Pilots Completion Report

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Project Team

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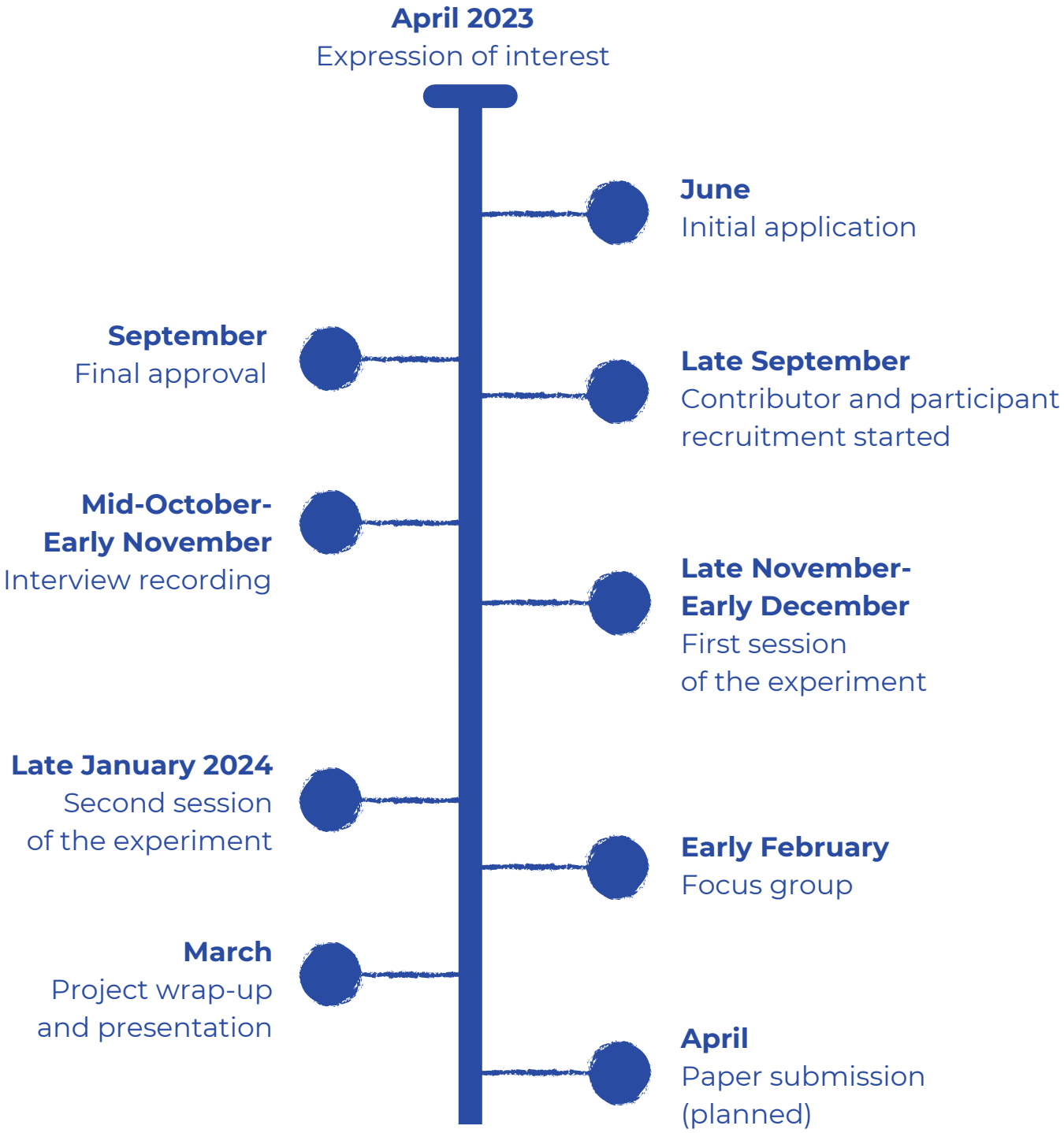
Project Timeline



