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# Supporting international PGT students' interaction and participation, academic confidence and belonging through academic skills classes and a student-led video project

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## *Abstract*

This paper reports on a research project which took place at a university in the North of England during the academic year 2021-22. As a small team of discipline-based Academic Skills Tutors, we provide weekly two-hour classes for PGT Education students. Classes focus on giving students the tools to develop their academic and communication skills. The aim of our research was to find out about students' interaction and participation, levels of academic anxiety, and sense of belonging. To gather students' views, we conducted an online survey which was sent to all students, and we ran three focus group sessions. We then presented the results to students and asked them if they would like to participate in a video project in which their experiences were captured, with a view to creating a resource for incoming PGT students to support their transition to postgraduate study in the UK. The project produced three short videos, each of which picks up one of the themes of the research (participation, academic anxiety and belonging). This paper first presents our research findings on the three themes: student interaction and participation, academic anxiety and students' sense of belonging. It then reflects on the process of producing the student-led video project.

**Keywords:** belonging; interaction; participation; academic anxiety; co-creation; strengths-based; transition.

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## *Introduction*

International postgraduate students are a vital and growing cohort of students in higher education in the UK. The university at which this research took place has experienced a huge growth in international student recruitment at PGT level since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. This creates both opportunities and challenges for staff and students. An article published by Shu et al. in 2020 comments that, to justify the benefits which arise from the economic and academic advantages that international students offer, universities should improve the quality of international students' experiences and identify factors that promote their successful transition to postgraduate study in the UK. The university which we report on here has established a small team of Academic Skills Tutors who work within selected academic departments in the Social Sciences which have large numbers of international students. The aim of the team is to support the development of PGT students' academic and communication skills.

We were employed as Academic Skills Tutors in the Department of Education, teaching 12 classes of students during the 2021-2022 academic year. We delivered a non-credit bearing module embedded into students' programmes of study and scheduled into their timetables, the aim of which was to support students' academic development and integration. The students enrolled on the module were predominantly international and mostly, though not exclusively, speakers of Chinese as a first language (L1). The module consisted of weekly two-hour classes, which ran throughout the entire academic year, and students were offered one-to-one tutorials during the vacation periods. Student feedback on the module shows that they valued the content of the classes, and they frequently commented on how they felt that it had helped them to develop their skills and understand the UK higher education environment.

The aim of this research was to find out whether the classes had an impact on students' sense of belonging. In order to address this, we considered three areas: interaction and participation in classes, academic anxiety, and an overall sense of belonging at the university. We ran an online survey to gather information and held follow-up focus groups with students to get more detail. Once the findings from our research were in, we worked

with a small group of students on a project to develop a resource which could be used with future groups of students to support their transition into master's study. This article first explains the research focus and the results of the survey and focus groups. It then details the project in which students created three video resources addressing the issues which emerged from the survey data.

## *Context*

### Interaction and participation

Interaction and participation in class, especially seminars, is a core element of higher education pedagogy in the UK. However, for many students from different educational contexts, this can be problematic because they are not used to being expected to ask and answer questions or challenge ideas. This lack of familiarity with the UK HE academic context can create some challenges, and academic staff in UK higher education can regard international students, and Chinese students in particular, as lacking important graduate skills such as language, communication and critical thinking (Gu and Maley, 2008; Wu, 2015). Our observations in two-hour classes are that many students remained very quiet or even silent throughout, and we often find ourselves teaching classes consisting solely of Chinese L1 speakers where it can be difficult to stop conversations veering into Chinese. We therefore began by asking how we could encourage greater student participation and interaction in our classes. Research into silence among Japanese learners of English as a second language (L2) at Japanese universities identified reluctance and inability or lack of opportunity to speak as reasons for a lack of student participation (King, 2012). This aligned with comments from the focus groups that 'the other students have said that they would like to say more but still feel shy' and that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students 'don't have many opportunities to communicate with other, non-Chinese, students'. Furthermore, a participant noted that 'a lot of Chinese is spoken among the students', even in the English language classroom, because most, if not all classmates share the same mother tongue and speak in this language in class.

