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<b>Title</b>	Higher education professionals' perspectives on international student experiences of life and learning in Ireland : a qualitative study
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<b>Publication Date</b>	2013-08-27
<b>Publication information</b>	Irish Educational Studies, 32 (3): 355-375
<b>Publisher</b>	Taylor & Francis
<b>This item's record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4649">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4649</a>
<b>Publisher's statement</b>	This is an electronic version of a forthcoming article to be published in Irish Educational Studies, available online at: <a href="http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03323315.2013.826334">http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03323315.2013.826334</a>
<b>DOI</b>	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2013.826334">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2013.826334</a>

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TO CITE:

O' Reilly, A., T. Hickey, and D. Ryan. 2013. Higher education professionals' perspectives on international student experiences of life and learning in Ireland: A qualitative study. *Irish Educational Studies*, Published online August 2013

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2013.826334>

## **Higher education professionals' perspectives on international student experiences of life and learning in Ireland: a qualitative study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although numerous studies have explored international students' experiences, there is a dearth of research exploring the perspectives of professionals who have contact with international students. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by providing an analysis of higher educational professionals' ( $n = 11$ ) perspectives of international students' experiences and analysing the challenges which arise when working with international students. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff from a large Irish Higher Education Institution. Participants described a range of difficulties experienced by international students, including sociocultural and psychological difficulties, and outlined a number of challenges which exist when dealing with international students, most of which relate to cultural differences and lack of interest in internationalisation. The findings have important policy and practical implications for higher education service provision and point to the need to consider internationalisation as a process which can be enriching for international students, host students and staff members alike.

Keywords: international students; psychological well-being; sociocultural adaptation; higher education professionals

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of students travelling abroad for the purposes of enhancing their education through an international perspective. It is now estimated that there are over 2.9 million international students enrolled in higher level institutions worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2008). Although Ireland has not always been considered as an important destination for international students in higher education, since 2002 the percentage growth rates in international student numbers in Ireland have been similar to, or in some cases higher, than those experienced by the main destination countries for international students (i.e., US, UK, Australia, Germany, France, China and Japan). According to Education Ireland (2010), there are approximately 26,000 international students from 159 different countries studying in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) at present. In 2005, a higher level group was created to advance international education policy and strategy in Ireland forward and a framework for internationalisation was set out in an Irish government report, the primary objective of which is to ‘ensure Ireland becomes internationally recognised and ranked as a world leader in . . . international education’ (Department of Education and Skills 2010). One further aim of this strategy is to increase the current 26,000 strong crop of international students to 38,000 by 2015.

### **Experiences of international students**

A great deal of research effort has been devoted to understanding international students’ experiences abroad. Indeed, the psychological and educational literature on international students has been described as ‘massive’ (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001, 146). This research has found that while many international students have positive experiences studying abroad, some students struggle to adapt to life in the country they travel to. Researchers have proposed that this is because of a range of post-migration demands placed on the individual such as language difficulties (e.g., Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, and Kondakci 2011), academic difficulties (e.g., Poyrazli and Grahame 2007), financial problems (e.g., Murphy-Shigematsu 2002; Turcic 2008), sociocultural demands (e.g., O’Reilly, Ryan, and Hickey 2010; O’Reilly 2011; Ward and Masgoret 2006) and diminished social support (e.g., Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis 2008). These

conditions can influence an individual's psychological wellbeing and interfere with their studies (e.g., Lin and Yi 1997; Zhang and Goodson 2011).

It has been documented that international students who are not native speakers of the language of the host country face particular challenges, needing to adjust rapidly and learn fast. However, even students who travel to a country where the local language is the same as in their home country have reported experiencing language difficulties, such as problems with unintelligible accents or the use of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions (e.g., Ryan and Carroll 2006). Several researchers have discovered that international students who have higher host language proficiency report better adjustment and experience lower levels of negative behavioural and emotional responses attributable to the experiences of adjustment to a new cultural environment; that is, they experience lower levels of acculturation stress (e.g., Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, and Kondakci 2011; Poyrazli et al. 2001; Poyrazli et al. 2004; Yeh and Inose 2003). Adjusting to a new academic environment can also be a major challenge for international students. Findings from a number of studies have indicated that language proficiency has a significant effect on academic performance while international students have also reported experiencing problems relating to study techniques, test taking and classroom instruction (e.g., Cadieux and Wehrly 1986; Kondakci, Van den Broeck, and Yildirim 2008; Poyrazli and Grahame 2007).