SUMMARY

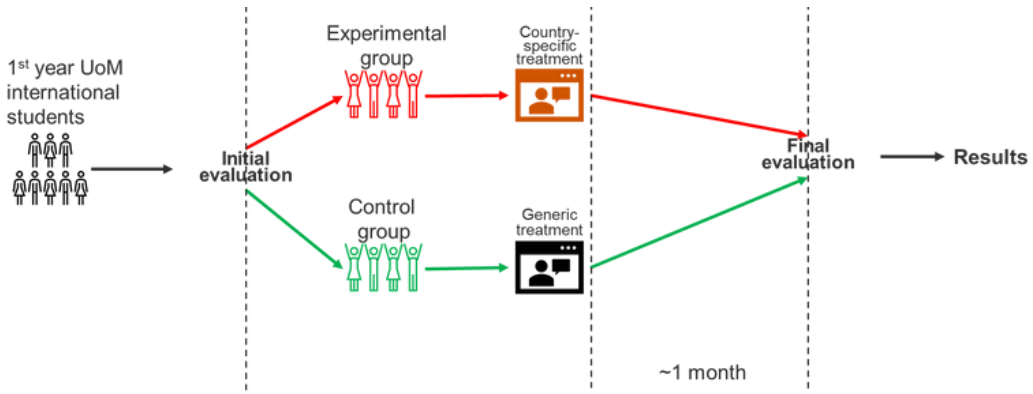
This Flexible Learning Pilot (FLP ID-41 from here onwards) has successfully tested the viability of creating an online peer support database for international students at the University of Manchester.

Overall Pilot Rating: Fully Delivered

A full-scale solution would include interviews with current international students uploaded on a secure drive, to be used as a part of pre-arrival and ongoing academic support resource for new international students from the same countries. The goal of the solution would be to build on the commonality of previous experiences and provide new international students relatable, current, and actionable ways to adapt to the UK academic requirements, enabling them to get grades based on merit rather than familiarity with the local educational system.

FLP ID-41 featured a smaller scale version of that solution **implemented as a controlled experiment** in which the first-year students were exposed to the video interviews of second- and third-year students, and the resulting change in their self-efficacy and grades was measured (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Experiment design



In October-November, interviews with second- and third-year students were recorded, edited, and uploaded on a secure drive. The questions interviewer asked focused on what the students found surprising and different studying in the UK in comparison to their country of origin, how they navigated those differences, and what would they do differently with the benefit of hindsight (the general themes coded from those interviews are presented in Appendix 3).

The first-year international students (undergraduate and post-graduate) were invited to participate in the experiment and separated into two groups: control and experimental. Both groups were asked to fill in a self-efficacy questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for the full questionnaire). The experimental group watched an interview with the student from their own country, and the control group watched a generic video about starting out at university (similar in structure to the experimental videos). The participants were invited back one month later to fill in the questionnaire again, and were asked to provide their current grades.

The experiment indicated **a significant increase in language/communicational aspect of self-efficacy** (LCASE in figure 2 and table 1). Thus, the pilot provided a robust rationale for introducing this system on a university-wide scale to improve international students' experience at university.

Figure 2. Experiment results

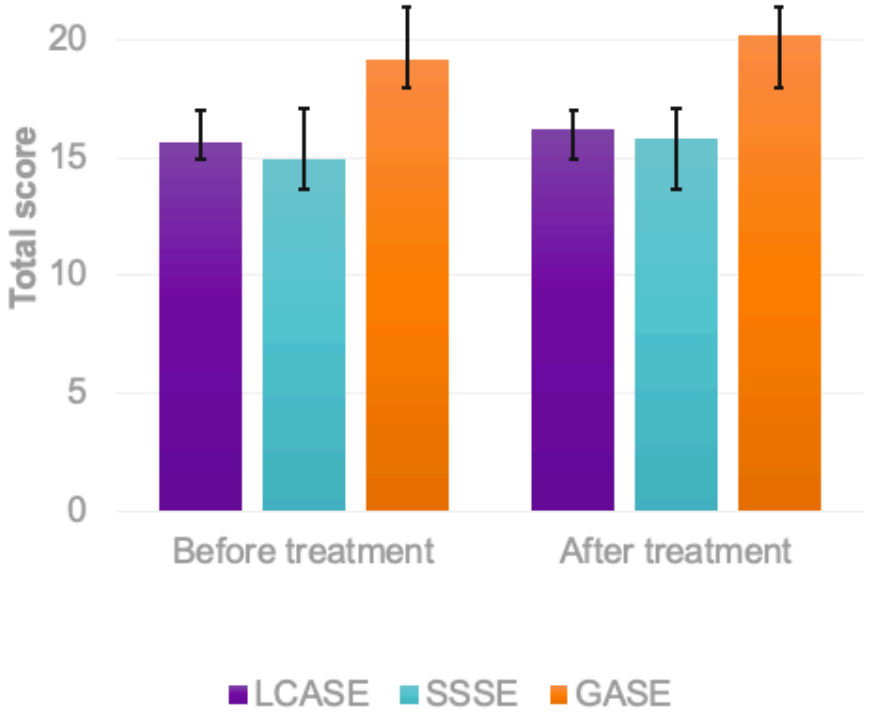


Table 1. Experiment results summary

Concept	Increase from measurement 1 to measurement 2	Increase in experimental group vs control
Community acceptance SE (CASE)	No	No
Language/ Communicative ability SE (LCASE)	**Yes**	**Yes**
Academic ability SE (AASE)	No	No
Study skills SE (SSSE)	Yes	No
General academic SE (GACE)	Yes	No

Below, we discuss how the project has met its objectives.