**Academic anxiety**

A second focus for us was how to help students overcome academic anxiety. Among international students, anxiety can be pronounced; students are moving to a new country, with a different language and academic culture. A study by Adeoye-Agboola and Evans (2015) involving 105 international students at the University of Bedfordshire, correlated anxiety with academic performance. The main correlates cited were assessments, finances, English and even the weather. Additionally, research from Coneyworth et al. (2020) reported that 92% of new international postgraduate students did not understand what was expected of them. These issues were reflected in our own work, as during the first term we observed high levels of stress and anxiety amongst our students on tasks such as academic reading, critical thinking, using APA referencing and producing 3,500-word essays.

**Belonging**

Our third question aimed to get a deeper insight into students' understanding of what belonging meant to them. Student belonging is regarded as a key component for student success at university. Robertson, Cleaver and Smart. (2019) call it an 'intangible asset' in higher education – they comment that it is highly valued, but hard to quantify. Kuh et al.'s (2010) work on student belonging suggests that it is one of the most significant factors in student success, so we wanted to find out whether the Academic Skills classes enhanced our students' sense of belonging. For this research, we used Goodenow and Grady's (1993 p.25) definition of belonging as:

> students' sense of belonging in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which they feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others - especially teachers.

In 2012, HEFCE commissioned a 'What Works Student Retention & Success' report on student engagement and belonging (Thomas, 2012). Since then, universities in the UK have been challenged to focus on their moral and educational duty to support students and help them succeed. The introduction of the report highlights that the road to academic success starts with feeling like a student. This includes making friends, developing

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confidence and, above all, feeling integrated within their programme of study and the university (Broadfoot, 2012). The report goes on to detail research projects undertaken in 22 different institutions aimed at improving students' sense of belonging. Findings include the following observations. Student belonging is achieved through supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing knowledge, students feeling confident and self-identifying as successful HE learners, and students enjoying an HE experience relevant to their interests and future goals. Thomas (2012) advocates that universities nurture a culture of belonging to the academic and social community. She says that:

> Particularly effective interventions are situated in the academic sphere […] Such interventions often develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students' confidence, demonstrate future relevance, and nurture belonging (p.8).

As such, we view the Academic Skills classes as a key component in nurturing students' belonging. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the classes were non-credit-bearing, but tasks and group work were built into the classes to develop students' skills and provide them with practice. This meant that students worked with their peers to complete activities. Secondly, classes ran throughout the entire academic year (3 x 10 weeks), so students got to know their teachers well, and a relationship of meaningful interaction between staff and students was established. Finally, as the year progressed, we worked with students to support them with their final independent study module (dissertation). Through this, we got to know students' interests and future goals. In addition to our focus on supporting students' sense of belonging, we also used a paper by Quan, He and Sloan (2016) on how Chinese postgraduate students adjusted to academic study in the UK. The paper focused specifically on students who were studying in the UK for a short period and their coping strategies in a UK academic context. The authors provide very useful suggestions on supporting students' transitions. They propose a process-based, four-stage model to support Chinese PGT students' successful transition and adjustment to study in UK HE. This includes a first stage of pre-departure preparation; the second stage within the first four weeks of students' studies when their anxiety about

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academic work usually peaks; the third stage of student engagement and adaptation; and a final stage towards the end of the programme, during which students gain confidence. It was helpful for us to apply this model to our students' academic journey because it showed us that their experiences fell within the four stages of Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) model.

**Figure 1. Summary of Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) 4-stage model of Chinese students' successful transition.**

| 1. Before the start of the programme | Engage students online with quizzes and introductions before they even start the MA programme. |
|---|---|
| 2. Weeks 1-4 | Predict the high levels of stress students are likely to feel in the first 4 weeks: learn as much as we can about their previous educational experiences and be careful not to overwhelm them. |
| 3. As the year progresses | Continue to give students ample opportunity to interact with each other through tasks and activities. |
| 4. In the final term | For dissertation support, encourage students to ask questions and share their learning with each other. |

## *Methodology*

To gather students' views, we conducted an online survey which was sent to all students, and we ran three focus group sessions. The survey asked students about their participation in class and whether they felt more confident as a result of regular attendance in the Academic Skills class. We also asked questions about whether their levels of academic anxiety had decreased during the year and how they defined belonging as a student. The focus groups used the same questions, but allowed students to expand upon their answers so that we obtained a deeper insight into their experiences. In total, 40 students completed the survey, and five students attended the focus groups. Once the initial research was complete, we presented it to the students and asked them to

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participate in a follow-up project aimed at supporting next year's students' transition into university.