Although the difficulties that international students experience with regard to issues such as academic adaptation are much discussed, many students also struggle with more general problems such as financial difficulties. Studies have consistently shown that a significant amount of stress experienced by international students relates to financial hardship, while surveys involving international students have reported that finance ranks as one of students' greatest concerns (e.g., Deressa and Beavers 1988; Murphy-Shigematsu 2002; Turcic 2008). International students also face the additional challenge of coping with cross-cultural differences. Students travelling abroad often find it difficult to adjust to a new diet, adapt to a different climate or understand the norms, values and attitudes of host nationals, for example (e.g., O'Reilly, Ryan, and Hickey 2010; O'Reilly 2011; Berno and Ward 2004; Novera 2004; Ward and Masgoret 2006). Equally challenging for international students is the issue of diminished social support. Research has shown that international students often travel abroad alone and experience difficulties making host national friends (e.g., Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis 2008; Pitts 2009;

Ward, Masgoret, and Gezentsvey 2009). Differences in social interaction styles as well as language and cultural differences have been identified as barriers to forming relationships between international students and host national students (e.g., Arthur 2003; Caruana and Spurling 2007; Sodowsky and Plake 1992). Because international students experience diminished social support and have problems socialising with host students, they sometimes report feeling very lonely and homesick (e.g., McLachlan and Justice 2009; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007).

Failure to overcome the difficulties outlined above can have potentially detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of international students and interfere with their studies (Lin and Yi 1997; Rasmi, Safdar, and Lewis 2009; Zhang and Goodson 2011). For example, researchers have found that students with lower perceived English fluency are at risk for depressive symptoms while studies have also found an association between increased social support and lower depressive symptoms among international student samples (e.g., Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey 2004; Dao, Lee, and Chang 2007; Schram and Lauver 1988; Ying and Liese 1991). Furthermore, in one of the only systematic reviews carried out in this area, Zhang and Goodson (2011) discovered stress, social support, language proficiency, length of residence and region of origin were the strongest predictors of international student adaptation.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framework**

Much of the earlier research exploring the nature of the difficulties experienced by international students was guided by three main theoretical frameworks: (1) culture learning framework, (2) social identification theories and (3) stress and coping framework (Zhou et al. 2008). However, in response to theoretical weaknesses identified in these models, and in an attempt to bring conceptual integration to research exploring cross-cultural transitions, Ward and Searle (1991) proposed a model of cross-cultural adaptation integrating the stress and coping, culture learning and social identity frameworks. According to Ward and colleagues, cross-cultural adaptation implicitly incorporates psychological and sociocultural dimensions and researchers should distinguish between these domains of adaptation (e.g., Searle and Ward 1990; Ward et al. 1998; Ward and Kennedy 1993; Ward and Searle 1991). Here, psychological adaptation is defined as psychological well-being or satisfaction in a new cultural environment, while sociocultural adaptation refers to an individual's ability to fit in or interact with members of the host culture.

Ward and Kennedy (1993) propose that psychological adaptation can best be understood in terms of a stress and coping framework and that sociocultural adaptation is best explained within a social skills or culture learning paradigm.

Support for Ward and Searle's (1991) model of cross-cultural adaptation has been borne out in several studies (e.g., Berry et al. 2006; Brisset et al. 2010; James et al. 2004; Ward and Kennedy 1998; Ward and Rana-Deuba 2000). Unlike most models of cross-cultural adaptation, Ward and Searle's (1991) model does not emphasise the negative aspects of cross-cultural adaptation, most notably culture shock (Oberg 1960). Instead, their model reconceptualises culture shock to include both social and affective components and permits maladjustment to be seen as an outcome of the transition experience (James et al. 2004). This change reflects the general paradigmatic shift in many disciplines from being primarily concerned with pathology to a new model of psychological health and well-being (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). A second strength of Ward and Searle's (1991) model is that it clearly delineates between psychological and sociocultural adaptation, when previously there was confusion in the literature around these two aspects of adjustment (James et al. 2004). Another significant strength of this model is the use by Ward and colleagues of standardised assessment techniques for the measurement of most variables relating to cross-cultural adaptation, thus enabling the development of theory and research in this area of research (e.g., Ward and Kennedy 1999; Ward and Searle 1991). Ward and Searle's (1991) model remains the most comprehensive and most appropriate framework for this research on international students and the present study is part of a larger project which ultimately aims to refine and update this model of international student adaptation (O'Reilly 2011).

