Cultural Diversity in a Masters in Illustration:  
A case study in internationalisation.

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**Abstract.** Illustration practice over the last three decades has become an even more international discipline with illustrators working across a range of global markets. The Internet and social media, such as Instagram, provide opportunities for illustrators to promote their work to a global audience, allowing opportunities for more international commissions, projects and collaborations. In this global market a greater awareness of other cultures is an essential aspect in the learning of any new graduate.

The current master’s programmes in Communication Design, at The Glasgow School of Art, were established in 2011. They have since grown to a cohort of approximately 50 students, comprised of students from over twenty different nationalities. In this case study I will reflect on what the team has learned through working with such a culturally diverse cohort of students at masters level. I will discuss the strategies the team has developed to deal with the diversity of prior study and cultures. I will provide insights from current illustration students and recent graduates of their experience of how it has informed their practice and development as reflective practitioners. I will explore the benefits of peer learning and a critical reflective journal in student development within a culturally diverse cohort. I will provide insights from students and graduates of their experience of the effectiveness of these strategies in achieving their intended outcomes.

Keywords: Illustration, internationalization, cultural diversity, peer learning, reflective practitioner, critical reflective journal, illustration pedagogy.  
  
  
1 Introduction

In a global environment which is increasingly characterized by division, conflict and the building of walls to divide nations, it is appropriate, to celebrate the diversity of cultures currently studying on the masters programmes in communication design at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA). These programmes have experienced rapid growth since they were established in 2011. Over the last three years the cohort size has consolidated at approximately 50 students, consisting of over 20 different nationalities. As illustration has grown to be an increasingly global practice there is an opportunity for students to benefit from internationalisation to inform students cultural awareness and ability to collaborate in a global discipline which benefits international, EU and home students. The Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) acknowledges this potential in it’s ‘Framework for Internationalising in Higher Education’, (2015) [1].

GSA is a small specialist institution and independent art school based in Glasgow, Scotland currently ranked 6th in world for Art & Design Education [2]. It has 540 postgraduate students in a total student population of 2300 students, which includes undergraduate, postgraduate and Phd level students. (2017-2018) [3]. The master’s programmes in communication design include the MDes Communication Design, a two-year full-time model in which students can choose to explore inter-disciplinary practice or focus in a specific discipline, and the MDes Graphics/Illustration/Photography, a one-year full-time model with students specializing within a chosen discipline pathway. Both programmes are taught in English. In this case study I will reflect on lessons learned by the team in supporting a culturally diverse cohort. I will present the strategies the team has developed, based in pedagogic theory, to address the challenges of growth in diversity and student numbers. I will provide insights from students and graduates of their experience of the effectiveness of these strategies in achieving their intended outcomes.

2. Context

For comparison purposes I have included Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics for postgraduate taught full-time programmes (PGT) that are comparable with the programme taught at GSA. HESA statistics indicate there were 184,995 PGT full-time students in the UK for session 2017/18.

Below I have outlined the comparison breakdowns for session 2017/18 in which HESA reports an increase of 4% in the UK over the previous session 2016/17. Of the 184,995 PGT full-time students in the UK, 16,345 study in Creative Arts & Design in the UK and in Scotland this figure is 1325 students [3]. The Masters programmes in Communication Design (MCD) for the same session had a cohort of 46 students, which included 24 different nationalities; some of these students have dual citizenships and multi-cultural backgrounds. This group is indicated as MCD in the table below.



Data Collated from HESA Statistics (excluding MCD figures)[3].

