Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education
ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 39: March 2026
https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi39.1600

CASE STUDY

Bridging worlds: a study of academic skills, cultural exchange, and integration in UK higher education

Anthony D. Cliffe and Lin Chou

University of Chester, UK

ABSTRACT

This case study explores the experience of an Academic Skills Adviser and an international postgraduate student at a university in the Northwest of England in relation to academic skills, cultural exchange, and integration into higher education in the UK. We explore a series of reflective accounts through collaborative autoethnography of our journey as adviser/advisee over two years. These accounts are thematically analysed to discuss our shared significant moments and reflections of our respective positions. We explore the unique position academic skills advisers can play in not only improving student attainment and retention but in their role of helping students to integrate into the academic and wider community. We do, however, explore the distinct challenges academic skills advisers and international students face when it comes to cultural exchange in an academic environment. Finally, we finish with recommendations for how we can support international students.

KEYWORDS: cultural exchange, collaborative autoethnography, international students, academic skills, cultural education, student support, learning development.

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received 28 April 2025. Accepted 5 February 2026.

Introduction

As a Senior Academic Skills Adviser, I, like my colleagues in the field of Learning Development, often sit, at least in my institution, in a distinct third space, a grey area between academics

and Professional Services, with a need to wear different hats (Steele & White, 2019). As advisers, we sit in the unique position in the higher education hierarchy at the intersection of existing as academics (but not on academic contracts, though we teach daily, comment on students' work, and design learning materials), Specialist Mentors (dealing with students of all different backgrounds and learning differences), Professional Services (as seen through the eyes of the university), and frequently becoming a one-stop shop for all student queries.

We are also uniquely positioned in the institution engaging students across all levels of study and all programmes. With this comes unique access to different types of students: first-generation students, mature students, and a breadth of international students. This presents its challenges and many rewards, particularly when advising international students. The number of students pursuing education abroad has grown considerably in recent decades (Deuchar, 2022; Kearney & Lincoln, 2017), with a focus on recruitment of this demographic leading to challenges in providing support (Ramachandran, 2011). Issues arising for international students might include developing confidence in using English as a second language, feeling at home in a university setting, and negotiating expectations of higher education (Konstantinidis, 2024). To enhance interactions with and promote retention of international students, there needs to be intercultural communication competence between academic staff and students.

Saha (2018) argues that academic advisers to international students can contribute significantly to the experience of a student in a positive way and can contribute to high academic attainment. Research further indicates that advisers can foster an increase in belonging and social integration (see also Cena et al., 2021; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). This involves understanding students' cultural and educational backgrounds, which can facilitate more effective adviser-advisee relationships.

This case study outlines how this adviser-advisee relationship between myself (an adviser) and Lin (an international postgraduate art therapist student) organically evolved through regular interactions with the Academic Skills Team and how this fostered not only an increase in academic attainment for Lin, but also a sense of cultural belonging to the university and the United Kingdom (UK). We also explore in this case study how this occurred and how the transference of culture impacted us both. We end with our thoughts on how academic advisers sit in a privileged space of intersectionality of culture.

Method

This research employed a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) approach, following parts of the procedures of Chang et al. (2013) and Zacharias and Shleykina (2021). Initially, we considered ethnography (the study of culture within a group) but recognised we could not adequately separate ourselves from that group. This led us to autoethnography, the study of self within a cultural context (Edwards, 2021). However, whilst autoethnography typically involves a single researcher exploring their personal experience, we adopted Chang et al.'s (2013) seminal work on CAE. CAE provides a method to draw upon the lived experiences of each co-researcher, but to then interpret these personal experiences within the broader sociocultural contexts which focus on multiple perspectives, challenging the single voice of autoethnography, and sharing the collaborative experiences of individuals who are part of the research (Chang, 2021; Chang et al., 2013). As Karalis et al. (2023, p. 3) argue, CAE 'promotes the exploration of how individuals, such as educators, perceive their roles, and how these perceptions shape their actions and interactions within their professional spaces', aligning to our chosen methodology.