### **Higher education professionals' perspectives**

Although much research investigating the adaptation of international students has been conducted worldwide, previous studies have largely ignored the perspectives of professionals working in higher education who have regular contact with international students. However, Caruana and Spurling (2007) have argued that HEI staff have in-depth professional and experiential knowledge of students' experiences, and where and how these come into conflict with institutional perceptions or structures. For example, administrative staff working in an international office are likely to be well informed on the most common problems which arise

within the international student population they serve. Individuals working in a student health service (e.g., doctors, counselling staff) are also likely to be well informed on the type of problems experienced by international students. Indeed, researchers have found that doctors are often the first and only professionals to notice symptoms of stress in international students and are thus in a unique position to do some preventative work (e.g., Aubrey 1991). Furthermore, it is likely that teaching staff who have regular contact with international students are particularly aware of the difficulties experienced by students studying in their discipline, while the chaplaincy service is another possible source of information on international student adaptation. Spiritual care has long been recognised as an essential component in providing holistic care and may be very important for international students who are away from home (e.g., Fisher 1999). To date, however, only a handful of studies have explored higher education professionals' perspectives of international student adaptation (e.g., Jenkins 2000; Ng 2006; Trice 2007; Turcic 2008).

There is also a paucity of research in psychology exploring the challenges which professionals face when dealing with international students. Although internationalisation is clearly of benefit to organisations for a variety of reasons, HEIs are in danger of treating international students as commodities, without understanding how students can be best supported when studying abroad. Indeed, increasing overseas recruitment is the target of most universities because of the revenue international education produces (Ryan and Carroll 2006; Trice and Yoo 2007). International students contributed approximately 20 billion dollars to the US economy during the 2010/2011 academic year (National Association of Foreign Student Advisers [NAFSA] 2012), while Butcher and McGrath (2004) report that the increase in international student numbers in New Zealand during the 1990s saved several institutions from bankruptcy and buoyed property markets in many major cities. However, there is a danger that the economic value of international students is driving internationalisation without resources being allocated to ensure adequate campus infrastructure (Arthur 2003). Adequate support for international students can only be provided if HEIs are aware of the challenges that arise when dealing with students and services are reviewed appropriately to meet identified needs. However, this aspect of international student adaptation has been relatively overlooked by researchers.

## **Research aims and justification**

The present study aims to address the gaps in the literature which are outlined above by examining the perspectives of a range of higher education professionals with regard to international student adaptation and exploring the challenges faced by professionals who have contact with international students. The study uses a qualitative design whereby participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews with the first author. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews have a number of strengths; for example, they allow the researcher more freedom to improvise and adapt questions by means of probing to elicit data that participants might not have provided spontaneously (e.g., Babbie 2004; Marlow 2001). Furthermore, face-to-face interviews present the researcher with the opportunity to take advantage of social cues such as voice, intonation and body language. This type of interview also enables synchronous communication between the interviewer and the interviewee whereby the answer of the interviewee is more spontaneous, without an extended reflection (Opdenakker 2006). This study is one part of a larger research project which aims to provide an in-depth analysis of international students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation in Ireland in light of existing conceptual frameworks. In this project, the findings from this study of higher education professionals will be triangulated with the findings from a larger mixed-methods study wherein data were collected from a large sample of international students thereby providing a greater insight into the challenges facing international students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants in the present study were recruited from a large Irish urban HEI where approximately 17% of the student body comes from countries outside Ireland. In total, 11 individuals volunteered to take part in this study. Eleven was deemed an acceptable number of participants as this number presented the research team with information on international student adaptation from a number of alternative perspectives.

As recommended by Weiss (1994), individuals were recruited from a number of different areas around the institution. Using this sampling technique, an in-depth and extensive picture of



international students' adaptation could be obtained from different perspectives. In the first instance, individuals were recruited from the various international offices around the HEI where this research was carried out. The main remit of these offices is to disseminate information on international opportunities, promote courses abroad, provide support to international students on campus and develop an international outlook among students and staff. A second group of participants was recruited from the student health service. This service provides on-campus medical, psychological and psychiatric care to registered students (including international students). Another group of participants was recruited from the student chaplaincy service, which offers pastoral care to students. These individuals have personal contact with students and also actively liaise with student clubs and societies. The final group of participants consisted of academic staff in disciplines with particular contact with international students and comprised individuals teaching students and/or involved in discipline-related academic management roles within the institution.

Interviews were conducted with international office staff of different levels ( $n=5$ ), staff from the student health service ( $n=2$ ), members of the chaplaincy team ( $n=2$ ) and academic staff from areas where there are high numbers of international students ( $n=2$ ). Eight of the participants were Irish (72.7%) and three individuals were originally from other countries (27.3%). Six (54.5%) of the participants in this study were female and five (45.5%) were male. Participants had an average of 7.5 years' experience working with international students.

## **Procedure**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the present study. First, a number of services around campus where there are individuals who have regular contact with international students were identified. Individuals working in these areas were then contacted by the first author and invited to take part in an interview with her ( $n=14$ ). Three individuals did not reply to the request by the first author to take part in this study, which meant the response rate for this study was high (78.57%).

