things to do that you say ‘what do I do here?’ (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

Equally, non-anticipated implications for the decision to study and live overseas, struck the participants upon arrival:

(...) And the moment comes, (...) I found an empty cupboard, I had not brought my towel, I was missing a lot of things (...) So, it was like reality hit me when I arrived (...) (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Realisation about the little pre-departure efforts spent to find suitable accommodation surfaced upon arrival. The negative claims were related to the overvalued price felt it was paid for accommodation and the insufficient time taken to decide on their lodging. There was regret for not having spent more time to look at other choices of accommodation.

What we're paying isn't cheap at all and the halls aren't really that outstanding; so, I regretted it a bit, once I was already in them, not to have given myself more time to look for private accommodation (Roberto, FG 3, translated,)

Even when there was no preparation for the studying abroad experience, the findings of this research show little support for the conception of culture shock as a static and inevitable stance when sojourners get in contact with a new culture (Oberg, 1960). Rather, they appear to support culture learning, and stress and coping theories’ motives (Ward et al., 2001), which claim challenges can be prepared for and stress can be coped. Participants whose first experience abroad was this, as afterthoughts, realised they did have a say and the course of actions could have changed would they have been more involved and prepared for their experience overseas.

Post-arrival regrets flourished for not having sufficiently prepared, acknowledging such readiness could have facilitated the experience. Lacking culture-specific knowledge about everyday aspects became evident. Nonetheless, the underlying belief was that a comprehensive preparation that included mental readiness was needed. A whole picture of how living abroad and independently was therefore missed. The concept of “preparedness for change” coined by Kim (2001) helps to explicate the reality hit students felt on arrival. Opposite to the preparedness suggested by Kim to minimise the chances of unrealistic sojourners’ expectations about their life in the host culture and to augment the possibilities for an agreeable adaptation, the students in this study whose first experience was this, recognised how lacking preparation for their sojourn had affected their experience. This lack of mental and cultural preparation brought with it evident struggles that allowed for a stormy beginning. Therefore, in accordance with Kim (2001) the extent of readiness appeared to be consistent with the type and amount of challenges students faced post-arrival.

4.3.2 First day

The first contact with the Institution upon arrival was through a service offered by the international affairs to pick the students up at the airport in London on Wednesday and Thursday, September 21 and 22, 2016 before the beginning of week 0⁷. The service consisted in driving the participants to the city of studies and dropping them off at their accommodation, regardless of it being a university’s residence or not.

Overall, this service was acknowledged as “very useful” and “of great help”. For instance, Daniel succinctly described his perception of it as: “they save you trouble and money”. Paola empathised with the idea by claiming her arrival had been trouble-free. She arrived to the airport “and right away, (...) I hopped in the bus, and I arrived here” [city of studies]. Armando pinpointed as one advantage of this service “to meet people that were coming to the same thing” right from the airport.

In spite of the availability and usefulness of the airport pick-up service, findings indicate that nearly half of the participants did not arrive in time to make use of it. In this regard, there were two reasons for it. First, a few students arrived one or two weeks earlier than the service offered dates. This was because they had travelled accompanied, someone familiarised with the UK was waiting for them upon arrival, or their exchange programme had required them on those dates for an induction before insertion into country of studies. Second, many other students arrived

⁷ Week 0 or Fresher’s week, as it is known in the UK, takes place before the beginning of full term on Week 1 (Simons *et al.*, 1988).

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after the service had been offered. In this regard, on the one hand, the decision not to arrive on the suggested dates by the University was consciously made, due, for example, to personal commitments previously arranged:

I arrived later for work reasons, as the company I was in... we had (...) many projects, so as not to completely throw away the work. (Jorge, interview, translated)

On the other, it was due to external causes such as administrative issues with sponsor:

We didn't arrive in time for that (...) In my case [the sponsor] delayed us a lot. We arrived the Sunday we had to arrive; we didn't get a chance to arrive before. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

In addition to the latter reason, as a post hoc reflection, it was acknowledged the suggestion given by the University to arrive the Wednesday and Thursday before the beginning of Week 0, was perceived as optional. As a result, the extra mile to arrive in time was not gone. It was interpreted more as 'you could' rather than "you should" arrive in the specified dates in order to participate in the activities that would be offered as support to settle. The advised dates of arrival did not seem to be taken seriously until it was realised it could have been useful to arrive at that time. Being unaware of the rationale behind the proposed dates seemed to have contributed to perceive them as an extra rather than an essential:

[University should] put a bit more emphasis in that you should try to arrive since the first days, so that you can participate in everything, see the events, the inductions, everything that's available. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

Concerning the availability, awareness, and use of services, the participants identified the airport pick-up provision as very useful. Findings indicate, in line with the staff views in Roberts and Dunworth's (2012) study that lack of awareness was not to blame for the scarce utilization of this service. Rather the little uptake was attributed to lacking an understanding of what the service entailed and why it was convenient to use it. Students in this study seemed aware about the airport pick-up service's existence; however, they appeared not to see the point of adjusting their sometimes previously arranged schedule or to make an extra effort, in order to arrive in the institutional proposed dates and benefit from the services offered. The loose perception of the offering of this service may point towards a cultural value difference between a high vs. a low uncertainty avoidance society (Hofstede, 1986). For instance, Mexico has been classed as a very high uncertainty avoidance society, in which "there is an emotional need for rules", whereas the UK has been classified as a low uncertainty avoidance society, in which, people are "comfortable in ambiguous situations" (Hofstede Insights, 2017). Thus, based on this notion, the participants'

perceived lack of emphasis to make use of the airport pick-up service could have been rooted in understanding it was not an important situation. Hence, for the participants there seemed to be the need to perceive the offering of the service more like an important recommendation ("you should") rather than perceiving it as an optional invitation ('you could'). Not having seen the reason to use the service offered and arrived in the dates proposed, had repercussions in the students' missing the introductory events arranged for them a day or two after the airport service was offered (this will be explored in more detail in section 4.3.3.). For instance, raising a wider understanding of the participants' cultural profile may help the institution to optimise the delivery of information in a way that results in a more successful intake of services for the student's benefit.

Dealing with emotions seemed to have been a difficult task to endure right upon arrival, even when the University's airport service had been used and had saved the worry of transport, accommodation had been previously arranged, and this was not the first time travelling abroad for studies:

(...) the first night it was emotionally tiring, arriving at 10:00p.m to a place that you don't know, freezing, very hungry, after I've flown like 15 hours, that was the most difficult part. (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

Difficult feelings such as loneliness were also evident the following day upon arrival; they were dealt with own strategies:

I arrived to the halls, and I was freezing at night, and next [day] I had to walk, look for something, and to face doing nothing and being alone, I went out to walk (...) (Antonio, FG 2, translated)

In that sense, the experience of being emotionally taxed on arrival was not different from a student who had not taken the University pick-up service, but had been accompanied by her father two weeks earlier, and whose first experience abroad was this. Being unaware of how much transport in host city could charge, prevented her from taking public transport and making her start be perceived as "horrible":

I arrived with many suitcases, my bike box (...) one thinks that taxis are super expensive, so I said 'let's walk and there we were at midnight carrying the bloody suitcases (...) it was horrible (...) (Natalia, FG 2, translated)

There are a couple of ramifications from these findings. First, in line with the stress and coping approach there seems to be a need of a more active involvement in order to cater the students'

emotional needs upon arrival. Emotional exhaustion appeared to be triggered since some “elementary necessities” could not be sufficed (Maslow, 1954). Dealing with the students’ basic needs and emotions upon arrival could be then an area to cater for. Second, in association with the latter claim, being better equipped as to culture-specific knowledge may have helped to diminish some of the struggles faced (Ward et al., 2001), such as not taking a taxi due to believing it was not an affordable choice, and in turn ameliorate the stress and negative affects experienced just upon arrival.

4.3.3 University induction

In relation to the delivery of induction, as explained earlier, this study differentiates between two types of induction. In this research, University induction refers to the series of activities organised at the university level specially launched for the transition of international students. Faculty induction, as a university organisational structure, is delivered at the faculty and departmental level to introduce new students into their subject specific dynamics.

On behalf of the University, the provision of activities to introduce international students into the academic and daily life was planned for Friday, September 23rd, 2016 a day or two after the students who had used the airport pick-up service had arrived. However, as previously noted (see 4.3.2), findings demonstrate that nearly half of the students did not arrive in time for this series of activities. The students, who had not used the airport pick-up service, arrived as of September 24th and up to October 8th, two weeks after the beginning of week 0. In addition to the latter, it was found that the opportunity to participate in these induction activities was missed by the vast majority of the participants, even when they had arrived in time. To explicate the participants’ absence in the transitional activities on Friday 23rd four themes were found: students who were unaware about the induction day, and had arrived intentionally or unintentionally (due to delays with sponsor, for example) after that day. Students, who were aware, arrived in time and attended. Students who were aware and willing to attend, but could not find the location. Finally, students who arrived in time, but were unaware about these events, so did not attend.

In the first case, there seemed to be unawareness for the running of these guiding talks and for the suggestion to arrive a couple of days earlier to be able to attend. Hence, there was the understanding the University was not providing support with “basic things” and consequently, situations had to be sorted out by own means:

(...) they haven’t really explained to me some basic things(...)For example, the bank account, nobody explained to me, I had to go to several banks to ask (...)it took me three

weeks to get the account (...) I did struggle because I had to use cash all the time (...) (Pablo, interview, translated)

The second theme corresponds to the students who were aware about these instructional talks, arrived in time, and attended. Therefore, opening a bank account, an introduction to the host culture and academic life, and a city and campus tour featured as the induction activities in which they took part. The attendees' view in regards to these orientations usefulness was not strong. Generally, their comments were neutral with some elements of positiveness. For instance, Paola stated the welcome activities she had taken part in, had provided her with some background information:

I arrived on the 22nd and I did get a chance to go to sort of how to open a bank account (...) and the other one about the British culture (...) by the Union. Another one (...) was like how to be a student in this University (...); it gave you a bit of context. (Paola, FG 1, translated)

Similarly, touring students around the city and showing them where shopping could be done was considered just as "ok":

It's ok. They were driving you through the city, and telling you where the city was, (...) where you could do groceries and the shopping malls. (Diego, FG 1, translated)

The overall impression about the induction was that they were "very informal" and "very optional" activities. Even when the perception was that not a lot of efforts were devoted to the organisation of these introductory events, in some cases they seemed to have helped its purpose to familiarise with the University's premises and with bureaucratic processes such as opening a bank account:

(...) for me it was useful to arrive and not knowing anything and like...first to locate myself in the campus (...) and the bank, it was also like a concern I had, (...) it helped, it facilitated. (Paloma, FG 3, translated)

In line with perceiving the induction as a series of activities of "optional" nature in order to interpret them as formal inductions, there was the need to feel mandated to attend:

More than inductions, I think they were like activities (...) because everything else I attended and that I found was the compulsory of my Faculty. (Daniel, FG 1, translated)

The attendees' equally got the impression that there was a dearth of activities catered for international students on behalf of the University. Having attended to a religious society's event,

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provided for international students, and which involved exposure to “very nice” cultural acquaintances triggered the feeling that this group of students was not being well taken care of by the institution:

It would be nice if there were more [events] for internationals. [...] Apart from them, I haven't found another group, organisation, (...) which has targeted the international student group. (Daniel, FG 1, translated)

Being aware about the running of these orientation sessions, and aiming to attend, yet unable to make it, was the third theme found. For instance, although there was awareness of an induction for international students on the 23rd, and there was the intention to arrive in time “specifically” to attend, unfamiliarity with the host University settings made it impossible to achieve. The building where the welcome day was to happen could not be found. Feeling vulnerable since this was the first experience abroad and aspiring to receive some structural support upon arrival yet being unable to find it, only seemed to have worsened feelings of uncertainty:

I just couldn't get it right, and I missed the freaking induction. (...) at night, I was feeling worse, more lost than anything. (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Apart from the premises being a new and unfamiliar setting, the rationale behind being unable to find the event's location may be rooted on the peculiar building numbering system of the University premises. For instance, in this setting, buildings near geographically were not near in number. Therefore, this dearth of logic in the organisation of facilities did not seem to have helped the students to find a location.

The last group that featured were the students who did arrive in time, but seemed unaware about the happening of these induction events. Hence, they did not attend. Their perception was a dearth of University induction for international students:

In my case, as an international student, I didn't feel like there was an induction. (...) they didn't do any activity like “so here we have the new students, let's (...) give them a tour” or anything like that (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

Equally, the insight was that an induction, as an international student was not provided “rather, for being new at the school”. The welcome gathering for the incoming students from the American continent at the end of Week 0 was acknowledged as the “only” induction provided for international students. This coincided with the opportunity where other Mexican colleagues were met:

It would only be [event's name] when we met all the Mexicans for the first time.
(Natalia, FG 2, translated)

Correspondingly, students who were aware about the induction day and attended, but perceived it as a series of “optional” activities; students who arrived in time, but did not attend, conceived as induction only what was required to attend as part as of their Faculty orientation activities:

The only induction I had was the mandatory one, the one marked on the timetable that was for all the School. The one you've got to be there because you've just got to be there. (Armando, FG 2, translated)

Findings seem to lead towards three important implications. First, relating to the various degrees of awareness about the happening of this introductory one-day session. Second, concerning the attendees' perception of the induction as “very informal” and “very optional” activities and the need for more structured support. Finally, the perception of a dearth of activities catered for international students.

Concerning the awareness about the induction day, opposite to the findings on the airport pick-up service where students appeared to have knowledge about it, in relation to the delivery of the University induction, findings revealed there was disparity on the awareness level among the students (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012). The information did not seem to have reached all the students the same way, as some of the students who had taken part of the airport service and had timely arrived for the orientation, did not participate in it. The gap between service provision and utilisation, mirror the results by Harryba et al. (2012) at an Australian University, in which though services were offered and needed by international students, they were hardly accessed. Additionally, this fragmented delivery and reception of information might indicate a disconnection of internal parts within the university where the information is disseminated in different ways; thus, it reaches students dissimilarly. This imbalanced level of awareness equally indicates an unequal opportunity, as a group of students were not benefitting from these resources, and perhaps never looked for support, as claimed by Roberts and Dunworth (2012).

In addition to a possible fragmented delivery of information, and linked to the participants' perception of the induction as “very informal” and “very optional”, the invitation to partake in the induction day could have been interpreted differently based on cultural values. For instance, there seemed to be a mismatch between the message trying to be conveyed and the way the participants' receive it. As pointed out in the First day findings, this mismatch could also be a consequence of different extents to deal with uncertainty, as coined by Hofstede (1986). For instance, very high uncertainty avoidance societies like Mexico seek for security and are not

comfortable with ambiguity, which raises anxiety. Consequently, high uncertainty avoiders feel vulnerable in unknown conditions, and feel at ease with situations that are structured and where little room for uncertainty is left whereas the opposite seems to apply to contexts such as the UK, as a low uncertainty avoidance culture (Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede Insights, 2017). As seen in the references above there was “an emotional need for rules” (Hofstede Insights, 2017) and that appears to explicate why the “only” perceived induction was the “mandatory one” whilst the other events were merely perceived as “very informal” and “very optional” activities. This finding also has an emotional implication, the students who attended the induction day, although perceiving it as an unstructured event might have gained some certainty; hence, felt more confident by attending. Whereas the students who aimed to attend the induction and did not make it felt “worse” afterwards, which seems to have raised anxiety levels.

In regards to the participants’ perception of a dearth of activities tailored for them, as international students, findings by Harryba et al. (2012), in an Australian University, support the claim. The authors concluded the delivery of generic services does not match the specific needs international students have and therefore, the provision of more specialised services is advocated. Thus, in consonance with Harryba et al.’s (2012) research’ findings, this study seems to encourage the need for more culture-specific support as claimed by a participant “targeted [to] the international student group”.

4.3.4 Faculty induction

The Faculty induction, referring to the university organisational structure, took place on the week commencing on September 26th, 2016. This week is known in the UK as Week 0 or Fresher’s week (Simons et al., 1988). It takes place before the beginning of full term on Week 1. Regarding the Faculty induction received, two standpoints were found. They were negative and positive. Although, pursuing a Master’s or a PhD degree did not seem to make a strong difference on the participants’ impressions, the views about Faculty induction mainly came from Master’s degree students, who were perhaps used to a more structured educational level, but who were also the largest group of participants. The participants’ fragmented views appeared to be rooted on the different type of induction received, based on their Faculty and sub-faculty of adscription. The induction programme implemented seemed to vary depending on each School and on what each considered was good practice to orientate students or not:

(...) It all depends a lot on each School, and the courses each one is taking and the people in charge. (Victor, FG 3, translated)

Concerning the negative views, the induction was perceived as “informal”, “short”, depersonalised, and non-holistic given a perceived dearth of social activities. For instance, it was seen as “rather informal” and “short” when the expectation was for the provision of more context about the programme that would allow being acquainted with information about the studies to undertake. To meet this end, the hopes were for a full-time induction rather than a “one hour” activity:

I was expecting something a bit more... orderly, more structured but it was (...) nothing more than just getting there and hearing: ‘this is your teacher, that’s your coordinator, over there is your director and this is where you are to work’. (Diego, FG 1, translated)

The discontent also emerged when it was found out that there was not a comprehensive plan of activities arranged by own Faculty to follow on the first week. The anticipation seemed to be for a full orientation schedule that would serve as a support to transition into the host setting:

(...) I checked the timetable and there were four scattered talks (...) so I asked around and they told me ‘It’s all up there, what you see there is all you have to do’, so I thought to myself ‘Alrighty then’. (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

The Faculty induction was also interpreted as depersonalised. It was perceived as a massive event where students, regardless of degree and subject to pursue, were gathered to be given “very general” information. The length and the happening of it, at the end of the day, were not considered suitable either. In consonance with research by Harryba et al. (2012), the result of this one-size-fits-all practice seemed to have been of little help to orientate students into the basics of their programme:

(...) It was in a huge hall with too many people amongst MSc and undergraduates and so it was just like a one hour session (...) it was six or seven pm and they were talking about very general stuff, not really an induction to the field as such. (...) (Armando, FG 1, translated)

Following that idea, being in a big hall with many new students from different programmes did not seem to be a suitable opportunity to identify and start creating bonds with colleagues rather they had to wait until the beginning of classes:

From the sixty people in the same room as me, I didn’t know anyone from my MSc until the first day of classes. [...] (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

For instance, the result of a short and depersonalised approach appear to be that after the induction, the students had concerns that they have to sort out by themselves:

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(...) we've managed because (...) we get together and 'hey have you found this? Did you find out that?' (...) not really because the University is supporting us. (Oscar, FG 3, translated)

Moreover, the planning activities that would allow students to socialise outside the University premises, and hence, to break the ice with colleagues was identified as an area that was wished for, yet not contemplated in the planning of some Faculty inductions.

(...) we only had it for one day (...) and of course, we didn't really get to know each other or anything (...) an induction tour that would have been nice. (Fernando, FG 3, translated)

In alignment with the previous claims, the positive views came from students whose Faculty induction contemplated a combination of three components: social activities, academic guidance, and a tailored orientation programme. This approach prompted the students' to feel guided "very much step by step". For instance, including social activities as part of their academic induction seemed to have helped to mingle with colleagues in a more relaxed environment. It enhanced feelings of being taken care of. It was equally acknowledged that the same opportunity was not granted to all the new students:

They even took us to the zoo. It was purely social. (...) We were given lunch and everything, while some others were already taking classes. (Natalia, FG 2, translated)

The provision of opportunities conducive to socialise within the Faculty induction was a boost for people of "shy" personality. It had helped to decrease feelings of anxiety and had facilitating the instance of meeting people:

I'm a bit shy and the social part, perhaps, causes me some anxiety. (...) Ever since the induction (...) it made like that part (...) very quick and easy. (Paloma, FG 3, translated)

In this regard, the incorporation of social off-campus activities within the Faculty induction programme also allowed, "to break the ice" and to create bonds with classmates:

They did a certain type of integration activities (...) different types of practices to integrate and work as a team, they helped us a lot to break the ice with my same classmates. (Alberto, FG 3, translated)

In addition to being offered with spaces to interact off campus, being academically guided was considered another positive component of a helpful induction. It was not felt like a one- off event,

but rather like an accompanied process. Being aware about resources available might have contributed to feelings of reassurance:

The coordinator was all the time worried about us and about us getting to know each other (...) and also academically, we always received like lots of follow-up. (Antonio, FG 2, translated)

The delivery of a tailored induction depending on the programme of study was perceived as very helpful. This practice allowed the opportunity to start creating social networks:

The fact that it was an induction per programme helps a lot because it gives you an idea of who your classmates would be (...). It is very useful that it is specific. (Andrea, FG 3, translated)

The overall view of Faculty induction was that there was not unified form of delivery. It varied from Faculty to Faculty, and from department to department. This goes in consonance with discoveries by Simons et al. (1988), who found a wide range on the provision of departmental induction that could go from the delivery of systemic information through a one-hour in mass introductory talk to longer outside of school informal gatherings aimed to socialise and break the ice among colleagues. These pronounced differences between faculties and departments allowed for a realisation of “implicit messages”, as described by Simons et al. (1988) about the internal organisation of each context. For instance, what the School’s primacies were, and the relationship they were to hold with their students. However, in opposition to their findings, in this study differences between departments were not comparable to the subject discipline to which the participants’ were ascribed; for example, in Simons et al.’s (1988) research, the orientation provided by the science department was considered formal, informative, and distant whereas the one given in the arts Faculty was more informal, chatty, and friendly. In this study, forms did not obey ascription to hard or soft sciences. The rationale for the form it took seemed dependent on who was in charge and what was thought as adequate.

Given the lack of homogeneity in the form of departmental induction, two fragmented views were found. Those of negative nature resonate with findings by Simons et al. (1988). Although their research had as focus local undergraduate students in the UK and data was gathered more than three decades ago, the participants’ views concerning Faculty induction were not very different to the findings from this study. Induction was reported as boring and sometimes a waste of time. Findings equally support those more recently identified by Roberts and Dunworth (2012), in which the perception of support services of a group of undergraduate and postgraduate international students in Australia was explored, and orientation programs were regarded as not

the most successful strategy to deliver information. In their study, the participants were displeased about the orientation received, claiming to have employed own skills to be acquainted with the needed information, which in turn could have led to a more stressful path to meet their needs.

Additionally, negative impressions were rooted on the impersonality and size of the induction activities at the faculty level. These results also echoed with those previously found by Simons et al. (1988) as some of the participants in both studies were equally unsatisfied due to these factors. The launch of massive meetings with students from different departments did not appear to help making the students feel welcomed. Such approach did not promote feelings of identity with the department of ascription. Rather there were instances of feeling part of a “large and undifferentiated collectivity” (Simons et al., 1988, p.10). In alignment with this, satisfaction with the delivery of induction featured when a comprehensive, more personalised, and a smaller scale approach was taken. This approach allowed for rapport building among colleagues as well as with academic members. In addition to the relevance of a personalised tactic, although students recognised as helpful the balanced provision of social and academic guidance as suggested by Mortimer and McLaughlin (2006) the positive difference seemed to rest on the inclusion of activities to socialise. The integration of socials accounted as the element that prompted the students’ contentment for the induction received. The inclusion of the social dimension as part of the Faculty induction’s agenda seemed to help to diminish feelings of anxiety by providing room for interaction with academics and fellows. Being so, this study’s findings appear to support the idea, as advocated by Simons et al. (1988) that the delivery of a more personalised approach is a more conducive choice to help students transitioning and integrating into the new environment.

These findings similarly indicate the participants’ expectation for a comprehensive, including activities to socialise, and more structured approach to Faculty induction that could help them to transition did not seem to be sufficed, in some cases. Thus, as pointed out by Harryba et al. (2012), the overall dissatisfaction seemed to be rooted on a mismatch between the international participants and the actual service delivery. Addressing this gap, research, regarding the challenges international students face and the institutional services offered (Sherry et al., 2004; Buultjens and Robinson, 2011), has reinforced the need for educational institutions to be cognizant of the needs and expectations of those learners’ who they recruit, and adopt support services accordingly in an attempt to assist these students with a smooth transition.

4.4 First two weeks findings and discussion

The following section endeavours to present the challenges the participants' encountered, within their first two weeks of stay, as well as to how they went about solving those difficulties whether relying on the University's assistance or on own coping mechanisms. Although, following a sub-chronological structure that discloses the situations encountered during the first two weeks, the findings and discussion of this segment are presented into three strands: academic, sociocultural, and affective aspects, with each considering the difficulties to different extents, institutional services and-or coping strategies employed. While the affective domain refers to the areas explicitly linked to having an emotional impact on the participants' adjustment, the academic and sociocultural aspects also draw on the factors influencing the stress and wellbeing of the participants. Therefore, each sub-section aims to consider the principles of both, the culture learning and the stress and coping frameworks. Equally, it draws on empirical studies that have been documented in the field of cross-cultural adaptation.

In general, the participants' quotes chosen take into account the existence of a time indicator to locate the happening at sometime within the first two weeks. Moreover, their selection included raising a specific point and elaborating on it to understand its reasoning. Sometimes the comment made shows the conceived expectation and whether it was met or not. Finally, the selected quotes consider the participants' feelings in relation to the situation being exposed.