In the whole of the UK HE sectors for both full and part time students in session 2016/17, the predominant sending country was China with 95,090 students [4] attending UK HE institutions, of which 30,220 studied in Creative Arts and Design [5]. The second and third countries for all subjects in UK HE are, Malaysia, (16,370) and the USA (17,580). The largest cohort of PGT full time European students studying in the UK originated from Germany (13,735). Even though these results may not be surprising with China forming 18.54% of the total world population in 2018 [6] the statistics do however indicate a significant impact in UK HE system with such a high level of applications from one country, China. On 7th February 2019 The Guardian reported record numbers of applications from China in 2018 stating “Last year there were also more than 100,000 postgraduate students from China and Hong Kong at British universities, out of nearly 350,000 full-time postgraduates” [7]. On 4th September 2018 the BBC [8] reported that although the number of international students is increasing in the UK (3% over the past decade), the UK lagged behind other countries growth, with growth in USA (40%), Australia (47%) and Canada (57%). Changes made in 2012 relative to the right to stay and work in the UK post-graduation ,was cited as a reason the UK is ‘missing out’ on more international students. The report estimates the benefit of international students to the UK economy in 2018 was £25.8bn [8].

The term international students used in the paper refers to all students and graduates out with the UK and EU region and includes students and graduates from North America, Asia, the middle East, some Scandinavian countries, Australasia and Africa.

# 2.1 Rapid Growth

There are many challenges that arise from teaching a diverse postgraduate cohort, especially in context of rapid growth over the last 4 years. The previous atelier model of teaching of one to one tutorials that was effective for smaller numbers could not simply be up-scaled to deliver the programme to a larger cohort efficiently due to resourcing. We had to adjust our traditional atelier approach (Swann, 1996) [9] and look at alternative approaches.

# 2.2 Anecdotal Evidence

Students are invited to feedback into the programme via several mechanisms. Students participate in a programme specific quality enhancement questionnaire (QEQ), and input to an anonymous annual review of the effectiveness of the teaching and delivery of programmes at GSA issued by the learning and teaching department. Students are also invited to feedback formally through their student representatives at the student staff consultative committees (SSCC). As a relatively small Art School, there are also less formal feedback mechanisms. Staff discuss with students directly to elicit their opinions and thoughts on course elements and any new developments. This allows any local matters to be resolved quickly. In addition, staff also offer optional exit tutorials to all graduating students. The exit tutorials provide an opportunity for students to share their experience of the programme and discuss their plans for transitioning to a practice or further study.

The above mechanisms provided information and insight that helped staff to identify several challenges to improve the student experience on PGT programmes at GSA.

# 3. Methodology

The key staff involved in developing strategies to address these challenges were Brian Cairns, Andy Stark and Colin Faulks. The key texts that informed the teaching team’s approach were the pedagogic theories of peer learning (Boud) [10], reflective journals (Moon) [11], the reflective practitioner (Schön) [12], and learning in groups (Jacques) [13].

A review of relevant research was carried out to identify common themes and issues for PGT international, EU and home students in relation to the programmes at GSA, and to reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies adopted. The initial challenges were identified through the anecdotal evidence identified in section 4, Challenges.

I decided to survey Year 2 students and recent graduates in order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies in addressing these challenges. I decided not to interview the Year 1 students at this point as the group has not yet had sufficient experience at GSA in the 4 months period since they started their study. The recent fire at GSA (June 2018) and subsequent disruption has also disrupted the initial settling in period for this cohort which may distort the findings due to the exceptional circumstances. The questionnaire with 12 categories with 70 questions in total was distributed to the participating group and 25 replies from 28 invited contributions, were received and analaysed. with 3 non replies. The replies consisted of 13 students and 12 graduates. The combined group represented 13 different nationalities. 9 contributors identified their first language as English, with the remaining 16 identifying English as a second language.

The sample group includes 15 current Year-2, MDes Communication Design students and 13 recent graduates of both the MDes Communication Design and MDes Illustration who primarily specialized in illustration were invited to answer a common questionnaire focusing on qualitative feedback. The 15 MDes Communication Design students included 10 different nationalities. The 13 recent graduates included 10 different nationalities. The range of cultures included, UK, European, North American and Asian cultures. The current MDes Communication Design students included 2 male and 13 female students. The graduate selection included 4 male and 9 female graduates. This gender balance reflects the balance in a typical cohort of students on the programmes. The responses from the questionnaires were reviewed to assess the effectiveness of the strategies adopted.