Twelve students agreed to participate in the follow-up project. It was agreed that the students would make videos depicting some of the challenges they had faced and offering solutions to these difficulties. The aim of the videos was to implement Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) four-stage plan on academic transition. We intended to create a resource which could be used to address stages 1 and 2 of Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) model for future cohorts. We aimed to produce a resource which could be viewed by prospective students before they arrived at the university, and which we could use as a tool to facilitate conversations about the intense feelings of culture shock which arise in the first few weeks of the academic programme. To do this, we worked with students at stages 3 and 4 of Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) model (engagement, adaptation and gaining confidence), inviting them to share their experiences of transition and the coping strategies they adopted. The whole project took place over one academic year.

## *Findings and discussion*

The focus groups indicated overall satisfaction with the Academic Skills course. Teachers were praised for the way they put students at ease and encouraged them. Our classes are small (around 15 students is standard), creating a nice space for interaction, and we keep in touch with the students outside of the classroom by responding rapidly to email enquiries and posting useful links which help them prepare for the next class or consolidate their learning.

### Student interaction and participation

The students in our classes often shared the same first language, which led to some challenges for participation in English. Notes from one focus group stated that 'the other students have said that they would like to say more but they feel self-conscious' because they have a shared first language'. It seems here that students' self-consciousness can

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inhibit participation. This reminded us of the 'lack of opportunity' mentioned in King's (2012) study. One focus group participant remarked that ESOL students 'don't have many opportunities to communicate with other, non-Chinese, students'. Furthermore, she noted that 'a lot of Chinese is spoken among the students', even in an English language classroom. The students' exposure to the target language is thus reduced because most, if not all, of their classmates share the same mother tongue and speak in this language even when in class. One student, keen to speak English at all times, described her 'battle' to keep speaking English in the face of some of her classmates' reluctance to do so. It is interesting to note that the apparent comfort of being in a class of compatriots can also lead to feelings of frustration that one is not fully experiencing what it means to study at a UK university. The same student said she believed some students strongly wished to say more but were hampered by shyness. This finding corroborates that of Gu and Maley (2008), who found that Chinese students often struggle with a 'habit' of not speaking unless nominated, rather than laziness or a lack of subject knowledge.

We therefore asked ourselves how we could help our students overcome their feelings of reluctance when interacting with us and each other in English. Our research revealed that although we want to encourage interaction, we are only partially succeeding at this stage. A first step might be to explore the opportunities offered by the considerable cultural differences between British and Chinese cultures. Our students are here for many other reasons than to improve their academic English and are often fascinated by the culture of their host country as well as the 'direct contact' with native speakers afforded by their classes. Over the past year, impromptu classroom discussions have centred on festivals and celebrations, the best places to eat and drink locally and ideas for day trips. At first glance, these topics have nothing to do with Academic Skills, but perhaps such brief conversations might serve to improve our students' confidence, offering them, as King (2012) says, 'enhanced opportunities for intercultural communication encounters'. King also comments that these kinds of conversations can lead to a greater level of interaction. As teachers, we can also learn from what King's study has to say about silence 'not always being passive'. He feels that students sometimes choose not to talk and, in so doing, are trying to communicate something.

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**Academic anxiety**

Many students seemed overwhelmed and uncertain at the start of the course and lacked faith in their ability to meet the requirements of various assessments. This was reflected in the focus groups:

> When I arrived here, I thought maybe I need to find someone and pay them to write my essays. (Chinese Student, F 30+).

This shock was felt in a different way by another student, who not only lacked experience of the UK HE system, but was also returning to higher education after a break of several years.

> I graduated my BA in 2015. 6/7 years I haven't been a student. It was unfamiliar, a new educational system. I had to adapt in a few weeks (Chinese Student, F 26-30).