Within the first two weeks, the academic challenges just started to emerge. The academic difficulties were related to an overlap of administrative and academic endeavours whilst having to settle into the new environment. In this regard, lacking knowledge on how to do things and time seemed to be important elements that conflated, and did not contribute towards a smooth transition. Moreover, linguistic difficulties in classes as well as the realisation that the educational system was different to that in Mexico and required more self-study, revealed. Institutional remedial assistance, especially in linguistic and academic terms appeared; however, the resources in some cases did not seem to be sufficient.

At this point, the first two weeks, the sociocultural aspects illuminated in this section have a strong emphasis on the everyday challenges the students' faced, including finding accommodation upon arrival, and are in consonance with the culture learning approach that claims training should be given to deal with daily errands. This revealed as an area that took a significant amount of the participants' energy and time within the first days. Additionally, the sociocultural segment also displays the coping mechanisms employed by the participants to come to grips with culture-specific knowledge and displays, where it corresponds, the participant's individual reaction, as part of their personality, to sort the situation out. In relation to physical

health adjustment, coping with jet lag and different diet habits featured. These two elements appeared as aspects that could not only interfere, with school commitments, in the case of jet lag, but with the participants' physical and emotional wellbeing.

Affective struggles were not strongly identified; however, financial stress featured as a main stressor. Although, homesickness was recognised as an affective hindrance, its level of difficulty varied depending on how culturally distant the participants perceived the English culture was, and given the easiness to stay connected with family and friends at home through the use of social media. The main coping strategy identified in situ was the support provided by other Mexican co-nationals whether with more experience or newly arrived, which seems to reinforce the view of social support as a coping mechanism.

A final introductory remark to make is the time in which the data from this section was collected. Although the intention was to capture the students impressions as early as possible and a questionnaire was applied approximately 10 days after the institutional advised arrival date, most of the findings from the first two weeks come from the focus groups and interviews, which took place in weeks 3 and 4 respectively, of the participants' arrival. Therefore, even though I am reporting retrospectively, the comments elucidated here are still fresh, as they are only referring to a maximum of 2 weeks later.

4.4.1 Academic challenges

During the first week, or Week 0, of the participants' introduction with the new academic conventions, two challenges seemed to emerge. The first one being related to an overlap of activities, which hampered the students from having time to settle in, before starting with their academic endeavours. The second was the recognition that academic English was a challenge and that English academic system required more independent study efforts.

4.4.1.1 Overlap of activities on Week 0

In conjunction with the perceived disparity in the type of induction received, where some students were having full inductions on Week 0 and started progressively integrating into the academic environment, there were others who started classes on Week 0. With the exception of a few students who had arrived a week or two before Week 0, the students who participated in this study, had been in the UK for a maximum of 4 days and a minimum of a day at the beginning of Fresher's week. In that sense, where a brief orientation was provided, the participants' insertion into the academic environment took place in some instances a day after arrival. For instance, there seemed to be an overlap of activities, which did not allow enough time to settle into the

new setting, as there were administrative (e.g. enrolling for courses) and academic matters (e.g. attending classes) that needed to be dealt with right away.

In relation to the overlap of administrative duties and the adjustment to the host environment, lacking time to adjust and knowledge on administrative processes represented a challenge to face during the first week of the students' transitioning:

(...) it took me a week maybe to settle in a small room, only because I came to the University every day to do all that paperwork (...) it was a little hard. (Arturo, interview, translated)

Simons et al. (1988) identified dealing with administrative tasks as one of the major tasks to undergo during the induction week. According to them, dealing with a list of bureaucratic chores upon arrival sends the message of "being processed", like a product, rather than making the student feel "welcomed or introduced" (p.10). In addition to the feelings of impersonality that this approach conveys, having to perform administrative duties for which there was not knowledge about how to do, at the same as trying to settle in daily life domains only appeared to augment stress. There was conflict between the time needed to transition into the host environment and the dealing of administrative procedures.

On a similar note, administrative tasks took longer than expected and absorbed the time needed to come to terms with academic duties due to the perceived administrative staff's unawareness about bureaucratic procedures, such as getting enrol for courses:

(...) it took me like a week and a half (...) because (...) they didn't have knowledge on how things were to be done (...) it was kind of stressful because we were already in the week that classes started. (Enrique, interview, translated)

The staff's lack of awareness about the services available was also reported as a hindrance to adapt, for international students in Australia, by Roberts and Dunworth (2012). This study parallels those findings since students reported being referred to people who did not have sufficient knowledge about how the procedure should be done. The shortcomings of the administrative staff's unpreparedness in regards to the students' transition might be the time taken and the emotions it triggered. The students were expecting to be guided by staff with ample knowledge about processes and services. Was this not the case, students' feelings of uncertainty and stress could not be ameliorated, as there was not a clear path to solution. Equally important, matters such as this were absorbing the time needed to settle in and focus on academic endeavours.

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Related to the overlap of academic duties and the adjustment to the host culture during Week 0, the recurrent assertions were of problematizing nature. Academic rigour for the programme chosen was expected; however, the unmet expectation was for a “longer period” to adjust. This is because in some sub-faculties classes started on Week 0. Attending classes a day after arrival was perceived as problematic and stressful since there was no time “even” “to do shopping” as classes took place “every day” right after arrival. The hope was for a less hectic academic load during the first month in order to settle in:

(...) I thought it was going to be intense, heavy, but not so much since week zero (...).

Week 0 was very, very heavy (...) I imagined, like the first month (...) was going to be a bit more of introduction, basic knowledge (...). Not that it'd start so full on. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

The importance of the findings above seemed to be twofold. First, they highlight the need for an earlier arrival to the UK in order to allow more time to settle into daily life and deal with administrative concerns, before starting with studies. As shown in this study, most of the participants had been in the host city from one to four days, before they started to deal with academic and administrative concerns whilst equally having to settle into the new sociocultural milieu. This seemed to have contributed to an increased strain on the participants. Therefore, the recommendation is for a wider span of time for the students to settle, before starting with studies. In order to do so, students could be advised to arrive a week earlier than what they were originally advised to (Wednesday or Thursday before the beginning of classes). Second, these findings call for the need for expectation management as for slow start and heavy load on PG programmes. Having identified these appraisals of stress, the encouragement is for pre-arrival awareness and preparation in these accounts, so the participants know what to expect and plan accordingly in an attempt to lessen the stress experienced, in accordance with the culture learning, and the stress and coping frameworks.

Complementing the previous academic and administrative clash of activities whilst having to settle in the new environment, another overlap became evident. In an attempt to socialise, the participants resented not being able to partake, due to academic commitments, in the social activities planned in Fresher’s week. The progressive transition that it would allow, as well as the opportunity to learn more about the culture by meeting and interacting with local people was missed:

(...) I would've liked to enjoy the Fresher’s week, but unfortunately (...) as soon as we arrived, the first Monday, lectures and lectures and lectures. (...) So, the truth is that I

would've liked to have a slightly longer period of adaptation, or to learn a little more about how things were (...). (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

A distinguishable characteristic of Fresher's week is its social drive. Vast arrays of social activities are especially tailored for new undergraduates (Simons et al., 1988). They include a wide range of on-and-off campus activities aimed to mingle. In that regard, the participants' pre-departure expectations had expressed interest for the institutional provision of activities to socialise.

However, in some cases that was not possible. The activities that were launched during Fresher's week were not tailored for international or postgraduate students, but mostly oriented towards new undergraduate students. Even so, the postgraduate participants who longed to socialise believed they could have benefited from attending those events. Nonetheless, given the lack of consistency of induction structures in which each Faculty and department seemed to organise its own agenda; these social activities overlapped, in some instances, with own academic duties, and impeded the participants' attendance in Fresher's week socials.

An argument could be that even when Fresher's activities were not explicitly supplied for postgraduate and international students, attending would have helped international students to get involved, meet people and allow more time to adapt. Like undergraduate students, international students are most likely new to the academic conventions of the institution. Being so, even if Fresher's activities are not meticulously planned for international students, they could still benefit from these activities in two ways. First, it would grant them with opportunities to meet people, interact, and socialise. Second, it would allow for a week's window of time to settle into the new academic and cultural milieu. In spite of these two possible advantages, some of the participants were not able to partake in the Fresher's activities as they overlapped with academic duties. Moreover, undergraduate students are transitioned into HE throughout a week; however, international students were expected, in this case, to be up to par in preparation by the provision of one day of introductory activities (Friday before the commencement of classes). Thus, this finding leads to suggest the need to internationalise 'Fresher's week', in a way that is inclusive, available, and relevant for international postgraduate students. In line with this, the lack of provision of activities and resources especially tailored for postgraduate students was pointed out. There was criticism for the perceived institutional focus on introductory events for undergraduate students whilst arguing the interests of undergraduate and postgraduate students are different. This assertion seemed to call for the implementation of more useful resources for postgraduate students:

the University is focussed only on Fresher's (...) first week...pure party. It's okay, but perhaps (...) those are things that if you look at from the point of view of a postgraduate, you see it differently (Enrique, interview, translated)

The latter argument seems to support the imbalance of events for undergraduate vs. postgraduate students during the induction phase. Being so, the recommendation would be for a stronger emphasis on the provision of activities relevant to the needs of postgraduate international students upon their arrival and that could grant them with opportunities for the development of appropriate social skills whilst allowing them with more time to settle, so they could better focus on academic duties once classes start. Based on this claim, the optimal scenario would suggest the planning of ad hoc inductions that meet the needs of the different groups of incoming students.

In relation to the proposal above for a tailored induction for international students, the running of different introductory activities for domestic and international students has received criticism (Schartner and Cho, 2017). The claim is for the supposed segregation and lack of meaningful integration this arrangement brings to international students. Possibly, in line with this idea, this University's induction for international students was run the Friday before the commencement of classes, only a day or two before the arrival of domestic students in an attempt to avoid the clustering of international and of domestic students. However, based on these findings, I counter argue the feasibility of this approach. Whilst it may be possible that an uneven arrival might promote the formation of relationships with whichever groups, whether co-national, other internationals or locals, arrive together and the segregation of those who arrive later; the findings demonstrated the participants needed more time and space to gradually transition into the academic and social setting. As expressed in this study, students were just "getting the hang of it" when the University was massively populated by the arrival of domestic students, and the achieved sense of control was lost. Therefore, careful planning should be given to the timing and length of the induction activities in a way that it prevents activities' overlap and considers the different elements and stages international students need to go through, before commencing their academic studies.

4.4.1.2 Language and academic conventions

During the first two weeks, the students were on their first exposure to the conventions of the institution. The academic struggles encountered were related to understanding academic English and uncovering the differences in the new educational system.

In the first place, coming to terms with English in classes was a challenge met. The expectation was for a better understanding of the language. Listening to unfamiliar accents resulted more difficult than anticipated, and had a negative effect on self-esteem:

(...) as soon as I heard the first lecturer with an accent (...) from I don't know where (...) for every 10 words he said, I was understanding 4 (...) it was a huge downer because I was pretty sure that I was going to understand at least a bit more than that (...) (Armando, FG 2, translated)

The empathy and preparedness of the lecturers shown in appropriate pace, pitch, and clarity, were accounted as aspects that aided the participants' understanding of academic English during their first two weeks:

(...) [in the induction they] made a lot of emphasis in that the British [instructors] need to speak clearly, loud and slow, precisely for those of us for whom English is not our first language (...). (Andrea, FG 3, translated)

The findings are similar to previous study results that indicated the difficulty to understand the regional accent of lecturers as the main challenge a group of undergraduate and postgraduate international students in the UK faced to adjust academically (Dean, 2012). Being unfamiliar to different accents in the host language might not be by itself the source of problem. Rather it might be the combination of different paralinguistic elements such as speed, intonations, pitch levels, and accent with which the language is uttered (Kim, 2001). In this regard, Schartner and Cho (2017) exploring the views of, international and domestic students, and staff, concerning 'internationalisation' at a UK University, found that staff considered not to be properly prepared to address a multilingual and multicultural audience. Hence, the academics would use idiomatic expressions and metaphors whilst teaching; and as a result, non-native English speakers would only get a partial, or a mistaken, message of what was intended. Schartner and Cho's (2017) findings seem to have applicability in this study, in that students perceived as helpful for their language adjustment, when the lecturers spoke "clearly, loud, and slow", but felt down when the pace and complexity of the language, allowed to understand only a small percentage of the message conveyed. Another implication of this finding seems to rest on the negative effect on wellbeing that feeling incompetent with language skills arose. Likewise, Brown and Holloway (2008a) reported feelings of anxiety due to linguistic competence during the first few weeks by postgraduate international students at a South University in England. Lack of linguistic competence could also have ramifications on the participants' academic performance. Therefore, this seems to call for, on the one hand, a sensitisation and preparation on behalf of academic staff to bear in mind and address the needs of the multicultural and multilingual population they are

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teaching to. For instance, adjusting language for one that is unadorned, clear, and easier to understand to non-native English speakers, might be a useful alternative. On the other hand, it suggests a need for a greater linguistic preparation on behalf of the participants. Having met the IELTS entrance requirements did not seem to be enough to embrace the challenge of coming to terms with academic British English.

In addition to the academics' support for the improvement of English, two other institutional sources of support were found. First of all, the intercultural integration of the academic programme. Brown and Holloway (2008a) pointed out other advantages of the international composition of classes. In their study, the multicultural integration of the course was regarded as a positive influence for the students' wellbeing. The students perceived companionship in their colleagues from other cultures and appreciated the opportunities for intercultural mingle it provided. In this study, being part of a multicultural and multilingual programme where English was the only possible form of verbal communication accounted as an element that promoted the use of the host language in class, prevented the use of the students' mother tongue and lent to socialise:

Something that helps a lot is that in my programme there are only twelve of us (...); apart from two Chinese (...) and two British nobody else shares the same nationality, so that forces you to speak to people (...) (Oscar, FG 3, translated)

A second source of support voiced was the delivery of free courses for language refinement. In spite of the favourable recognition of this service, there was disappointment, as the places to take part in them, did not seem to be enough. For instance, Mateo who had talked about his struggles with the local accent, acknowledged the usefulness of the resource, his intention to join and his inability to do it:

That's something good, the course, (...) they give you like help with English (...) but still, it got full very quickly, I couldn't register. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

The enhancement of the provision of academic services to tackle any educational and language gaps international students may have was a recommendation of good institutional practice raised by Schulte and Choudaha (2014). Based on undergraduate international students in the USA, their findings reported academic issues as one of the most prominent reasons for attrition. Although these two groups of international students sat in different contexts (UK vs. USA and UG vs. PG), the recommendation to reinforce the delivery of academic resources appear to match the needs of both of these groups. Thus, equipping students with academic tools to better understand the host educational system was recognised in the work of Schulte and Choudaha (2014) as a useful

service. Participants in this study converged with that view in that the delivery of academic courses featured as a component that improved their understanding of the new educational system and thus, facilitated their academic transition:

(...) we've been helped a lot (...)they have taught us different ways to avoid plagiarism or breaching the rules of academic integrity (...)I think it's very important because I'm not used to, this type of writing ,it's not my first language(...) (Roberto, FG 3, translated)

In addition to language challenges, independent studying was recognised as a difference between home and host educational systems. Being used to an academic system where independent study was not core (Hofstede, 1986), more efforts on self-studying were recognised as needed, to meet the educational expectations:

I think in Mexico we don't have much the culture of self-study (...) I have a subject (...) in which I don't understand everything, so you have to (...) at least have read and checked the information previously, so you can understand and keep up with the pace (...) (Sara, interview, translated)

This seems to point towards the need to increase pre-departure awareness among the participants about the differences between home and host academic system, and the implications of such differences. This in turn might lead for a more realistic understanding of what the academic expectations are, and motivate the students for a deeper prior to departure academic engagement and preparation. Thus, establishing institutional contact with incoming international students well in advance and assisting them with educational training might be a useful strategy to consider and implement.

4.4.2 Sociocultural challenges

The overall findings of this section suggest the sociocultural challenges the students faced during their first two weeks of sojourn were related to lacking knowledge about British cultural norms and practicalities. Thus, having complications with bureaucratic procedures, finances, getting supplies, and driving rules featured. In addition to those difficulties, there were two, which required an internal adjustment. They were dealing with jet lag and new food diets.

4.4.2.1 Accommodation upon arrival

Finding accommodation upon arrival featured as an easy or difficult task to endure depending on the type of accommodation sought, private vs. university, and on the attitude taken to solve the situation.

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On the one hand, finding accommodation did not appear to have been a matter of great concern as it had been envisioned that the institution would get involved and help. There was confidence and a perceived overreliance on the University for support:

(...) I arrived here and I had no place to stay, but I was arriving with the [airport pick-up service], so I said 'they should probably help me' (...) and I arrived to the halls (...) (Antonio, FG 2, translated).

On the other, arranging lodging upon arrival was not an easy task to endure for those students who aimed to find private accommodation on their own. The difficulty was related to the unfamiliarity with the bureaucratic and financial procedures to rent a place in the UK. The length and efforts needed to find a place to live appeared to be underestimated. Being unable to meet the requirements of either having the financial resources or knowing someone who would assume liability on the students' behalf were a hindrance:

It was hard for me (...) I thought (...) it was going to be very easy to find something (...) (...), but (...) they asked to pay the whole year in advance (...) or to make monthly payments you need a guarantor (...) so I lived two weeks on an Airbnb. It was tough (Paola, FG 1, translated).

Ward et al. (2001) claimed that in spite of the extensive research done to theorise the role of individual personality traits in cross-cultural transition, little empirical research has recognised the effects of individual behavioural attributes on the sojourners psychological wellbeing. Although the participants above did not envision arranging accommodation prior to arrival and it could be argued their level of conscientiousness at that point was similar or even null, once in the host city their reactions to the situation and wellbeing's effect were different. Therefore, it is believed that different degrees of conscientiousness, as part of the Five-Factor Model of personality (Wilson et al., 2013), and its affective relation with the stress and coping approach, could help to explain this account. For instance, upon arrival the participant perceived with a low level of conscientiousness reflected a spontaneous and laid-back attitude in relation to finding support and accommodation upon arrival, which appeared to have helped him to stay calm and not being emotionally affected by his lack of accommodation. Whereas the participant identified with a higher level of conscientiousness upon arrival was concerned about finding accommodation by herself and went through the systematic procedure needed to rent a place, which led her to perceive this as a more stressful event. Given the fact that both of these participants had been abroad previously, this finding also leads to suggest that some individual behavioural characteristics might surpass having had previous experience, which has been recognised as a pre-arrival preparation strategy (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Kim, 2001). Therefore, since the culture-learning framework is about

acquiring culture-specific knowledge, it is of upmost importance to equally understand the personality traits that are conducive for such learning and performance (Wilson et al., 2013). Consequently, there seems to be viability for further exploration of personality traits and their effects on well-being, for cross-cultural transition and adaptation.

Alike research by Menzies et al. (2015) based on international postgraduate students in Australia, finding suitable accommodation upon arrival featured as a very difficult aspect to face. Lacking knowledge about the host culture way of doing things appeared to have hindered the process. Thus, in both studies, the participants appear to have underestimated how long it would take to find accommodation and the requirements for it. Therefore, based on experience, there was awareness that having more pre-departure preparation and knowledge would have helped:

(...) those are the type of things I'd suggest you should be aware about before coming here because they're the ones that make you feel restless, and don't allow you to enjoy the experience as you should. (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

The latter insight resonates with research by Hausmann- Stabile et al. (2011) about Latin American-trained International Medical Graduates in the USA, in regards to the cultural, social, and academic challenges the participants in their study faced. The researchers conclude "lost time and money" (p.10) could have been saved, would the graduates have been better equipped with knowledge prior to departure. This, in line with the core principles of the culture learning and the stress and coping approaches, appears to reinforce the need for a thorough pre-arrival preparation that contemplates arranging accommodation prior to departure in order to diminish the strain that otherwise could emerge.

The experiences of the students who had previously arranged their accommodation with the University had saved the worry to find a place to live upon arrival. Nonetheless, on arrival their views diverged yet they were both related to finance. On the positive side, there was contentment for the inclusion of a bus card for free transport in the city:

The price of the halls seems quite well to me because (...) it includes the bus card.
(Mateo, FG 1, translated)

Opposite to the previous observation, discontent was remarked for the overly expensive value for housing and the extra payment to use laundry in their university accommodation:

I think our halls' payments are not that cheap (...) and it seemed absurd to me having to pay separately for the laundry. (Roberto, FG 3, translated)

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The students living on private accommodation reported to be satisfied with their choice. However, different to the students, who opted for university accommodation and were entitled to a bus card that allowed them free transportation in the city through the duration of their residence contract, the students living in private accommodation were not eligible for it. Based on previous experience, this action was perceived as an unfair gesture on behalf of the institution to those who were not living on its halls of residence:

When I was in Canada, we paid a fee, but they gave the card to everybody and they didn't have like a privilege to those living in halls. (Andrea, FG 3, translated)

Being unaware about the distance between lodging and the University premises; hence, the need for public transport to commute between them, and being equally uninformed about the costs of transport seemed to have provoked a financial imbalance due to this non-anticipated expense:

(...) I had to pay for it separately, because I'm not staying in school accommodation, so (...) it's like a disbursement that I had not contemplated. (Enrique, interview, translated)

Satisfaction with student housing also featured in the work of Brown and Aktas (2011). In their study, Turkish international students likened their satisfaction with student housing to finding the comfort and ease they would at home. However, in this research, satisfaction with student accommodation was based on what it provided in a cost-benefit equation. Therefore, money was a fundamental element to feel satisfied or dissatisfied with the lodging the host University had provided. This same rationale seemed to apply to those students who had opted for private accommodation. Although satisfied with their choice, money was a factor that affected the students' perception of University's services, due to providing a transport card only to those students staying in residence halls, and hence saving the expense for it. Another point of discussion is the previously reported scarcity of university support for students living off campus (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012). Not providing further assistance to students opting out of university accommodation might give the impression that only a certain population of students are looked after.

In relation to institutional housing, research by Menzies et al. (2015) indicated a miscalculation of the costs of living and studying in the host country had hindered the experience of the international postgraduate students in their study. Those findings echo with the occurrences in this study in that lacking a real budget had caused a bumpy start. As claimed by Roberts and Dunworth (2012) there was an apparent gap between the students' expectation of what the housing service should include, and what it actually entailed.

Based on the previous results, a few recommendations are suggested. First, through the dissemination of transparent information, the host institution is encouraged to raise awareness among its coming international students, from less stable economies, about the living costs in the UK and the implications that being short with money could have on the participants' wellbeing. The latter is in the bid to encourage students for a better pre-departure financial budgeting. Similarly, in an attempt to diminish disappointment, more efforts could be devoted to transmit institutional services' information in a way that enhances the participants' awareness about what the services include. Finally, striving to provide similar support to different groups of students, the degree of assistance provided for students opting out of university accommodation could be re-evaluated. In accordance with the culture learning, and stress and coping frameworks, these findings seem to point toward an association between the level of pre-departure preparation and the stress experienced upon arrival.

4.4.2.2 The basics of the culture

In agreement with Roberts and Dunworth's (2012) findings, the sociocultural challenges the participants encountered within their first two weeks were of practical nature and came mainly from students who did not participate in the induction session. They appeared to emerge due to dissimilar or unfamiliar cultural practices in the broader context (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012). The difficulties were related to lacking the necessary skills to cope with everyday situations (Searle and Ward, 1990); such as not knowing where and how to do grocery shopping, and being unfamiliar with left hand side driving.

Previous studies on international students in the UK (Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Brown and Holloway, 2008a) have reported not knowing how to proceed in daily life situations such as shopping, as a struggle faced during the first weeks. The difficulty did not seem to stem on the complexity of the action itself, but on being exposed to a new activity where there was not background information as to how to do it:

(...) when you first arrive and you've never seen it, you wonder 'and now what do I do?'

Once you learn it, you realise it's very easy. For example, in the supermarket, that you can go ahead with your basket and pay by yourself. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

For instance, in accordance with Schild (1962) understanding of suitable procedures is needed for effective communication to happen between the foreign student and the host culture. This goes in line with the proposition that at start people in new cultures tend to be socially unskilled and challenged by the norms and daily practices of the host society; errands which at home did not represent an issue at all (Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Furnham, 1993). Hence, given the loss of

cultural familiar rituals and the need to substitute them for different fitting norms (Oberg, 1960), learning about British ordinary routines, such as grocery shopping and the use of self-service machines, became a task to undertake.

In this sense, the approach adopted to be acquainted with the necessary skills to deal with everyday aspects, such as using self-service machines in the supermarket, was that of learning by doing (Furnham, 1993). Thus, the students implemented different experiential learning techniques to train themselves on culture specific areas. Observing host nationals how they performed the daily activity was one of the informal training techniques employed:

I had to stay like three or four times watching how they did it instead of asking, because I felt embarrassed to ask how it worked. (Carlos, FG 2, translated)

Within the first stage of the sojourn, learning by observation as pointed out by Schild (1962) could be the most important learning strategy to learn the norms of the host society. Observation to understand the British rules of conduct was also a tactic employed by postgraduate international students in the UK (Brown and Holloway, 2008a). In this study, shyness prevented the student from asking for guidance. This parallels previous research (Liu and Winder, 2014) in which international students' feelings of uncertainty hindered asking for help. Personality traits such as 'shyness' have been identified (Furnham, 2004), as important determiners of the type of difficulties the students in the new context would face. In addition to inhibition possibly being part of personality attributes, reticence to ask for guidance could also allow to explain the level of confidence the participants, on their second week in the host culture had, and the extent to what they believed, at this point, host nationals could be approached. Thus, there seemed to be feelings of vulnerability and outsiderness at this stage.