The largest group from any one country was 6 (5 students/1 graduate) from China followed by 4 from South Korea (1 student/3 graduates). The 12 other nationalities were represented by individuals or two people at most. The average age of the sample group was 26 years old with a age range from 23 -34 years old, consisting of 6 males and 19 females. The results of the questionnaires from students and graduates revealed the following insights on how effective the strategies applied had been.

# 4. Challenges

These are the main challenges identified by students through the feedback mechanisms at GSA.

# 4.1 Language

The issue of language presented a problem on several levels. There was the issue of language proficiency which arose when a metaphor or phrase was expressed in conversation. Without the cultural context the student would often be unable to interpret the intended meaning. Comprehension needs to be sufficient for students to keep pace with the conversations in group tutorials, critiques and presentations. Students who were less confident in their language ability seemed reluctant to offer peer feedback or participate as readily in discussions. This hindered the students’ own learning and frustrated peers.

Another aspect that became apparent was the use of design terms by the team itself. Staff would often use varying terminology for a similar concept. This was confusing to international students regardless of language proficiency, since often the student had not learned design specific terminology. The written element of the Critical Reflective Journal (CRJ) was a particular challenge to those students who struggled with written English in an art and design context. An additional obstacle for some students was the Scottish accent, which some students took time to adjust to.

# 4.2 Diverse Prior Learning

Students on the one-year pathways generally will have studied as an undergraduate within communication design practice or continue in a chosen specialism such as illustration. The student has an understanding of the subject even if it has been taught quite differently at their prior institution. The one-year pathways are discipline specific. The two-year MDes Communication Design programme invites students from a range of prior learning including non-practice-based disciplines. These students are invited to either focus on an existing discipline, explore an inter-disciplinary approach, shift their discipline or in some cases develop a practice if their previous study has been a theory based undergraduate course. In these instances, the student may be conceptually sophisticated but less technically able and have limited experience in making. Teaching across a range of abilities and prior knowledge presented a challenge to the team, as did to maintaining cohesion in the group.

# 4.3 Diverse cultural backgrounds and life experience

Typically, the cohort size has been approximately 50 students composed of over 20 different nationalities. With such a culturally diverse group it can be difficult for students to bond and become a cohesive cohort. Staff observed a tendency for any larger group of students from the same nationality to pull together .Whilst this natural gravitation is understandable, and in the short term feels beneficial for the student, a it resulted inthose students avoiding interaction with the larger group and thus students from other cultures. This was notable among more collective cultures in particular.

There is also a diverse range of ages among the student cohort, typically from age 23-34 with an average age of 26. Students with more life experience engaged more readily with other cultures and tended to take greater responsibility for their learning, appreciating the self-directed nature of master’s level study. Sovic (2008), in her survey of international students transitioning to study in the UK suggests institutions should do more to “build bridges between the two groups” of home/EU and international students [14].

# 4.4 Transitioning into a different culture and climate

For many the environment and culture in the UK, and specifically Scotland, is significantly different from their home country. It can take students some time to adjust. Often younger students were initially homesick, depressed or feeling adrift. One factor staff identified was that the dark and wet Glasgow winters significantly impacted students from sunnier climates regardless of language. These long dark days had a significant impact on these students between the months of November and March during the first semester of study and for some students was detrimental.

# 4.5 Transitioning into a different education system

The initial adjustment to a new institution was frustrating to some students. GSA is significantly different to many student’s prior undergraduate colleges. Students often carried unrealised expectations that their master’s study would be more like their undergraduate study, even though the nature of the programme is explicitly declared at the interview stage prior to study. This was apparent in the adjustment to the more self-directed nature of master’s level study. Those who had studied in a modular system expected a highly scheduled structure and did not anticipate the level of self-directed study required at masters level. Students who returned to study with a significant break between their undergraduate study and masters study tended to adjust and settle quicker. Asian culture students placed a greater emphasis on product than process and could be unsure if they should submit sketchbooks and workbooks for review at assessments despite clear instructions to do so. Several cultures also placed an emphasis on grades over learning which could be detrimental to the students learning and progress.

