



# Tools to Support International Student Transitions

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# Overview



- What is a successful transition?
- What challenges do transitioning international students face?
- What tools can we use to support international student transitions?
  - Setting expectations with the **culture shock U-curve**
  - Promoting slow thinking skills with **Critical Incident Exercises**
  - Providing appropriate **language tuition**
  - Providing opportunities for **relationship-building**
- When and where can support be offered?
  - Orientation sessions
  - Online short courses/Pre-sessional courses
  - Modules and in-sessional support
  - Personal tutoring system



## Successful transition

- Succeeding in academic study; developing a strong social network
- Integration

	<b>++ Maintenance of origin culture/identity --</b>	
<b>++ Seeking relationships with other groups --</b>	Integration	Assimilation
	Separation	Marginalization

Adapted from Sam and Berry (2010)

# Challenges



- Culture shock
- Intercultural misunderstandings
- Language skills not sufficient for academic success or social integration
- Lack of social connections/belonging

## Culture shock



*“Students attending universities in a culture different from their own have to contend with novel social and educational organisations, behaviours and expectations... The collective impact of such unfamiliar experiences on cultural travellers in general has been termed ‘culture shock’.”*

(Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008)

# Culture shock



- “U curve” model widely promoted; originally published by Lysgaard (1955)
- Some variations in stages, but one example is:
  1. Honeymoon
  2. Crisis
  3. Recovery
  4. Adjustment

<https://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/living/cultural>
- U curve model has been critiqued – J-curve also suggested (Collins, Dailey-Strand, & Callaghan, 2021)

# Intercultural misunderstandings



- May occur if international students rely on the norms of their origin culture to interpret meaning
- However, relatively few misunderstandings in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context may be due to this – ambiguity in utterances may be more important (Kaur, 2011)

# Intercultural misunderstandings



## **Scenario:** *Direct vs Indirect Communication Styles*

In Czech higher education, teachers and students often communicate directly and value concise, straightforward feedback. For international students from cultures with a more indirect communication style (e.g., some Asian or Middle Eastern cultures), this can be perceived as abrupt or even rude. When professors give critical feedback, students from indirect communication backgrounds may feel offended, believing they are being personally criticized. Meanwhile, Czech professors may find these students' responses overly polite or non-committal, misunderstanding them as a lack of confidence or clarity.

- *Adapted from OpenAI (2024)*



## Language skills not sufficient



- Problems engaging with reading
- Difficulty writing assignments
- Difficulty participating in seminar discussions
- Unable to communicate well enough to build strong relationships with peers

## Lack of social connections



- May feel a lack of “belonging”/disconnected from the university community
- May have a negative effect on mental health



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# What tools can we use to support international student transitions?



## Setting expectations with the culture shock U-curve

- Introduce students to the U (or J) curve before or at the start of their studies
- Key focus = setting expectation that there **will** be challenges, but that these can be overcome
- Possible activities:
  - Students consider what support (if any) they might need at each stage, and where to access this
  - Students create an action plan to help a fictional international student at the “crisis” stage



## **Activity: create a three-point action plan for the student described below (state assumptions)**

### **Initial Excitement**

Anna, a 20-year-old student from Brazil, arrived in Prague, Czechia, three months ago to study at Charles University. Initially, she was thrilled, enchanted by the historic architecture, new friends, and freedom of studying abroad.

### **Growing Frustration**

As weeks passed, simple tasks like grocery shopping or taking public transport became challenging due to her limited Czech. Everyday interactions, which felt direct or even cold, left her feeling disconnected from classmates and uncomfortable in public settings.

### **Crisis Stage of Culture Shock**

Now, Anna feels intense homesickness. She misses the warmth and expressiveness of Brazilian culture, from friendly interactions to familiar foods. Seeing her friends' social media posts back home, she questions if studying abroad was the right choice and wonders if she'll ever feel at ease in her new environment.

- *(OpenAI, 2024)*

# Promoting slow thinking skills with Critical Incident Exercises (CIEs)



- CIE = story with misunderstanding/problem/puzzle + question(s)
- “*Cultural assimilators*” and “*encounter exercises*” (Snow, 2015)
- Encounter exercises intended to promote slow/system 2 thinking skills (Kahneman, 2011)
- These can:
  - Help students deal with unfamiliar situations
  - Highlight possible challenges students may face
  - Integrate well into language classes

## Example CIE



**Situation:** Xiao Li has become friends with a group of Western students at his school in China, and one day they invite him to go out to a bar at a Western-style hotel. Xiao Li willingly accepts the invitation. When they first get to the bar, some of the students talk to Xiao Li, asking him what he thinks of the fancy hotel and bar. However, soon they begin talking just to each other, making jokes Xiao Li doesn't understand and speaking English so quickly that Xiao Li can't follow the conversation. For a long time Xiao Li just sits there silently. Finally, Xiao Li tells the group he needs to get back to school and then leaves.

**Question:** Why didn't the Western students make more of an effort to include Xiao Li in their conversation? (Be sure to explain the behaviour of the Western students, rather than why Xiao Li had trouble understanding.)

**Task:** Come up with at least *five* possible explanations.

- (*Snow, 2015*)

## Czechia-based CIE Activity



**Situation:** Sarah, an international student from Canada, is studying in Czechia. One day after her lecture, she approaches her professor to ask about some points she didn't understand in the class. She notices that the professor and other Czech students seem to keep more distance than she's used to and don't engage in small talk.

After she asks her question, the professor gives a brief and to-the-point answer, without offering additional elaboration or asking if she needs further clarification. Sarah also notices that the professor doesn't make much eye contact and quickly moves on to other tasks, almost as if they are dismissing her.