Once individuals had expressed an interest in participating, they were given an information sheet and letter of informed consent. Prior to interviews taking place, the first author explained to participants that she was interested in the experiences of short-term and long-term international students, who come to Ireland specifically to study, giving definitions for each.

Long term is used to describe international students studying abroad for the duration of their education, while short-term international students are students studying in another country as part of an exchange programme. Such exchange programmes typically last between 4 (one semester) and 10 months (two semesters). These two groups were contrasted with students who have migrated to Ireland with their families and progressed to study in local institutions in the same way as domestic students. In conducting interviews, the first author used a number of semi-structured interview questions such as ‘Can you describe the type of contact you have with international students?’, ‘What do you think are the most common problems which international students experience?’ and ‘What would you say are the biggest challenges for you when dealing with international students?’ During the interview, participants were invited to share examples of their interactions with international students, and the first author probed any additional comments to help clarify participants’ responses and raised emergent questions. Participants were also invited to mention any other information relevant to the topic of international student adaptation which had not been mentioned before the interview was terminated. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and were audio-recorded digitally.

An important assumption of qualitative research is that the researcher’s perspective shapes his or her view of a research topic (Malterud 2001). The following information is therefore worth mentioning: the first author in this project is Caucasian Irish and in her mid-twenties. Before this research project began, she thought extensively about any preconceived notions she may have had about international students or the day-to-day reality of their lives. This process was important in that it allowed her to become aware of any stereotypes she may have had about international students. At this stage, the first author also considered how her status as a student and Irish citizen could influence participants’ willingness to disclose private information to her. She ensured that she was aware of how her preconceptions, beliefs, values, assumptions and position may come into play during the research process. Finally, every effort was made to follow the guidelines for good interviewing set out by Barbour (2007) during the interviews with participants. For example, Barbour (2007) argues that a good interview schedule consists of a series of headings or a few carefully worded open-ended questions which allow respondents to elaborate. Barbour (2007) also advises researchers to start an interview with the least threatening questions and gradually progress through to those that probe a little more. She recommends that the researcher be prepared to modify questions or augment questions as new

issues arise and that the researcher ends interviews on a positive note wherever possible so as to avoid any distress (or as much distress as possible where the topics are sensitive) for the participant. It was considered important to follow these guidelines closely as they provided a framework which facilitated the first author in maintaining an open mind, setting aside any preconceived notions about the phenomenon under study during interviews with the participants.

### **Data analysis**

The digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and inductive content analysis was identified as the most appropriate method of data analysis. Content analysis is a method for analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages (Cole 1988). It was used in the present study as it is a content-sensitive method (Krippendorff 1980) and is flexible in terms of its research design (Cavanagh 1997; Harwood and Garry 2003). In analysing these data, the steps outlined by Elo and Kynga's (2008) were followed closely. According to Elo and Kynga's (2008), qualitative analysis has three main phases: (1) preparation, (2) organising and (3) reporting. In the preparation phase, the researcher decides on what constitutes a unit of analysis and what to analyse at what levels of detail. At this stage, a researcher must also decide whether to analyse manifest content or latent content or both. Manifest content refers to the main themes of a text while the aim of latent content analysis is to notice hidden meanings such as silence, sighs or laughter. Next, the researcher must strive to make sense of what is going on in the data. Once the researcher is familiar with the data, then data can be organised using either the inductive or deductive approach. Inductive analysis, the method of analysis used in the present research, involves open coding (i.e., making notes, writing headings and creating a coding sheet), creating and naming categories and abstraction. Abstraction involves formulating a general description of a topic through grouping together categories. Furthermore, in an effort to establish interrater reliability, a second individual with experience in using qualitative research methods reviewed a percentage of interview transcripts (27%). The percentage agreement between the two raters showed very good reliability, as the combined total agreement was 84%.

## **RESULTS**

Findings are presented here using frequency counts and quotes for illustrative purposes. The following codes were used: international office staff (INT), student health service personnel (HTH), academic staff (ACA) and chaplains (CHAP). Participants in this study were given an identity number so, for example, the code for the first individual in the international office staff group is INT1. Given the limited space here, the following results represent only the most prominent themes.