Objectives:

1) to improve self-efficacy and grades of international students by making them more aware of the differences in educational systems, reduce potential stress from not understanding the requirements

The pilot showed that the proposed solution is a good way to improve international students' self-efficacy. No significant results were shown for grades. However, previous studies in pedagogical literature indicate a strong connection between self-efficacy and grades, thus we believe the lack of significant results in this area might be due to the limitations experiment design (e.g. the timing of or between measurements), and thus not fully indicative of the potential effects of the solution.

1.1) Before the beginning of the academic year, create 20 videos from the second- and third-year students representing 3-4 countries pointing out differences between the UK and those counties' education systems and their own ways to bridge those differences

This objective was fulfilled with **24 videos delivered.** However, due to delays caused by the the approval and recruitment periods, the recording of the videos had to be carried out rather late (see timeline), and delayed the experiment. Reflections on the ways this and other delays mentioned in this section could have been avoided are discussed in the Lessons Learned section.

1..2) Give the first-year students access to the videos made by students from the same country

This objective was **not fully delivered due to problems with recruitment**. Out of 200 participants that the team had expected, only ~60 ended up taking part in the experiment.

1.3) First year students' self-efficacy is measured in the beginning of the year and at the end of the first semester; self-efficacy and grades are compared for the experimental group and the control group

This objective was **fully delivered.** Some interpretation of grades had to be done by the research team as students from different programs are assessed on different scales. The **non-treatment (i.e. no access to video) condition was replaced with a generic video condition** to comply with university research ethics.

2) To inform education providers about the rarely talked about differences in educational systems in different countries, enabling them to create more inclusive classrooms

This objective was fully delivered. **The focus group** included academic staff from **different faculties**, a mix of males and females (**4 male, 5 female**), and **a mix of early-career, mid-career, and late-career academics**. Limitations and adjustments for the full-scale solution, such as not relying on the university login for students before arrival and informing HNAP with the material from the database were suggested by the academics.

3) To identify directions of interventions for future research on education of international students

This objective was **fully delivered**. FLP ID-41 showed that vicarious self-efficacy through observing others is a viable direction of future research, while building engagement funnel is an important practical implication of the study.

DELIVERABLES

FLP ID-4 had 4 work packages, all of which were delivered.

WP 1

Delivered, on a secure drive

Videos and transcripts (Content necessary for experiment Recording and editing videos, storing them in a secure folder, transcribing them for the staff focus group)

WP 2

Delivered, on a secure drive, will be shared as a part of Open Science requirement

Focus group data (A focus group with academics to assess the usefulness of the database)

WP 3

Delivered, on a secure drive, will be shared as a part of Open Science requirement

Experimental data (students' self-efficacy and grades)

WP 4

Delivered

Final Report and Academic Paper (in preparation for submission to Studies in Higher Education (CABS 3*)

Materials and publications

1. Final report
2. Presentation at the Behavioural Lab Seminar Series (06/03/2024)
3. Presentation at the AMBS T&L meeting (27/03/2024)
4. Academic paper in preparation for submission to Studies in Higher Education (CABS 3*), full draft available on request

KEY DELIVERY CRITERIA

This section will address how FLP ID-41 has delivered upon the 5 key criteria of flexible learning pilot programme.

01

Relevance

Target: **high relevance**. The goal of the project was to reach the main stakeholder group (international students); propose improvements to current academic support system.

Result: **The project was proven to be extremely relevant**. It demonstrably showed the proposed solution's ability to meet the needs of the main intended stakeholder **(international students)**, and its viability as a pioneering solution for international student support that so far has no analogues in the UK.
The focus group has also shown the project's relevance to the secondary stakeholder group **(academic staff)** as a way to raise emotional intelligence and potential useful information for staff training at programs such as HNAP or academic advisor training. In general, the focus group participants considered the database to be a potentially useful resource for all academics, as well as a way to normalise peer advice among students.
One of the focus group participants mentioned that a similar solution (a peer support forum) exists in some Chinese universities and is widely used by students, but moderation is an issue. For a managed solution such as FLP ID-41 proposed it would not be a problem.
Presentation at AMBS T&L meeting has also indicated very high relevance of the pilot for the **school and university as a whole**, especially given the large proportion of the international students in UoM cohorts.