Feeling unsure, Sarah walks away, wondering if she had done something wrong or if her question was unwelcome.

**Question:** Why did the professor behave in the way they did? Focus on explaining the behaviour of the professor, rather than Sarah's behaviour.

**Task:** Come up with at least *five* possible explanations.

- *Adapted from OpenAI (2024)*





## Some CIE topics used at St Andrews

- Making small talk before a lecture
- Expectations about queuing
- Sharing work with peers
- Discussion about the division of tasks for a group project

Also see a new online project to collate CIEs:

<https://culturalcounterexercises.wordpress.com/>

# Providing appropriate language tuition



- Needs analysis
- Consider
  - Which languages?
  - Which domains?
  - What level?
- Language for academic purposes informed by likely future academic usage
- Language for general usage informed by likely day-to-day tasks/interactions

# Providing opportunities for relationship-building



- With staff, international peers and home students
- Provide regular opportunities to meet with staff
- Support student-led social events
- Consider novel approaches (e.g. students as researchers to investigate why they don't feel a sense of belonging)
- *“Cross-cultural adjustment is benefited when sojourners develop social support networks that are relationship-oriented (i.e., socio-emotional), diverse in nationality, and include host-nationals.” (Shu, Ahmed, Pickett, Ayman, & McAbee, 2020)*



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# When and where can support be offered?

# Orientation sessions



- Pre-departure or post-arrival
- CIE-type scenario discussions used previously for students at a Japanese university who were studying abroad
- Culture shock U-curve can also be introduced
- Can be challenging to create time in a traditional orientation week
- ...but these activities can help facilitate peer communication
- Also consider “long” orientation approach

## Online short courses/Pre-sessional courses



- Can include focus on intercultural communication skills and language skills
- May be fee-based courses, or offered for free
- Offer an opportunity for students with a similar profile (e.g. need additional language study) to meet before their main programme starts

## Modules and in-sessional support



- Language modules may be able to integrate culture shock U-curve and/or CIEs
- English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules may also tailor teaching by discipline (e.g practice at XJTLU, St Andrews)
- In-sessional support can allow students to access extra tutorials and workshops to support with language/academic skills

## Personal tutoring system



- Allows students to build a pastoral relationship with a named staff member
- Can also allow signposting from staff to other relevant support services
- Consider frequency and mode (online/in-person) of meetings
- Consider the purpose of each meeting
- At St Andrews, moved to fewer and longer meetings, each with a specific purpose
- Can be challenging for staff to know when to signpost for students who are struggling – training is required



# Summary of key points



- International students face multiple challenges integrating into their new environments
- **Models of culture shock** can help set expectations, and plan how to find support when needed
- **CIEs** can develop system 2/slow thinking skills, which are important for navigating intercultural communication
- **Language tuition** is important, and should respond to student needs
- Facilitating **relationship-building** is important to enhance students' sense of belonging
- The above can be covered through orientation sessions, short courses, modules and in-session support
- Personal tutoring systems, social events and student research projects can help build social connections and belonging

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# Additional intercultural misunderstanding scenario



## Scenario: Grading Systems and Feedback Expectations

An international student from the United States is studying at a Czech university. In the U.S., academic feedback is often comprehensive, with detailed comments on assignments, regular grades provided for each task, and a generally more interactive classroom environment. The student is accustomed to this system and relies on frequent, detailed feedback to measure their academic progress.

However, in the Czech Republic, the academic culture might be less focused on continuous assessment. Feedback may be less frequent, more succinct, or provided only if a student explicitly requests it. Moreover, grades in Czech universities might be distributed on a stricter scale where high grades are less commonly awarded, reflecting a different academic norm.

**Misunderstanding:** The U.S. student submits several assignments and receives minimal feedback with satisfactory or slightly above-average grades without detailed explanations. The student perceives this as a sign of poor performance or disinterest from the professor, feeling increasingly frustrated and unsure about how to improve or adapt.

- *Adapted from OpenAI (2024) – Jun 16, 2024*

# Additional culture shock U-curve crisis stage scenario



**Background:** Lena, a 21-year-old from South Korea, is five months into her Master's program in International Business in Prague.

**Initial Excitement:** Initially, Lena was captivated by Prague's charm and the university's vibrant student life. She enjoyed exploring local customs and the city itself.

**Crisis Stage:** As the novelty wore off, challenges surfaced. Lena struggles with the Czech language, making daily tasks and interactions stressful. Academically, the independent and unstructured teaching style contrasts sharply with her experiences in South Korea. She receives little feedback, and group projects often leave her sidelined due to language barriers.

**Social Isolation:** Socially, Lena feels isolated. Efforts to connect with classmates falter as she navigates cultural differences and cliques, exacerbating her sense of loneliness.

**Emotional Impact:** Facing homesickness and anxiety, Lena doubts her decision to study abroad. The excitement has given way to a struggle with adjustment, marking her deep immersion in the crisis stage of culture shock.

- *Adapted from OpenAI (2024) – Jun 16, 2024*

## Additional Czechia-based CIE



**Situation:** Maria, an international student from Brazil, has recently arrived in Czechia to pursue her Master's degree. She is eager to integrate into the local culture and make new friends.

One afternoon, Maria is in the university cafeteria when she meets Jan, a local Czech student. They start chatting about their courses, and the conversation seems to be going well. However, when Maria asks Jan about his weekend plans, he responds with a brief, "I'll just be with my family," and then changes the topic back to their studies.

Maria feels confused and a bit rejected by his abrupt response.

**Question:** Why did Jan behave in the way they did? Focus on explaining Jan's behaviour, rather than Maria's behaviour.

**Task:** Come up with at least *five* possible explanations.

- *Adapted from OpenAI (2024) – Jun 16, 2024*