### **Topic 1: adaptation of international students**

Participants commented on a number of difficulties which they felt international students experienced including sociocultural, psychological and academic difficulties, practical problems, discrimination and linguistic challenges. The frequency counts for the occurrence of these themes relating to international students' difficulties are detailed in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, sociocultural and psychological difficulties were the difficulties commented on by most of the participants. In relation to sociocultural difficulties, participants noted that some international students experienced problems adjusting to Irish culture and overcoming religious differences. For example, one participant spoke about incidents in campus accommodation relating to religious attitudes towards food while another participant commented that female Muslim students sometimes experienced difficulties on their placement from college because of religious and cultural practices. In terms of psychological difficulties, higher education professionals reported that many international students were homesick. They felt that their homesickness was exacerbated by the fact that students sometimes found it difficult to adjust to the way of life in Ireland or were away from their family for extended periods of time due to Irish government policy on family reunification. While participants noted that some students experienced severe psychological difficulties (e.g., depression, attempted suicide and assault), they felt that these cases were isolated. Participants did mention a number of other difficulties which they felt were particular to international students' experiences, including practical (e.g., financial), academic, accommodation and language difficulties as well as discrimination. Finally, a number of higher education professionals also commented on factors that impact on adaptation, such as age, and on the drop-out rate of international students.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In discussing international students' experiences, individuals pointed to the centrality of support in successful international student adaptation. Most of the discussion here related to the role of international students' conational networks, which participants felt played an important 'comforting' role in international students' lives:

If there are 30 of you from your home country and you all know each other you tend to stick with each other . . . it keeps you in your comfort zone when there are other uncomfortable things around you. (ACA2)

A number of participants ( $n=8$ ) also commented on the level of contact international students had with Irish students. They generally felt that international students had difficulty making Irish friends and described how Irish students sometimes appeared uninterested in engaging with international students or had negative perceptions about them. For example:

Irish students have a certain perception of international students . . . that they're very studious or something, they don't want to get to know them and that can be hard for international students. (INT5)

Higher education professionals also raised a number of other issues, as summarized in Table 2. In the first instance, a number of participants signalled a concern that difficulties and problems among international students may not always reach official channels, making it hard to assess students' experience accurately. On the other hand, they were also keen to point out that a focus on difficulties obscures the fact that many international students have mainly positive experiences in Ireland. Finally, participants commented on the diversity among international students and the importance of recognising that heterogeneity is important in their dealings with international students.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

## **Topic 2: challenges in role**

When asked if there were any aspects of their job which presented a particular challenge to them, participants identified a number of challenges. As displayed in Table 3, these challenges were grouped into three main areas, with the most frequently discussed challenge relating to international student characteristics.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

#### *Challenges in role relating to international student characteristics*

Over half of participants commented on the challenges in their role which were associated with international students' characteristics. Although participants were keen to emphasise that they enjoyed working with international students and were happy to continue to do so, one participant did feel they were put under pressure by the demands placed upon them by international students:

They are quite demanding and you have to be prepared for that ...some of them will email and when you send them a reply they come straight back with a question, they don't realise that you're dealing with a lot of students. (INT1)

Participants ( $n=4$ ) also commented on the ongoing challenge of trying to bridge the gap between differences in shared cultural meanings and overcoming communication difficulties. As one individual noted:

Some are Asian students whose English wouldn't be so good . . . if you're dealing with those and trying to get expressions, that's very tiring. (INT4)

Other participants also expressed a concern around trying to find a balance between helping students and at the same time encouraging them to be more independent. They noted that this was particularly difficult when there was a cultural difference in negotiation styles:

You have to find a balance between helping them [international students], giving them a lot of support but allowing them to be independent . . . I've had to learn that you have to say "no" to students because if a person comes from a bargaining culture if you say "maybe" it's as if saying "I will." (INT4)

#### *Challenges in role relating to host institution*

A theme that emerged from interviews with participants was the challenge they perceived in making their host institution more aware of, and engaged with, international students. The majority of comments here focused on the challenge of trying to 'make the college more international', pointing to the need for a two-way adaptation rather than an exclusive focus on the adaptation of the international students. For example, participants identified the desirability of promoting more authentic interaction between international and host students. As one individual noted:

Something which we haven't figured out yet is how to get Irish students interested in engaging with international students . . . if we can facilitate that interaction that would be great. (INT3)

This perception of a lack of real engagement extended beyond the student body. One participant noted the tendency among staff to pass international students to the international office rather than manage their issue themselves:

The challenge for me is working with other people here ...when international students ring the switchboard, no matter who they ask for, they're always put through to the international office... they get quite frustrated when you tell them you've got the wrong place. (INT5)

### *Recurrent role challenges*

Linking with the desire above for a more coordinated or campus-wide attempt to support international students, when speaking about recurrent role challenges, one individual spoke about how they felt frustrated by the fact that when they referred students to another service for assistance they often did not find out if the individual's problem was solved:

Very often people come to you for help and you point them in the right direction and someone else has to pick it up then . . . sometimes if people come to you about that problem they associate you with that and they want to put it behind them. (CHAP1)

Another role challenge identified by one participant as a very significant part of their work with international students concerned the responsibility of managing their time effectively. In particular, they found acting as a/the major source of information or support to a large group whose needs have seasonal peaks difficult:

Time management is one challenge . . . you're very conscious of the fact that you don't want to be leaving people by not answering e-mails because they usually need the answer pretty quickly, so therefore you generally work overtime in August and September to try and keep up with stuff. (INT4)

## **DISCUSSION**

The results from this study suggest that higher educational professionals have a high level of awareness about international students' experiences in Ireland. Findings also revealed a number of challenges associated with providing services to international students and internationalisation in education. International student experiences: psychological and sociocultural dynamics With respect to higher education professionals' perspectives of international students' adaptation, they indicated that sociocultural difficulties present one of the greatest challenges for international students in Ireland. This finding is in line with previous research which has found that international students often experience sociocultural difficulties while abroad (e.g., O'Reilly 2011; Berno and Ward 2004; Novera 2004; Ryan and Twibell 2000). For example, in their investigation of Asian student adaptation in New Zealand, Berno and Ward (2004) found that international students had significant sociocultural difficulty dealing with bureaucracy, dealing with conflict and managing cultural and communication issues. Related to sociocultural differences, another important finding from the present study was that higher education professionals felt that religious differences impacted on Muslim, particularly female Muslim, students' adaptation. Although Cole and Ahmadi (2003) note that there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of Muslim female international students, previous studies have found that Muslim international students often feel isolated and that this impacts on students' educational experiences (e.g., Asmer 2000; Cole and Ahmadi 2003; Poyrazli and Grahame 2007).

Psychological difficulties emerged as another common difficulty among international students and could mostly be attributed to feelings of homesickness. This finding accords with the existing literature, which has shown that students studying abroad experience various forms of psychological distress (e.g., Janca and Helzer 1992; Ryan and Twibell 2000). In fact, Yi, Giseala Lin, and Kishimoto (2003) note that homesickness is among the most frequently reported concerns of international college students in the United States, while Orr and MacLachlan (2000)



also found elevated levels of homesickness among a minority of international students studying at an Irish university. Although homesickness is often considered by mental health professionals as a 'mini-grief', relocation and adjustment to college life sometimes turn into significant stressors when resources are lacking among international students and therefore should not be underestimated (Stroebe et al. 2002). Moreover, numerous studies have demonstrated a link between homesickness, acculturative stress, depression and even suicide (e.g., Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey 2004; Wei et al. 2007; Willis, Stroebe, and Hewstone 2003; Ying 2005). It is important, therefore, that homesickness should not be considered as unworthy of support or attention, but that students and higher education professionals are aware that it can become dysfunctional.

In terms of the theoretical implications of this study, the findings lend support to Ward and Searle's 1991 belief that distinguishing between sociocultural and psychological domains of cross-cultural adaptation may more adequately span the range of responses among international students. Such a division is useful as the sociocultural adaptation domain represents the levels of response that fall within the relatively normal adaptive range, while the psychological adaptation domain may be a useful approach considering levels of difficulty that cross the clinical boundary.

It is important to note that one of the central themes which emerged in the present study was that despite the presentation of some psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems, participants felt that many international students have little or no difficulty adapting to life in Ireland. Other researchers have also found that some international students have little difficulty adapting to life in a new country (e.g., Hellste'n 2002; Myles and Cheng 2003; Rajapaksa and Dundes 2002). For example, Myles and Cheng (2003) noted that many of the international students interviewed in their study were relatively well adjusted to university life. Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) also reported that a high number of international students in their study (67%) felt welcomed by host nationals. All too often, however, the positive aspects of adaptation are overlooked and an emphasis is placed on the negative aspects of studying abroad.

### **Challenges experienced by higher education professionals**

The second research question in the present study explored the major challenges identified by higher education professionals in their role. These related mainly to certain student

characteristics. For example, some participants felt that international students were ‘demanding’ and that there were seasonal peaks and cultural variation in the way these demands were expressed. In general, however, participants had favourable opinions of working with international students. A similar finding also emerged from Ng’s (2006) study examining staff perceptions of international student clinical trainees. Participants’ comments on the difficulties which they faced trying to overcome communication difficulties, bridging the gap between differences in shared cultural meanings and dealing with different negotiation styles, echoes the findings of Jenkins (2000), who noted that miscommunication was a significant problem for Chinese international students and staff at an American HEI.