Another experiential culture strategy, as pointed out by Furnham (1993), was the passing on knowledge by sojourners with more experience. In this case, the training was by a co-national colleague who had more time living in the UK and was familiarised with everyday errands:

(...) he taught me about the [self-service] machines, how to use them, (...) several things like of general knowledge, but no one tells you how it should be. (Natalia, FG 1, translated)

Although the practise of transmitting useful information is considered to emanate from experienced sojourners (Furnham, 1993), this study found that striving to learn about the host environment, newcomers paired up with equally newly arrived students. The participants toured the city and explored different possibilities to buy supplies at a reasonable price:

(...) in a day we could visit up to five supermarkets, at the end it was not cool, but you already knew where the cheap [things] were (...) (Andrea, FG 3, translated)

In relation to the latter, what seems to have motivated the initiative to explore the city and discover the quirks of the British culture, were a combination of previous studying experience abroad and time availability. In this case, the student had arrived to the host city two weeks before the beginning of Fresher's week, which allowed more time to discover the host environment. This appears to reinforce the benefits of arriving well in advance before the beginning of classes to have the opportunity to settle into the sociocultural milieu and without having overlapping commitments to attend.

Formerly claimed by Klineberg and Hull (1979) and Kim (2001), and shown on the latter quote, previous experience was also encountered as a coping strategy. Being aware about the unfamiliarity with resources upon arrival motivated a student with previous experience abroad to bring provisions of food to go by the first days and until being familiar with the environment:

Since it had already happened to me, the first two, three days, you arrived and you don't know what's going on, right? So, I brought food just in case (...) (Enrique, interview, translated)

Apart from being unaware with how to manage daily life activities and the challenge that it represented, lacking knowledge on where to purchase had a financial negative impact. For instance, the need to get personal, grocery, and home supplies, led the students to suffice their needs wherever possible. Being tight with money, made students regret the choices taken:

Had I known from the beginning that [supermarket name] was the most expensive place to buy with the little money I had to survive until receiving my stipend, I'd have gone (...) to [supermarkets' name] that's cheaper. (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

The negative emotional effect that lacking culture-specific knowledge and own financial resources leads to suggest a more active involvement of both parties. The host institution, on the one hand, could devote more efforts to provide students with assistance on daily matters as specific and narrow as to grocery shopping, since it has been shown the taxing affects such dearth of knowledge had on the participants' wellbeing. On the other, participants' should increase their awareness about the living standards of the UK and hence, prepare financially for it in an attempt to reduce the financial stress they felt upon arrival.

Another daily aspect that called for adjustment during the first days was related to the rules of the road. For instance, driving on the left side of the road and signposting. Coming from a right-

driving country, this was acknowledged as a “very big difference” between Mexico and the UK. Thus, this practise brought unfamiliarity and implied efforts to familiarise. Learning by doing (Furnham, 1993) and learning by observing (Schild, 1962) were also the coping strategy embraced:

The first days (...) you don't even know to what side to look to, and then you look to both sides, or you see people crossing and you follow them (...) (Natalia, FG 2, translated)

In the first place, it could be argued that the participants faced these struggles because the induction sessions were not attended (due to arriving intentionally or unintentionally after the delivery of the activities or to lacking knowledge about these happenings). Nonetheless, the set of orientation activities covered mainly three aspects: how to open UK bank account, a city, and a campus tours, as outlined in section 4.3.3. Hence, the aspects presented above did not seem to be a theme taken care of as part of the induction. In addition to that, although the city tour did aim to show students the availability of shops and places to purchase, this was interpreted more like an informative training with no practical guidance. In this regard, one of the criticisms of the information giving approach is its focus on theoretical rather than on practice and thus, its limited effectiveness due to lacking a hands-on element (Furnham, 1993). Therefore, even if the induction had been attended, showing students where to buy supplies might not have equipped them with the skills needed to know how to use the self-service machines and where it was more convenient to buy, knowledge which later they acquired by themselves (Schild, 1962; Furnham, 1993). On the one hand, this seems to show that the one-day induction for international students, accounted more as an informative session, which resulted in little help when it came to dealing with appropriate behavioural practices. On the other, only a few participants could partake in the induction session since they were unaware about it or had not even arrived, by the time it was provided. Thus, these results link with those of Roberts and Dunworth (2012), which claim some of the institutional services especially created, and disseminated as accessible, to support international students failed to do so since they were not conveyed in a manner that could actually meet the students’ needs. Therefore, the call is for sound considerations in regards to the arrival of international students, the induction’s date and length of provision, and the practical nature of the orientation programme in a way that is actually available for the students when they need it and with resources that are of practical use for them.

4.4.2.3 Physical health adjustment

Upon arrival, given the change of time zone from the East to the West Hemisphere, two internal, physical-health related areas needed adjustment to the environment. They were the regulation of

the body clock and of diet habits. Both vital functions, sleeping and eating, interfered with the capacity to perform well in the new environment. Research by Brown and Holloway (2008a) supported the notion that moving to a foreign context triggered not only psychological and affective disruptions, but also physical, as illustrated in this study.

Jet lag was reported to last between 5 days to 2 weeks. The symptoms of it were perceived differently depending on how much it had interfered with school performance or not. For instance, when the participant had arrived a few days earlier than the beginning of Week 0 and the sleeping disruption happened during that lapse of time, jet lag was not perceived as a hindrance to adapt:

It lasted like 5 days (...) it wasn't really a problem. (Enrique, interview, translated)

However, it was seen more as a difficulty to adjust when the student had arrived a day before the beginning of Fresher's week and the jet lag symptoms conflicted with academic duties:

(...) the first two weeks (...) I was falling asleep in class. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

The second well-being concern was adjusting to British diet habits. The dislike for the new type of food available brought preoccupation for the negative impact it could have on health. There was consciousness this was an area, which needed quick adjustment to the new environment; hence, taking a proactive stance was required:

(...) solving the food issue (...) was one of my priorities, the first few days, (...) because otherwise 'I'm not going to eat here, I'll lose weight', and I said 'this can't be possible' (Pablo, interview, translated)

British food featured as one of the recurrent and "most difficult" aspects to adapt on arrival. The difference between Mexican and British cuisine was perceived as significant. Lack of taste and its price were identified as the sources of dissatisfaction:

Food seems bland (...) and expensive to me; (...) it's not worth what it costs (...) doesn't seem tasty to me. (Arturo, interview, translated)

Findings support research, which recognise an evident link between food and cultural identity (Warde, 1997). The dislike for local food featured as a problematising aspect to adapt. Difficulty to adjust to an unfamiliar diet was also encountered by Brown and Aktas (2011). The authors explored the challenges a group of Turkish international students anticipated to face, on arrival to several European countries. In their research, food and the socialisation around it featured as a main concern. Although struggles with different food was a common theme in this study, there

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were not associations between the dislike for local food and longing the situational context that evolved around home food, such as with whom were the meals taken (Warde, 1997), and found in Brown and Aktas' (2011) study.

The dislike for British gastronomy seemed to trigger the need for Mexican food or home products in the host city. However, due to the city size and the geographical distance with home country that did not appear as a feasible solution:

(...) The farther you are from your country, the more difficult it is to find it. It's so small
(...) that it's difficult to find your culture (Andrea, FG 3, translated)

Inability to find Mexican food and products played a fundamental role in making the participants feel linked and close to own culture. Equally, the absence of it affected the individual's mood as it triggered feelings of detachment and nostalgia (Locher et al., 2005) and were considered an obstacle to adapt:

The food, I'm missing it a lot (...) (Armando, FG 2, translated)

(...) I feel like that affects you, I can't find Mexican products. (Fernando, FG 3, translated)

Food was an aspect that was not compromised. The participants did not seem willing to adopt the eating habits of the host culture. Rather the coping strategy was "to fix" the food by adding familiar spices and flavours, preparing their own home diet or looking for food with a similar taste:

(...) Indian food tastes very good, well, I like it a lot, it looks a lot like Mexican food, I mean, the condiments they are using there. (Victor, FG 3, translated)

These findings, in relation with the stress and coping framework, allowed identifying two components that affect the students' wellbeing and could interfere with their capacity to adapt to the UK. In support with the argument raised in this thesis about the need for an earlier arrival and hence, a longer period to adapt, it is the consideration of the time length needed for physical recovery, as part of jet lag and traveling from a different time zone. Advising students to arrive the Wednesday or Thursday before the beginning of classes does not seem to be a sensible suggestion if the least time reported for internal body adjustment was 5 days. Thus, this appears to reinforce the claim for more sound advice as to the arrival date.

4.4.3 Affective challenges

This section aims to unveil, in accordance with the stress and coping framework, the factors directly associated with stress, and the strategies used to cope and adapt. For instance, within the two first weeks, homesickness, financial stress, and social support were, in different ways and to different extents, related to the individuals' wellbeing.

4.4.3.1 Homesickness

Concerning homesickness, the views seemed to be related to how distal or proximal the host culture was perceived by the participants. For instance, the following two extracts show how two mature students, the former without prior abroad experience and the latter with previous experience, diverged in their perception of the culture gap between home and host culture, and based on that understanding, they experienced feelings of homesickness or not.

The first time abroad student perceived the new environment as "familiar"; therefore, did not seem to miss home:

(...) I don't feel that I'm in England (...) I never thought that things were so, so similar in many ways (...) I feel that I'm in Mexico. Well, (...) in a familiar place. (Sara, interview, translated)

The student with previous experienced abroad perceived the host culture as very different and distant from own. Home culture was compared to a culture that felt closer. Thus, stronger homesickness feelings became evident:

(...) in the United States, there are a lot of people from Mexico (...) you still feel more like sheltered than in here, right? Here you still struggle a little, you struggle. (Jorge, interview, translated)

These findings are in accordance with previous research claims by Furnham and Alibhai (1985) and, Searle and Ward (1990) in that the greater the cultural gap between home and host culture, the more difficulties the student would face to adapt. Therefore, this research supports the notion that there is a relationship between the cultural distance and the level of difficulty to settle in the new environment. However, what is different from the findings by Furnham and Alibhai's (1985) is that their conclusions are based in the exploration of values of four groups of students (Asians, Africans, Northern Europeans, and British) in which the cultural principles of some groups are more different or similar to others; hence, easier or more difficult to adapt to the UK context. Opposite to that, this study focused on the views of a group of participants from the same country, Mexico, sharing traditional cultural values. Nonetheless, findings showed the

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participants' perceptions towards the easiness or difficulty to adapt, although belonging to the same cultural group, differed. This may allow for the following realisation. Though there could be some national and cultural shared traits as posited by Hofstede (1986) adapting to a new culture goes beyond the macro level characteristics, and more towards individual personality features, which may influence their perception. Thus, more than home and host cultures being classed, as sharing or differing values ones, how similar or culturally different these societies are, seems dependent on how distant each sojourner perceives the cultural gap. Being so, the participants in this study, who perceived the social and physical surroundings as familiar, found adjusting to the UK easy whereas students who perceived it as a distant culture claimed to struggle to adapt. This finding might then be of help to reinforce the role that personality plays to adapt.

In addition to the latter, homesickness was not seen as a difficulty when it was understood as an expected challenge to face, regardless of the degree of cultural familiarity:

The other part, the emotional, that I miss my mom and my boyfriend, (...) here, there and everywhere (...) it would've been the same (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

The previous claim is in partial opposition to Searle and Ward (1990) view, which recognised expected difficulties and cultural distance as the most influential factors of sociocultural adjustment. Although this study shows conformity with the relevance of both of these adjustment predictors, it was also found that these two elements (expecting a difficulty and cultural gap) did not need to jointly happen in order to have an impact on the extent of difficulty to settle into the new culture. For instance, as illustrated in the quote above, being aware of the challenge to face alleviated homesickness feelings irrespective of cultural depth between host and home culture.

The combination of awareness for the emotional challenge to face and the use of social media seemed to have facilitated dealing with nostalgic feelings:

(...) it was evident that was going to happen (...), but it's not like before (...) we have social media, (...) WhatsApp, Skype (...) so, you can be up to date (...) so, that mitigates the feeling of being far away (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

In accordance with Bochner et al.'s (1977) functional model of overseas friendships friendship, meeting people from the same culture provided supportive counselling and assisted emotionally with feelings such as homesickness. Being able to spend time with people of similar interests beaten the fear of feeling depressed and homesick:

I thought (...) the first days I was going to be super depressed (...) homesick to its fullest, but (...) it helped me a lot to meet (...) Fernando who lives close by (...) we go running and things like that (...) (Sergio, FG 3, translated).

The opposite also became evident when homesickness did take an emotional toll during the first days due to a dearth of interaction with co-nationals and locals. On the one hand, co-nationals had not been met up to that point. On the other, the interaction with locals appeared to be limited to the exchange that happened whilst using a public service:

(...) initially on my arrival, it was very sad because the only people you talk to are those with whom you buy things. The second day I said, 'Ah, I feel very lonely' (Natalia, FG 2, translated).

This appears to support the need to connect local and international students prior to arrival. The development of relationships prior to arrival might help to ameliorate the negative affective impact of feeling lonely and homesick due to the inexistence of a pre-established social network. Interaction with locals and other foreign students is further explored in Weeks 3 and 4 findings and discussion.

4.4.3.2 Financial stress

As revealed in other studies, focusing on international students in the UK (Brown and Holloway, 2008a; Newsome and Cooper; 2016), finance featured as a source of tension among the participants. This seemed to be an area of concern for students with and without previous experience abroad. However, their outlooks to the situation seemed to be different.

Regarding the views of the students studying abroad for the first time, finance was a source of stress rooted in the struggle to meet the high living costs of the host society, as research by Newsome and Cooper (2016) indicated. Three related causes revealed. The first related to the exchange rate. The significant disparity between own currency (Mexican peso) and local (pound) appeared to have taken a toll on the students' emotional wellbeing:

I had pesos, not pounds, so I was paying in pesos, but it does hurt you a bit (Isabel, FG 1, translated)

Second, stress was bound to not knowing how to administer own expenses and to an apparent over reliance on scholarship. Appropriately managing day-to-day responsibilities such as, budgeting similarly revealed in Newsome and Cooper's (2016) study, as a challenge postgraduate international students faced:

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It's a bit difficult (...) to manage the money you've got (...) for the first days and all of a sudden, it gets extended because it so happens that [sponsor] deposits (...) on the fifth working day. So, you're with the same twenty pounds in the pocket (...) it's like a stress you've got that doesn't let you start enjoying the experience from the beginning.

(Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Third, equally over reliance on scholarship led to feeling financially, and hence, emotionally insecure due to lacking own funds. Lack of financial preparedness resulted as a hindrance to meet the students' own necessities, as coined by Maslow (1954), and 'enjoy all of it':

I didn't come with a lot of money (...) and I said to myself 'this has to be enough' until [sponsor's name] deposits (...) So, I was a bit (...), too apprehensive the first two weeks; I couldn't enjoy all of it (Armando, FG 2, translated)

Regardless of the causes of stress in relation to money, what seemed similar in the participants with no experience was the attitude taken towards the situation. There seemed to be a sense of acknowledgement about the difficulty of the situation (e.g. "it's being difficult), and acceptance of their responsibility for things being the way they are (e.g. "I didn't come with a lot of money").

Contrastingly, the financial concerns of the participants who had already studied abroad had a different focus and attitude. For instance, although equally related to money, their stances were about the services the University provided, and about the unhappiness and distress for the extra payment needed to access its facilities, such as the Sports Centre and the Food Courts. Thus, their comments were more critical towards the University as a service provider:

Our tuition fees are quite hefty (...) which makes it rather excessive to have to pay for a gym membership to use the facilities (Paloma, FG 3, translated).

In that sense, the service provided by the Institution was compared with a previous experience overseas:

Finland was more expensive (...), but there was buffet catering, as student, you could have everything you wanted for 2.70 euros, laundry was also free (...) Here you get charged for everything (...) you do struggle with that, every single thing would be charged, nothing is free here. (Fernando, FG 3, translated)

Parallel to findings by Roberts and Dunworth (2012), among international students in Australia, there was dissatisfaction about the excessive amount having to be paid for services that, according to the students, did not merit the quality of the services offered (e.g. extra payment for the use of gym, food court). Moreover, Cemmill and Bekhradnia (2008) reported England as one

of the most expensive places to study in the world. According to the authors, the “premium” quality of UK degrees equals their “premium” costs. The economic impact the participants felt during their first two weeks might not be surprising provided they were coming from a country with less financial stability and without a lot of financial preparedness as findings have shown. Although, focussed on international postgraduate students from different nationalities, Brown and Holloway (2008a) reported the same findings. Their research participants were equally dissatisfied with the costs of living in the UK. Similar to the Mexican participants in this study, their participants compared the fees of the course and the living expenses with those at home resulting in feelings of consternation. Parallel findings have also been reported in contexts such as the USA. For instance, to tackle the financial difficulty enunciated by both undergraduate international students and HE institutions, as one of the most influential reasons for attrition, Schulte and Choudaha (2014) advocated for the early provision of forthright and detailed information about complete costs of attendance. Brown and Holloway (2008a) had previously postulated the same remedial proposal; however, according to them the provision of information should be pre- departure in order to prepare the students adequately for their experience.

The latter is a proposal from which participants in this study could have benefited since learning the total costs of attendance by experience was an unexpected hindrance they faced. As Cemmel and Bekhradnia (2008) stated the total cost of getting a degree overseas implies not only the tuition fees, but also the living costs and other expenses. Therefore, having the corresponding information in time might be of help to raise awareness and level off expectations with actual provision of institutional services, so that the total costs to fund their education are not underestimated.

4.4.3.3 Sources of support upon arrival

The main sources of support identified upon their first two weeks were Mexican students. The assistance from other Mexican co-nationals, referring to: Mexicans newly arrived, Mexican students already in the host city, and the Mexican community from the Union of the University, were identified as the main coping strategies during their first two weeks.

Previous research by Ward et al. (2001) stated the support obtained from co-nationals is mainly socio-emotional. In this sense, empathy due to sharing the same needs, made other newly arrived Mexicans students be perceived as the main resource during the first days:

Firstly the new arrived mexicans as me, we all came together and went to know places together, we've helped each other exchanging stuff we need or making each other company going aroud the city. (Antonio, in situ questionnaire)

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Mirroring Urban et al.'s (2010) findings in which Dominican international students in the USA found strong emotional support to deal with the emerging difficulties from their conational colleagues, the students in this study identified the Mexican community as their main source of support to settle into the UK. Relationships with people from the same culture allowed for a deeper connection and understanding for the challenges endured (*Ibid.*). However, contrary to Urban et al.'s (2010) report, in this study academic support was not mentioned as an area of intragroup help rather it was moral support what was voiced.

Mexican society and Mexican guys that I have met inside and outside the halls. (Victor, in situ questionnaire, translated)

Hausmann-Stabile et al. (2011) have recognised social networks as a fundamental component for the integration of Latin sojourners. In this respect, reference, in this study, was made to the Mexican society affiliated to the union groups of the University. The usefulness of this societal group was related to how it allowed Mexican students to connect one with another and to enhance feelings of ease:

It gave me the opportunity, in one way or another, to get to know each other, and (...), somehow it makes you feel at home. (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

The existence of this bond with people from similar social and cultural backgrounds permitted a space for mutual support and understanding in times of social vulnerability, which can lead to "social isolation, identity crises, and anxiety" as reported by Hausmann- Stabile et al. (2011, p.35). In this sense, interactions with other co-nationals through the Mexican community in the University smoothed the initial transition into the host culture:

It's like a buffer now that we've just arrived (Daniel, FG 1, translated).

Being able to stay connected with people of the same cultural background seemed to have helped to understanding the new cultural norms (Urban et al., 2010). Thus, Gustavo related the language and cultural affinity to the helpfulness it carries to better "understand" and "adapt" to the target context:

(...) to find someone who (...) comes with the same ideas you brought from home, who understands your culture, it's already a huge advantage because that's part of what helps you (...) to understand a bit more, to adapt better (...) to the local culture (Gustavo, FG 2, translated).

Students who had been longer in the host environment were also appointed as main resources:

The people I've met have helped me in this process of adaptation, especially those who already have been more than 15 days here. (Isabel, in situ questionnaire, translated)

This study appears to agree with the stress and coping literature, which has highlighted the prominence of social support for the sojourners' psychological adjustment (Ward et al., 2001). For instance, it was found that social support upon arrival mainly arose from other co-nationals in the host city whether newly arrived or more familiarised with the English physical and cultural environment. The main type of support provided was of socio-emotional and practical nature (Bochner et al., 1977). Symptoms of homesickness were ameliorated by own perception of cultural distance, mental readiness in that nostalgia would be something to happen, and contact with family and friends at home by using social media. It was equally observed that beyond academic or cultural stressors, a limited budget featured as a main source of stress. In line with this, is that greater financial awareness and preparation should be reinforced prior to departure as advocated by the culture learning approach.

4.5 Weeks three and four findings and discussion

This section unveils the challenges the participants' experienced, as well as the institutional services accessed and the coping strategies implemented for support during their transition to the UK and university life during weeks 3 and 4. The difficulties reported in this section do not indicate they were of new emergence in weeks 3 and 4. Rather they have been defined as longer lasting challenges since these were the difficulties that possibly became evident from the beginning and persisted in weeks 3 and 4, interfering to different extents with the students' capacity to focus merely on their academic endeavours. In light of that, the usefulness of the University's assistance to overcome and-or the students' resourcefulness to resolve these difficulties is explored.

The quotes for this section were selected taking into consideration indicators that drew me to the present moment, which was weeks three and four, through the use of verb tenses such as present, present perfect and present progressive, for example. Furthermore, the quotes were chosen when an insight was introduced and its rationale was detailed. Finally, the selected quotes demonstrate the participants' feelings in relation to the argument being made.

The structure of this Weeks three and four segment reflects the themes that emerged during the third and fourth week's period of the participants' stay. Therefore, bearing into account the three dimensions of this study, academic, sociocultural, and affective, findings indicated that at this point sociocultural and academic difficulties were relatively balanced. In relation to academic related concerns, the participants from the focus groups and the individual interviews, at this

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point of data collection, were on their second and third week of classes, respectively. Therefore, they had already been exposed to the educational conventions and ways of working, but perhaps not enough to make substantial comments about academic-related concerns as reflected on the findings' discussion length for the corresponding sections.

Nonetheless, previous academic and professional experience and perception of the UK educational style featured as positive elements for the participants' academic adaptation. Most of the participants were mature-aged students with either postgraduate academic skills or working experience, which seemed to have facilitated their transition to practical accomplishments.

Equally, given that they all were postgraduate students coming from a teacher-centred educational approach, contributed to have an initial impression of the UK academic system as more flexible and accounted as a plus for their adjustment. Contrarily, cognitive processes in English as a foreign language, time length to transition from work to study, academics' guidance, and administrative related issues were still perceived as problematic areas on weeks 3 and 4.

Concerning the adaptation to sociocultural aspects, having an estimate of living costs by weeks 3 and 4 was a boost for the participants since they had more control over their finances and hence, felt safer about their expenditures. The host city's resources were perceived as a neutral element since it had positive and negative aspects to consider. However, struggles to get adapted to the weather and not knowing how to be prepared for it, dealing with administrative procedures such as opening a bank account, social withdrawal due to lack of confidence on English skills, lack of interaction with locals and interaction in university halls starred as the long-lasting challenges on weeks 3 and 4. The implication of these findings is the impact that these struggles had on the students' wellbeing and time, and therefore, on their inability to focus on their academic goal. Thus, rather than devoting efforts to studying and fully engaging academically, the participants were still striving to settle to some of the academic and sociocultural appropriate conventions and were dealing with the corresponding emotional burden. Therefore, regarding the affective domain, although this section follows the pattern outlined throughout this thesis and presents the unique issues encountered within the academic, sociocultural, and affective spheres, in this third section of findings, the sociocultural and academic sections inherently pick up the affective consequences of the challenges raised. Consequently, there is not a specific section to unfold the affective concerns of the participants, rather the emotional implications, whether positive or negative, are integrated within each one of the academic or sociocultural components, given its impact on the participants' wellbeing and (in) ability to focus on their academic endeavours.

4.5.1 Navigating in the academic environment

Navigating in the academic environment seemed to be aided by elements such as previous academic and professional experience since the participants were generally mature-aged students with either previous postgraduate academic or work skills. Moreover, shifting to a less teacher-centred educational approach seemed to have given an initial positive impression of more flexibility and freedom. Opposite to that, challenges were in association with cognitive processes in a foreign language, transitioning from work to study, and issues related to academic and administrative guidance.

4.5.1.1 Previous academic and professional experience

Whilst there were some academic related challenges identified as barriers to adapt, findings demonstrated that the “professional experience and other biographical elements” of mature students’ were an enhancer for the participants’ transition (Fragoso et al., 2013, p.67). Therefore, views in relation to the UK academic system were consistent with those reported by Baker et al. (1996) in the Australian HE context. Correspondingly, the participants in this study, after the first two or three weeks in turmoil, did not consider themselves as experiencing difficulties to adapt to the host educational system. On the contrary, when postgraduate studies were the immediate occupation carried out before embarking into a PhD in the UK, the extent of academic demands was believed easier than expected. There was an implicit sense of confidence in performing competently:

(...) I thought it was going to be a bit stricter, the [academic] system, but not, it's very very relaxed (...) (Arturo, interview, translated)

Two elements were identified as a boost for academic transition. The first one being the students’ own agency and the second being structurally related (Fragoso et al., 2013). The professional and scholar experience of mature students, both at the PhD and Master’s level, appeared to have had a positive impact for their adjustment. Therefore, the practical side of studies featured prominently as an easy aspect to adapt:

[In] the Clean Rooms (...) I’m used to get my hands on, I haven’t had any problem (...) like being afraid (...) to use a cutter (...) that experimental part (...) has been really easy to get used to. (Enrique, interview, translated)

Blackboard I already knew it, so (...) I like that I had already worked with that system before. (Sara, interview, translated)

Research by Wilson (1997) demonstrated the influential role of life experience, in this case portrayed in the form of having previously used the lab equipment and the virtual platform, to build on the participants' confidence. Elaborating on the latter, Fragoso et al. (2013) recognised life experience as an advantage of mature students shown in their capacity to draw together the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired. Based on this, findings seem to recognise the usefulness of the participants' lived experiences to increase their confidence in the practical terrain, which in turn contributed for a smoother transition in this aspect of the academic context.