The Teaching International Students: effective learning for all, 2-year project (Carroll, 2011) by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) [15] recognizes the transitional impact that international students experience in studying in UK HE. In the study, international students cite issues such as language and the need for support to deal with the transition into a new educational system with new academic cultural assumptions and standards, which the study describes as a “new game, new rules”.

# 4.6 Promoting a Studio Culture

“Studio provides this learning environment. It is the environment for inter-disciplinarity, peer learning, critical enquiry, experimentation and prototyping, has particular relevance in the 21st century and is the foundation of our student experience”.  
  
- GSA Strategic Plan 2018

Studio based learning is a key component of study at GSA. However, many of the students starting their masters study have had a different former study experience especially if it was characterized by a modular structure and involved attending classes in multiple locations. Some students studied in institutions that had a hot-desking approach or alternative methods and strategies to managing estates resources with no fixed studio. Students from theory-based prior study had no experience of studio culture and of making at all.. Some students struggled with concentration in the studio environment being more accustomed to working at home, but it was noticeable that these students tend to miss out on opportunities for peer learning and essential information as a result and their learning was diminished from those who were present in the studio for the majority of the week.

# 4.7 Critical Reflective Journal

The CRJ requires students to reflect on their actions as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991) which requires both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. [12], with both intrinsically linked with the act of making work. Students also need to reflect on their own learning through writing which “forces learners to organize and to clarify their thoughts in order to sequence in a linear manner. In this way they reflect on and improve their understanding”. (Moon, 2006) [11]. The CRJ also requires analysis of secondary sources and research, helping the student to identify their position as a practitioner within the wider practice of communication design or a particular practice such as illustration. Multiple challenges were encountered by students relative to the Critical Reflective Journal (CRJ). The practice of maintaining CRJ was new and unfamiliar to most students aside from the challenge of the significant written component for international student and those with limited language proficiency. International students struggled to express their ideas and summarize their projects. These International students were not alone as we identified that English speaking students also struggled with aspects of the depth of reflection and word count required. Those students who engaged fully with the CRJ tended to be mature students in both age and practice who realized the benefit of a reflective practice, and fully engaged as reflective-practitioners.

# 5. Strategies employed to address challenges.

# 5.1 Language

The challenges of language were addressed in several ways. At the request of the team, the minimum language requirement for applications (IELTS) was increased to ensure greater language proficiency in international students to address the issues raised by home/EU students that presentations, critiques and group tutorials discussions were hindered by lack of English spoken language proficiency. Students who continued to struggle with expressing their ideas in English were directed to GSA Student Support who ran a series of discursive workshops to encourage confidence in speaking English.

The tutorial structure was changed to include more group tutorials and presentations to provide more opportunities where students were able to practice their spoken English and express their ideas and build confidence as well as observe other peer approaches to presentation. Staff adjusted their own language to reduce the number of colloquialisms, metaphors or phrases that could confuse international students who did not have the cultural context to understand the reference. Terminology specific to the disciplines were also explained to students in a series of seminars, while staff agreed on a common use of terminology to minimize confusion for international students. A publication that addresses terminology in art and design for international students was added to the reading list to assist international students [16].

# 5.2 Diverse Prior Learning

As we have students from diverse prior learning, we front-loaded the first semester with a series of scaffolding workshops, seminars and inductions with the purpose of reinforcing design principles to ensure all of the group had the required understanding to actively engage. In the HEA Teaching International Student study (Carroll, J., 2011) [15] group activities and collaborations are identified as having a positive impact in integrating international students.

This also allowed staff to assess each student’s abilities and develop understanding of their practice. These workshops placed an emphasis on making. Presented as one day projects, students were given scope to experiment within the structure of a brief.