Based on the acknowledgement of the project's relevance across the stakeholder groups, the project team recommends introduction of the full-fledged solution for the benefit of both students and the staff.

KEY DELIVERY CRITERIA

02 Efficiency

Target: **no immediate efficiency gains due to limited scale.** The pilot should have indicated a clear way to improve the efficiency of resourcing with some effort to be shared with the students as opposed to solely relying on academics' time.

Result: **The project shown some efficiency, overdelivering on the target.** The positive significant results of the experiment indicate that experimental group of students has experienced increase in communicative (or language) self-efficacy, thus we can conclude that the intervention, albeit small, has improved on the current student support system.
The feedback at the Behavioural Laboratory Seminar has suggested a way to further improve efficiency: when the team is obtaining funding to implement the proposed solution on a wider scale, we will liaise with the Flexible Learning Programmes and pedagogy academics to potentially hire a researcher or fund a PhD on the topic of international students. This person could be put in charge of maintaining the database while also drawing on it for their research. Further efficiencies could be obtained by using the database as material for HNAP and academic advisor training sessions as proposed by the focus group participants.

03 Effectiveness

Target: WP 1 resources to be used as teaching materials in BMAN10780 module (Academic and Career Development), in the Welcome Week lecture as well as transnational and post-professional students with AMBS on the courses such as Leadership for Development and Financial Management as well as MSc in IME.

Result: **In progress.** Students who contributed their testimonies for the study have been contacted to allow the use of their testimonies for teaching purposes. There is interest from BMAN10780 module coordinator and IME MSc programme in using the materials next year. Further discussion about using the materials for the Welcome Week will be held following up on the AMBS T&L meeting.

KEY DELIVERY CRITERIA

04 Outcome

Target: **to carry out all the planned activities** (WPs 1-3) with the planned/sufficient number of participants. Positive outcomes for the participants, both international students who are part of the experiment (increased self-efficacy and grades) and for the faculty members who will discuss the interviews in a focus group (increased cultural awareness), are possible. No unintended outcomes (positive or negative) were expected due to the limited scope of the pilot.

Result: **almost full completion.** FLP ID-41 led to some improvements for the international students (one dimension of self-efficacy, but no outcome on grades). **No unintended negative outcomes occurred for either experimental or control group** as the questionnaires indicated that there is no self-efficacy item that decreased from the first to the second measurement period in either group.
For the members of the faculty, there were some interesting results in terms of cultural awareness: some focus group participants remarked that they did not expect international students whose first language was English to experience difficulties studying in the UK. For the early career academics the findings were somewhat revealing and helpful to understand their students, however, for late career academics the findings were only confirming their experiences with international students.
The recruitment difficulties led to the smaller than planned amount of experiment participants. However, **all activities were carried out with the sufficient number of participant.**

05 Sustainability

Target: **no sustainability consequences** due to the limited scope of the project. The pilot relied on existing facilities available at the University of Manchester (Behavioural Research Laboratory) and was not going to create any additional resources for reuse.

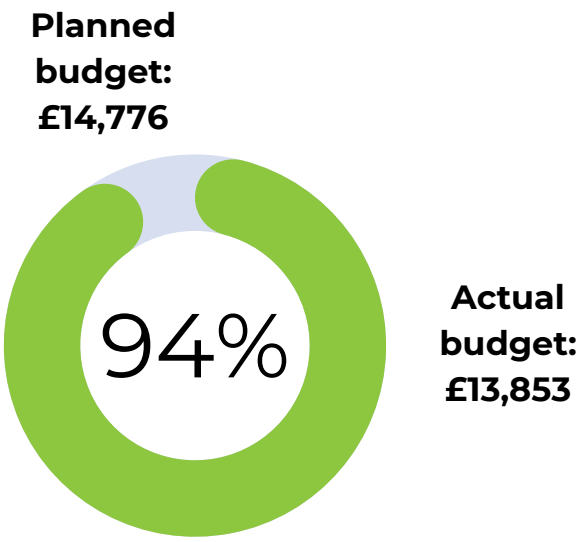
Result: **the project went as expected.** No additional resources impacting sustainability, bar the space on university secure drive, were created. Some highly impactful behavioural and operational difficulties were identified and are detailed in the Lessons Learned section.

FINANCIAL

Due to problems with recruitment, FLP ID-41 has not reached the target number of participants. This led to a restructuring of the budget: the study had to go over the budget in booking the lab hours and the researcher's time, but ended up under budget for compensations. Full financial report can be seen in Appendix 1. The major changes included:

- Videographer costs were removed as the FLP ID-41 team was told the local resource area team does videography for free.
- Several minor expenses were added (stationery and catering). They should have been budgeted for in advance, but the pilot team did not foresee those expenses arising. The details are in Lessons Learned section.
- The team purchased vouchers worth £2,000 for contributors and experiment participants. Due to the recruitment problems, £930 worth of vouchers remained unused. They were transferred to the Behavioural Research Laboratory to be used in other experiments with accordance to the university policy. The money for those vouchers were returned to the pilot's P code.