4.5.1.2 Perception of the UK educational system

At this stage, the third and four week, the structure of the UK educational system was regarded as a useful component for the academic transition of the participants. It was recognised as a scheme that extended the students' horizons and encouraged them to develop, for example, their critical thinking skills and take a more active stance of their learning process. Although inspired in work-related differences of 40 countries, Hofstede's (1986) 4-Dimensions model might be of use to interpret the cross-cultural differences the participants' encountered between home and host academic system. The first dimension explored in this study is that of power distance. This dimension claims inequality in power is present in all cultures; however, the degree to which it is accepted differs from culture to culture. As reported by Hofstede, Mexico has been classed as a large power distance society, which means the less influential people consider acceptance of inequality as "normal". The UK, on the other hand, has been identified as a small power distance society where little tolerance is given in the context of inequality. Applying this concept to the teacher/student and student/interaction, Hofstede claimed that in a large power distance society, like Mexico, education is teacher-centred. In light of that, he posited the teacher is regarded as a "guru" who transmits "wisdom" and deserves to be respected by their students. Hence, the expectation is that teachers start the communication and lead the way. Consequently, learners are expected to follow the paths indicated by the teacher. Opposite to that is the focus of the UK academic system, as a small power distance society, in which it is believed the "truth" can emanate from any knowledgeable individual; thus, it values the students' "independence" and follows a student-centred approach to education (Ibid.). The value of the learning process rests on the extent of communication in class, in which learners are encouraged to start the communication, allowed to challenge the teacher's view and prompted to cultivate their critical thinking skills. Given these two contrasting learning and teaching approaches, the encouragement to develop critical reasoning in classes was considered as an improvement and was regarded as the preferred component so far experienced in the studying abroad sojourn:

I was used to (...) someone coming and imposing an idea, and here it's totally the opposite (...) it forces you more to think, (...) to create your own opinion (...) it lends itself to dialogue, I think that's what I've liked the most (...) (Julia, interview, translated).

Although mature students have been recognised as a group of students more likely to actively engage with their learning process (Richardson, 1994; Devlin, 1996; McCune et al., 2010), findings demonstrated that non-mature students might also actively engaged. For instance, as indicated in the quote above, the only non-mature student pursuing a Master's of Arts and with previous abroad experience, was also eager to take a more active stance in relation to her learning process and appreciated the opportunities that the UK academic system provided in that regard. Thus, there were three characteristics, age, previous experience studying abroad, and disciplinary context, which could have influenced her view. In regards to age and field of ascription, there was no evidence to suggest the other younger participants in this research with or without prior abroad experience, ascribed to a STEM master's degree shared a similar opinion. This absence of comments might mean engaging with the critical element of learning was not that easy task to endure since the participants were coming from a teacher-centred pedagogy, as literature has highlighted (Taylor and Ali, 2017). However, struggles developing a critical reasoning may have not been voiced due to avoid losing face, which is a distinctive characteristic of collectivist societies, like Mexico (Hofstede, 1986). Previous experience in another Latin American academic context, in this reference's case Brazil, was not believed to be of much influence to appreciate as an advantage the focus on critical thinking of the UK educational system since Mexico and Brazil fall under similar learning and teaching approaches based on cultural affinity (Hofstede, 1986). Thus, the appreciation for playing a more active role in the learning process could be rather attributed to pursuing a degree in the Arts. Whether studying a hard or a soft sciences degree had an impact on the non-mature aged students' perceptions, regarding the focus on critical thinking in UK pedagogy (Taylor and Ali, 2017), was out of the scope of this study. In this study, there was only one non-mature student pursuing a Master's of Arts in the whole participants' cohort whilst the other Master students belonged to the STEM subjects and did not express insights in this regard. Therefore, exploring the students' beliefs about the learning and teaching UK approach and its feasibility to adjust based on age, previous experience, and disciplinary contexts, seems a suitable venue for further investigation.

The views of the participants pursuing a PhD degree, whether in the social or the hard sciences, who were all mature-aged students, showed that some of the features of the UK pedagogy were perceived as an advantage in comparison with Mexico's educational system. For instance, the encouragement to discussion and debates in classes was recognised as a different and enjoyable element:

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(...) perhaps a lot of us are not used to [debates], (...) but you can throw your comment, and another one says 'no, that's not true' (...) and so the instructor starts to mediate (...) that's very nice. (Enrique, interview, translated)

Hofstede's (1986) dimension of collectivist and individualist societies could help to illuminate why taking a more participatory role in classes was acknowledged as a benefit. Within the teaching context, in a collectivist society as in this case Mexico, learners will only participate in class when directly requested by the teacher whilst interaction is to happen in small groups and losing face should be avoided (Hofstede, 1986). Whereas in an individualistic society, like the UK, individuals can let their voice be heard in response to an open invite by the teacher, learners will speak out in big groups, disagreement and conflict are incited, and the concept of losing face is weak (*Ibid.*). For instance, having the eagerness to pursue a PhD with the intention to explore and create new ideas in the strive to contribute to knowledge seemed to contradict with the principles of the more delineated and controlled pedagogy followed in previous education levels in Mexico, for example. Based on the latter, it might be reasonable to appreciate why the participants valued the encouragement of the UK instruction to challenge, discuss, and debate different points of view at the PhD level. Nevertheless, literature has shown that undergraduate international students in the UK coming from teacher-centred contexts have found the UK encouragement to discuss and debate as intimidating and bewildering (Taylor and Ali, 2017). In that case, the difference between these two groups of students lays on the level of study to pursue and belonging (or not) to the mature aged group. Thus, findings from this study seemed to agree with the previous claim that mature students are more apt to engage actively with their learning process (Richardson, 1994; Devlin, 1996; McCune et al., 2010).

In addition to acknowledging as advantageous the opportunity to discuss and debate, PhD and Master's degree mature participants perceived the UK academic system as more flexible. These insights captured different understandings of flexibility. On the one hand, it referred to the nuanced composition of the classes' timetable. This was accounted as a helpful transitional component:

(...) here, that my schedule wasn't so fixed (...) has helped me (...) (Armando, FG 2, translated)

On the other, flexibility was equated with freedom that prompted students to become learners that are more autonomous:

(...) In fact, I like a bit more to work that way (...) without so many limits, like with more freedom. (Mario, interview, translated).

The previous insights might be better understood by considering the differences in the teaching and learning interaction between Mexico and the UK, based on degrees of the uncertainty avoidance dimension coined by Hofstede (1986). For instance, Mexico has been classed as a strong avoidance society (Hofstede, 1986). In high uncertainty avoidance contexts, students are used to “structured” scenarios of instruction, in which little room is left for uncertainty by providing them with specific aims, elaborated assignments, and fixed schedules (Ibid.). The opposite is asserted of weak uncertainty societies, like the UK, in which the approach to learning is claimed to be more “unstructured” with imprecise objectives, open assignments, and not set schedules (Ibid.). Bearing this into consideration, it might be easier to appreciate the participants’ positive stance concerning the flexibility the UK pedagogy lent, in which there was more freedom to organise personal agenda, set own goals and work pace. Whether this was an impression maintained or changed with time, especially at the PhD level where the challenges of a less structure approach to learning could have emerged later in their academic sojourn, was out of the scope of this thesis that focused on the students’ experiences during their first month.

4.5.1.3 Cognitive process in English

Language competence has been previously pinpointed as an obstacle to adapt by international students in other educational contexts, such as Australia (Leder and Forgasz, 2004). In this study, memory recall in English, as a foreign language, was acknowledged as more difficult and as a hindrance for linguistic competence. There was awareness about the differences in cognitive processes between first and second language, and this conflicted with process of adaptation:

What I realise is that I don't have very good memory in English (...) when I study in Spanish, or read something or listen in Spanish, I get it and it's recorded quite well, but in English, it's not the same. Yes, it's a smaller percentage what's recorded and I memorise. (...) that also makes me struggle to adapt, to understand things. (Pablo, interview, translate)

Baddeley (1992) has defined working memory (WM) as “the system for the temporary maintenance and manipulation of information, necessary for the performance of such complex cognitive activities as comprehension, learning, and reasoning” (p.281). It has also been noted “individuals with smaller working memory capacities are often in a more disadvantaged position than those with larger capacities” (Healy and Bourne, 2013, p.342). In this regard, the WM capability of international students, as individuals undertaking studies in a setting where their mother tongue is not the language of instruction, has been documented as limited (Healy and Bourne, 2013; Mann et al., 2013). Nevertheless, research by Healy and Bourne (2013) reported an association between the student’s level of proficiency in a second language and the WM capacity.

Therefore, this seems to suggest a stronger emphasis on the students' needs, in spite of having passed the IELTS entry requirements, to be linguistically well prepared before embarking into their sojourn. The risk of not doing it lies on the potential repercussions this could have for participants' effective learning and communication performance at the beginning of their experience where stress is at its highest (Healy and Bourne, 2013; Mann et al., 2013).

4.5.1.4 Transition from work to study

In agreement with findings by Fragoso et al. (2013) in their research of Portuguese mature students, having been away from formal education settings for a long period of time, typically between five and ten years, was identified as an hindrance to the students' adaptation to academic life. In equal consonance with Fragoso and his colleagues' results, mature students identified younger students as "fast learners" (p.76). In this case, transitioning to postgraduate studies right after another degree was seen as an advantage over mature students, who had taken a break after pre-graduate studies and did not feel like having fresh knowledge. Hence, getting tune in into the school rhythm and catching up with the pace was a struggle, which by the end of the four week, started to feel smoother:

Perhaps if you come from a Bachelor's or a Master's you come (...) used to it (...). That's what I've seen with the other guys (...), they get it very quickly (...) it hasn't been that long since I graduated, but maybe 8, 10 years (...) So, that part, it's been difficult, but now like your brain starts to work again and gets the rhythm (...) (Enrique, interview, translated)

Another element that featured in the transition of international mature students to postgraduate education was more time needed to adjust. Transitioning from work to school came in the form of a challenge. Where work was the previous activity, the change to school dynamics was perceived as drastic. Previously working students appeared to need more time to re-channel into academic duties. The reference below was on his third week of stay:

I'm still adapting (...) I think next week I'll be more oriented to the academic, but I'm still struggling. (Jorge, interview, translated)

There were not recollections on the participants' behalf that indicated any remediating action to bring themselves back into the life of study before setting off for the UK. However, there were mentions about having arrived after the University's suggested arrival date due to work commitments, as pinpointed in the pre-arrival findings. The relevance of this finding is on making previously working students' aware about the need to allow themselves for a longer transitional time, so that they could easily redirect their efforts into academic duties.

4.5.1.5 Academics' guidance

McDonald (2014) in his research supporting international students in the UK HE emphasised the importance of approaching the students' personal tutor at the Master's level or the PhD supervisor even for personal or financial concerns. His findings showed students were reluctant to seek for advice with academic members due to cultural differences, in which it was not perceived as appropriate behaviour. McDonald (2014, p.64) concluded international students were "potentially missing out important support which is available for them". Though this study correspondingly found that references made in regards to personal tutors or supervisors were related to academic guidance, rather than thinking on considering academics as resources for personal or financial matters possibly due cultural practices, as claimed by McDonald; findings indicated participants did want to benefit from their academic support. However, it was not possible due to the academic's lack of contact. For instance, Ariana had not met her personal tutor as of her third week in the UK. She revealed on "the faculty-welcoming day" she was informed she would receive an email stating who her tutor was to be, nevertheless:

As of now I still haven't received it. So, I think that part is a bit unattended (...). We're all like that, we're all wondering who our tutor is (...). (Ariana, FG 2, translated)

Comparably, the view of a PhD student was similar; he was on his fourth week and perceived he still had not had proper supervisory guidance and was unclear as to the way of working:

(...) they haven't explained well to me the way of working(...) I want to talk to my supervisor (...) to be clear on how I'm going to report (...) what they expect (...) that kind of thing I don't have very clear, I've sort of understood them. (Pablo, interview, translated)

4.5.1.6 Liaison between sponsor and the University

On week 3, feelings of stress and bewilderment due to unsolved administrative matters were still apparent. There seemed to be a dearth of transparent communication between the students' sponsor and the host University. Lack of consistency on the practise of administrative procedures, such as the payment of tuition caused confusion, aroused uncertainty, and questioned previous understanding:

(...) I went to student services (...) and they told me very different things to what [sponsor's name] had said, so a huge confusion between the University, [sponsor's name] and me arose. (Isabel, FG 1, translated)

Therefore, due to that unclear flow of communication between the sponsor and the institution, students were directly involved in the midst of administrative processes still on their third week of stay. Hence, feeling responsible and pressured for the payment of a hefty tuition:

Once I arrived here, I wasn't expecting so much trouble with [sponsor's name]; I thought it was going to be easier, that's what stressed me out the most. And it's still pending.
(Daniel, FG 1, translated)

In line with that, Zittoun (2007) argued uncertainty could be a paralysing experience that played a fundamental role during transitions. Therefore, clarity in the administrative procedures to follow is of upmost importance to decrease the ambiguity international students' face in an unknown environment. To that end, as claimed by Ramsay et al. (2007) appropriate communication of knowledge across the different university components (e.g. faculties, departments), areas such as pastoral, administrative and academic, and in this case sponsors, is needed for the provision of quality services. The expectation would be that such approach allows for a fluid and transparent delivery of information that reduces feelings of strain and uncertainty for the newly arrived international students.

4.5.2 Sociocultural long-lasting challenges

By weeks 3 and 4, a budget for living expenses seemed to have been built. This allowed for feelings of certainty and control over financial expenditures. The attributes of the host city also featured as components that had an impact on the students' well-being and transition. The availability of places to go out and socialise highlighted as limited; whereas public transport and safety were accounted as positive elements to adapt as well as accessibility to community assets, such as parks. Nonetheless, the weather, opening a UK bank account, linguistic competence for social purposes, interaction with locals and interaction in university halls were struggles, in some cases, still being faced by the end of the participants' first month of stay in the UK.

4.5.2.1 Building a budget

A line of argument throughout this thesis has been the financial constraints the participants faced due to the high living costs in the UK and their lack of financial preparedness. Therefore, as monetary restraints augmented and a deeper need for savings surfaced, two coping mechanisms appeared to have been implemented (Fernbach et al., 2014). First, efficiency planning, in which the participants stretched their funds in an attempt to save, shown in comments such as: "this has to be enough". Second, priority planning where the acquisition of less relevant things was surrendered (Ibid.) According to Fernbach et al. (2014) budgeting allows for a more flexible

behaviour on behalf of the consumers; hence, lack of it seemed to have led the participants to feeling limited. The psychological implication of feeling financially constrained could be the stress, the negative dispositions, and the interference that these have on the participant's intellectual capacity and ability to concentrate on the academic task they were to pursue (Haushofer and Fehr, 2014).

From the findings it has discovered the participants did not have envisioned financial planning, hence they learnt to build a budget by involvement (Schild, 1962). Although, expenses on food seemed excessive, by the end of the third week there was already an estimated budget for it, which seemed to be enough and expenses had gradually decreased:

I spent seventy pounds [on the first week] and I didn't buy anything (...) next week I spent fifty-something. Now, what I'm spending is twenty pounds, and I even have extra food (...) with twenty pounds (...) a week you have enough. (Pablo, interview, translated)

In addition to the previous view, by the end of the fourth week, it was believed that money from stipend was enough to make a living. However, the first month required more money to settle in. Hence, relying solely on scholarship for expenses during the first four weeks did not seem enough. At the end of the first month, there was confidence in own finances since there was a clearer budget of expenses:

For money, (...) I was making like a recount, and with the scholarship; really, money is well enough, as long as you don't pay tuition. (Enrique, interview, translated)

This finding is important because it allows to realise the time that it took the nonbudgeter participants to create a budget and thus, to feel emotionally and financially confident. Based on these assertions, due to financial constraints, the participants may have experienced stress and negative affective states for nearly a month. In line with this, this study argues financial planning should be encouraged as an alleviating resource for the monetary constraints and stress, participants without financial planning faced (Fernbach et al., 2014). For instance, the consideration of areas that go beyond the academic focus, such as this, as part of the induction agenda for international students in contexts like this, may prove of benefit for a smoother adjustment, which in turns may lead to a deeper focus on the academic pursue.

4.5.2.2 The host city and its resources

Recent research by Insch and Sun (2013) in New Zealand has argued although the physical and sociocultural features of the host city have an impact on the students' overall education experience, little emphasis has been given to explore the perceptions and satisfaction of HE

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students in relation to the host city. In agreement with that, this section unveils in detail the host city attributes that according to their participants were important for their wellbeing and their implications for adaptation. The themes that emerged relate to some of the relevant city attributes compiled by Insch and Sun (2013); namely, shopping and dining, personal and public safety, public transport, and community assets. This section will then present these characteristics in the order above indicated. Before delving into each city component, it is noted that all the participants in this study came from urban areas in Mexico and some of the students originally resided in Mexico City, the country's largest populated city.

The shopping and dining component refers to "wide choice of shops, nice places for a coffee and range of restaurants" (Insch and Sun, 2013, p.181). In this regard, coming from larger cities, the host city size was recurrently regarded as "very small" or "nothing, not even my neighbourhood". Based on that, the discontent was associated with the lack of leisure activities for the participants to get engaged in and was perceived as a hindrance to adapt:

It really seems to me (...) a little bit boring (...) very monotonous like there aren't a lot of options. (Arturo, interview, translated)

I'm shocked in that sense, there's very little activity, very few things to do, (Oscar, FG 3, translated)

In Roberts and Dun's (2012) study it was found that international student felt campus life was restricted as there were not many activities for them to partake in, especially in the evening. Motivated by that, their participants looked for engagement opportunities outside the University. The authors' claim is in relation to the dearth of institutional support to integrate these students in the wider context. Although in this study, reference is made to the lack of activities in the host city, it might raise a similar awareness as to what extent the University is getting involved to promote in this group of students a sense of belonging and to integrate them into the broader society.

Also, concerning the accessibility for shopping and dining in the host city, unhappiness for the lack of availability to get supplies, primarily over the weekend, due to narrow shopping hours was repetitively expressed. It allowed for comparisons with home city, where the practise of extended stores' opening times, particularly over the weekend conflicted with the way this is done in the UK.

We're used to (...) more extended opening times than here. (...) It shocked me (...) that it was half past five p.m. (...) and everything was already dead, just like three lost souls wandering around. (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

The latter finding could demonstrate the role that subtle and implicit value differences between home and host culture play (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985). The distinctive perception of time between Mexican and English cultures featured as a deeply rooted value, which was still causing struggles to adapt on weeks three and four. Time has been recognised as a culturally distinct characteristic, and its understanding and use is dependent on the culture of occurrence (Furnham, 1993). Based on this, the participants differed in their understanding of what appropriate opening times were; thus, resented the British use of time and perceived it as inadequate. This also denotes how non-evident cultural differences, as in this case time perception, are the ones that could sometimes be the most persistent and take longer time to adapt. Therefore, subtle cultural value differences could also be those most deeply rooted when adapting to a different culture and hence, prior-to departure awareness about cultural matters might help alleviating clashes, such as this.

The second host city attribute was related to personal and public safety. This component refers to feeling safeguarded from physical violence, delinquency and other coercions (Insch and Sun, 2013). In this study, the peacefulness of the host city accounted as a positive element to adapt. For instance, compared to the bustling rhythm and less satisfactory conditions at home city, the slow pace of life in the host city counted as a contributing element for the participant's emotional well-being:

A very quiet city (...) I was looking for that kind of tranquillity, I lived in Mexico City, so, big cities tend to be very chaotic, so, small ones are better. (Mario, interview, translated)

Following on the previous idea, the host city was regarded as a safe environment to live in. Safety featured not only as a helpful component for the students' physical and emotional health, but also possibly as a contributor to maximise the focus on academic endeavours by freeing some mental space. As illustrated below, external distractors, which were an evident concern in Mexico City, were nonexistent in England:

Mexico City is a very bustling city (...) you not only have to worry about your professional activity, (...) there are other issues like traffic (...), insecurity, which is not the case here (...) there are none of those problems, so I feel very calm. (Arturo, interview, translated)

Moreover, the participants' satisfaction of the host city was associated with the quality of transport (Insch and Sun, 2013). The availability and reliability of the public transport service appeared as a contributing element to adjust to the host city

It's small, but, it has a good quality of travel, (...) public transport, I do give that a good point about living here. (Fernando, FG 3, translated)

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The availability of community assets, such as the city's parks (Insch and Sun, 2013) featured as a positive attribute of the host city since these offer opportunities for free leisure activities, should the participants not want to stay all day at home:

(...) the city has many public spaces (...) by which you can walk, you can stay for a while, without having to be locked up all day in the house, and you don't really have to pay anything for the parks (...) (Roberto, FG 3, translated)

The overall contentment with the Southern English host city, as well as the comparisons made with the students' home environments, are in consonance with findings by Brown and Holloway (2008a). Both researches had as context of study, South England, and their population were postgraduate international students, although in Brown and Holloway's study there was no focus on a specific cultural group. As reported in their study, the participants were equally satisfied with the host city especially in terms of the open green spaces and landscapes, and the less bustle of the city. Brown and Holloway (2008a) raised the awareness that the perception of the participants might have changed if they would have been allocated in more industrialised cities such as London and Manchester, in which the positive account attributed to the greenness and more ease pace of life in their study, and resonated in this, might have been different.

Comparison-theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995) might help to explicate the participants' perceptions in relation to the host city for their well-being. Generally, the concept of well-being has been likened with notions like "happiness, life satisfaction, quality of life and positive affect" (Osseiran-Waines, 1995) and there have been usually two approaches (an objective and a subjective) to explore it (Liao, 2009). The former line focuses on socioeconomic factors such as individual status, living conditions, and economic status (Campbell et al., 1976). Whereas the latter believes "that well-being resides within the individual and relies on the standards of the respondent to determine what is good life" (Osseiran-Waines, 1995, p.114). Comparison-theory then emerged in an attempt to explain the association between objective and subjective dimensions and it seems to be a useful theory to explicate the participants' perception of well-being satisfaction. According to comparison-theory individuals make a judgement of life based on relative values, such as "own experiences" (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995). Thus, it is contended "objective conditions affect subjective perceptions indirectly through comparisons with other possible alternatives" (Liao, 2009, p.103). Therefore, as demonstrated in the references above, the participants made judgements based on own past experience, and their extent of satisfaction was linked to their own standards of comparison (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995). For instance, in comparison with home urban cities, limited availability of shopping and dining places resulted in dissatisfaction. While based on lower perceived levels of personal and

public safety at home city, safety featured as a high host city attribute for well-being. A high level of satisfaction equally applied for the observed improvement of public transport, and for community assets.

These findings might indicate a connection between the attributes of the host city and the participants' well-being. The relevance of this finding rests on acknowledging the impact that external domains, such as availability of places to shop and dine, public open places, transport, and feeling safe, play for the participants' well-being and hence, on their whole satisfaction of the experience. Overall, compared to own standards the participants' seemed satisfied with the attributes of the host city except for the availability of shopping and dining options, and their perceived narrowed opening hours. The perceived lack of accessibility of places to shop and dine is especially relevant since it could link to another finding highlighted in this study in relation to interaction with locals (see 4.5.2.6). It is relevant as greater availability of places to shop and dine could also represent a wider range of venues for socializing. Therefore, as claimed by Staats et al. (1995, p.110), "Universities and our evolving societies need to address these needs within the context of cultural change". Thus, university administrators and city leaders are encouraged to uphold the city attributes regarded as effective for the students' well-being and to address the perceived lacking ones since international students are a considerable resident population in university host cities (Insch and Sun, 2013). Finally, dissatisfaction with less extended opening times is speculated as a cultural value that could benefit from a raised, prior to departure, cross-cultural awareness.

4.5.2.3 The weather

Although this study focused on the first 4 weeks of the sojourn and on a specific country of provenance, Mexico, the findings echo with those found in the doctoral work by Brown (2008) and Schartner (2014) on their longitudinal studies of post-graduate international students from diverse nationalities in the UK. In the former study, the weather featured as one of the main struggles during the first weeks, and in the latter case, it was identified as a difficulty that persisted until the end of the students' sojourn. In comparison with other challenging areas that gradually improved over time either due to accommodating to the new context or implementing new strategies (Berry, 1997), given the climate differences in host and home country, the weather appeared as an unremitting factor, which still was taking a toll on weeks 3 and 4.