These scaffolding workshops were accompanied by a series of seminars. The seminars addressed principles of primary and secondary research and terminologies used in research and design practice through buzz groups and snowball groups, (Jacques, 2000) [13]. The aim was to provide students with the appropriate language and methodology to identify a proposal and develop their project, as well as provide a shared experience to help the cohort to bond. Students were also asked to declare their prior learning and share their skills with peers.

5.3 Diverse cultural backgrounds and life experience  
  
To encourage greater interaction earlier in the course and disrupt behaviors isolating students to one group, staff allocated desks for the first semester in advance of the student’s arrival on the programme . to ensure students mixed more widely within the cohort. it was hoped that this would encourage international students to practice their spoken English and engage with peers from other cultures. The scaffolding workshops and seminars were also supported with a day of studio tours of Glasgow based design studios and arts organizations with the intention that the studio tour day would promote informal opportunities for staff and students to engage and introduced students to a wider creative community in Glasgow.

# 5.4 Transitioning into a different culture and climate

Many international students struggle with the cultural shift as well as the academic shift when studying in the UK, regardless of language, which Sovic (Sovic, 2008) describes as ‘culture shock’ and ‘academic shock’ [20]. Recognizing the effects of a culture shift on new students from very different cultures who were very far from home and often relatively young, the staff sought to identify any students they believed to be struggling early in the programme. It was hoped that the action taken as described in 3.2 to front-load activites within the programme would also provided frequent points of contact to facilitate to support and encouragement for student who were struggling with the change. . Students from some cultures were reluctant to acknowledge this difficulty, especially to a tutor. The team actively developed their relationship with GSA Student Support, for advice on how best to support these students, Staff participated in ‘Scotland’s Mental Health First Aid Training’ (SMHFA) which develops skills in asking appropriate questions, listening without judgment and giving guidance where help can be found.

Previously if staff identified a student they believed to be struggling and suggested contacting Student Support, they had no means of confirming if the student had acted on the advice since that would compromise student confidentiality. The team adopted a new approach of flagging struggling students to Student Support in the hope that students would be more responsive due to the nature of the confidentiality and anonymity this allowed.

The Scottish climate was the issue the team had no control over. Students from sunnier climates often experienced low moods through the dark winter season and to counter this staff primed new students to be aware of this potential adverse effect. Students were encouraged to actively seek daylight and if required consider a seasonal affective disorder [17] (SAD) lamp to offset the seasonal effects.

# 5.5 Transitioning into a different education system

In the initial week of attendance, for orientation, students are taken on a physical tour of the school and facilities and introduced to all key members of staff that they will engage with during their study. To address unrealized or undeclared expectations that students have brought with them from their prior study, staff encouraged students to declare their expectations of the programme at the outset through a series of introductory seminars with the purpose of allowing staff to clarify how the masters programmes at GSA function and what can be realistically expected of staff, students and GSA.

A handbook was produced as a PDF and distributed on the virtual learning environment (Canvas). The handbook lists key dates such as holidays, semester dates and other information with the aim of reinforcing the student’s orientation to a new environment.

Students who were grade focused were encouraged to experiment and explore their discipline, relaxing their focus on grades and identifying what it was they really wanted to learn and achieve through their study. This was facilitated through the series of seminars where students map their learning journey and state a specific intended goal, identifying what will be required to achieve it in terms of learning and resources and to promote a perspective that would stretch beyond the immediate assessment grade which could become a distraction to learning. Staff proposed the possibility of simplifying grades to fail, pass, merit, and distinction which the team believed would be more beneficial to students' learning and provide greater clarity to international students than the alphanumeric grade system which most students found confusing. This proposal is currently under discussion.

# 5.6 Promoting a Studio Culture

It was recognised that some activities such as illustration are more desk-centric whilst other activities required time away from the studio, such as reportage illustration and photography but the studio remains the key as a place to reflect on the work created to make meaning of it and identify emerging patterns.