Such comments highlight the feeling of disorientation and the need for rapid adjustment experienced by many international students, with wilful academic misconduct planned as a last resort. Fortunately, the focus groups also indicated that the Academic Skills classes were an effective way to prevent such outcomes:

> At (the) beginning of doing something I want to master everything within a very short time. It's impossible. Academic Skills classes made me know 'relax, it is a process; you have to learn step by step'. This reduced my anxiety… With the help of the Academic Skills class, I know how to write what should I include. I know just relax and everything will be done (Chinese Student, F 26-30).

> After gradually I have learned something from this module… I use all the knowledge I acquired in this course. This is the correct way to improve my confidence. After I learned something from this lesson, I learned how to write clearly (Chinese Student, F, 30+).

> We needn't worry too much about the dissertation. For each section we know clearly about structure and content (Chinese Student, F 30+).

> When anxiety is gone, it's quite easy. Anxiety was reduced gradually with help of this lesson (Chinese Student F, 30+).

The final comment is particularly encouraging because it demonstrates that the student has an awareness of the progress made in developing academic skills and language

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confidence. However, some students reported feeling under pressure even in the
Academic Skills classes:

> In today's lesson, the teacher chooses some students. At that time, we were
> nervous. Like Chinese teachers! Like a pressure for us. For me, personally, it's also
> encouraging. I learn English more. Gradually, I'm used to this atmosphere. I
> became less nervous and can express myself (Chinese Student, F 30+).

> I'm OK with answering questions but some members were shy at the beginning.
> They didn't want to answer questions. Maybe people can improve (Chinese Student
> F, 26-30).

These results were not surprising, as anxiety and stress are common among all students,
with international students frequently reporting anxiety. Two major causes are social
isolation and time management (Gibney et al.,2011), which underscores the importance to
students of feeling that they belong and that they have the opportunity to engage with their
peers. Coneyworth et al. (2020) found that a large number of international students
express confusion with the requirements of courses, and lack confidence in VLEs and
independent study, both of which are often a part of a taught postgraduate courses, and
which can add to the sense of anxiety, disorientation and culture shock experienced by
students.

**Students' sense of belonging**

Our lessons are designed to be interactive and group-based, with a variety of tasks for
students to work on together. The results from the survey we conducted in April 2022
show that a majority of students (62%) felt that the Academic Skills classes did support
their sense of belonging. Although we might have liked this figure to be higher, this does
suggest that the Academic Skills classes make some contribution to students' sense of
belonging. Moreover, in the focus group, students commented on two of the three aspects
of belonging defined by Goodenow and Grady (1993):

- **Included:** 'I really like having opportunities to interact with others. I feel like I am
  part of this. In China I just listened and got bored' (Chinese student F 21-26).

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- **Accepted:** 'The class helped me [go] from unfamiliar to familiar. It made me relaxed. [….] It was unfamiliar. New educational system/ I had to adapt in a few weeks. This class gives me company […]. The teacher gives us feedback. We can ask whatever we want/ This makes me feel comfortable, not nervous. Someone is helping me! Not just pushing me' (Chinese student F 21-26).

Carrying out this research, and the subsequent video project, led us, as a team, to discuss the notion of student belonging more deeply. We reflected that perhaps aiming for a sense of belonging amongst our students was too high an ambition. After all, master's level international students are in the UK for just one academic year, and many of the students we taught remained within the comfort zone of a mostly Chinese social group. Perhaps a more realistic goal might be, as one student put it, to support students to 'find their place' in the university for the short time that they are here. On reflection, finding your place somewhere seems to be a less fundamental shift than the change of identity which is required to feel a sense of belonging in a new place. This allows students to retain their sense of identity, but to find a place within an alien academic culture where they feel comfortable.

## Video project

Once the first stage of the research was complete, we moved on to the video project. The aim of this was to capture our students' experiences in the three research areas of participation, academic anxiety and belonging, and pass this on to the next cohort of students.

The project took place during the summer vacation, when students were working on their independent research projects (dissertations). Although they were busy with their academic work, some of them welcomed the opportunity to work together and contribute to a shared project. We arranged a meeting to share our research findings with the students and invite them to offer ideas for induction/transition videos. The meeting was attended by 12 students, two members of staff from the Graduate Students Association and four Academic Skills teachers.