This research was carried out under the approval by the GID Research Ethics Committee at the University of Chester in 2025: Number-GEAC02. This research conforms to the ethical principles and standards as set out in the University of Chester's Research Integrity annual statement.

Method procedure

We met before writing our reflective accounts to discuss the journalling process. We aimed to ensure the reflective accounts encompassed the following: (i) our first encounter; (ii) initial meeting; (iii) pertinent events to the relationship; (iv) important cultural aspects; and (v) key take-home messages.

Upon completion of this, the shared reflective accounts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, initially individually and subsequently collaboratively. After this, we met via MS Teams (due to now being located in different countries) and once in person (as Lin was in the UK for her graduation) to discuss the emerging themes which are presented in this paper. The following is a culmination of our

collective experience with Lin's supporting narrative in quotations (for ease of identification of experience).

Discussion

Our first encounter

One issue students often face when starting university is building confidence in developing the critical skills required to succeed at university (Sinfield & Burns, 2022). In the first term, our team is often tasked with introducing our service and disseminating fundamental skills to new students. This is where I first met Lin, as she recalls:

> During this session, he introduced us to the concepts of Level 7, critical thinking, academic writing, and how to utilise the academic skills service. I vividly recall feeling somewhat perplexed by the content, much of which I struggled to understand. At that time, as someone who had just arrived in the UK, I was still in the process of adjusting to the various accents I encountered.

Due to my accent being heavily influenced by where I grew up in Liverpool, UK, Lin heard 'werd', rather than 'word', which made no sense to her. This echoes the findings of Diaz and Iqbal (2024) of the challenges of international students and regional accents in post-1992 institutions. To address this, Lin was:

> Determined to resolve this, I decided to approach him after the lecture. What struck me significantly was Anthony's kind response; he not only clarified the word but also apologised for his accent. This moment marked my first true culture shock. I had never anticipated that the teacher, rather than pointing out my fault, would apologise for his accent. I had always assumed that it was solely my responsibility to overcome the language barrier due to my limited English skills. In that moment, I realised that Anthony might be able to assist me with my assignment.

After discussing this and having our first cultural exchange discussion of dialects, Lin booked her first one-to-one with me as an adviser, which led to weekly meetings throughout Lin's time at the university.

The Academic Skills team has four elements of provision: teaching, resources, feedforwards, and one-to-ones. Our one-to-one system allows students to book with an adviser for 30

minutes in person or online to discuss their work or any skills-related deficit. These appointments are unlimited for students at the university.

Enacting cultural exchange

As Lin progressed through her studies, our meetings began to follow a pattern. The first part discussed the assignment/skill, and the second part discussed some cultural aspects she was interested in. This stemmed from discussions with peers, media, or everyday interactions. Speaking to this, Lin recalled:

> Anthony shared with me that Liverpool is home to many descendants of Irish immigrants, and he had even undertaken a DNA test revealing that over half of his heritage is Irish. Inspired by his story, I decided to undergo my own DNA test and was fascinated to learn that I have Korean ancestry. Anthony also offered his insights into the histories and cultural distinctions of English, Irish, and Scottish communities—perspectives that, while briefly addressed in textbooks, became far more vivid when recounted by someone with direct ties to those cultures.

This two-way cross-cultural exchange, we argue, is fundamental to a successful adviser-advisee relationship. As an adviser, it allows insight into students' lives; it is not just about quantifying their academic experiences. More importantly, it enables me to appreciate the individual challenges that these students from international backgrounds face, as students are experts in being students. Beyond that, academic advisers occupy a unique position to explore each individual as a person rather than as a target or a metric. Therefore, it is crucial for advisers to diminish the power dynamic that may exist between adviser and advisee, which often characterises traditional academic hierarchies. The instances of cross-cultural understanding were particularly evident between Lin and me during our discussions about family lives; despite our disparate cultural backgrounds, we discovered many similarities between us.