Studio was promoted through the scaffolding workshops and front loading of projects in the first semester which were targeted at promoting unity in the cohort as well as to develop a habit of studio attendance. Students were encouraged to be active in the studio even on non-contact days to benefit from peer input and take ownership of their learning through self-directed study. Students were encouraged to develop peer led reviews with the studio as the focus and share prior learning and skills. (Budge, Beale & Lynas, 2013) state “a social aspect to developing creativity in design involves seeking and giving peer feedback. Peer feedback and critique is integral to the creative practice of designers” [18]. (Boud, 2001) [10] also states that being able to give and receive constructive feedback is an important ability in most fields but it is critical in the professional practice of design”.

# 5.7 Critical reflective Journal

To assist in the development of the CRJ, workshops were provided that looked at structure and analysis of a reflective text. An elective called ‘Design Process Journal’ shared many common aspects of the CRJ and was recommended to students. This elective encouraged students to maintain regular logs of activities to reflect on and many students found these activities supported reflection in their CRJ. Students were provided with exemplars from previous graduates’ CRJs as examples of structure and writing style variations.

Tutorials were recorded by students and posted on a virtual learning environment (VLE), Canvas. Students were encouraged to initially record the discussion of the tutorial with references and other notes as a means of documenting their activities. Students were encouraged to return later and reflect on the notes taken and add any further reflections. This record provided an active live text to support the writing of the CRJ as an ongoing process rather than writing the document retrospectively. Staff then accessed these journals to review for accuracy, understanding and to provide additional advice or clarify any misunderstandings from the tutorial. As Moon [11] points out the shared nature of the journal may influence the content of the writing itself but the student is encouraged to write reflectively and explore how they can communicate their ideas as a reflective practitioner.

# 6. Assessing the effectiveness of strategies introduced

# 6.1 Language

Language remains a challenge for both international students and home/EU students. Home/EU students felt the cultural differences and lack of English proficiency reduced the pace and depth of discussions in group tutorials, collaborative projects and presentations. Though attempts were made to be inclusive, students from both international and Home/EU felt they had to find work arounds to be understood. International students often struggled with the written aspects of study and lectures finding it hard to keep up with the critiques or understand the subtle nuances of a discussion in real time.

A Korean graduate stated, “Even when I talk about works or opinion in my mother language it is hard to express what I want to talk about. With English I feel like only 50% of my thinking is expressed”. A Chinese graduate stated, “At the beginning of study I could only understand the literal meaning of conversations… at the same time when conversations or lecture happens”. An Irish graduate states, “one major disadvantage to the program having a wide range of nationalities. At least a quarter of the class struggled with basic conversational English which led to a variety of issues”.

The strategy of the staff to increase English language requirement (IELTS) should reduce the issues with proficiency in English that frustrated home/EU students but cultural understanding remains an area that students need to continue to overcome. The increase in IELTS will be applied in the next session 2019/20 so there has not been time to collect any evidence on the effectiveness of this change. Staff have adjusted their own language in response to feedback from students which seems to have been effective in reducing the instances of confusion with terminology and general communication. Students still struggle with the written element of the CRJ, however most acknowledge that although it is challenging it does help to develop their vocabulary without the pressure of public speaking

# 6.2 Diverse Prior Learning

The scaffolding projects and seminars strategy was effective at establishing a studio culture and assisted in helping a diverse international group to bond. Only 3 replies stated this was not the case, while 19 replies confirmed their effectiveness with 3 non replies. A Korean student acknowledged the scaffolding projects role in establishing a peer group was “probably the most useful part of the projects” and a Turkish student commented it promoted “social interactions”. Some students on the one-year pathways felt the projects themselves, though effective at establishing social cohesion in the group, could be further developed to assist their personal projects, while students on the 2-year programme appreciated the principles of play promoted in the workshops. Most felt the projects did help to kick-start making work at the start of the first semester which was generally considered to be beneficial. The seminars were seen as being effective in explaining the self-directed nature of master’s study, introducing students to research principles and to construct their own learning path. The experimentation and aspect of play promoted in these workshops often resurfaced later in student projects. The diverse prior learning of students also provided the opportunity for skills swaps

6.3 Diverse cultural backgrounds and life experience

Questionnaire responses showed that 22 of the 25 respondents stated they socialized with students from other cultures. Only 3 stated no or limited social interaction. Though most Chinese students did socialize with students from other cultures, language proficiency was an identifiable factor limiting social engagement with other cultures.