Figure 3. Budget spent



LESSONS LEARNED

Systems and process

1. **Approval times.** The approval time for the pilot was longer than the team expected (over summer and stretching into September), while some of the required documentation (such as letter of award) arrived much later than the pilot was approved. We understand that the FLP project is very new and many things are getting figured out in real time, therefore we don't think that some processes need to be changed as those are 'growing pains' that have been largely overcome by the time the FLP ID-41 ended. The only thing we would suggest is a reminder to all applicants to **take approval times into consideration** for planning their pilots, especially if they are time-sensitive and need to take part in a particular time of the year. A **guidance on how long the pilot might take** would also help: for instance, just stating that a pilot does not have to take place within a single academic or financial year, what is the expected scale of impact, or if it can or cannot be paused, would help with planning.
2. **Application and reporting forms.** The application form has very specific terms in it (e.g. the 5 delivery criteria) that are not easy to address for people who are not familiar with the FLP goals and terminology, as well as with the specificities of different streams. Our team would suggest a **more detailed guidance pre-application** to improve upon this element. It can be in a form of a recorded seminar or a workshop delivered by a member of FLP team as a way of gauging interest in future applications.
3. **Ongoing support.** Our team has found the ongoing support for our project **extremely helpful.** The FLP team was very engaged and gave us multiple opportunities to raise issues that we've faced in calls, on Teams and over emails, and always responded very quickly with actions and updates.
4. **Finance.** Apart from normal deviation in costs (for instance, transcription costs that are determined by a subcontractor), our team had not budgeted for several non-staff costs such as Catering and Stationery. We consider it an easily avoidable oversight on our part. In future, **instead of** approaching budgeting as a whole with the thought of 'what we need' and **adding items** we need, we would approach it as a list of items, go across them one by one with the question 'will we have this', i.e. **eliminating items** we definitely don't need. This will reduce the risk of forgetting some minor items.

LESSONS LEARNED

5. **Recruitment.** Recruitment of participants was the most problematic process for us. We have ramped up our efforts gradually, starting with posters in every building across the university, advertising through Behavioural Research Laboratory mailing list, asking the lecturers of the largest courses we knew to advertise the study in their lectures, and a team member going to the lectures and advertising them in person. When that did not produce a required amount of participants, we asked AMBS student support, student communication coordinators, FLP programme members and Masood Entrepreneurship Centre to help promoting the study. We have attempted contacting student societies, but they were not responding to our messages (see Student Experience section). We have learned three main lessons from this experience. First, if possible, **projects should not be targeting a specific group of students** (such as first-year students, students of a specific program, international students, etc.), as any grouping reduces the potential pool of participants. Second, our largest drop-out was from the sign-ups to the first session of the experiment. We believe the reason behind it was us advertising early, but having to delay the experiment until we could get enough contributors. So, people who signed up in September lost their interest by the end of October. Thus, in the future, we would aim to **advertise a voluntary project no earlier than 2-3 weeks in advance**. We would also aim to **eliminate interdependencies between project parts** as a delay in one could cause a domino effect on other parts. Finally, in the future we would go with the **all-out advertising from the get-go**, given the reducing levels of student participation year-on-year (as evidenced from one of our team member's experience of running other similar projects).

Incentives and capacity

1. **FLP programme positioning.** FLP programme is positioned solely as a way to improve current teaching activities. While there are some differences between doing a study vs a current teaching change, such as in approvals or ethics, one does not necessarily exclude another. As research is very important for early career academics, we believe our pilot shows that **allowing pedagogical studies** to be done within the programme remit could be beneficial for the programme's attractiveness to young academics who need both teaching and research for their career progression or probation requirements.