After a brief presentation of the research findings, students were divided into three groups to work on scripts for three separate videos on interaction and participation, academic anxiety and belonging. By the end of the session, each group had drafted a short script and submitted it. The session ended with a commitment from the students that they would work on producing the videos over the summer with support from the teaching team, but the ownership and leadership of the video production would be theirs. The video project used a strengths-based approach (Rapp, Saleebey and Sullivan, 2012) whereby students shared their own strengths and expertise to produce a successful outcome. The only input from staff was to book rooms and source equipment. Rapp, Saleebey and Sullivan (2012) identify six key principles of the strengths-based approach:

- It is goal orientated.
- It values the individual's capacity, skills, knowledge and connections.
- It considers the individual's environment.
- It does not ignore challenges.
- It aims to facilitate co-production.
- It supports social networks and wellbeing.

The students met and worked on the videos themselves, making editorial decisions and doing all of the production. At the end of the summer, three videos were produced, which focused on the three research themes. The videos will be used to engage students pre-enrolment. We will post them online in the course pages of the MA programmes which we teach on. We will also use them during induction sessions as discussion points to start conversations with students about the importance of interaction and participation, as well as the benefits of asking questions and developing ways to overcome culture shock and develop a sense of belonging in a new place. The following section provides links to the videos and briefly describes the content of the videos.

**Video 1 [Interaction and participation](#).** In this video, three students describe their experiences of interaction and participation in class. The students describe different experiences with members of the teaching team and each other which helped them to gain the confidence to interact and participate more.

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**Video 2 Academic anxiety.** In this video, one student shares her experience of feeling very anxious while writing her assignment. She advises viewers to seek support from the Writing Centre or the Academic Skills tutor, saying that the one-to-one advice they offer reassured her and made her feel more confident.

**Video 3 Student belonging.** In this video, three students share examples of when they felt a sense of belonging at university. For one, it was an invitation to Christmas lunch with a local family through membership of the Christian Students' Society. For another, it was as a result of her voluntary participation in a student-led conference, and for the final contributor, it was her experience of a tutor staying behind after class to answer her questions.

## Reasons for success

There has been much written in the literature on students as co-creators and on achieving student ownership of projects (Cook-Sather, 2014; Bergmark and Westman, 2016; Deeley and Bovill, 2017). Having worked in different higher education settings over many years and in a variety of countries, we know that it can often be a significant challenge to really empower students to take ownership of a project. However, this project did achieve that, so we want to reflect on some of the possible reasons for this.

*Clear goals*

The project had clear goals, which were communicated to students. The students all studied on Education programmes, including MA TESOL, MA Global and International Citizenship Education, MA Education, MA Social Justice and Education, and MSc Psychology in Education. The fact that they were studying Education meant that they were likely to already be interested in the goals of the project. Some students had even chosen dissertation research questions with a similar focus. Our post-production interviews also revealed that students felt that the transferable skills they were developing might serve as a springboard into employment. One of the students commented, *'*maybe this programme will doing some help for my future job'*.* Another factor was that all of the students involved in the video project were international. They had recently been through the process of

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culture shock and acclimatisation to the UK, and to higher education in the UK, so they had experience of the challenges this entails, and they shared the goal of making this easier for the next intake of students.

*Capacities, skills, knowledge and connections*

The video project used the students' existing skills and knowledge. They established one student as leader (she directed the videos) and appointed another student to support her and liaise with the rest of the team. These two students worked closely with the other students to ensure the success of the project. The two students occupying these roles led the work and gained the trust and cooperation of the rest of the team. The work of these two students was crucial to the successful completion of the project because they sustained interest and commitment to finishing the task. It became apparent that the two students' skills complemented each other – one was task-driven with considerable technical know-how, whilst the other used her emotional intelligence to get the best out of her team and motivate them if they felt discouraged. As she said in our interview: 'I think I kind of communicate with the members more […] I will notice if there's some problem with the members'. The rest of the team offered their experiences and ideas, and volunteered either to take part in the video production or to provide equipment. Students discussed the roles that they were willing to undertake to complete the project. Some students were reluctant to be in front of the camera, but others were willing to do this. Over the course of the next eight weeks, the students took full control of the project.