[Home city name] is hot-as-hell, and to come to this cold weather, it was like 'I am going to die'. (Carlos, FG 2, translated)

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The drastic change in climate conditions had several ramifications for the participants' health, emotional and social behaviour. First, there were health consequences. Although used to cold winters, upon arrival due to the extreme change in temperature sickness became apparent:

I was coming from a summer above 35 [Celsius] degrees, so to arrive here and find that in autumn, temperature at night drops to 8-7 degrees already...I covered up and still got sick. (Armando, FG 2, translated)

Second, having recently learnt that in wintertime "sunset will be about 3:50p.m." anticipated concerns about how shorter winter daylight would affect mood. It was feared that it would conflict with regular routine, and hence, affect social and academic life and demands:

It'll shorten my day because once it gets dark, I feel less eager to do anything; the same happens when it's cloudy, it's like, it's already night, I won't do anything anymore.
(Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Third, there was concern as to not knowing how to be prepared clothes-wised for winter. Coming from a "very hot" region in Mexico, where the temperatures were "35-40 Celsius degrees all year round", did not allow for an understanding of what would be needed for the winter to come:

I'm not sure what I'll need for winter (...) I still don't know exactly what I should get
(Mateo, FG 1, translated)

The weather has been long acknowledged as a powerful environmental factor able to define human life in many and various ways. For example, it influences agronomy and stock markets, encourages, or stops leisure intentions; it is even a useful and regular subject for casual conversations (Cunningham, 1979; Kamstra et al., 2003). Having said this, it might be of no surprise that the relationship between the weather and a wide range of human behaviour has been one of the oldest areas researched (Persinger, 1975). In the educational field, it can be traced as far as 1904, where research by Dexter (1904 in Cunningham, 1979 and in Howarth and Hoffman, 1984) reported a link between dropping barometric pressure, extreme humidity, and irregular winds, and students' poor behaviour and ability to concentrate in primary school. Within HE, research by Persinger (1975), based in Canada, found a relationship between "lower moods" and less sunlight hours. Supporting the latter, Cunningham (1979) reported helping behaviour was associated with a clear sky and extended hours of sunshine, whilst temperature was also influential for a willingness to help. In addition to the association, identified by Persinger (1975) and Cunningham (1979), between the number of sunshine hours, and the positive or negative mood state in a person, Howarth and Hoffman (1984) focused on 9 specific weather variables to study their relation with behaviour changes. They found that humidity, temperature, and hours of

sunshine, in that order of relevance, affected their university participants' concentration. This empirical evidence might help to validate this study's participants concerns about the weather, in general, and specifically about the temperature and the limited exposure to sunshine hours during the winter in the UK, and the effect it could have for their wellbeing and academic performance.

Advancing the previous claims, recent medical research has named as seasonal affective disorder (SAD) to the set of depressive symptoms that distress many people during periods of rather few hours of sunshine (Kamstra et al., 2003). Therefore, SAD is highly related to hours of light (Ibid.). Consequently, the symptoms of SAD might be more evident in countries that are northern in latitude and, hence, farther from the equator, in which Fall and Winter days are shorter and with less daylight (Kamstra et al., 2003). In this sense, Mexico at an altitude of 23° N is closer to the equator than England at a 54°N latitude (Nation Master, 2014). This may imply that the participants were used to warmer climate and longer periods of daylight in Fall and Winter, and upon arrival felt the emotional toll that the change took. The implications of this finding are important in the social, affective, and academic domains since struggles to focus, energy loss, and exhaustion have been identified as some of the signs of SAD (Kamstra et al., 2003). The latter could interfere with the students' capacity to concentrate, be alert, and perform satisfactory; as well as with their drive to interact and socialise. Based on these possible symptoms and consequences, considerations should be taken into account in the strive to help the students, coming from warmer and more daylight exposure climates, have the least health, emotional and academic impacts, such as sicknesses, emotional disturbances or a deficient school performance whilst in their living and studying experience.

Thus, given the recurrent struggles to adapt to weather conditions in contexts such as the UK and since SAD has been proven as a clinical diagnosis (Kamstra et al., 2003), more efforts could be devoted on behalf of institutions to sensitise its coming, possibly affected, students in relation to this condition and its consequences. Comparably, the exploration of alternative resources that might help international students from warmer and longer daylight contexts suffice for the lack of these natural conditions is also encouraged. In this regard, two concrete practical recommendations are proposed. First, it is raising the awareness about how a detriment in ultraviolet light might slow the natural bodily production of Vitamin D (Cunningham, 1979) and hence, encourage the intake of such vitamin. Second, the use of light therapy (Kamstra et al., 2003) in the form of SAD lamps could be considered as a treatment to combat the deficiency of daylight.

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Another concern the participants faced was not knowing how to be appropriately, clothes-wise, prepared for the climate conditions. Findings indicated the weather conditions between home and host country were acknowledged as very different. Thus, the encouragement is for the institution to increase its awareness about these distinctive environmental considerations and based on that, disseminate relevant and practical information, so that the corresponding students are well better prepared with fundamental aspects, such as clothes.

Finally, findings indicated the instances in which the weather seemed to have had a milder effect was when the participants have been previously abroad and were aware about different weather conditions compared to those at home:

I was in Japan on an exchange programme (...). So, I was already aware about the weather, about how extreme it can be (...). (Daniel, FG 1, translated)

Correspondingly students in Brown and Holloway's (2008b) in which the participants from countries with more drastic weather conditions perceived an improvement with the British climate, the participants in this study who had studied abroad in a colder region, shared the feeling:

I'd been in Finland, (...) the weather there is much colder and it was never sunny, so, when I arrived here I said (...) 'how cool that I chose the United Kingdom' (Fernando, FG3, translated)

These outcomes support Klineberg and Hull's (1979) claim in that previous experience accounted as a preparedness strategy. This seems to prove that having knowledge on how things can be, helps to be mentally prepared for the change to face. Findings also provide support for the comparison theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995) in that the extent of satisfaction and wellbeing was interpreted in relation to previous lived experiences with the weather. Therefore, the initial clash with the weather seems to be lesser when more drastic weather conditions have been lived.

4.5.2.4 Opening a UK bank account

On week 3, opening a UK bank account was still a problematic aspect to deal with. There appeared two considerations as to why this procedural practice was still an unsolved struggle. On the one hand, how to open a bank account was one of the topics tackled within the induction session and the problematic claims emerged from participants who had not attended to it due to unawareness or having arrived after, as explained on the on-arrival findings. Therefore, the participants lacked UK specific knowledge as to how to open a bank account. Realising about their

inability to perform appropriately in simple and ordinary situations seemed to have contributed to feeling vulnerable. This was portrayed by feelings of irritation and by perceiving the UK practices as inappropriate:

It's a pain that you can't just drop in as you would at home. You have to make an appointment and everything. (Carlos, FG 2, translated)

This goes in line with Furnham and Bochner's (1982) proposition that culture training should be targeted to the ordinary aspects of the target culture. As the authors state, the participants, in their home culture, know how to effectively perform in everyday situations, such as opening a bank account, and though the outcome of the activity was expected to be the same in home and host societies, the form to achieve the end was different. Therefore, sojourners need to learn the new and appropriate conventions to deal with everyday situations in the host culture.

On the other hand, in addition to being a different administrative practice for which there was a dearth of preparation, the process of opening a bank account was perceived as a hindrance due to the inappropriate support received from the University:

(...) I had a hard time (...) I'm just about to receive [the card] and I, since [...] fresher's week, went to request the letter [to student services] (...) and they were giving it wrong or it didn't have the details requested, so the bank was refusing it. (Victor, FG 3, translated)

These findings resonate with those claimed by McKinlay et al. (1996) who highlighted as unhelpful the uncoordinated efforts of several services within the University to assist international students' transition into the target setting. The authors investigated the effects of a cultural orientation programme in a group of international postgraduate students in a UK University and concluded, among other remarks, a poor communication between the different components of the institution. Supporting this, Ramsay et al. (2007) in their research of mature-aged local and international first year university students in Australia found the need for an institutional coordinated and informed approach that would appropriately respond to the varied needs of the first year students. Although, this study was not focused on first year pre-graduate students, it accounted for the postgraduate participants as their "first year" since they were exposed not only to a new cultural environment, but also to new academic and administrative conventions.

Consequently, as pointed out in this study, there were two apparent causes for the specific struggles to opening a bank account. First, there was a lack of understanding and of skills needed to deal with British procedural practices. Second, the provision of assistance on behalf of the host institution, to open a UK bank account, featured as ineffective due to poor organisational

practices. The relevance of this finding rests on the deviated time and energy that dealing with daily errands, such as opening a bank account, still on the third week took off the participants from focusing on academic endeavours. Thus, in agreement with McKinlay et al. (1996) these findings support the need not only for the institutional provision of cultural induction schemes, but also for an internal reinforcement of sound management approaches that result in synchronised help for international students.

4.5.2.5 Language for social purposes

Statements made about language for social purposes came mainly in the form of difficult aspects. Language struggles were believed to be due to unfamiliarity with British English and the southern local accent. Understanding American English, given the geographical proximity of Mexico and the USA, and more frequent exposure even through media, was thought as an easier task to undertake. Likewise, having a better understanding of British English and its local accent was something believed to improve after two or three weeks in the culture:

(...) talking to Americans it's understood, (...) but here, at least in this southern part, it did give me a bit of a hard time, but after two, three weeks, you pick up the tone
(Enrique, interview, translated)

In some other cases, on week 4, understanding the language in social situations was still a struggle. The challenge was not asserted to be with English, in general, but specifically on understanding southern British English. Based on that, the trouble with language was on interactions with locals in real life settings and everyday errands, such as purchasing or enquiring about a service:

For me it's been difficult to get to grips with the English from here (...) sales people speak too fast, too crunched up, too British, it's been really really difficult. I have to guess what they are saying; when they speak clearly, I don't have a problem (Mateo, FG 1, translated)

Brown and Holloway (2008a) studied postgraduate international students from various nationalities, but mainly of Asian origin, in a southern British University. The authors reported anxiety related to speaking in English in the initial stage of their sojourn and a decrease of it as linguistic skills were acquired through time. These findings converge with those reported by the authors in that linguistic competence, particularly attributed to a lack of understanding of the local accent was a stressor during the first four weeks. However, in this study, whilst there were linguistic improvements reported as time passed, linguistic competence was still a struggle and a

source of stress by weeks 3 and 4 in some other cases. This seems to reinforce the association between extents of language competence and distress (Brown and Holloway, 2008a).

Feeling unconfident with the use of the target language was a trigger for the participants to isolate themselves on week 3. Ward (1967 in Furnham, 2004) identified this withdrawal interaction style as part of the symptoms international students transitioning to a new culture face. Disguised as an act of laziness or uninterested in making more efforts, this strategy may be used in an attempt to avoid losing face and exposing themselves due to feeling linguistically incompetent:

I've realised that I avoid social interactions because I get lazy to speak in English.
(Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Limited English skills has been recognised as a major hurdle for the development of social relationships, where international students feel unconfident about their linguistic abilities and hence, avoid interaction with domestic students, as in the reference above (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011).

However, although equally feeling insecure with own linguistic skills, an opposite reaction was found. A participant who had expressed concerns with language, rather than withdrawing socially, he was willing to take risks. The participant decided to step out of his comfort zone and push himself to practice his English as a coping strategy for the improvement of it (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011):

I'm glad I didn't get anybody in my flat that speaks Spanish because that in any way pushes me to speak in English. (Mateo, FG 1, translate)

The latter finding allows for the realization on how differently participants could approach situations in which they feel vulnerable. It raises the question about the influence that personality traits may have on the participants' decision to either challenge or isolate themselves due to lacking dominion over the language. Regardless of the strategy the students chose to undertake, the underlying point is, as McLachlan and Justice (2009, p.28) have sensibly claimed: "international students who are not confident and proficient in speaking English are at a severe disadvantage in their adjustment". Therefore, considering the implications that lacking adequate English oral skills bear on the sojourners' social wellbeing should be the drive to incentivise students to learn properly the language before embarking into the experience (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011). Additionally, it could be useful the launching of initiatives on behalf of the institution to promote programmes that assist students with their English oral skills, such as the establishment of conversational workshops as part of their induction agenda.

4.5.2.6 Interaction with locals and other foreign students

In consonance with previous studies (Russell, 2005; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Brown and Aktas, 2011; Liu and Winder, 2014; Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Schartner and Cho, 2017) pertaining the relationship of international students with British people, findings indicated paucity of relations. The participants did not find many opportunities for meaningful interactions with locals inside or outside the university premises (Newsome and Cooper, 2016). Thus, given the limited interactions between host nationals and international students, and as stated by Ward et al. (2001), the participants befriended co-nationals or other international students rather than British people. Consequently, the socialising part was bound to relationships with Mexicans and other internationals:

(...) the only interaction you have with the locals is when you buy something, when you need a service (...) up to now, I haven't met anybody from here, only foreigners and Mexicans (...)it has made me feel like nostalgic (Carlos, FG 2, translated)

Within the educational setting, inability to interact with domestic students was, in part, associated to the “skewed student intake”, as reported in similar findings by Schartner and Cho (2017, p.465). In both studies, having the UK as context, the participants identified that most of their colleagues, at the postgraduate level, were also of international origin. Even if there was the aspiration to be more in touch with local students for the sake of culture and language learning, as well as for a sense of belonging, the chances to interact with them were minimal if not absent still on week 4 as the extract below demonstrates:

(...) it's strange, but in the research centre there are more people from other countries than British (...) so, I haven't been lucky enough to interact directly with them (Enrique, interview, translated).

Peacock and Harrison (2009) claimed the high expectations international students in the UK had for interaction with domestic students was not achieved. In this study, participants' comments, such as: “I haven't been lucky enough”, in relation to the scarce interaction with domestic students, portrayed the same perception. It allowed realising there were possibly high hopes for more contact with UK students, which were not achieved.

Findings also demonstrated there were some programmes with a more balanced intake of domestic and international students. This could tentatively allow room for more meaningful communication exchanges between international and local students. Nonetheless, as found by Liu and Winder (2014), and Schartner and Cho (2017) international students perceived local British fellows as reluctant to form friendships with people from other cultures. Therefore, even when

both groups shared the same space, mingling with domestic students was still perceived as difficult due to attitude attributes. Thus, the participants found it easier to socialise with other international students due to their “shared foreignness” as stated by Brown and Aktas (2011), and who had the deciphering of the UK cultural norms as a task (Urban et al., 2010). This is illustrated below:

(...) there are indeed many English in my group, but they tend to be more closed off (...)

So, I've found it easier to socialise with, with other foreigners. (Paloma, FG 3, translated)

Tendency to make friends with other co-national and other foreign students rather than with locals has been long highlighted (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985). As noted before, two of the reasons for these participants’ conational and international clustering were accredited to the perceived unsympathetic attitude of local colleagues and to the shared understanding with fellow internationals. Consequently, interacting with fellow international colleagues was perceived as more open and receptive, opposite to how relating to “the others,” referring to British associates, was regarded. This interpretation of attitudes, as pinpointed by Liu and Winder (2014), led to bonding with other foreign students leaving local colleagues with the blame for the lack of interaction:

(...) those who've got another background (...) very open, very cool (...) we talk, very

respectful (...), but the others, it's only a 'hello', and sometimes, 'just turn off the light'

(...) (Pablo, interview, translated)

There are two potential consequences for gathering only with compatriots and other international students. First, it is the missed opportunity to acquire English cultural and linguistic skills that could have been attained through relationships with host friends (Furnham and Bochner, 1982). Being this one of the motives for culture learning to advocate for the creation of strategies that allows for a stronger connexion between local and international students (*Ibid.*). A second ramification is the division that the perception of “them” vs. “us” could create, and hence prevent the formation of a whole sense of multicultural community.

Similar to research by Russell (2005), and Newsome and Cooper (2016), in which the views of undergraduate and postgraduate international students were explored, UK students were not perceived by this group of international students as open, friendly, and inclusive. In that regard, lack of relations with locals surpassed the perceived advantages of the host society, as illustrated below:

(...) although it's a good country in general, and the city is (...) quite cosmopolitan, (...)

people are cold (...) they have very small circles of friendship of people from different

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ethnic backgrounds (...) it's not much seen, the mixture (...) in terms of friendship.
(Arturo, interview, translated)

Lack of openness to interact on behalf of local people was perceived as the most difficult sociocultural aspect to adapt:

And as for non-academic things, I think the main barrier, maybe, the way of being of the people (...). (Mario, interview, translated)

This could be explained as a clash of values between an individualistic and a collectivistic society.

For instance, the perception of the British idiosyncrasy as an individualistic society in which establishing relationships may not be at the core of their values conflicted with the relevance given to social contact in collectivist societies, like Mexico. Latin America has been recognised as a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1986; Urban et al., 2010). Societies classed as this are characterised for the salience given to the building of social relationships (Ibid.). Therefore, developing relationships with local students has been pointed out in the literature as a benefit mainly to learning the norms of the host culture and improving the language (Ward et al., 2001). However, as seen in this study, inability to create relationships with locals had a negative impact for wellbeing. Not reaching a high degree of connectedness with the host community was resented.

Overall, the perceived segregation of local and international students might point towards organisational, behavioural, and pedagogical aspects that would need enhancement. First, concerning the organisational design, a more balanced class integration of international and local class might be conducive for the interaction among these groups. This would need to be complemented with reinforcement to the behavioural component. For instance, research has been developed around the topic of internationalisation, aiming to study the challenges international students face, and within it, the lack of interaction between international and domestic students has been equally reported. What seem to be little explored are the strategies and mechanisms launched to sensitise domestic students. Equal to the essential preparation and provision of activities for international students, receiving universities could spend some efforts to prepare and get involved its local students for the students from a different culture to arrive (Schartner and Cho, 2017). Rather than one culture being in shock, all parties involved might experience, to different degrees, tensions (Berry, 1997) and for so, the argument is both, incoming and receiving participants, should be involved and prepared for a cross-cultural encounter. Providing intercultural communication courses for domestic students might help to widen their understanding of other cultures and perhaps trigger their interest to know more about other cultures, appreciate diversity, and hence, socialise. Participants in Schartner and Cho's (2017) study urged the University for a more active instance to involve domestic students

and for so, the proposal was for peer-mentoring programmes. The understanding was that this type of support would foment the development of friendships that could be carried on even after the end of the buddy scheme. At a pedagogical level, considerations could be given to teaching approaches and dynamics in which teachers could foster classroom interaction between international and local students, in a way that could be an advantage for both of them. Whilst international students may benefit from culture and linguistic skills from their host colleagues, domestic students could also learn about the international students' culture, and hence, implicitly prepare them for an international experience and possibly widen their horizons for intercultural appreciation.

In comparison to the participants' perception whose first experience studying in the UK was this, findings indicate the outlooks, concerning the interaction with locals, of the students who had previously studied in England were more positive. Two different elements of helpfulness were identified. First, friendliness and interest were perceived as contributors of the participants' wellbeing:

(...) I don't know if I am lucky, but now I found more friendly people (...) this time, there were more people who came to me, and did talk to me. (Eduardo, FG 3, translated)

Second, although acknowledging a dearth of interaction with local fellows, pleasant communication with English academics had helped to smooth the negative perception previously acquired about English people and similarly, to adjust to the host environment:

(...) Now I've also got only foreign friends, but I've been quite happy with my teachers, who are mostly English, and with whom I've had very good conversations, and (...), who have welcomed me very well, who have made it very easy for me to adapt. (Alberto, FG 2, translated)

Complementing the value of a kind attitude on behalf of English' scholars, was the claim that foreign colleagues' supportive behaviour had made up for the absence of relationships with local fellows:

I thought I was going to struggle making friends (...) the British do make their little group, but the teachers who are all British, are very sympathetic, (...) very human and with the other colleagues, (...) from Kazakhstan, Greeks, they do engage, they're very good people. (Fernando, FG 3, translated)

For instance, evidence from this study seemed to support Klineberg and Hull's (1979) claim that students with previous experience abroad were more skilled to develop relationships with local

students than those who were on their first sojourn. Similar findings resonated in research by Liu and Winder (2014) in which the undergraduate experiences of international students in the UK were explored. These findings might be because the students' expectations for interaction were more realistic. Therefore, little contact with locals was an expected challenge. Having been in an individualistic society before, as in this case were Finland and England, and experienced the context of an individualistic society might have helped to have a wider cultural understanding, and lower expectations for interaction. Thus, when these unexpected social exchanges occurred, they were highly appreciated.

4.5.2.7 Interaction in university halls

Living in university accommodation did not feature, in some cases, as an environment conducive to interaction among the different ethnic groups. The vast outbound international mobility of students of Asian origin (UIS, 2018) and the skewed intake of Chinese students in the UK (UKCISA, 2018) became apparent in the University lodging where the hopes for a multicultural ambiance were deterred.

(...) I wanted (...) that in my flat there would be more British, because they're also only Asians, (...) I'd like to live with more... even if they are not British, but internationals.

(Daniel, FG 1, translated)

The imbalance intake and the clustering of students from one same nationality seemed to have resulted in low levels of interaction among the different groups sharing university accommodation. The communal kitchen featured as the place where interaction and socialisation among the various university flatmates occurred. Nonetheless, the participants' perception was that establishing a relationship with their Asian fellows was hindered due to the use of their mother tongue rather than English for communication:

(...) if there are two or more Asians, they speak in their language, they don't speak English, they don't include you in anything (...), so it's the same thing to be with them than to be alone. (Oscar, FG 3, translated)

Speaking in a language that was not of communal understanding was seen with disapproval and seemed to have provoked feelings of irritation among the participants:

(...) out of respect when I'm with another Mexican colleague, and they're there, we don't speak in Spanish, because we don't like it when they speak in Chinese, we feel excluded (...). (Armando, FG 2, translated)

Although the proposition was for a more inclusive attitude, on behalf of the participants, that showed interest and allowed for communication, how the situation would have unfolded if the majority of occupants were of Latin American origin or Spanish speakers remains unknown.

In this view, willingness to interact with other accommodation sharers was interpreted as living in a suitable environment. Nevertheless, lack of involved on behalf of the Chinese colleague was resented:

I feel that I came to a good floor where everyone speaks, even though we are all from different countries, (...), but we all like to talk except for the Chinese, and in the kitchen we meet and play cards and everything. (Sara, interview, translated)

Although, not related to sharing accommodation, the outlook of a participant enrolled in one of the postgraduate art courses previously mentioned, where Chinese students were the vast majority, was more positive. The student was living in private housing, but was aware of her Mexican fellows' views in regards to the little interaction they perceived with Asian flatmates. She differed on her opinion. According to her experience, Chinese as classmates "do seek to integrate with others". Her interpretation for this was:

I don't know if it's because, maybe, they're a majority and then they seek to integrate with the minority, in some way. (...) maybe also (...) 'I want to meet people from somewhere else, and these few are the ones that are left that are not from China'. (Julia, interview, translated)

The findings of this study do not parallel those reported by Urban et al. (2010) in relation to the opportunity for interaction that living in residence halls provided. In their exploration of the international experience of Dominican students in the USA, university accommodation was a boost for the socialisation and interaction between host students and international students. Opposite to that, this study reported an imbalance of local students and international students living in institutional lodging. There seemed to be a scarcity of local students living in residences and a skewed intake of Asian students living in these premises.

Finally, although there was the limitation of not knowing what the Asian group of students considered about their Mexican flatmates, the perception of East and South-East Asian international students in the UK, as a group that do not mix much with students from different cultures, was not a novelty. This finding is in consonance with research by Burslem (2004) in the social integration dimension of their *Broadening Our Horizons UKCOSA*, international experience report. This stated Asian students had lower than average contact with UK students, as their social contact was mainly devoted to relationships with fellow colleagues or other international

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students. The findings of this study seem to be consistent with such pattern of relationships, in which the participants equally sought to relate to other Mexican co-nationals and other non-compatriot international fellows. However, when it came to accommodation both groups, Mexican and Chinese students, though both international students, appeared to have a poor interaction between them. Peacock and Harrison (2009) explicated the paucity of interaction between U.K. and Chinese students due to the cultural distance between these two groups.

According to the authors, Chinese students were acknowledged as the farthest culture, prone to self-segregation attitudes, and sharing little cultural basis. Although, in terms of values, Mexican and Chinese culture had been identified as a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1986), there seem to be inherent differences that do not promote, but hinder the creation of relationships between these two ethnic groups. This represents an area that could be further explored, however it was out of the scope of this thesis.

In this view, aiming to meet the international student expectation for multicultural interaction while studying abroad, despite skewed intakes, universities should strive for the implementation of living programmes, for those students opting for institutional accommodation, that foster interaction and knowledge about other people's culture. Some university halls could be set up thematically, in which the languages and the cultures of the occupants' preference can be promoted through the development of periodical activities and gatherings throughout the year. This proposal is followed up in the Recommendations for HE policy and practice section.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter is framed under the research questions that drove this study. Therefore, having discussed in detail the findings of this research, this chapter aims, in the first place, to provide an overall view of the results concerning the queries under examination. The first section will revisit each of the research questions and, in relation to them, provide an overview of the main findings. It then identifies and acknowledges the limitations of this research, and the implications of these limitations for transferability and application. The next section states recommendations for future lines of research and inquiry. This is followed by a series of recommendations for HE policy and practice. Following the chapter, the original contribution of this PhD research to study the transition and adjustment of international students is presented. Finally, this chapter concludes with some personal remarks of my journey as an international student and a novice researcher.

5.2 Research questions

The first section summarises the overall findings pertaining the research questions of this study, this in the effort to review their coverage and account the extent to which they have been answered. The following three research questions were the drive for this study:

- 1) What are the challenging areas this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced to adapt during their first four weeks of stay in the UK?
- 2) What are the coping strategies implemented for the adaptation of their studying and living abroad experience?
- 3) What are the participants' experiences concerning the support received by the host institution for their adaptation to the new environment?