LESSONS LEARNED

Policy and strategy

1. **Information about the programme.** Across FLP ID-41, we have found that very few people across the university are familiar with FLP programme and are aware of the nature of funding it provides and the project it supports. Thus, **accounting office** required additional explanation of what the funding is for and where it is from. Furthermore, at the team's school (AMBS), most programme directors were somewhat confused as to what is FLP and its scope in relation to current teaching activities and required additional explanation from the team. It would be helpful for the programme to do additional presentations for academics with managerial responsibilities for them to be better informed about the programme, **its key contacts, as well to have a webpage with current projects** for the pilot owners to link back to.
2. **Ethics.** Ethical and IGRR approval **take a very long time and require an extremely detailed information** about any and all aspects of a study, down to every email that would be sent as a part of the project. As the current university policy regarding ethics is unlikely to change, we will keep that in mind ourselves and advise any other pilot owners to **take those times into consideration**. An additional complication from ethics is that due to the rigidity of the possible ways of advertising a study, if a pilot suggests voluntary participation of the students, **the sign-up process is significantly complicated** by the ethics procedure. Thus, students have to be shown the full consent form and GDPR disclaimer before signing up. As most students sign up for things on the go (by scanning QR codes or following links), most don't have the time to read through a wall of text and end up not signing up. This is something to keep in mind for us in the future and for other teams engaging in similar projects.

Student experience

1. **Willingness to participate.** We have found 2nd and 3rd year international students very willing to participate and share their experiences with the 1st year students. Contrary to our expectations, **being filmed was not an issue for the students**, most agreed to provide their name, and only a couple asked for a retake to formulate their thoughts better. The informal feedback was overwhelmingly positive: the first thing almost every contributor had said, unprompted, was ***"I wish something like that was available in my first year"***. Such reaction indicated that existing students can be engaged in helping the new students in more ways than they currently are. Moreover, the first year students who attended the sessions and watched the videos made extensive notes and rewatched it, indicating high engagement and usefulness of the advice.

LESSONS LEARNED

2. **Project length.** Given the high drop-off rate (almost 50%) from recruitment to the first session of the experiment, we were worried that first-year students would not participate in the second session. However, the dropout there was minimal (about 10%). Thus, the students who have taken part in the first session in October were willing to return for the second session in February. We don't know if the reason behind it was that they were getting paid only after the second session or because they were interested in taking part. Nevertheless, our experience shows that **students don't mind long projects**, and we would not suggest other potential pilots to aim for shorter time span for the fear of drop-off.
3. **Student societies.** Following our risk mitigation plan outlined in the application, upon facing recruitment issues we reached out to all international student societies to ask for their help in promoting the study. **None of them responded to our messages.** We were surprised to see such a lack of engagement and could not establish the reason behind it, but we would not advise future projects to rely on student societies for engagement and participation.

Physical Estate

1. **Available facilities.** Working on the project, our team has discovered that some facilities are available to us free of charge, such as podcast room at AMBS with professional video and voice recording and broadcasting equipment. We would advise any future pilot teams to **inquire at the facilities teams across the university for any specialised equipment** availability as the university has multiple diverse facilities across the campus and their availability is not something university staff is usually informed about.
2. **Available human hours.** In sharp contrast to physical assets, we strongly advise against relying on any university-provided time as other teams' priorities change unpredictably. Thus, in the course of our project, we relied on one local resource area team to edit our videos, but a week before we needed those videos, we were unable to make contact the team, possibly due to their other commitments, and so the pilot owner had to edit the videos herself. For this reason, we advise future teams not to rely on resource always being outside the team, unless this had been clearly (and ideally contractually) agreed in advance. Our suggestion is to ideally **complete the required tasks within the project team where possible.**

LESSONS LEARNED

Culture

1. **All-round support.** Our team was pleasantly surprised by the amount of support we were finding across the university, both in our own department and school and outside. With the exception of one local resource area, every team we contacted was very responsive and helpful. The marketing team has found out about our project from the Student Support and offered to advertise our project on their own initiative, without us approaching them. It was a great experience, and speaks to a **strong collegial spirit at UoM**. That being said, having received limited support from several programme directors due to their high workload with current teaching, the project team mostly contacted teams directly dealing with students. As they know their functions and limitations better than us, they were able to advise us on alternative contacts or help us directly. Staff with managerial responsibilities generally are too busy to get into the details of unsolicited requests from other departments. At the same time, student support teams and marketing support teams, while limited in time, have multiple people who potentially can respond to queries. Thus, for other projects coordination we recommend seeking **horizontal rather than vertical connections.**

NEXT STEPS

Managerial implications and recommendations for AMBS and UoM

01

Database introduction

Based on the results of the experiment, we recommend introducing the database on full scale. This can be done in collaboration with admissions team and a pedagogy PhD or Flexible Learning fellow who is interested in studying international students to manage and fill the database, while also using it for their studies.

02

Build engagement funnel

FLP ID-41 showed that international students benefit from support (including peer support), but struggle asking for it fearing they would be perceived as less capable. A peer-driven funnel can help normalising asking for additional support. A potential funnel is illustrated in figure 4.

03

Incorporate student experience to staff training

With the large proportion of international students at UoM, the experiences of these students can be a valuable foundation for academic advisors and non-teaching stuff, pointing out areas that require support and cause the most confusion.