With respect to the institutional challenges noted by participants, the majority of comments related to difficulties encouraging internationalisation and diversity within the institution where they worked. Some participants identified a need to promote greater integration of international and host students and indicated a need to raise awareness of cultural accommodation in the host students and staff on a campus-wide basis rather than only among the incoming students. The lack of interaction between host and international students was also commented on by participants in the context of the role social support plays in cross-cultural adaptation. Participants noted that international students sometimes struggled to make Irish friends as some host students appeared uninterested in engaging with them. This finding is in accordance with previous research, which has found that host students often perceive intercultural contact with international students to be complex, problematic and demanding (e.g., Caruana and Spurling 2007; Dunne 2009; Ryan and Carroll 2006; Trice 2002). Furthermore, in their book on teaching international students, Ryan and Carroll (2006) noted that a number of studies have shown that lecturers are often unsure about how to respond to international student needs.

This study was conducted in Ireland, where the numbers of international students are growing steadily. However, there are a number of practical recommendations arising from this study which are relevant to higher education professionals in any English-speaking context.

In the first instance, as participants noted that some international students were experiencing sociocultural adjustment difficulties, it would be beneficial for higher education professionals to include a component on sociocultural differences and adjustment to specific aspects of host culture in all orientation programmes designed for international students.

Although there is a limit to how much information can be conveyed at one event, the data in this study indicate that attempts to raise international students' awareness about issues such as differences in religious practices, accents and interaction styles would be helpful. Indeed, Trice (2004) has suggested that workshops on how to relate to the opposite sex, understanding host culture and friendship norms might be useful. An alternative suggestion made by Trice (2004) to alleviate sociocultural difficulties in a creative way is for institutions to sponsor programmes that explore a controversial issue on campus from several cultural perspectives.

Cultural awareness training for staff who have primary (i.e., international office staff, chaplaincy) and secondary contact (e.g., technical support and administrative staff) could also be designed to include a discussion on sociocultural differences. Trice (2004) suggests that this would raise awareness among staff members of how to help international students deal with their difficulties and how to overcome personal difficulties interacting with international students. Jones and Brown (2007) have also proposed that providing this type of cultural awareness training for staff could support staff development opportunities. For example, it could benefit the host institution in that individuals would then have skills which they in turn could use if working abroad. Given that psychological difficulties also featured as an area where higher education professionals felt international students experienced problems, a greater awareness of student counselling services and support groups within the host institution should be promoted among the international student body. Lack of awareness around where to seek appropriate assistance is a problem also reported by Poyrazli and others (2001) who recommended that host institutions make more of an effort to advertise the resources available to international students on campus.

It is important to interpret the concerns of higher education professionals regarding international students' psychological difficulties against the backdrop of participants' comments relating to the perceived lack of interest among Irish students and some staff in meaningful engaging with international students. In order to facilitate interaction between host and international students, international-host peer-mentoring programmes could be implemented to facilitate students' interactions. Such peer-mentoring programmes have been shown to be effective in facilitating interaction between international students and host students. For example, Westwood and Barker (1990) found that pairing international students with American students enhanced their academic performance and reduced the probability of dropout. However, peer-

mentoring programmes need to be adapted to make them more attractive for host students and try to facilitate students' interactions in more fun and creative ways.

Another suggestion would be to organise workshops for host students planning to go on an exchange later. This would allow students to be put in touch with international students from the future exchange culture who could give advice about the cultural practices and academic environment in their home country. This would also help to raise host students' awareness of some of the sociocultural differences which international students have to deal with, which might in turn facilitate ongoing interaction; even if this was partly self-interested rather than purely altruistic. The development of workshops promoting interaction host-international student interaction in academic work could also be mutually enriching. Indeed, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that skill training workshops and cultural exchange groups foster a sense of community for international students, while a review of research conducted in the UK by Caruana and Spurling (2007) found that working in multicultural groups offers the potential for improving students' creative and lateral thinking. Deardorff (2006) notes that it is important that institutions recognise that the development of interculturally competent students is an anticipated outcome of internationalisation; that is, students who 'behave and communicate appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations' (Deardorff 2004, 196).

Whatever changes are considered to student services, it is important to remember that the challenge of igniting interest in local students to interact more meaningfully with international students does not lie with international students or higher education professionals alone but needs to be considered at a more fundamental level by university administration in terms of engaging the entire student body. Indeed, Grace and Gravestock (2007) have advocated that HEIs think more broadly about diversity and take a more inclusive approach to internationalisation; that is, one serving all students rather than dealing with specific groups such as international students.