They will unfold be in the sequence presented above. As such, the challenges faced will be the first domain revisited, followed by the coping strategies implemented, and concluding with the institutional support received.

5.2.1 What are the challenging areas this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced to adapt during their first four weeks of stay in the UK?

Findings from this research seem to support the notion that Mexican postgraduate international students similar to other groups of overseas students undergo an extensive array of challenges as claimed by Ward et al. (2001). To different extents, these difficulties ranged from sociocultural, affective, linguistic, physiological, academic, and financial. It is asserted that on the participants' agency, lack of time and preparation, personality and societal attributes played an influential role for the type of challenges they experienced. The following paragraphs present the findings' implications for the adjustment of this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students in the UK.

Although the ultimate goal for undertaking studies in the UK was to obtain an academic degree, pre-arrival findings allowed to realise the main pre-departure concerns of the participants were not related to the educational domain, but to sociocultural and affective areas. The participants anticipated struggles to fit in the host culture and to feelings of loneliness. Therefore, their expectations for the University's support were for the provision of tools that would help them to manage their sociocultural and emotional needs. On the one hand, the desire to get support in knowing how to navigate in the new environment seemed to be related to the need to enhance their capacity to appropriately perform everyday tasks in accordance to the UK context (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012). On the other, the emphasis given to the provision of activities to socialise might have a relation with the core values of a collectivistic society (Hofstede, 1986), in this case Mexico, in which relationships with others is of upmost importance for wellbeing. The rationale behind this finding might be that feeling confident and connected with the host environment are at the basis for getting adapted. Thus, before thinking on what the academic challenges would be, there was a need to feel in control, sociocultural and emotionally.

Moreover, pre-arrival findings indicated that whilst students were worried about on arrival, culture-specific and socialising support, institutional pre-departure concerns were mainly focused towards assisting the participants with administrative matters to get them to the host city. This finding questions the little relevance given to academic preparation. Though the participants in this study were not undergraduate students about to be introduced to the conventions of HE, they were students about to embark on a different level and academic system. This raises the question whether there is an institutional implicit supposition that overseas postgraduate students are aware of the UK educational system demands and the expected autonomy degree as a local postgraduate would possibly be. Hence, not a lot of institutional emphasis is given to pre-departure academic preparation.

Findings do not seem to support traditional views of culture shock (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960), in which the early stage of the experience is marked by feelings of excitement. Parallel to research by Brown (2008) also investigating postgraduate international students sojourning in the UK, this research identified the first four weeks as a period where stress and uncertainty were at peak. These feelings appeared to decrease, in some cases, as time passed, over the lapse of 4 weeks, and as more confidence and culture-specific knowledge were built on.

Lack of information and preparation about the English culture and the university life emerged as major components that prevented a smooth transition; lacking culture-specific knowledge also featured as an obstacle in the experience of a group of Dominican international students in the USA (Urban et al., 2010). Being unaware about what the participants would culturally, socially, and academically, face upon arrival caused significant stress to a higher or lesser extent, during their first four weeks of stay. Lacking knowledge about administrative, cultural, and social procedures as diverse as looking for suitable accommodation, getting enrolled for courses, doing grocery shopping, extent of locals' involvement with internationals and real costs of living and studying in the UK was a hindrance to adapt to the on and off campus UK context.

Therefore, the findings of this study suggested that Mexican international students in the UK, like Dominican students in the USA (Urban et al., 2010), needed more prior to departure preparation in order to be better equipped for the challenges to face; thus, maximising the chances for a smoother cross-cultural transition. Although some students did spend some efforts getting prepared and they seemed to have paid off, overall the participants acknowledged a better preparation for their journey was needed.

(...) the best thing is to come better prepared. (Gustavo, FG 2, translated)

Students with and without experience abroad seemed to be aware and had taken responsibility for their lack of preparation. After all the challenges the participants went through during their first month of sojourn, they reflected on what they could have done differently to improve their own living and studying experience in the UK and offered them as recommendations for other Mexicans to come to the same University. These pieces of advice seem to encapsulate the challenges the participant faced and equally, to point towards the root of the problem. For instance, the students living and studying abroad for the first time focused on pre-departure training suggestions.

As indicated in the pre-arrival and on arrival findings, the latter participants reported not to have considered pre-arrival preparations as something needed, and hence, did not devote pre-departure preparation efforts. However, after the experience, their view shifted. According to

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them, lacking pre-arrival preparations had hindered their adaptation. Therefore, for them, being better prepared implied taking into account two elements: spending more time and financial efforts to get ready. First, investing more time to gain knowledge on how things were going to be as well as on available resources was believed as a practice that could have ease the transition. Second, the impact that the high living costs in England had had on the participants, especially those abroad for the first time, seemed to be sourced on a dearth of financial preparation. In this sense, planning ahead, doing a pre-departure budgeting exercise, in which having an estimate of how much would be needed for daily life expenses, such as food costs, rather than finding out by experience could have been a helpful strategy to ameliorate the financial stress experienced. In addition to lacking knowledge about England's living costs and a planned a budget, the financial stress the students experienced appeared to emerge due to an overreliance on scholarship. The participants seemed not to have considered saving and trusted the stipend they would receive from their scholarship would be enough for living. The result of that was a stress that hindered to some extent their first four weeks abroad. Therefore, it was realized how those two elements had negatively impacted their experience.

The students who had previously lived or studied abroad steered their suggestions related-to or for implementation upon arrival. Overall, the participants who had spent more time with travel preparations, as reported in pre-arrival and on-arrival findings, did not seem to experience the same type of challenges as those who did not spend preparation time. Thus, the focus of their advice was not on pre-arrival preparations, but on aspects that could give or could have given a more positive outcome would they have been considered for arrival. In this regard, arriving earlier than the institutional advised date was suggested as part of being better prepared. In this study, the University's advice was to arrive the Wednesday and Thursday prior to the beginning of Week 0. Findings demonstrated arriving a couple of days before the beginning of fresher's week did not appear to be enough time. This finding allows for a very important consideration, which is more time was needed to adjust. Even when the participants arrived on the institutional advised day, there was an overlap of activities, which hampered the students' adaptation. The participants were in the midst of getting to grips with university and outside life, as well as with academic and administrative demands in some cases. Apart from those aspects, there were physiological factors, such as dealing with jet lag, which interfered with the students' academic performance. More time was equally needed by the students to familiarize with the University and host city surrounding, since students after a couple of weeks of arrival were still struggling to find their way around. In line with the latter, the participants, as they expressed, needed more time to get the hang of it since they felt overwhelmed once all the students arrived, and the little confidence they have achieved with the surroundings was lost. Based on the aspects highlighted before, a main

recommendation of this study is to consider and allow for a longer period for international students to arrive and settle before they are to start pursuing their academic goal. Allowing the students with more time to find their way around, in and outside campus, and deal with physiological adjustment issues such as jet lag, without having to deal with administrative and academic demands might be of help to diminish the stress experienced.

The results of this study seem to call for the importance of raising consciousness in the international student cohorts, about the need for planning prior to embarking on the experience. Similar to other groups of sojourners such as students in missionary programs, business people, diplomats, etc., prior to traveling language and culture specific training programs should be considered to prepare outgoing international students for their sojourn (Furnham, 1993; Kim, 2001). Although international students receive formal schooling, which might enable them to be familiar to some extent with the culture in matter, culture-specific trainings could be a booster to facilitate the adaptation in the host culture.

It is also suggested that the host institution and the corresponding sponsor partake responsibility by supporting the outgoing participants with pre-arrival preparations. Building a relationship with students before arrival and trying to manage transitions, by assisting them with pre-departure planning that go beyond assistance with procedural tasks and getting them to the city of studies. Providing students with timely pre-departure assistance and information about areas of known difficulty and uncertainty could be of aid (Urban et al., 2010). Supporting that notion, Russell (2005) claimed a need for an appropriate orientation and support system, which aim to increase the students' awareness about what they will encounter in the host environment and train them with appropriate behavioural skills.

By weeks 3 and 4 students were more familiarised with culture-specific procedures and some of the daily-related challenges started to fade away. However, by the end of their first month of sojourn, the main challenge, as identified by the participants was getting adjusted “to the way people are”:

(...) What you would conceive that this University must be it's all fulfilled. (...) So I guess it's all about getting adapted to the people, to the way people are here. (...) (Arturo, interview, translated)

Although reported more than three decades ago by Furnham and Bochner (1982), developing and keeping close relationships in Britain was still identified by Mexican postgraduate international students as a main area of difficulty. In this sense, the following section concerning relations between international and local students, aims to unveil some considerations in that regard.

5.2.1.1 Involvement of international and local students

The results from this study supported previous research (Russell, 2005; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Brown and Aktas, 2011; Liu and Winder, 2014; Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Schartner and Cho, 2017) highlighting the poor levels of interaction between locals and international students in the UK, in and outside the university setting. Two reasons seemed to have contributed to this happening. First, a perceived skewed intake of international students at the postgraduate level appeared to have prompted the formation of co-national or other foreign students' conclaves (Peacock and Harrison, 2009). Second, the scarce interaction with UK fellows seemed rooted on a behavioural attitude where British colleagues were not perceived interested in socialising with students from different cultures. Despite the possible causes found in this research, similar findings related to lack of interaction between local and domestic students have been reported in other contexts with a large influx of international students, such as the USA (Schulte and Choudaha, 2014).

Pertaining to that, the call had been for HE institutions to devote more efforts into the development of programmes that promote the interaction between these two groups (Schulte and Choudaha, 2014). Bearing this in mind, several proposals to promote intercultural interaction within and outside the classroom have been offered. In that regard, the fostering of the delivery of social events (*Ibid.*) and the implementation of peer-mentoring schemes (Schartner and Cho, 2017) featured. Moreover, a proposition from this study is the running of intercultural courses for both groups, local and international students during the first month or first semester. These courses should aim to increase the students' awareness and understanding about each society's cultural values. The combination and provision of different cross-cultural techniques might help to achieve such purpose. For instance, the running of self-awareness trainings might aid both groups becoming aware of own behavioural preconceptions whereas experiential learning techniques could expose international and local students to cross-cultural encounters in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of each other's reactions, and cultural values' differences (Furnham, 1993).

A proposition targeting to enhance the participation levels in international settings has been proposed by Straker (2016). According to him, the focus for the promotion of interaction has been misled. The emphasis has been placed on the international students' participation whereas the focus should be in the international classroom participation. Re-routing the efforts towards an increase in participation in a multicultural setting implies other considerations such as the involvement of local as well as international students for the creation of a favourable environment for interaction. In agreement with this proposition, this study calls for a more active

involvement on behalf of local students. Domestic students might also benefit from interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds by learning about other cultures if going abroad is not a possibility.

In addition to more institutionalised efforts for programmes aiming to augment interaction between international and local students, findings demonstrated a need to enhance appreciation for diversity in local students. Even when the University adequately provided more activities to promote social interaction and integration, there are potential chances of such implementation being unsuccessful if British students do not show a more proactive attitude towards international students (Russell, 2005). Based on that, Russell (2005, p.76) advocated for the need to “educate UK students in their attitude to international students for the benefit of all parties”. Recent research (Schartner and Cho, 2017) has recognised tolerance as an essential attribute for global citizenship, in the exploration of the perceptions of domestic, international and staff at a British University. The participants in this study perceived this lack of understanding. Because of that, it is believed the institution could be more actively involved and help raising awareness and conscientiousness in local people about the fact that international students come from “a very very different place”. According to the participants, getting adapted to the host culture was not due to lack of willingness, but to lack of understanding on how things in the new context worked.

The following quote best illustrates the sentiment previously described:

I think that they should create awareness with people (...) about the fact that it's not that we don't want to adapt, and that we don't want to understand the culture and all that, it's just that it's too different. (Pablo, interview, translated)

The previous argument seems to go in line with the claim by Ward et al. (2001) in which despite an increase in the sensitivity to the challenges international students face, the responsibility for their intercultural adjustment has been mainly placed on them. Similarly, Schartner and Cho's (2017) research concluded although global education involves an active engagement on behalf of both groups of students, involvement of local students has been largely passive whilst international students carry the blame for intercultural interaction. Therefore, unless a shift of approach, the message sent could be interpreted as if the only population that needs to make efforts to adapt is that of international students. In that sense, this research encourages the implementation of intercultural communication programmes for both groups of students, locals and internationals, aiming to increase awareness and appreciation about cultural differences, to better prepare both groups for the intercultural encounters likely to be faced, and to enhance the development of mutual understanding and conscientious attitudes towards people from different cultural backgrounds. Urban et al. (2010) contested the focus should be then in improving the

quality rather than the quantity of interaction between local and international students by promoting and developing on and off campus social and peer-mentoring activities. Though this study agrees with such proposition, it argues the route to enhance the quality and success in interaction is by cultivating both groups of students understanding, respect and appreciation of each other's cultures.

Having grappled an understanding of the challenges the participants faced during the initial phase of their sojourn, the following section delves into the coping strategies implemented.

5.2.2 What are the coping strategies implemented for the adaptation of their studying and living abroad experience?

Findings showed that this cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students upon arrival heavily relied on co-nationals whether newly arrived or already living in the host city to adapt. Students also reported developing relationships, but to a lesser extent, with other international students. Previous studies by Brown and colleagues (Brown and Holloway, 2008a; Brown and Aktas, 2011) have emphasised the support that mixed-nationality relations bring to dealing with feelings of loneliness among international students. Research by Bochner et al. (1977) classified relationships with other foreign students as the least helpful relation since they are believed not to provide the affective assistance that co-national students could give nor the linguistic and cultural support that local students could share. However, I argue that socialising with students from other nationalities has an impact that goes beyond the learning of the language and culture of the host culture and the emotional support that co-nationals can bring; creating relationships with other foreign students could prepare students for a global world. For instance, socialising with students from other nationalities in a second culture can be an enriching experience that enhances the students' cultural knowledge about a third culture, in that sense it could be said, they may be in the process of learning a third culture.

As previous research has evidenced (Furnham and Bochner, 1982), the participants found personal and informal assistance much more helpful than the actual guidance provided by the institution. The presence of a solid group of fellow Mexicans in the host institution worked as a "buffer", as illustrated by a participant, during the first transitional weeks. Co-nationals with more experienced in the host setting or newly arrived, and the Mexican society belonging to the union students' groups of the host University, featured as strong sources of support and assistance upon arrival. Mexican co-nationals were met on-arrival due to sharing (private or university) accommodation, attending the same Faculty or programme of study, taking the institutionally sponsored airport pick-up service, finding the Mexican students' group or attending the reception

event launched for students from the American continent approximately 10 days after arrival. Bearing in mind the different paths and times in which the participants established initial contact after arrival with their conational fellows and given the chief source of support that this interaction represented, it is suggested some institutional support to liaise new incoming Mexican students with the Mexican society before arrival. Working in collaboration with well-consolidated groups and specific sources of support identified, such as the Mexican association in this case, might prove effective to harness the potential for transition that groups like this can provide. For instance, institutionally helping students to establish this link, and build a relation among them and with them prior to departure to work in collaboration for the development of pre-departure tools, such as webinars with specific and relevant information, might be useful additions.

Concerning prior to departure, it was also observed the participants took responsibility for their preparation process to different extents. The various levels of agency taken did not seem to be directly related to having had or not prior experience abroad. It was found that participants with prior and no-prior abroad experience took an active stance to get ready and devoted efforts with pre-departure preparations. This might indicate that while previous experience could be accounted as an influential drive to get prepared, personality also does. This finding might be useful to delve further into the attributes and the role that personality (Wilson et al., 2013), in addition to or regardless of other elements such as previous experience, have for the adaptation of international students.

Moreover, on arrival, prior-experience living or studying abroad also accounted as a preparedness strategy (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Kim, 2001; Liu and Winder, 2014). Students with prior cross-cultural experience showed to be better equipped than those whose first experience abroad was this. Upon arrival, the students with experience seemed to have navigated easier in the environment with aspects such as daily life; there were also more elements of a resilient attitude; they found it easier to integrate with the host community and perceived host nationals friendlier. Equally, the participants who claimed having lacked preparation and reported to have been “hit” by reality were those who had never been abroad before. The experience for someone without prior experience was, as claimed by a participant, “very different” even with simple things as easy as “finding food”.

Supporting previous claims by Ward et al. (2001), advocates of the culture learning and stress and coping frameworks, this study supports the role that micro and macro level attributes played to adapt. As expressed by the participants, at the micro level, having a resilient attitude was thought to be helpful in transitional times. Taking a positive stance was considered to make a difference even when the journey was hard. Thus, flexibility to face the problems that would emerge, and to

learn to adapt was thought to be of help. At the macro level, different extents of dealing with uncertainty (Hofstede, 1986) between home and host culture seemed to have had a strong impact on the participants' adaptation. For instance, coming from a high uncertainty avoidance society, on arrival the participants needed to feel secure by perceiving more structure on what they needed to do. Nonetheless, given this lack of structure, common in a low uncertainty avoidance society like the UK, and having missed some of the transitional support offered, nervousness seemed to have risen. Thus, uncertainty upon arrival was a significant stressor especially in relation to sociocultural and academic-administrative aspects and not knowing how to do things; this ambiguity in turn had an affective impact. However, by weeks 3 and 4 the students appeared more familiarized with the surroundings. This certainty then seemed to have reduced anxiety and stress. It is for so important the institutional cultivation of awareness about the role of cultural values, how they interplay in transitional moments and affect the students' wellbeing. This in an attempt to plan cultural sensitive organizational practices aimed to reduce uncertainty and hence, anxiety and stress.

Belonging to the mature-aged students group, and having prior work experience were identified in this study as a coping strategy for the students' adaptation. This notion is explored in more detail in the following section.

5.2.2.1 Mature students: challenging the concept

This study allowed for an atypical view of mature students in HE, one different to the usually found in the literature. Research related to local or international mature students generally defines them around the difficulties they face mainly due to financial constraints, demanding jobs, childcare and family responsibilities, and had been away from educational settings for a few years (Bowl, 2001; Leder and Forgasz, 2004; Swain and Hammond, 2011; Fragoso et al., 2013).

Although, caution has been given not to treat these students as a homogeneous group (Fragoso et al., 2013) without considering the nuances that each individual brings to the learning environment that has not always been the case. While encouraging not doing it, the focus of the literature, whether on local or international mature students, has been on studying one group of mature students who share some of the typical characteristics outlined above, and perhaps assumed as applicable to all groups of mature students. The implication might be then that mature students are generally interpreted as learners with family responsibilities having to negotiate time between home duties and study (McCune et al., 2010), and that was not the case in this study. Within the wide array of mature students, this study provided a fresh insight of full-time, without family responsibilities and with working experience mature students. It identified not only the barriers,

but also the positive impact of their life experiences into their transitional learning (Fragoso et al., 2013).

Findings resonated with those posited by McCune et al. (2010, p.699) in which it is claimed that mature students “who have worked in areas related to their programmes of study are likely to have a richer understanding of possible trajectories”. According to the authors, if students have previous working experience in areas related to their studies, they might be more apt to engage actively with their programme. This is not exclusive of mature students, but of those with prior work experience (McCune et al., 2010).

Findings concerning mature students are not consonant with the wider literature and opened up valuable avenues for future research. For instance, this research grasped on aspects perceived by ‘atypical’ mature students as positively influential for their transition. Unveiling some of the attributes that mature students brought to the educational experience, such as previous hands-on experience, could also be helpful to compensate the paucity of studies highlighting the skills mature students possess.

In sum, although the literature (McCune et al. 2010; Burton et al., 2011) has emphasised that mature students are not a homogenous group, the flow of studies has been on mature students with a specific profile such as with family and caring responsibilities, working experience and struggles finding time to study. Thus, mature students have been portrayed as a group where the disadvantages have outweighed the advantages that life and working experience bring to their transition. Opposite to that, this study has shown that ‘atypical’ mature students have been understudied. Thus, the relevance of the exploration of mature students in this study lied in its atypical sample, which challenged the traditional concept. It offered another view in which mature students can also be full time students, without the family and caring commitments usually attributed to mature students, which could interfere with their learning careers, and who benefitted from previous experience working skills and were focused on achieving an academic degree overseas.

The final section wraps up the services employed by the host institution and their extent of usefulness for the participants’ adaptation.

5.2.3 What are the participants’ experiences concerning the support received by the host institution for their adaptation to the new environment?

This study supports the argument previously posited by Brown (2008) concerning postgraduate students in the UK, which claims that stress, although decreasing over time, is most intense at the

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beginning of the sojourn, in this context it contemplated the first four weeks. If that is the case, it might be sensible to suggest that is a key stage in which institutional support should be in place (Brown and Holloway, 2008a).

Concerning accommodation, results from this study showed that those students who opted out of university's lodging felt left adrift. When it was decided to stay in private housing, institutional guidance appeared not to be available. Students learnt about dealing with bureaucratic procedures, choosing a non-suitable location, and the extra payment for transport, as a plus of university halls, from experience. This discovery echoes the participants' perception in research by Roberts and Dunworth (2012) that claimed those students who did not request the housing service of the University felt left alone. This seems to indicate students staying in and out of university lodging received different treatment and extents of support. Hence, opting for university accommodation granted students "privileges", as noted by a participant in this study. This raises awareness in that support for students should be to the extent possible equal. Rather than limiting students with information about the institutional choice, an additional link on the University's housing website about other alternatives of accommodation available, might be a helpful implementation. Providing international students with advice as to the possible and known advantages and disadvantages of university vs. private accommodation might assist them making an informed decision about their choice for housing.

Urban et al. (2010) reported a group of Dominican students in the USA were aware of an extensive repertoire of university services for international students and thus, took advantage of them. Opposite to that, this cohort of Mexican international students in the UK did not seem aware, and did not use some of the support resources the University offered for its benefit. Therefore, communication between the institutional components and the participants appeared unsuccessful. Lacking knowledge about the available services seemed to have contributed to the little intake of resources. For instance, the induction day launched to introduce international students with matters such as banking, a campus and city tour was missed by many of the participants. Thus, this study in consonance with findings by Roberts and Dunworth (2012), found an inefficient delivery of the services established to support international students. In an attempt to increase the intake of services available and catered for international students, the University should aim for a more effective approach to disseminate information in a way that the services offered are of students' cognizance. Sending information all at once and from the different University's internal offices proved ineffective by making the participants feel confused and overwhelmed with "so much there's to do". Having as a result, missed relevant information sent and a failure on the message trying to be conveyed. Disseminating information all at once and from various sources, featured as an ineffective practice in this study.

In this view, when recruiting international students, universities, as a whole, might consider as helpful increasing their awareness about the cultural values of the societies they are dealing with, and in that respect, prepare for more ad-hoc strategies to deliver the information. In this sense, helping students to transition from a culture where a more ABC's type of guidance is the practice to one that is more independent seemed to be needed. Thus, the underlying reason for an ineffective delivery and reception of information could be rooted in a clash between a low (UK) and a high (Mexico) context culture (Hall, 1976). In a low context society culture, extensive written information is delivered in an attempt to avoid misunderstandings whereas in a high context society, there is little reliance on written communication. In this case, a useful bridging strategy could be developing a timelier and centralised plan in which different university components agree on the time and content for the delivery of information to minimise the chances of students from high-context cultures, feeling bombarded and confused with all that myriad of written information and benefit from the value of availability of it. Moreover, the institutional provision of cultural trainings for staff might assist raising a wider understanding of the participants' cultural profile in an attempt to optimise the delivery of information in a way that results in a more successful intake of services for the students' benefit.

Furthermore, as previous findings by McKinlay et al. (1996) suggested the organisational tactic employed by the University to support international students did not appear to be the most effective. There seemed to be a disconnection between the internal parts of the university, and poor communication among them and with the participants. For instance, there seem to be an overlap of activities for new students during Fresher's week and the running of classes in some of the faculties. Equally, there was disparity in the orientation agenda delivered in each of the Faculties. These findings could imply an unequal opportunity for the students to benefit from these activities as well as an institutional loss of efforts to help due to uncoordinated managing strategies. In this sense, the assistance validated as useful by the participants, for their integration to academic life, were found at the individual or programme level rather than across Faculties or university wide. Schartner and Cho (2017) similarly reported the uncoordinated institution-wide efforts at another UK University. According to them, favourable efforts from specific academics and departments, for the adaptation of international students, were not likely to permeate throughout the university.

In relation to the overlap of Fresher's activities and the Faculty's agenda, and in addition to a possible internal failure in communication between different institutional services, this finding seemed to indicate these events were mainly addressed towards undergraduate entrants and therefore, there was not room for the happening of these activities in the postgraduate faculty's timetable. However, the participants in this study resented the time to adjust and the

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opportunities to socialise that participating in socials during Fresher's week, perhaps tailored to their postgraduate level, would have allowed. In this sense, the encouragement is for further considerations so that Fresher's week evenly grants postgraduate international students with more time and integration activities to settle.

Faculty induction was perceived as lacking consistency in its form and content of delivery across the different programmes. For instance, each Faculty was divided into sub-faculties, then into departments and lastly programmes; and as best illustrated by a participant "each tiny bit does its own induction, and each one does it in a different way". Consequently, the participants satisfied with their Faculty induction were provided with off-campus activities to socialise and their orientation lasted for more than a day whereas the dissatisfied students were facilitated with an informative Faculty induction that lasted a couple of hours. Therefore, it might be reasonable to encourage the implementation of a more centralised Faculty induction, which is content and time affined in order to maximise the chances of providing similar extents of support for the new entrants. In line with this, a more active involvement of different layers of institutional leaders, staff and faculty is encouraged in a way that "reflects a clear understanding that this process is an ongoing effort that involves the entire campus", as Liu and Winder (2014, p.58) stated.