PROPOSED DATABASE

The proposed step-by-step process of full database creation.

Set-up

Preparation stage

- Coordinate with admissions team
- Fund a PhD/research position to fill and maintain the database
- Advertise among existent students

Database creation

Record the testimonies

- Record existing students (first year students at the end of the year)
- Edit the videos
- Upload on a secure server, grouping videos by country

Database access

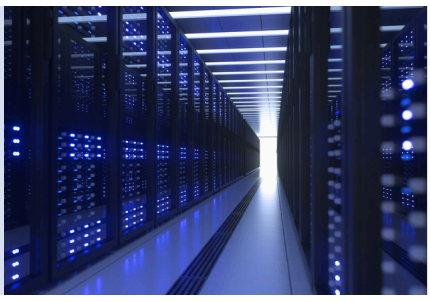
Give access to new students

- Include link to the database into the pre-arrival pack for undergraduate and postgraduate students
- Use secure login to ensure only UoM students get access

Database maintenance

Update and expand the database

- With sufficient content, tags and links can be added
- Provided prior consent, interviews can be used for staff training
- Delete old videos after 5 years if the information is out of date



The introduction of the database can be a pioneering step for UoM's international student support as no similar solutions exist in other UK universities.

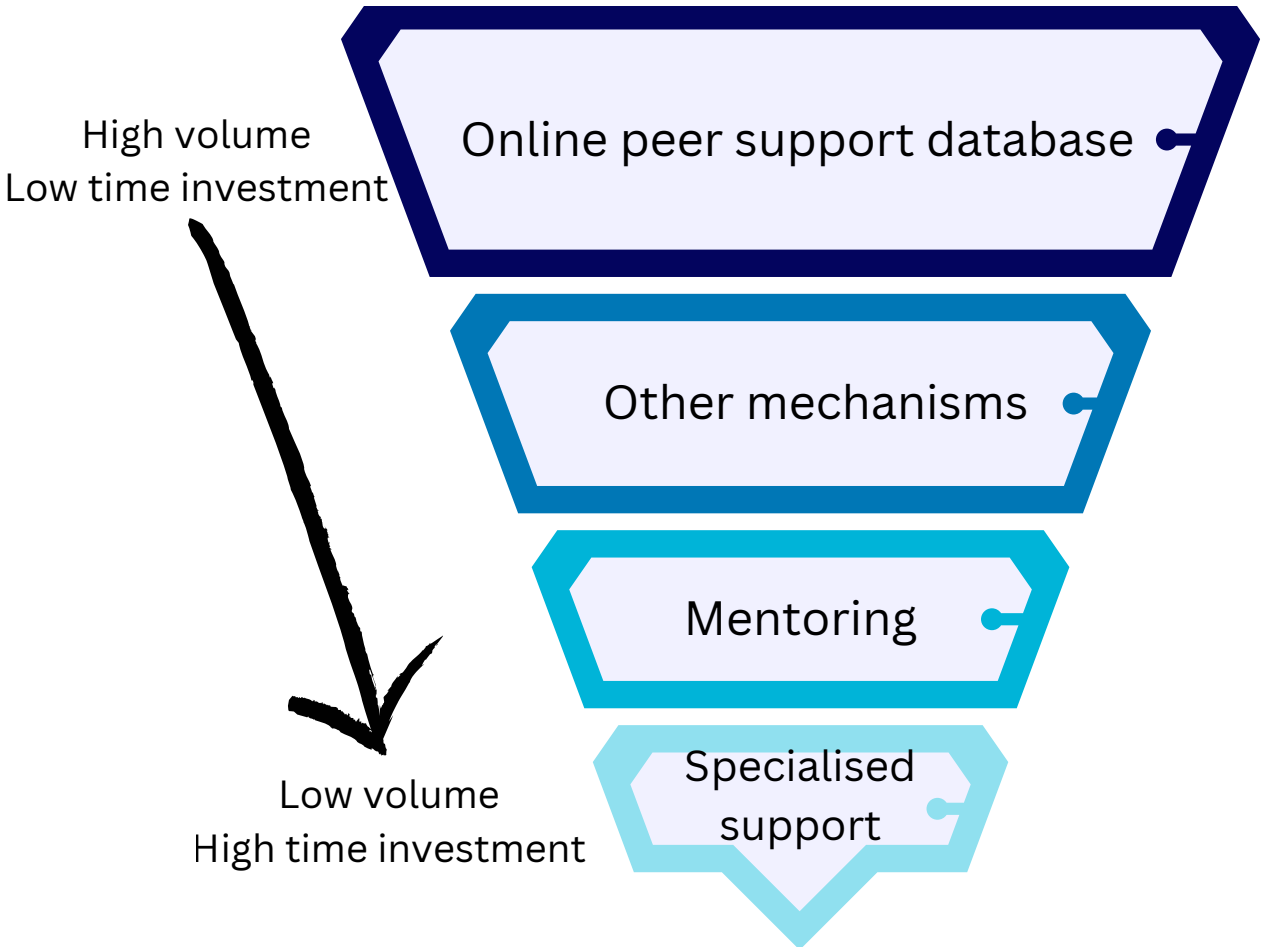
PROPOSED FUNNEL

Peer-driven funnel to normalise asking for academic assistance.