Although the present research provided an insight into international students' experiences in Ireland and made some progress addressing existing gaps in the international student literature, there is a need for ongoing research in this area, particularly research carried out directly with international students. As noted earlier, the results discussed here come from one part of a larger research study which aims to provide an in-depth analysis of international students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation in Ireland in light of existing conceptual

frameworks. Reports on other phases of this project focus on exploring the experiences of international students' in Ireland from their own perspective (e.g., O'Reilly, Ryan, and Hickey 2010; O'Reilly 2011). A particularly salient finding of the current study was that participants had problems encouraging internationalisation and diversity, and future research could profitably explore the attitudes of general staff working in HEIs towards international students, outside of those with particular roles in relation to them. The attitudes, skills and training needs of wider academic, administrative and support staff will be particularly important for HEIs which are attempting to increase their numbers of international students at present.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In summary, it is clear from the present study that higher education professionals have developed a detailed understanding of international students' adaptation in Ireland. They acknowledge that adaptation can be complex and that international students' experience are varied, with many students having little or no difficulty adapting to life abroad. This study also revealed that while some of the services needed to support students throughout their stay are provided, institutions have an important responsibility to review their services for international students in order to provide the optimal supports.

This study also demonstrated the need for HEIs to reconceptualise their idea of a unidirectional exchange, wherein it is only international students who bear the burden of adaptation in order to reap the reward of their sojourn. Instead, consideration needs to be given to the value of a shift to a bidirectional exchange model where both international and host students are helped to profit from enhanced cultural diversity and horizon-broadening opportunities to interact with each other at a variety of levels. A truly welcoming educational institution is one which does not merely tolerate the arrival of international students for financial gain or even provide support to international students who run into difficulties. Instead, it is one which builds on the diversity and opportunities for intercultural exchange resulting from the presence of international student to offer cultural, social and academic enrichment to international students, host students and staff members alike.

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Table 1. Themes Relating to Higher Education Professionals' Knowledge about International Students' Difficulties

Theme	<i>n</i> = 11
<b>Sociocultural difficulties</b>	
<i>Her parents were from a very traditional Muslim country, and her big thing was to just be a young person in Ireland which was extremely difficult for her parents to envisage (CHAP1)</i>	10
<b>Psychological difficulties</b>	
<i>Some of them are lonely...they don't know how to negotiate things, because we do things very differently over here from some countries (CHAP1)</i>	10
<b>Practical difficulties</b>	
<i>The stress of trying to pay huge fees and coming from third world countries and trying to do a course at the same time has broken people (HTH1)</i>	7
<i>International students underestimate the cost of living or thought that they would be able to make money or work while they're here...that they'd have time to do that, which they don't (ACA2)</i>	
<b>Academic difficulties</b>	
<i>A Japanese student came to say that in the tutorial that she was in she found it very difficult. From her perception all the students were arguing with one another and she couldn't get her point in (INT4)</i>	7
<b>Accommodation difficulties</b>	
<i>There were a bit upset with the noises made by the students that live in the same student residence...they sing very loudly and there is shouting here and there (INT2)</i>	5
<b>Discrimination</b>	
<i>There are isolated cases...there was a very bad case of one student who got attacked and was injured very seriously and that seems to have been a racist attack (INT3)</i>	5
<b>Influences on adaptation</b>	
<i>Sometimes there's the perception that the young people are the ones that you have to give huge support to, but some of the [international] students coming in are older. When you're getting older your adaptability isn't as good (INT4)</i>	5
<b>Drop-out rates</b>	
<i>This year we had two students who went home immediately...one girl you just couldn't talk her out of it, she was here less than 24 hours and she just said there were personal difficulties (INT1)</i>	4
<b>Language difficulties</b>	
<i>Even if you are fluent in English when you come to Ireland and you're faced with an Irish person and the way they speak... we have our own idiomatic speech (INT2)</i>	3

Table 2. Themes Relating to Participants' Knowledge about International Students' General Experiences

Theme	<i>n</i> = 11
<p><b>Lack of information on international students' problems</b>  <i>There are probably more cases than I would become aware of...so it could well be that they're less satisfied than I imagine (ACA1)</i></p>	6
<p><b>Positive experiences of international students</b>  <i>I don't get many international students with problems probably because they have to be pretty got together to come here in the first place (CHAP2)</i></p>	5
<p><b>Diversity among international students</b>  <i>I know we have this phrase "international students" and I know how that makes to kind of lump them into one box...but of course there is no such thing as the average international student (HTH1)</i></p>	5

*Table 3.* Frequency Counts for Themes Relating to Challenges in Higher Education Professionals' Jobs

<b>Theme</b>	<b><i>n = 11</i></b>
Challenges relating to international student characteristics	6
Challenges relating to host institution*	4
Recurrent role challenges	2

\* The term host institution is used here to refer to the HEI where this research was carried out.

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