Complementing the previous arguments, adopting a more centralised scheme for Faculty induction might help preventing overlaps of activities organised across different programmes and increasing the involvement of more students. In this study, given the lack of integration activities in some Faculty inductions, the participants aspired to take part in the activities prepared for Freshers. However, in some cases their classes started in Week 0 and were unable to attend in those activities, which they deemed as helpful.

In sum, the delivery of different types of support set out the participants in dissimilar contexts to start their sojourn. Thus, the proposal is for the delivery of a more comprehensive and centralised Faculty induction scheme that is available in all the programmes and considers the time length and the provision of not only academic guidance, but also social activities that promote interaction among students and with their academics. The considerations are also concerning the focus of activities in Fresher's week as mainly for undergraduate students whilst advocating for a stronger emphasis on the design and implementation of social activities at the postgraduate level in the first weeks of sojourn.

Regarding the induction especially launched to support international students, in this study referred as University induction, it was found that many of the participants did not attend. As a result, two to four weeks after arrival, there were still struggles related to some of the areas, that according to the administrative staff interviewed, were to be covered on the Welcome day, such

as, explaining how to get enrolled and opening a bank account. Moreover, it was found that the students had missed the introductory sessions due to lack of awareness about those happenings, not finding the location or to reasons out of their control, such as sponsorship issues, for which they arrived after the Welcome day. This finding's usefulness might be twofold. First, it might help to reconsider the idea that international students who missed the induction activities do it because they feel that they do not need the support (McKinlay et al., 1996). And two, it might be an incentive for the institution to reroute their efforts for a comprehensive approach that targets to reach all its incoming students, including late comers, and thus, grants them with the same support opportunities.

In relation to the content of the University's induction, empirical evidence in this study advocates, in accordance with the culture learning approach, for a stronger emphasis to daily life guidance. The main struggles the participants experienced during the first four weeks were not academic related *per se*, but more of sociocultural nature, which in turn affected their wellbeing. Nevertheless, the participants who partook in the University induction, reported assistance to familiarise with the city and campus premises in the forms of tours as well as administrative assistance to open a bank account, as the induction activities organised by the institution. Whether having taken part in the orientation activities or not, did not seem to make a difference to equip students with adequate behavioural skills to manage everyday situations, such as knowing how to buy and cross the roads, for example. Based on this, students seemed to have benefited more from assistance grounded on a culture learning approach (Brown and Holloway, 2008b), which aims to provide sojourners with tools for daily life performance in the target society (Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Ward et al., 2001).

Previous research evidence in the UK and USA context (McKinlay et al., 1996; Liu and Winder, 2014; Schulte and Choudaha, 2014) has stated international students have been treated as a homogeneous group with one-size-fits all induction approach. Supporting that claim, this study demonstrated the need for the implementation of a more specialised and elaborated support system that takes into consideration the diverse and individual needs of international students. Thus, institutions are encouraged to spend more efforts in the management strategies to support the different cohort of international students in a way that it considers, as stated by Liu and Winder (2014), the different challenges they are likely to face based on personal issues and country of origin. In line with that, the delivery of an induction tailored programme, depending on the students' region of origin, is pondered as helpful since as the participants' claimed their needs are "very different". For instance, given the marked difference in weather conditions between Mexico and the UK, the weather featured as one of the most disturbing and persistent aspects to adapt. The participants lacked preparation and knowledge as to how the weather would be like

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and were equally unaware as to how to be prepared clothes wise for it. As discussed by the participants, the UK weather conditions did not seem a nuisance for those who had been abroad already and had experienced a different climate to the one at home. However, the weather showed to be a real struggle for the participants coming from much warmer weather regions and with no previous experience abroad. Consequently, if institutions consider what challenges international students would face based on their own local understanding, the UK weather, in this case, would probably not feature as one of the areas to tackle and support, as shown in this study. In this regard, universities might need to raise their awareness and understanding of the cultures' profiles they are dealing with and based on that, plan a suitable induction programme for its international students.

Concerning tailor-made events, the reception launched to welcome students from the American continent and its appropriateness should serve as an incentive to plan more events that are ad hoc. This reception featured as very useful given the opportunity that it granted to meet people with the same or similar linguistic and cultural bonds whilst expanding their social networks. Although this was mainly a social event, some acknowledged it as the only induction catered for internationals.

Additionally, findings suggested apart from help with administrative assistance during the recruitment stage, institutional accommodation, a one-day induction, and a welcome reception for students from the American continent, the participants for their international transition were provided mainly with the same support services as domestic students. Therefore, the provision of specialised services to transition proved insufficient. This might indicate the emphasis was on bringing the students' over; whilst upon arrival the participants were expected to settle into academic and societal norms and demands by employing the same means provided to local students or by the participants' own means. Different to the specialised process to recruit students from different regions where there is a director per area, it is the generic help provided to these regional students upon arrival. Based on this, the claim is for a more active institutional involvement to help its recruited students to transition by means of the implementation of more and better-attuned transitional programmes (Andrade, 2006; Buultjens and Robinson, 2011).

In sum, this study advocates for the implementation of a specific and more extensive University induction tailored for international students bearing into account their cultural profile and needs, whilst arguing for a more centralised Faculty induction, where postgraduate students are granted with similar opportunities in length and scope of opportunities.

An additional institutional strategy to help international students to be more effectively prepared for their sojourn and for the cross-cultural challenges they are likely to encounter, could be

mediated through the involvement of more experienced co-national students. Relying on students with the same cultural background and language might be a helpful tactic to convey the meaning in a way that somebody from a different culture might not be able to. Apart from the intelligibility of communication, co-national fellows with more experienced in the host environment could feed forward new compatriots on areas that were of struggle for them and on local practices learnt by experience. The participants proposed a series of webinars in which tailored information for Mexican students and from other Latin American countries with similar characteristics, such as struggles with the weather, could be made accessible prior to arrival or within the first days of their sojourn as a tool to get ready.

Finally, improving the communication between the University and the participants' sponsor equally featured as an area that could contribute to lessen the stress and disruption that dealing with financial payments represented still on the third week of stay. A stronger link of communication between the two counterparts is strongly encouraged as a strategy to make the students feel supported, release pressure and prioritise their focus on academic concerns.

5.3 Limitations

Given the specificity of this study, there are some potential limitations to bear in mind for the transferability and application of this study's findings and recommendations. They are in relation to the participants' demographics, the timeframe of the study and the existence of an established group of conational fellows in the host city.

In relation to the participants' demographics, first, the participants in this study were mainly males. Therefore, it could be argued that the role that gender played in the students' adaptation could have been more explored through a more balanced participation of males and females. Similarly, although the participants were all postgraduate students, most of them were pursuing a Master's degree. Even when it was possible at times to distil different perceptions between Master and PhD participants, it is asserted that gathering more balanced data of these two levels of study would have allowed for a deeper exploration of the unique challenges each group faced, especially in relation to the academic domain of their adaptation. Additionally, at the Master's level with the exception of a student pursuing an MBA and a Master's of Arts, all the participants were pursuing a Master of Science. This could mean findings portray mainly the opinions of students ascribed to STEM subjects whereas the insights of social science postgraduate students are underexplored.

The timeframe of this study could also be regarded as a limitation. In an attempt to scrutinise how the students navigated in an unfamiliar setting, learnt appropriate behavioural skills and coped

with stress in their early days of stay, this research focussed on the first four weeks of the students' sojourn. However, following the participants further in their experience would have allowed exploring issues related to cultural identity and intergroup relations, based on social identification theories (Ward et al., 2001). Therefore, another tentative limitation of this study could be its focus on the first four weeks and the inability to explore the adaptive outcomes that a longitudinal study would have probably allowed. A longer follow-up might have permitted to scrutinise the type of adaptation that the participants embraced.

The main source of support identified upon arrival was very specific given the presence of a well-consolidated group of Mexican students. Therefore, the support provided by this group of conational fellows and how it could have shaped the participants' initial encounter with the host setting, might not be transferrable to contexts where there is not such a community of Mexican students for support and cultural identification.

5.4 Recommendations for future research

Although previously stated as a possible limitation, this study's timeframe allowed realising that a longer follow-up of the participants' experience might permit scrutinising other aspects of intercultural contact such as identity and acculturation strategies. This then represents a possibility for future research in an attempt to capture a view that goes further than the consideration of affective and behavioural approaches to one that contemplates social identification theories.

In light of the findings, exploring the students' adaptation experience based on their field of adscription, whether STEM or Social Sciences, seems a feasible research venue to undertake. How the students prepared and undertook their sojourn overseas and adaptation depending on their academic orientations might provide some important insights. Likewise, capturing the students' perception depending on their postgraduate level of study, Master or PhD, might shed light on specific challenges, based on the academic demands of each context.

Pre-arrival preparation proved to be an area worth of further investigation. In that sense, several lines of study are suggested. First, this research identified a dearth on the literature concerning the exploration of international students' pre-arrival planning and expectations. It equally observed the repercussions such preparedness (or lack of) had for the participants' adaptation; therefore, a stronger scrutiny of the sojourners' preparation strategies prior to departure is encouraged. In alignment with the latter claim, and given the usefulness of pre-arrival support, the exploration of different pre-arrival organisational practices at HE institutions with a large influx of international students is also a venue that warrants further examination.

Aiming to expand knowledge regarding the adaptation of minority groups of international students such as students from Latin America, and based on the importance of pre-arrival and on-arrival bridging elements, the short-term adaptation of other groups of students of Latin America origin in the UK context and the strategies implemented for their adjustment is also a possible scope for further scrutiny.

In the specific context of the researcher, there are a few lines for future development born in mind. First, it is the qualitative investigation of prior to departure preparedness strategies for outgoing undergraduate and postgraduate international students and the extent of support by the home institution, the second largest Public University in Mexico. This is in an attempt to identify differences or similarities in planning strategies and the extent of sources of support available for the transitions of these two groups of students, aimed towards sound recommendations for organisational practices. Another line of query is gathering and scrutinising the insights of the main sponsor of this study's participants aiming to learn their focus of support and perceived onus for the contestants' transition. Lastly, the application of this study's methodology to incoming international students, non-Spanish speakers given that language could pose a different context to adapt, in one of the Faculties in the Mexican HE institution described above, is also a consideration for further research. In relation to the latter line of investigation, a specific point of interest is in the interaction with locals, which was identified in this study as one of the most difficult aspects to adapt and it was in part attributed to a clash between an individualistic and a collectivist society. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to delve further into the challenges international students face in a collectivist society and appreciate if interaction with locals also surfaces as a main challenge.

5.5 Recommendations for HE policy and practice

Based on the results of this study, this section endeavours to deliver recommendations for HE policy and practice. Many of these recommendations are directed towards a more comprehensive provision of support on the pre-arrival stage since it is there where more input seemed needed to ease the students in transition. In addition to some other proposed strategies for on-arrival implementation. For so, their presentation intends to follow a chronological order wherever possible.

The first recommendation encourages HE providers to route more institutional efforts to assist incoming international students with pre-arrival preparation. This support should go beyond the assistance on administrative matters and aim to introduce the overseas recruited students to the quirks of the UK culture and the academic conventions of the host institution prior to their arrival. Towards the end of this PhD research, in the institution under study, some initial attempts in this

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regard were identified through the provision of an online course. However, little was known as to the source, what students get it, and how it is obtained. This in turn leads to the subsequent recommendation.

The development of clearer channels of communication between internal parts of the institution is encouraged, so that undertakings are steered towards the same objective, and reflected in the provision of consistent extents of support for the different groups of international students.

Moreover, transparent communication and enhanced awareness about different internal activities, planned to assist international students, could result in a better intake of institutional services available for the students' benefit. In this regard, strengthening the communication between the University's fees team and the students' financial sponsor is urged. A stronger and straightforward liaise between these two components could save unnecessary stress and alleviate a burden the participants in this study faced upon arrival.

In line with more efforts for pre-arrival assistance, prior to departure linguistic input could be provided to students recently recruited through an institutional interactive online course, where English for academic purposes could be rehearsed. The latter in addition to promoting an enhanced awareness on the recruited students about the importance of adequate linguistic competence on arrival not only for academic, but also for social purposes for a smoother beginning; a linguistic competence that goes beyond having met the institutional language requirements for admission.

Furthermore, similar to the strategy to recruit international students by region led by a director with knowledge of the culture they are in charge of; providing international students with pre-arrival information and support relevant to their region of origin is supported. This could be possibly achieved by uploading pertinent information by region on the institutional website.

Additionally, the implementation of webinars that involve students from different regions, already studying in the institution, in which they share their experiences, might help to sensitise newcomers as to what the challenges are and how to prepare for them depending on their region of origin. In relation to this, it is suggested that the liaison between the international office and the relevant student society is improved for a more active participation of students with embedded knowledge about the region. For example, students belonging to the Mexican association could be of support for new incoming students before departure and on their arrival either by partaking in these webinars or by arranging advisory peer-group support to assist them. However, such might not be possible if there is no knowledge of who the new students are, when will they arrive and how to support them. Therefore, a stronger and clearer link of communication and collaboration between the international office that recruits these students and the societies of students of specific regions is suggested.

Arriving a couple of days before the start of classes proved to be ineffective and very stressful as settling in, complying with organisational procedures, and meeting academic demands overlapped. Consequently, advise an earlier arrival date for international students is recommended. Encouraging overseas students to arrive two weeks or at least one week prior to the official beginning of their programme to rest and deal with biological matters such as jet lag, settle in and come to grips with everyday life activities, before starting with their academic endeavours might be a more reasonable length of time.

In line with the previous recommendation for an earlier arrival, on arrival the provision of a more comprehensive and more extended University induction targeted to assist international students with daily life concerns and with closer guidance during their first week is urged. Diminishing the stress by guiding them through everyday errands could result in more time and efforts being devoted to academic endeavours. One day dedicated to introduce and orientate international students into the academic and non-academic environment did not seem enough. Therefore, a larger period of induction activities is recommended. Furthermore, the planning and delivery of a Faculty induction that is consistent in its format and length across programmes and sets students in similar grounds for the beginning of their academic journey is advocated. Moreover, in terms of content, an agenda within Faculties that delivers not only administrative information, but also targets to integrate its incoming students and academics, and build a sense of belonging is encouraged.

Being aware of the level of satisfaction of its international students in relation to the support services offered is of upmost importance for the university's agenda to maintain and foster the practices identified as helpful and discard or modify those estimated as ineffective. To this end, seeking the students' feedback concerning the assistance received is encouraged to appreciate the extent to which the institutional support meets the needs of the students, as learners and customers, to in turn improve the quality of the services provided. Besides, if universities aim to retain and maintain their lead status with international students, sensitive assistance is to be encouraged. In this view, increasing awareness among administrative staff about the needs and challenges international students face in their transition could be helpful. Furthermore, intercultural training courses could be delivered for staff members to educate and improve the appreciation of cultural values differences. This might enable them to better respond to the diverse needs of the students.

The delivery of intercultural communication courses for both groups of students, domestic and international at the beginning of the sojourn, is also advocated. The aim would be to increase cultural awareness about own culture and enhance appreciation about other's culture in order to comprehend the rationale of some cultural incidents that could arise and how they could be coped. This approach might be of help to shift the focus, and alleviate the responsibility only on

the international students' behalf, from having to adapt to the host environment to a more active instance in which both parties get involved and strive for a greater two-ways benefit. In this sense, a deeper understanding of own and other individual's culture and their value differences is hoped to promote a more dynamic interaction among both groups and an enhanced appreciation about different cultures where both groups can learn about each other's context.

Finally, and in agreement with the latter recommendation, the promotion of greater involvement of local and international students by catering activities that involve both groups is advised. For example, buddy schemes in which partakers are in touch before arrival; domestic students could also be the first point of contact on arrival for the international student. Furthermore, although difficult to achieve given the heavy intake of international students from specific nationalities, institutions could aim for the implementation of schemes that promote a more multicultural living environment for students living in university halls. For example, some institutional accommodations could be arranged thematically, in which the occupants would have the opportunity to explore the language and the culture of a specific region of their interest. Therefore, throughout their stay different activities to foster the residents' linguistic and cultural knowledge can be launched, and be imparted possibly by a native of the language and culture being practised. This might provide an opportunity for those students eager to learn other languages and cultures, and could also respect those students who prefer to stay in their cultural conclaves.

5.6 Contribution

The contribution to knowledge of this study is threefold. It embraces practical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. The former two contributions although distinct areas, are considered to be interrelated, and therefore they are jointly presented in the paragraphs to follow. Nonetheless, the contribution to theory is presented on a section of its own in the hopes to redress the theoretical concern of research on international students' cross-cultural adaptation as an under-theorised field (Brown, 2008).

Despite the increasing literature aiming to capture the experience of students in international mobility and the unique attributes that distinguish each cohort, the latter group has been mainly studied under the overarching level of 'international students'. Moreover, the research that has looked into the peculiarities of each cohort has been largely focussed on the main groups of students in mobility. Students of Latin American origin are not a leading group in international mobility; however, they are an increasing group and their challenges of transition should be equally explored. To this end, this study focussed in a context of international mobility where little research has been developed, students of Latin America origin, specifically from Mexico, studying

in a UK University. It then adds to the literature on the transition and adaptation of understudied groups of international students and it provides important insights as to what challenges and resources a cohort of Mexican postgraduate students experienced and sourced from during their first four weeks of their sojourn. In line with this, aiming to orientate policy practitioners towards the provision of suitable means of support for their different groups of international students, this study provides specific recommendations for organisational practices based on the specific needs of an understudied group of international students. Additionally, although the results do not aim to be generalised, this research offers some cultural specific hints that could be of relevance for policy and practice concerning students of similar cultural backgrounds.

While the early stage has been acknowledged in international students' transition as the stage in which stress is at its highest, little research has focused specifically on this period. Moreover, a timespan that delineates what is vaguely meant in the literature by the 'early stage' or 'the first weeks' has not been clearly established. Therefore, it is a contribution of this study to provide a specific timeframe when referring to the 'first weeks'. It equally contributes to the literature by methodologically providing a fine-grained account of the students' experience during their first four weeks of stay, which contributes to a deeper understanding of what the stressful events are, their triggers, and when in time they may happen. In addition to observing how long the challenges faced tentatively would last and how in control the students felt by the end of the fourth week. Thus, this study demarks the 'first weeks' as the first four weeks and offers a guided explanation of what this period of time embraces.

Another important contribution of this study is the methodological consideration it gave to the beginning of the experience. For instance, this study did not ponder the arrival of the sojourners to the host city and institution as the beginning of the experience rather it conceives the pre-departure stage as the start of the continuum. Therefore, this research scrutinised the under explored pre-arrival aspect of the sojourn in an effort to better understand how the participants bridge between home and host context. This allows for a very important consideration, which is that research on international students' mobility has largely been based on data collected upon the students' arrival and it has mostly examined the participants' experience from that point onwards. Whereas this study allowed realising, the sojourn started well before the participants' travelled and their extent of pre-departure preparations and institutional support had important ramifications for the challenges they faced. Consequently, exploring the pre-arrival stage of the participants' sojourn allowed for deeper understandings for the way the participants' process of adaptation unfolded and such is a contribution of this research.

Although research related to the internationalisation of HE has expanded, the challenges international students face and the institutional support services for this group of students have been regularly explored in disconnection or in some cases although jointly scrutinised, stronger emphasis is placed upon one dimension whilst superficially covering the other. This study contemplated both elements as relevant, and as part of the same process and experience. Therefore, a response of this research has been to link and analyse the implications of institutional support for the challenges faced (or not) in order to provide a holistic view.

The results of this study offered a different view of mature students, one dissimilar to the commonly portrayed in the literature and worth of more investigation. In spite of the awareness, not to class mature students as a homogeneous group, empirical efforts have been routed towards the main group of mature students regarded as people with family and childcare responsibilities. This study contributes then to the exploration of another facet of mature students with different concerns and abilities for their sojourn and it opens a new venue for investigation.

Finally, international students' process of adaptation has been criticised as an under-theorised field (Brown, 2008); in an effort to redress such theoretical concern I have attempted to follow a comprehensive approach for analysis, which considers theory, the participants' views and related empirical research. For instance, I have embraced the culture learning and stress, and coping approaches, and as part of their principles, I considered the micro (personal) as well as the macro (cultural) characteristics of the participants and have tried to explore these features with relevant theories, whilst referring to empirical evidence in the field. This allowed me to move beyond identifying the challenges faced to delving into the source of the problem and relying on theory to try to explicate it. In this respect, aiming to contribute with grounded research on the international student adjustment, the following contribution to theory section spells out how the findings from this study confirm, contradict, extend, or modify the theories of adjustment, culture shock, culture learning, stress and coping, and culture distance drawn on for the purposes of this study.

5.6.1 Contribution to theory

Although findings from this study seemed to demonstrate that some participants better adapted as time passed by, in agreement with Lysgaard's (1955) proposition of a relationship between duration and adjustment, evidence also suggested that the students felt more at ease when they had come to terms with the appropriate cultural skills. Thus, adjustment did not necessarily seem to relate to a time condition, as proclaimed by Lysgaard (1955), but rather to acquiring the

necessary skills to perform in the new context, in alignment to principles to the culture learning theory (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). For instance, when a more solid management of finances through the building of a budget was achieved by the third and fourth weeks, less stress and more satisfaction was perceived. Whereas when the participants in weeks 3 and 4, were still trying to come to grips with linguistic and sociocultural conventions, their expressions seemed to express less satisfaction and more stress. Therefore, how adjusted the participants felt by weeks three and four, did not seem to respond to have been in the UK for a month (or nearly), but to have acquired or not the skills needed to properly function in the host context. Thus, although this study observed in some cases an improvement in the adjustment of the participants as time passed, as theorised by Lysgaard (1955), findings seem to support a relationship between adjustment and acquisition of skills that is not precisely linked to a time condition.

In relation to Oberg's conception of the beginning of the sojourn as a honeymoon, this study seemed to have found little evidence to support such claim. The participants' feelings in their first stage upon arrival did not appear to correspond with those of the honeymoon phase. Rather they likened with those of the crisis stage, where the sojourners were actually experiencing "the real conditions of life" (Oberg, 1960, p.178), and undergoing a significant amount of stress, in consonance with values of the culture learning, and the stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al., 2001). Nonetheless, evidence seemed to suggest that the participants, particularly those with no previous experience abroad, went through a honeymoon stage, but it took place prior to the sojourners departure. It was in this pre-departure phase that the latter participants appeared, in accordance with elements of the honeymoon stage, infatuated about the culture and the idea of going abroad, without being fully aware about what the experience entailed. Based on this, it could be said that the participants, especially those without previous experience abroad, followed the sequence of the first two stages (the honeymoon and the crisis) for the adjustment cycle as proposed by Oberg (1960), but they did not obey the timeframe offered as the honeymoon phase took place prior to departure. Consequently, the beginning of the sojourn did not seem to be marked by the arrival to the host culture instead it seemed in alignment with principles of the culture-learning framework, which claim the experience abroad is an integrative event that takes into account the prior to departure stage and practices (Furnham and Bochner, 1986).

With respect to how far into Oberg's (1960) adjustment cycle the participants progressed within their first four weeks, it seemed to be that by weeks 3 and 4, they were in the recovery stage. At that point, in line with culture-learning, and stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al., 2001), stress had started to decrease in some cases as more culture-specific, inside, and outside the University context, knowledge was acquired. The psychological adjustment to the new environment, portrayed in feelings of satisfaction and well-being, seemed to be associated with

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how confident and at ease, the participants felt about their relationship with the new environment, at that point. In this sense, by weeks 3 and 4, the students were grasping a better understanding of the English culture and such had helped to build more confidence with matters of concern in earlier weeks. Finally, Oberg's complete adjustment phase did not seem to have been reached within the timeframe of this study. However, the first three stages of the adjustment process proposed by Oberg seemed to have been followed to some extent, if it is taken into account that particularly students with no previous abroad skills appeared to have experienced a honeymoon prior to departure.

Concerning Adler's (1975) "independence" phase, although within the timeframe of this study, it was not possible to document whether the participants at the end of their adjustment cycle had increased their self-awareness and deeper understanding of other cultures; findings supported the notion that students with previous experience were more self-aware of what the experience entitled and showed a better management of the challenges faced. Likewise, this finding seems to be in agreement with culture learning's principle in that previous experience abroad, accounts as a preparation strategy that positively influences the individual's transition to the host culture. Nonetheless, it was also found that characteristics at the micro level, such as personality, preceded having had or not experience abroad.

Relevant to whether the participants embraced the change to the UK as an active process, in line with culture learning and stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al., 2001) or as a passive instance as posited by Oberg (1960), in the matter of pre-departure preparations both positionalities were found. There were students who did not take a proactive attitude to get prepared and likewise there were those who implemented different strategies as part of their preparation process. Nonetheless, on arrival the students, who did not devote efforts to prepare, seemed to have realised they did have an active role in their adaptation process, and the impact of culture shock could have been reduced would they have been better prepared. This finding then seems to confirm that transitioning and adapting to a new culture are active processes, in accordance with culture learning and stress and coping principles. Similarly, it is in opposition to traditional theories where the sojourner was depicted to play a passive role in their transition and adaptation.