Most of the students engaged with peer learning in the studio with the exception of 3 Chinese students, who either did not engage at all or on a more limited level. Notably students who were older, with more life experience, engaged more actively with peers from other cultures. The experience of a diverse cultural cohort was largely regarded as beneficial. An English graduate stated’ “this was one of the best things about the masters - I am still in touch with most people from the course who now live in other countries so it has a lasting benefit” while an Irish graduate stated, “it exposed me to people of wildly different cultures, backgrounds, and experience. These peers were massively beneficial to the development of my practice as they questioned my research processes and design methodology in unexpected ways. Personally, it was an incredible fulfilling, perception-altering, and joyful experience to make friends from across the globe and learn about their cultures”. Overwhelmingly the students and graduates felt supported by peers and staff, especially valuing the contribution of peers.

Some graduates who remained in Glasgow commented on the loss of a community of their cohort after graduation with only a few Home/EU graduates remaining in Glasgow. This was largely due to the international nature of the cohort and current UK visa laws that prevented non-UK/EU graduates remaining in the UK. Many international students stated a preference to remain in Glasgow if this had been possible. The Scotsman in their article on the 16th February, 2019 supports this anecdotal evidence stating, “Glasgow School of Art is top when it comes to retaining graduates, with just over half deciding to stay on after finishing their studies”. Most respondents felt the international nature of the programme was beneficial in developing a global awareness of their discipline that would benefit their future practice. Only 4 replies out of the 25 replies stated they did not really believe this was relevant to their own practice.

# 6.4 Transitioning into a different culture and climate

Due to the confidential nature of student information, it is not possible to provide factual information on the effectiveness of the initiatives taken to support students who are struggling with the cultural shift as well as the many other challenges present in starting a new period of study. One student in the questionnaire actually describes her experience as “culture shock”. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest the pro-active approach that the teaching team adopted has been beneficial to students who may have otherwise not engaged with Student Support or counselling support due to cultural factors. Commenting on the adjustment in academic environments and expectations, a Canadian student states, “it’s definitely a large gap to bridge at times”, and staff are making every effort to assist students making the transition.

# 6.5 Transitioning into a different education system

All students and graduates found the adjustment to study at GSA difficult, whether it was the adjustment from a professional practice to academic study or the adjustment to a different academic environment, students struggled with the freedom to construct their own learning over the course of one or two years in contrast to undergraduate study characterized by clearly defined briefs and learning outcomes with shorter deadlines. International students from out with the UK/EU region also struggled in transitioning to a different education system and culture. Korean graduates commented on the different expectations with a greater emphasis on process in the UK than Korean education. In Korea “make something looks good is the priority”. A Chinese student reiterated a similar viewpoint of her prior education in China, “it was more focused on how to make things ‘pretty’, a project could look very ‘fancy’ but with very few contents to look at”.

In contrast the same student states of her study at GSA, “At GSA I learned to look further and deeper in a project before I start to make it, and started to get to learn and think about the connections and relationship between myself (as an individual and artist) and the society I live in. Not just in the aspects of art, studying at GSA also rebuilt my mind-set on how to see myself as an independent individual living in modern society”.

The feedback from students and graduates indicates that the initial transitional period was difficult but at the end of the process the students and graduates had witnessed significant growth both personally and creatively.