The aim of the funnel would be to provide students with a variety of ways to support each other, and to encourage new students to actively identify and address their academic needs.

Current schemes (such as buddy scheme and mentoring) are time-intensive and require students to actively seek advice from other people, which many new international students are shy to do. We suggest that additional steps can help students build up confidence and network to seek more involved types of support.

Figure 4. Proposed funnel



The funnel would encourage students to seek support without being perceived as condescending, as well as saving time and resources for students who require more help while still providing enough to those who need less help.

REPORT APPROVAL AND COMMENTS

To be completed by a delegated person agreed by the workstream governance group.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX 1 - FINANCIALS

Cost Type	Description	Costs and Total
Staff	Dr Marianna Rolbina, grade 7, Lecturer in Digital Innovation, 0.2 FTE for 3 months	£3,153
	Dr Mina Rezaeian-Abrishami, grade 7, Lecturer in Innovation Management and Policy, 0.1 FTE for 3 months	£1,576
	Dr Siobhan Caughey, grade 6, Research Associate in Behavioural Science, 0.5 FTE for 3 months	£4,623
		TOTAL: £9,628
Non-Staff	Behavioural research laboratory time (20 half-days)	£2,200
	Transcription costs	£845
	Amazon vouchers for contributors	£480
	Amazon vouchers for experiment participants	£590
	Stationery	£108
	Catering	£99
		TOTAL: £4,225
Adjustments	Low recruitment	-£913
Final reconciliation		£13,853
Request for payment	total staff costs	£9,628
	total non-staff costs	£4,225
	total adjustments	-£913
	final reconciliation	£13,853
	Total request for payment	£13,853

APPENDIX 2 - QUESTIONNAIRE*

Age		
Gender		
Country of origin		
Country of previous study (if different from the country of origin)		
1.	As an international student I feel comfortable the way I was welcomed into my new academic life by the community.	1-5 Likert scale
2.	The university makes it comfortable for me to practice my cultural beliefs.	
3.	I feel safe in my surroundings,	
4.	There are plenty of social activities I can take part of without feeling out of place.	
5.	I am confident I can complete my program of study.	
6.	I feel good about my ability to participate in class discussion.	
7.	I understand the expectations of the teaching team on my course.	
8.	I have good English conversational skills.	
9.	I feel good about my ability to write academic papers.	
10.	I am certain about my ability to complete my studies.	
11.	I feel overwhelmed by my studies.	
12.	Based on my academic background I have a good understanding of skills and concepts.	

APPENDIX 2 - CONT'D

13.	I find it difficult to keep up with my academic requirements.	1-5 Likert scale
14.	I have access to academic assistance if I should need it.	
15.	I am not at all confident that I have the required academic skills and ability to succeed in my studies.	
16.	I understand how to demonstrate critical thinking.	
17.	I know how to find, evaluate, summarise and reference sources correctly.	
18.	I know how to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic malpractice.	
19.	I understand what it means to be creative in the academic environment.	
20.	I know I will be successful in completing my studies.	
21.	I am comfortable doing self-directed study and don't need additional guidance.	
22.	I understand how to deconstruct and analyse academic sources when building my own argument.	
23.	I feel confident in my ability to incorporate feedback received from the teaching team and peers.	
24.	I have the required skills to make my work look professional.	
25.	I feel confident in my ability to behave professionally and respectfully in the UK academic environment.	

*based on International Student Self-Efficacy questionnaire from Telbis, N. M. (2013). *International students' confidence and academic success.* The University of North Dakota. Constructs: CASE - orange; LCASE - green; AASE - blue; GACE and SSSE are added to the scale by the research team to measure specific skill change - brown; Confidence - white (not used in the study, no significant results).

APPENDIX 3 - THEMES

The main academic differences (difficulties, surprises)between the UK and home country faced in the first year of studies, as mentioned by the second- and third-year students.

APPENDIX 3 - CONT'D

The main resources and ways to address differences between educational systems mentioned by the second- and third-year students.