Thoughts on cultural exchange skills

As Academic Skills Advisers, we see so many students, often fleetingly, in their university careers; when a student repeatedly meets the same adviser, it opens up the possibility of exchanging information in both an academic and a cultural aspect. This allows advisers to

become *cultural navigators* (Strayhorn, 2015, as cited in Yuan et al., 2024): helping students understand, interact, and co-exist with the culture, traditions, and rules of higher education.

Discussions with Lin highlighted unique challenges that international students face: from language and, in the case of the UK, the many different regional dialects (Magne & Ferri, 2024); the often-quirky traditions and expectations of academia (Durkin, 2008); operating in a different language (Soden & Maclellen, 2004); and challenging preconceived notions such as criticality (Shaheen, 2016). International students often struggle with the concept of criticality and academic informal culture in higher education (Turner, 2006). Criticality is a core concept skill we expect all students, especially postgraduate students, to have upon graduating with their Master's degree. The Quality Assurance Agency's (2020, p. 4) *Characteristics Statement for Master's Degree* states that graduates should:

> Be able to apply research and critical perspectives to professional situations, both practical and theoretical, and to use a range of techniques and research methods applicable to their professional activities … that criticality must form a central part in all teaching.

However, for many international students, criticality is not something that culturally exists in their formalised education, which poses a significant challenge (Lillis & Turner, 2001).

With this comes the challenge of informality but also rigid structure and process in higher education in the UK. Shaheen (2016) found that students from non-English backgrounds rarely interact with educators informally, calling them Doctor or Professor, compared to a home student who often use first names. This echoes my experience of teaching in UK higher education, where titles are often reserved for slides, email handles, and door signs and yet international students are more likely to refer to me as Sir or Doctor compared to home students who inevitably always refer to me by my first name. For some international students, calling their educator by their first name is disrespectful culturally (Harzing, 2010); however, we assume that using first names is the norm for all students upon entering higher education.

As an adviser, I operate in a space where I am not bound by the time pressures of assignments, deadlines, Module Assessment Boards, and other red tape that tutors have. Nor am I marking students' work, which reduces an already inherent power dynamic. Whilst our job as academic advisers is to navigate the challenges of academia, as mentioned at the start, we often encompass much more than that. Through these continual cultural exchanges, Lin

has learnt about the UK, and thus integrated more, and vice-versa: I have learnt new cultural dynamics which have developed my practice as an adviser.

Challenges

Despite the many positives that working long-term with a student possesses, there are distinct challenges, which we explore in more depth here. Firstly, from an adviser's perspective, before an account from Lin of international student challenges.

Challenges from an adviser perspective:

Like most services, our provision has continued to be reduced regarding staffing and limited budgets at a time when they are most needed (Hughes et al., 2024). Such an increased demand for academic skills services is an unfortunate consequence of neoliberalism in higher education today (Olssen, 2021). A scramble for more student places, a reliance on an increase in international students to fill budget black holes, time pressures of admin, and dwindling resources in departments (Wray & Kinman, 2021) have led to the issue of too many students with too few staff to support. This, once again, is a point of tension for myself as an adviser: an innate want to support students and spend the time to develop cross-cultural bridging, but ever-increasing demands from the role make this more difficult to justify in terms of resources.

To get to this point of sharing culture, however, is not often an instantaneous process. I believe there has to be an element of respect and trust between the adviser and student built up over time before non-skills discussions take place, as evidenced in the case of Lin. There is no timeframe on this; this may be almost immediate for some adviser-advisee partnerships. For others, they may never reach a point, nor want, to discuss culture and other non-skills-related issues. However, for an exchange of culture and to bridge the gap between worlds, both sides need to build their part of the bridge in order to connect. This, I feel, comes naturally through the interactions with the student from simple questions about their day before moving to discussing their course. I also feel this trust builds over time as feedback is implemented by the student and their marks improve.

Lin shares some of her own observations and reflections in the following section.