6.6 Promoting a Studio Culture

Most student and graduates indicated that they had engaged with working in the studio as a direct response to the scaffolding projects and seminars designed to promote studio attendance and promote integration. The strategy had been effective at achieving the initial goal. However, many students in the current year 2 had reverted to working from their own studios or flats. The impact of the June 2018 fire and subsequent upheaval is a significant factor that may have influenced the year 2 students studio usage since the year group previously were active users of the studio in their first year of study. Previous cohorts had engaged in developing a studio culture with one Korean graduate stating “I lived in the studio, it was my house”. The studio culture helped to develop a sense of family in the very international cohort. A Spanish graduate commented, “one felt that they didn’t have to adjust culturally to the geographic location but that one belonged to a large, plural family. That was probably one of the triggers prompting us share and support each other from the very beginning”. The student goes on to state the social events, such as potluck lunches and peer activities created a “family bond” in the group.

The current year 1 students are also engaging with a studio culture as a response to the scaffolding projects and seminars to support peer learning. This has resulted in significant peer activities, including regular peer reviews, in addition to staff tutorials, and a salon model peer review, based on 19th Century Salons of France to discuss student projects and debate ideas. (

# 6.7 Critical reflective Journal

The critical journal was reported as being beneficial to developing student projects for the majority of the students and graduates, with only 3 Chinese students stating it was not. Most students/graduates maintained a habit of journaling on a regular basis from daily to bi-weekly to inform their critical reflective journal (CRJ). Five students stated they did not maintain any regular journals. Those who had studied the design process journal elective found it complemented the writing of their CRJ. A Scottish graduate commented “In Stage 2 I kept a Design Process Journal which was very helpful and did inform my CRJ. I think the combination of both was really helpful’. An English graduate stated, “I found the process of writing and designing the CRJ very beneficial”. Most students and graduates found it helped to reflect effectively on their learning as reflective practitioners. Many students and graduates did struggle with the writing task, either because of writing in second language, other factors such as dyslexia, or simply struggling with the act of reflection. An English student stated he struggled with “the initial setting up of habitual note taking and making time for consistent, constructive, reflection and reaction into both process and research”, however found the process extremely beneficial in reflecting on his learning and development. The lack of English proficiency can also be an isolating factor that diminishes integration with the group. Students who did engage with peers often describe their relationship as ‘familial’ and acknowledge

7. Conclusion

The feedback from the sample group confirms that the strategies employed by the team to address the challenges presenting in a rapidly growing, culturally diverse masters have been largely effective in achieving the stated objectives. Proficiency in English language will be vital for students to engage fully with the course. This will be an ongoing challenge, with students who lack proficiency not fully able to benefit and engage with peer learning or contribute to critiques, group discussions or presentations. Neither do they fully benefit from exposure to other cultural perspectives in order to develop a more global perspective. The increased requirements for English language proficiency may address some issues but there has not been sufficient time to test this in the current study.

The front-loaded delivery of the scaffolding workshops, seminars and studio tours was an effective strategy in bonding the cohort and assisted with the transition of a diverse cohort to a new academic environment and culture, as well as develop English language skills. The team will review further how we can support students who still struggle with significant transitional challenges.

The studio remains a focus for peer learning activities, both formal and informal. Peer learning will continue to be supported through social activities, and staff will further encourage and support opportunities for social interaction. The decline in studio presence in the year-2 group is possibly related to disruption from the recent fire at GSA, or this may be specific to the Year 2 cohort. Staff will monitor the progress of the year 1 cohort and assess if any further interventions are required to support a studio culture to promote peer learning.

The sample group found writing the CRJ a challenging task but ultimately beneficial to their study and development as reflective practitioners. Further physical exemplars of CRJs were requested to clarify expectations and illustrate a range of different approaches, and this will be provided. The level of engagement with the CRJ varied but was generally consistent with the students engagement with their studies overall.

Furness in her study ‘Beyond Discipline’ states the impact of digital technology has “created a more global world, with global connectivity” (Furness, L, 2015) [21]. Illustration practice over the last three decades has become an even more international discipline with illustrators working across a range of global markets. The Internet and social media, such as Instagram, provides opportunities for illustrators to promote their work to a global audience, allowing opportunities for more international commissions, projects and collaborations. In this global market a greater awareness of other cultures is an essential aspect in the learning journey of our students, who we aim to prepare for a global illustration practice.

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