*Environment*

The students worked together on the videos in an environment of collaboration. They agreed on the script and then worked together to produce a video. They shared expertise in areas such as directing, technical know-how, video editing and sound editing. They also shared equipment such as phone tripods and power packs. The students who were confident enough to be in front of the camera played their roles, while those more comfortable behind the camera also made valuable contributions. They used WeChat (a popular Chinese social media app) to communicate with each other and to arrange meetings.

The reality of an international classroom composed almost entirely of Chinese learners came to the fore in the post-video interviews. This time, it led to some doubts on the students' part as to whether the videos would resonate with a non-Chinese audience. One remarked: 'We have made a Chinese environment for these (prospective) students (in the videos)'. Responding to the teacher's prompt: 'So it will help their sense of belonging?', the other student said: 'Yes, but only for Chinese students'. They went on to acknowledge that widening the reach of the videos would require the participation of student actors from other countries, although they said 'it would be much more harder to work together'. It was clear from the ensuing discussion that the 'cultural shorthand' on which they were able to draw had helped our students complete their task on time. This was because, when time was short, the students did not need to waste time explaining things to one another.

*Support from staff*

As mentioned earlier, we as a teaching team had built strong relationships with the students over the academic year. We taught them weekly in small groups over 30 weeks. This sustained contact and built feelings of trust and closeness. In the interviews after the videos were made, one student alluded to this relationship of mutual trust and respect between her and her teacher, stressing that she did not want to let her teacher down: 'We have promised, so I promise you I can do that, so I have to do it'. At the scriptwriting session, staff were present to facilitate the process, but students were given autonomy to discuss their experiences and come up with original scripts based on this. Staff support for the project was hands-off once the aims and objectives had been established in the initial script writing session. The students self-organised all of their subsequent meetings and made all of the decisions about the video content. Many of the comments that we received from students indicate that the teacher's role in developing students' sense of belonging is of vital importance.

*Improved social connections and sense of belonging*

Although some of the students knew each other before the project started, some had not met before because they had been in different classes. However, during the process of the video project, they got to know each other better and they shared contact details, enabling

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them to meet up on agreed days and times. The student who took on the role of video director wrote thanking the teaching team for allowing them to work on the project:

> I would like to thank you for giving us this opportunity to be involved in this program. This was my first attempt at this style of video and we had a lot of fun with the program and I'm sure not only I but the rest of the team members will agree that this project has added a lot of excitement to their lives over the last few weeks that they have never tried before.

## *Conclusion*

This research project aimed to find out more about three elements of international postgraduate students' experience. Firstly, we wanted to learn about their interaction and participation while speaking English. Our findings suggest that, over time, students can be encouraged to interact and participate in English by building relationships of trust with their peers and teachers. However, despite our considerable efforts, we also found that some students remained silent throughout the year. Nevertheless, these students reported that their silence should not be interpreted as non-participation. Secondly, our research indicates that students can be supported in overcoming considerable academic anxiety if we, the teachers, help them to address the early stages of culture shock and recognise the disorientation that they experience as a consequence of moving into a different academic context. Finally, students' sense of belonging can be enhanced by activities in and out of the classroom. However, over the course of the research and project phase, we reflected in greater depth on the term 'belonging', and we have come to accept that a more realistic aim might be for international PGT students to 'find their place' in the university.

The video project enabled us to work with students in a holistic way. Quan, He and Sloan's (2016) model for successful transition helped us to understand the students' whole-year cycle. This enabled us to think, not just about the incoming students' first few weeks and how we can support their transition (stages 1 and 2 of Quan, He and Sloan's model), but also about how we can acknowledge the value of the outgoing students' experience and provide them with meaningful tasks which enable them to share their ideas and learning

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(stages 3 and 4 of Quan, He and Sloan's model). Giving students ownership of the project meant that they could direct it and work to their strengths. We hoped this would give them a tangible sense of belonging because they were genuinely valued, included, accepted and encouraged. However, Thomas's report (2012) on student belonging reminded us that it is not so much the type of intervention or approach which is important in creating a sense of belonging, but rather the intention behind it and its intended outcomes which support student belonging. As well as the aim to teach students academic skills, our intentions as a teaching team were to help students to make positive connections with one other and us.

## Acknowledgements

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