Challenges from an international student perspective:

As an international student in the United Kingdom, I have encountered a number of institutional and cultural barriers that have profoundly shaped my academic experience. Chief among these is the fragmented nature of university support systems. While intended to streamline administration, the compartmentalisation of services often leads to confusion and diffusion of responsibility, echoing the findings of Bartram and Terano (2011). In my experience, staff frequently redirected inquiries to the international office, irrespective of the issue's specific nature, leaving me with a persistent sense of being 'passed around'. This lack of a holistic, student-centred approach can produce feelings of neglect and disengagement, as I often felt.

This challenge was amplified by a disjunction between cultural expectations. Coming from a collectivist society, where individuals often act beyond prescribed roles to support one another, the UK's more individualistic and role-defined culture came as a significant shock. Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) and Akl (2010) both evidenced that international students, particularly from collectivist societies, struggle with the formal relationships and independence in Western pedagogies. My experience echoes these findings as the prevailing norm within British academia is to maintain clear professional boundaries which, in my opinion, can unintentionally alienate students unfamiliar with this approach. Despite an acknowledgement from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (2025) of significant issues of 'culture shock', little is done to help international students transition into UK higher education.

Conclusion

Fostering a sense of belonging and shared learning, and the willingness of staff to give up part of themselves and to have a space and time for cultural discussions is important (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). We recognise that the distinct challenges that academics face from time pressures, staff resources, and increasing student demands often lead to a mode of 'just keeping a head above water'. As in the case of myself and Lin, this process took many months before we got to a place where we would freely bridge our cultural worlds.

The next recommendation is that we need to, as academics, challenge our preconceived notions of 'normal' or 'expected' norms within higher education that students will have. Higher

education is now, more than ever, filled with more non-traditional students, each with their own unique experiences and challenges. Academics must recognise the distinct challenges that international students face. We suggest that whilst it may not be practical to talk to students for an hour every time they meet, they could offer cultural exchanges as part of the course or to have 'coffee and cake' meetings: informal scheduled meetings where students on their course can meet with tutors, get to know their coursemates, and exchange cultural practices.

Finally, investing in time for cultural exchange is a necessity for good practice. Academia is about learning and going beyond the subject. It should be inherent in us to learn about our students, and for students to learn about the staff, to foster a shared sense of belonging to an academic community. As practitioners, we can learn a significant amount about the challenges students face, both home and international, and therefore adapt our practices based on real-world experiences. Students are the experts in being students and as student-facing staff, we must be open to hearing these experiences and adapting our working practices to suit.

The reflections outlined above point to a crucial need for more integrated, responsive, and culturally attuned support systems within UK higher education. While some degree of structural complexity is inevitable, institutions must avoid perpetuating environments in which international students feel peripheral or unsupported. Enhancing interdepartmental collaboration, offering accessible academic mentorship, and fostering intercultural competence among staff are not merely administrative improvements; they are ethical imperatives. Ultimately, recognising and validating the multifaceted experiences of international students is essential to creating a more equitable and inclusive academic community. We have presented just one shared experience of an adviser-advisee relationship, and much more research is needed in the experiences of both staff and students when it comes to navigating the challenges and pressures of current higher education.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Editor Victoria Boyd for all of her work helping us to reshape this piece into a case study. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their excellent and insightful comments.

Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: Grammarly. The tasks performed by Grammarly were limited to: proofing of spelling and grammar in the final manuscript. All intellectual content remains solely the work of the authors. The authors have complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

Funding

The authors received no funding for this research and declare no competing interests.

References

Akl, L. (2010). *A Qualitative study of Eastern international students' adjustment to Western culture and Western pedagogy in a British university* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Leicester]. Figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2381/9949

Bartram, B., & Terano, M. (2011). Supporting international students in higher education: A comparative examination of approaches in the UK and USA. *Learning and Teaching*, *4*(2), 30–44. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2011.040203

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cena, E., Burns, S., & Wilson, P. (2021). Sense of belonging and the intercultural and academic experiences among international students at a university in Northern Ireland. *Journal of International Students*, *11*(4), 812–831. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2541

Chang, H. (2021). Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography for Social Science Research. In S. Holman, T. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2nd ed.) (pp. 53–65). Routledge.