Furthermore, on arrival, the participants implemented different adaptive and coping mechanisms to respond to the challenges they were facing. Hence, there was more reliance on own strategies, such as: observation, passing on knowledge by co-nationals with more experience and learning by doing with equally new arrived fellows, than on the University's assistance. Therefore, in agreement with both the culture learning and the stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al.,

2001), the participants showed to be active respondents that faced and dealt in proactive ways the challenges they encountered; different to the passive view of sojourners as people who needed medical assistance, positioned by former traditional theories of culture shock. Moreover, supporting culture learning, and stress and coping frameworks, the type of actions and reactions undertaken seemed influenced by the participants' individual and societal attributes. At the micro level, features such as linguistic competence, personality, cultural distance, relations with hosts and social support featured whereas at the macro level, differences in the characteristics of the host and home society played a role.

In connection with cultural distance, findings seem to support the theory in that the greater the cultural gap between home and host culture, the more difficulties the student would face to adapt (Babiker et al., 1980; Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Searle and Ward, 1990). However, the extent of difference seemed to be in association to how distal or proximal the host culture was perceived by the participants rather than to actual regional and geographic distance. This is to say the participants' perceptions towards the cultural gap, and the easiness or difficulty to adapt, although belonging to the same cultural group, differed. Whilst there were some participants with previous experience abroad, who perceived the UK culture as very different and were finding it difficult to settle, there were others without previous experience that felt the culture was very similar to own and were finding it easier to settle. Thus, this research supports the notion that there is a relationship between the cultural distance and the level of difficulty to settle in the new environment, but highlights the claim that the extent of difference could be perceived or real (Babiker et al., 1980). Moreover, in this study, the cultural distance responded to how profound the participants perceived the cultural differences between home and host culture. Finally, this finding might be of use to extend the notion that adapting to a new culture, entails national and cultural shared traits as posited by Hofstede (1986). Nonetheless, adjustment seems to go beyond these macro level characteristics, and includes individual personality features, which may have an impact on the sojourners' perception of the host culture, in alignment with culture learning, and stress and coping frameworks (Ward et al., 2001).

5.7 Personal remarks

I would like to conclude this thesis by stepping back and reflecting on my PhD journey both as an international student and as a novice researcher.

The development of this research has shaped and influenced my way of thinking in various ways. First, I learnt we, as international students, are active agents with some extent of governance over

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our decisions and actions. That has changed from how I initially perceived the extent of support the host University should provide. Based on my previous international experience where there was a very structured scheme of support and on arrival, although I was much younger, a complete inexperienced traveller and without a conscious preparation, I adapted quite easily in the new context. My interpretation was therefore that a smooth or choppy adaptation to the host environment was dependent on the HE provider and the transition mechanisms they launched. Although, I still think more resources and tailored sources of support should be institutionalised for the students, they eagerly recruit from overseas; now I think, the international student should take greater responsibility for their preparation abroad. Thus, this understanding has shifted and by the completion of this thesis, I conceive that cross-cultural adaptation is a shared responsibility between partakers, the international student and the host University. Therefore, the students themselves should raise awareness about their stance and better prepare for their experience abroad whereas institutional providers should endeavour more efforts to assist these students through the planning and implementation of more sources of support for these students' transition.

In light of this, my perspective as when the sojourn begins has also changed. From the interaction with the participants, it is now my understanding that it starts from the moment it is decided to go abroad, and the scholarship and acceptance to the University are granted. Physically arriving to the host city and University does not mark the beginning of the experience rather it is somewhere in the continuum with considerable planning behind. Nonetheless, when the focus on the need for pre-arrival planning emerged in this thesis, my first-insider interpretation was that it was a behaviour linked to a Mexican stereotype, that of doing things on the spot, and not planning in advance. However, based on the review of literature and the evidence-based research I consulted for this study, I am more suspicious about that initial interpretation. Now, I wonder if lack of planning is a conception not necessarily culturally rooted, but more of a veiled instance overlooked in international mobility. This seems to need to be teased out and triggers my interest for further exploration in a subsequent study.

The process of becoming a researcher was a challenging yet very enriching process. As I step back, I realise I have not only learnt, but changed a lot, personally and academically, during these four years. The emergence of challenges on a constant basis forced me to adopt new strategies to embrace each situation faced. Therefore, much flexibility and resilience were required, and uncertainty featured as the predominant unsettling feeling most of the time. The first year required me to come to terms with the academic conventions of the UK educational system, as I did not have a clear understanding of what the academic expectations were. Soon I realised I needed to acquire more skills to build arguments and to be critical. Perhaps it was not precisely

about lacking the skills, but about feeling unconfident to criticize a piece of research when I felt I did not have adequate expertise to counter argue an issue. I constantly struggled with this. Although, I was pretty convinced I needed to improve much more and I was not being critical enough, my supervisors' kind and constant reassurance that "I was writing at the PhD level" boosted my confidence and had an effect on me as I progressively started to write more freely and, hopefully, more critically. The latter was in addition to the fruitful discussions I had with them during our supervision meetings and the input I received through their written feedback, especially towards the end of my journey. This makes me realise acquiring the academic skills to develop a well-elaborated piece of research and reporting it, is essential, but knowing how to harness the potential of a person is equally important.

My confidence to make arguments also seemed to have improved as I acquired more knowledge in my area of study. That is why perhaps writing the discussion and conclusions of my thesis were for me one of the most joyful stages during my PhD trajectory. In this view, I acknowledge the most difficult phase of my PhD journey was data analysis. This was a very difficult stage in which I felt I was drowning among the huge amount of qualitative data I had gathered and this is where my discipline and perseverance muscles were tested. I was muddled by everything that I was looking at and was unable to make any sense of it for nearly a year. In this regard, an exceptionally useful strategy for me, as a PhD student and researcher, was keeping a journal to trail my process, but also to vent my emotions mainly when I was going through an awkward stage like data analysis. My journal was my loyal companion even in moments of despair; it really comforted me to read a few pages and helped me appreciate I was actually moving forward and improving. My overall PhD trajectory allowed me to realise doing research, at least the type of research I developed, is not a spotless, straightforward and tidy process (Boden et al., 2005) instead it is a very messy process, which requires the amalgamation of many personal and academic skills for its accomplishment.

Acknowledging that doing a PhD is a learning process, I would like to conclude my thesis by using this quote from Maya Angelou, which very much portrays my feelings in this final stage:

Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better
(Maya Angelou).

I now feel I can do better and could have done some things differently; however, at that moment, I did the best I could. This also marks the beginning of a new stage in which I will do the best that I can until I know better.

Appendix A Pre-arrival online qualitative survey

Instructions: Please answer the following questions with your personal information being as specific as possible; tick (✓) as appropriate or fill out as needed.

1. Age group	18-20 <input type="checkbox"/>	21-24 <input type="checkbox"/>	25-29 <input type="checkbox"/>	30+ <input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Gender:	Female <input type="checkbox"/>	Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Nationality:	(List of Latin American and Caribbean countries to be provided)				
4. Expected length of stay in the UK:	1 academic semester <input type="checkbox"/>	1 academic year <input type="checkbox"/>	1 up to 3 academic years <input type="checkbox"/>	More than 3 academic years <input type="checkbox"/>	Other Specify _____
5. Degree pursuing:	None <input type="checkbox"/>	Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/>	Master's <input type="checkbox"/>	Doctor's <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
6. Programme of study:					
7. E-mail address					
8. Is English your first language?					Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
9. What do you expect from the experience of studying and living in the UK? (E.g., academically, personally, culturally, etc.)					
10. How do you expect the University of Southampton to help you in your adaptation during the first weeks of your stay?					
11. Have you thought on any strategies to adapt to the new environment? If so, please mention them (e.g. join a society).					
12. What is your impression of the British culture? Please provide some examples.					
13. How different do you consider British culture is in regards to your own?					
14. Are you aware of this University's support services to its students?					Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Which ones are you familiar with? (You can choose more than one option)					
a) Student Services Centre (e.g. admission, enrolment, tuition payments, ID card, etc.)					
b) Accommodation Team					
c) VISA team					
d) Enabling services					
e) University's website					
f) International Office					

Appendix A

<ul style="list-style-type: none">g) Meet and Greet Serviceh) Pre-arrival Online Coursei) Induction Talks/Workshopsj) Faculty Officek) Other (please specify)		
15. Do you know where to look at information, advice, or guidance in case of any problems?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
16. What would you do to get the support you need?		

Appendix B **In situ online questionnaire**

Instructions: Please answer the following questions with your personal information being as specific as possible; tick (✓) as appropriate or fill out as needed.

1. How long have you been in the UK?					
Less than a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	1 week	<input type="checkbox"/>	1 week and a half	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 weeks	<input type="checkbox"/>	2 weeks and a half	<input type="checkbox"/>	3 or more weeks	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Age group	18-20 <input type="checkbox"/>	21-24 <input type="checkbox"/>	25-29 <input type="checkbox"/>	30+ <input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Gender:	Female <input type="checkbox"/>	Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Nationality:	(List of Latin American and Caribbean countries to be provided)				
5. Expected length of stay in the UK:	1 academic semester <input type="checkbox"/>	1 academic year <input type="checkbox"/>	1 up to 3 academic years <input type="checkbox"/>	More than 3 academic years <input type="checkbox"/>	Other Specify _____
6. Degree pursuing:	None <input type="checkbox"/>	Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/>	Master's <input type="checkbox"/>	Doctor's <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
7. Programme of study:					
8. Is English your first language?					Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
9. E-mail address					
10. Have you visited the UK for more than one month before your present stay?					Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
11. How many foreign countries have you been to for continuous periods of more than one month? (apart from the UK) 0-1-2, 3 or more If 1, 2, 3 or more countries... <i>For what purpose:</i> Study/Work/Travel/Other (please specify). You can select more than one option. What was(were) the main language(s) you used for communication <i>while there</i> ? Spanish/English/Other (please specify)					
12. What was your previous activity before studies in the UK? (Multiple choice answer: work/study/other; please describe) You can select more than one option.					
13. In what languages did you complete your first and subsequent degrees? You can select more than one option. Spanish/English/ Other (Please specify)					

Appendix B

14. Where will you live during your stay in the UK?	University <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation	Private <input type="checkbox"/> accommodation
15. How did you get your accommodation?		
16. How useful was the university in providing you with the assistance you needed with your planning for living and studying in the UK? (E.g. visa, accommodation, etc.)		
Not useful at all <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly useful <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely useful <input type="checkbox"/>		
Please give some examples		
17. Before you arrived in (host city name), what was your main source of support with your planning for living and studying abroad?		
Please consider all resources consulted (not only University provided).		
Kindly provide examples of the types of support you received.		
18. Which of the following services have you consulted since your arrival?		
You can select more than one option.		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Student Services Centre (e.g. admission, enrolment, tuition payments, ID card, etc.) b) Accommodation Team c) VISA team d) Enabling services e) University's website f) International Office g) Meet and Greet Service h) Pre-arrival Online Course i) University Induction Talks/Workshops j) Faculty Office k) Personal Academic Tutors l) Health service m) Students' Union n) Mexican Society (MexSoc) o) Other (please specify) p) None 		
If the answer is "None": Please feel free to indicate a reason why you have not looked at information, advice, or guidance from this university's services.		
19. According to your experience these first days/weeks, how useful for your adaptation has the information, advice, or guidance (IAG) given to you by this university's services been?		
Not useful at all <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly useful <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat useful <input type="checkbox"/> Very useful <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely useful <input type="checkbox"/>		
I did not look for IAG <input type="checkbox"/> Please give some examples		

20. Since your arrival, what has been your **main source of support for your adaptation?**

Please consider **all** resources consulted (not only University provided).

Kindly provide examples of the types of support you received.

Appendix C Focus groups guide

Introduction:

- Who am I?
- What is the aim?
- Deliver Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form.
- How will the focus group will be conducted?
- Are there any questions?

Guiding questions:

- How have you felt since your arrival in (host city name)?
 - How familiarised do you feel with the environment?
 - How have you navigated in the new context?
 - What have you done to adapt?
- Does this match your expectations and what you considered it was going to take you to adapt during your first weeks?
- What have been the easiest aspects to adapt during these first weeks?
- What have been the most challenging aspects to adapt during these first weeks?
- How do you feel the institution has supported you since your arrival?
 - Did you receive an induction on behalf of the university?
 - If so, how useful was this for your adaptation?
- What would you recommend other Mexican students coming to this university?
- What suggestions would you give this University to better prepare and help to adapt new international students during their first weeks?
- Is there anything you would like to add?
- How did find this activity?

Appendix D **Student's interview guide**

Introduction

- Who am I?
- What is the aim?
- Deliver Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form.
- Are there any questions?

Guiding questions

- Can you please describe how your first weeks as an international student in this University have been?
- How have you felt these first weeks?
- How would you have liked your first weeks to be?
- How do you consider the University has supported you this period?
- What would you have done differently in your pre-arrival stage and in these first weeks?
- How would you describe your adaptation to the new culture and academic system so far?
 - To what extent do you feel you have familiarized to the new environment?
 - What has helped to you to adapt?
- What have been the most challenging areas for you to settle in: academically and socially. Why?
- What have been the easiest areas for you to settle in: academically and socially? Why?
- How approachable do you think the university has been to provide you the assistance you need?
- What recommendations would you give to Mexican students coming to this University?
- How would you advise the University to improve the experience of its international students during their first weeks?
- Is there anything you would like to add?
-

Appendix E **Reflective journal**

13 October 2016, Journal Entry

form I asked if they had any questions. All of the in Spanish. A participant asked if I was to give the questions and I said yes. \Rightarrow participant So, the FC started at 1:15pm. Though my question was how they felt and familiarised they were with the environment, they started by bringing up their concerns / difficulties:

1) CONTACT; 2) Weather; 3) housing: discussed pros and cons. In general, 4 people were very engaged whilst one was more passive. Regarding their involvement, I found interesting that one participant played the role of a moderator. He was calling for participation and bringing back in track the conversations.

One of the participants mentioned "if he hadn't been able to catch up with work". "There was not enough time". It was a person that hadn't studied overseas before. Somebody else told her "Va a pasar". There was group support.

At 1:34pm, I asked the second question: how have you navigated into the new environment, what have you done to adapt?

Appendix F Reflective journal

Name: Working thoughts 05 July 2017

I have already written the first draft for the findings on the challenging, uni services and coping strategies codes. Now I'm going over again the codes (FGs) to see what's missing. There are just a few left:

*Time continuum

*First time overseas

*traer vs no traer

*post-arrival experiences.

Hence, I started revisiting the post-arrival experiences and realised the nodes:

*better than expected node has two entries. One from Ariana (*hay muchos mexicanos*) and one from Armando (*no se siente perdido*). These two references are not included and as of now, I am not sure where to integrate them.

*easy to adapt: the references here are linked to coping strategies and time continuum.

Therefore, some of the references here have already been included in the coping strategies section (Roberto: *familiarizacion sencilla* and Andrea: *facil por ponerlos en contacto antes de viajar*). There is one comment from Sergio as well. He refers to the experience been easy due to sharing accommodation with another Mexican. Thus, this is also in the coping strategies node.

Two other references are under the intercultural experience node (which I am thinking should be merged as I am thinking on allocating that data under sociocultural challenges; after I revisited my definitions for each domain), and specifically under: interaction with locals. These comments are from Eduardo and Alberto who had both been previously studying in the UK and they both compared their experience with the previous one.

*satisfied more international compare with previous experience: there are two references, one from Daniel and the other from Paola.

*worse than expected: there are four references and three arguments here. One is the claim by Daniel that the trouble with CONACYT made it worse. Thus, this argument has already been made on the affective and administrative domain. Perhaps their experience was "worse than expected" because of that issue. The other argument is that it was academically hectic from the beginning.

Appendix F

There are two references here one by Gustavo and another by Mateo. These are important references, which I have not included, but will include shortly under the academic domain challenging aspects. I will emphasise on the lack of time to get adjusted. Therefore, this node is clearly linked to the "time continuum/academically intense classes from week 0" node. I will not delete them from the other nodes because that is a different way to group them, and I will need them like that later to write an article. The third argument is the one made by Carlos and it was worse than he expected. He was left adrift from the beginning and had unpleasant experiences with locals. Not sure where to allocate this node yet.

After I wrote the previous paragraphs I realised that I actually only have two nodes here: better and worse than expected, and within each of these two there are various reasons. For instance, in the better than expected: a)presence of Mexicans b)locals are more amicable compared with previous experience c)coming with partner/company, d) more international/people more open to talk, e) in contact with colleagues before arrival. Hence, I think I am going to re-arrange this node. The better and worse nodes help me to see what helped and did not help these students to adapt. Useful for conclusions. Better to collide them.

I am going to dissolve the intercultural experience node and its child nodes (challenging/positive interaction with Asians; interaction with locals; neutral alcohol in Uni; and traer vs no traer) and add them under sociocultural challenging aspects. As I said earlier, I realised these data belongs to sociocultural aspects. I will still have them divided in the Fourth coding draft 19 May 2017 file.

Good luck!

Appendix G Participants information sheet

Study Title: The Effects of the Orientation Process for the Adaptation of Mexican Students in the UK.

Researcher: Elizabeth M. Hernández López

Ethics number: 17960

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

The present research is conducted as part of my Doctoral thesis in Education. I am a Mexican Postgraduate student researching the induction process and its effects for the short-term adaptation of Mexican international students in the UK. The aim of the current stage is to collect data for analysis, discussion and findings.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been approached to participate as you are an international student of Mexican origin prior to departing or during your first weeks of studying at the (University's name).

What will happen to me if I take part?

Should you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete four instruments; they are all optional. Before you start each one of them, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form, should you wish to do so. You could participate in Spanish, if you prefer.

The first two instruments are an online qualitative survey and a questionnaire, which will take approximately 20 minutes to complete and will ask for your collaboration in two different points in time, prior to your departure and on your first days upon arrival. They both ask for demographic information. Additionally, the online qualitative survey asks about your expectations to living and studying in the UK. The second questionnaire enquires about your sources of support during the early days of your stay.

The third instrument seeks your collaboration for a focus group where you will be asked to discuss your experiences of adaptation during your first weeks in the UK with other Mexican students. The activity will take about 45 to 60 minutes of your time and it will be conducted in Spanish. The focus group will be conducted approximately three weeks after the official beginning of classes within the university's facilities at a date and time that suits you.

Appendix G

The fourth instrument will be an interview where you will be asked some questions related to your experiences of adaptation during your first weeks in the UK. The activity will take about 45 to 60 minutes of your time and it will be conducted in the language of your preference, English or Spanish. The venue will be in the university's premises at a date and time that suits you.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

By participating in this research, you will contribute gathering substantial information that can capture experiences of the orientation and adaptation of Mexican international students in the UK. The results of this study would help to identify important means of support for students in similar situations.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no risks involved in taking part in any of the four instruments. Should you experience any uncomfortable feelings while taking part in this study, alternative means of support can be advised.

Will my participation be confidential?

Complete anonymity cannot be promised, as I will be working with you face to face in some of the activities. However, I will not ask for names on the qualitative survey, the questionnaire or during the focus groups or the interview, and responses will be kept anonymous when reporting the results. The identity of the institution will not be disclosed.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to withdraw at any time should you decide not to finish completing any of the instruments. If you decide after taking part that you no longer wish your data to be used, please let me know by October 31th, 2016

What happens if something goes wrong?

Should you have any concerns or complaint regarding this study, please feel free to contact the Research Governance office (institutional office's contact information).

Where can I get more information?

Should you have any queries regarding this project or interest concerning the analysis of it, please feel free to email me: Elizabeth Hernandez (researcher's institutional e-mail).

Appendix H Participants consent form

CONSENT FORM

Study title: The Effects of the Orientation Process for the Adaptation of Mexican Students in the UK.

Researcher name: Elizabeth Margarita Hernández López

Ethics reference: 17960

Please initial the box (es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet and
have had the opportunity to ask questions about the
study.

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for
my data to be recorded and used for the purpose of this

I understand that my responses will be anonymised in
reports of the research

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at
any time until October 31th, 2016 without my legal rights being

Data Protection

I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password-protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this study.

Name of participant (print name).....

Signature of participant.....

Date.....

Appendix I Nvivo coding

RQs		Sources	References
Challenges			11
Academic aspects			10
Challenging overlap of activities AND Not enough time to adjust			5
Challenging transition from work to study again			2
Educational system			7
Challenging Independent study			1
Negative Degree of involvement AND competitive			1
Neutral different distribution of classes			3
Neutral Pace Not surprised with academic system Level			2
Positive advantages			6
Positive up to level Confidence			2
Language for academic purposes			4
Challenging difficulty language for academic purposes			3
Negative and lack of empathy from colleagues			1
Positive Teachers help and intercultural programs scheme			1
Positive practical side of studies AND Being familiar with process			5
Affective aspects			7
Administrative aspects			1
Challenging Confusing relationship Sponsor and Univ of Soton			2
Challenging Positive dealing with homesickness			4
Economic aspects			3
challenging Stress and scholarship Money concerns			3
Neutral Expenses are gradually lowering			2
First time going overseas			3
Negative Pre arrival readiness			4
Positive Freedom to choose how to act			1
Sociocultural aspects			9
Coping strategies			10
University support for their adaptation			9

Appendix J Node sample

Challenges/Academic aspects/Educational system/Positive Node

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 3 Julia> - § 3 references coded [3.46% Coverage]
Reference 1 - 0.81% Coverage

Julia

Y pues, nada, es más bien como una cuestión de, de que la clase es más como una reflexión grupal acerca a ciertos temas, que un profesor, pues, hablando de, de lo que conoce, digamos, ¿no? [I: Uhum], en particular, ¿no?, y en ese sentido, es diferente, me parece que es, más interesante hacerlo así, es una cuestión de leer mucho, llegar a la clase, comentar lo que leímos, y reflexionar sobre, sobre lo que el texto que se nos dejó leer, ¿no?

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 5 Mario> - § 2 references coded [1.52% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.99% Coverage

Mario

Erm, pues aquí la gente es más, como acostumbrada a trabajar individualmente [I: Uhum], y este, como que la, la gente se va a poner sus propias metas [I: Uhum], no hay como alguien que, que te indique lo que tienes que hacer [I: Uhum], es más todo como, pues, no me recuerdo la palabra, pero bueno, es este, así [I: OK], uhum.

Reference 2 - 0.53% Coverage

Mario

Sí, sí, me siento bien, cómodo. Erm, de hecho, pues, me gusta un poco más trabajar así [I: OK], más este, como que, sin tantos límites, como más, con más libertad [I: OK]

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 6 Arturo> - § 1 reference coded [0.43% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.43% Coverage

Arturo

En la cuestión académica, yo pensé que iba a ser un poco más estricto [I: OK], el sistema [I: Uhum], pero no, muy, muy relajado, tranquilo, de hecho, también lo siento muy tranquilo.

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 7 Jorge> - § 3 references coded [2.90% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.60% Coverage

Jorge

Este, en cuestión académico, pues, este, pues no le noto un cambio total, ósea, por ejemplo, los programas de otras escuelas [I: Uhum] que están, casi similar [I: Uhum], nada más, con otro idioma, prácticamente

Reference 2 - 0.86% Coverage

Jorge

Este, pues, una buena experiencia, porque, por ejemplo, vienes a estudiar a un, a un área donde, es otra cultura, este, tienen otro nivel, o llevan otro proceso, en cuanto a ellos en la educación, como que se me afigura como que no es tan acelerado como en otros lados, es un poco más tranquilo.

Translated Node sample**Challenges/Academic aspects/Educational system/Positive Node****<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 3 Julia> - § 3 references coded [3.46% Coverage]****Reference 1 - 0.81% Coverage****Julia**

And, yeah, it's more like a question of, that the class is more like a group reflection about certain subjects, than a teacher, like, talking about, about what he knows, let's say, right? [I: Uhuh], let's say, isn't it?, and in that sense, it's different, I think it's more interesting to do so, it's a matter of reading a lot, getting to class, commenting on what we read, and reflecting about, about what the text that we were allowed to read, right?

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 5 Mario> - § 2 references coded [1.52% Coverage]**Reference 1 - 0.99% Coverage****Mario**

Erm, because here people are more, like used to work individually [I: Uhuh], and ummm, like people are going to set their own goals [I: Uhuh], there's no one who indicates what you have to do [I: Uhuh], it's all more like, well, I do not remember the word, but oh well, it's ummm, like that [I: OK],

Reference 2 - 0.53% Coverage**Mario**

Yes, yes, I feel good, comfortable. Erm, in fact, then, I like to work more that way [I: OK], more ummm, like, without so many limits, like, with more freedom [I: OK]

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 6 Arturo> - § 1 reference coded [0.43% Coverage]**Reference 1 - 0.43% Coverage****Arturo**

When it comes to academics, I thought it would be a little stricter [I: OK], the system [I: Uhuh], but no, very, very relaxed, calm, in fact, I also feel very calm.

<Internals\\STUDENTS\\Individual interviews\\II 7 Jorge> - § 3 references coded [2.90% Coverage]**Reference 1 - 0.60% Coverage****Jorge**

Ummm, when it comes to academics, like, ummm, I don't notice a total change, I mean, for example, the programs of other schools [I: Uhuh] are, almost similar [I: Uhuh], only in another language , basically.

Reference 2 - 0.86% Coverage**Jorge**

Ummm, like, a good experience, because, for example, you come to study a, to an area where, is another culture, ummm, have another level, or take another process, as for them in education, it seems to me like it's not as fast as elsewhere, it's a little more relaxed.

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