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F., & Hernandez, K. A. C. (2013). *Collaborative Autoethnography*. Routledge.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. John Wiley & Sons.

Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 48*(3), 504–518. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3779

Diaz, K. R. V., & Iqbal, J. (2024). Challenges faced by international students in understanding British accents and their mitigation strategies: A mixed methods study. *Education Sciences*, *14*(7), Article 784. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14070784

Durkin, K. (2008). The adaptation of East Asian masters students to western norms of critical thinking and argumentation in the UK. *Intercultural Education*, *19*(1), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980701852228

Edwards, J. (2021). Ethical autoethnography: Is it possible?. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 1–6. https://doi.org10.1177/1609406921995306

Harzing, A. W. (2010). *The publish or perish book: Your guide to effective and responsible citation analysis*. Tarma Software Research Pty Limited.

Hughes, G., Priestley, M., & Spanner, L. (2024). Stretched at both ends: Pressure on student services and the impact on academic staff at UK universities. *Education Sciences*, *15*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15010013

Karalis N. T., Minematsu, A., & Bosca, N. (2023). Collective autoethnography as a transformative narrative methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231203944

Kearney, M. L., & Lincoln, D. (2017). The international student experience: Voices and perspectives. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(5), 823–824. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1286832

Konstantinidis, A. (2024). An integrative review of the literature on factors influencing student well-being in the learning environment. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *7*, Article 100384. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100384

Lillis, T., & Turner, J. (2001). Student writing in higher education: Contemporary confusion, traditional concerns. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *6*(1), 57–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510020029608

Magne, V., & Ferri, G. (2024). Student perceptions of diverse accents of English in a multilingual London post-1992 university. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *21*(2), 268–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2023.2242988

Mohamad, D., & Manning, K. D. (2024). What does it mean to 'belong'?: A narrative literature review of 'belongingness' among international higher education students. *Journal of International Students, 14*(2), 20–37. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v15i1.5783

Olssen, M. (2016). Neoliberal competition in higher education today: Research, accountability and impact. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *37*(1), 129–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1100530

Quality Assurance Agency. (2020). *Characteristics Statement: Master's Degree.* https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/master's-degree-characteristics-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=86c5ca81_22

Ramachandran, N. T. (2011). Enhancing international students' experiences: An imperative agenda for universities in the UK. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *10*(2), 201–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240911413204

Saha, N. (2018). *International students' experiences with academic advising at a mid-western public research university* [Doctoral dissertation, Kent State University]. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=kent1523394293374372

Schweisfurth, M., & Gu, Q. (2009). Exploring the experiences of international students in UK higher education: possibilities and limits of interculturality in university life. *Intercultural Education*, *20*(5), 463–473. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980903371332

Shaheen, N. (2016). International students' critical thinking–related problem areas: UK university teachers' perspectives. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *15*(1), 18–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240916635895

Sinfield, S., & Burns, T. (2022). *Essential study skills: The complete guide to success at university* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Soden, R., & Maclellan, E. (2004). Experienced tutors' deployment of thinking skills and what might be entailed in enhancing such skills. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *23*(4), 335–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/026037042000233485

Steele, G., & White, E. R. (2019). Leadership in higher education: Insights from academic advisers. *The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising, 21*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.18113/P8mj2161110

Turner, Y. (2006). Students from mainland China and critical thinking in postgraduate business and management degrees: Teasing out tensions of culture, style and substance. *International Journal of Management Education*, *5*(1), 3–11. https://rgu-repository.worktribe.com/output/247897

UK Council for International Student Affairs. (2025, February 14). *Facing culture shock*. https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/student-advice/life-in-the-uk/facing-culture-shock/

Wray, S., & Kinman, G. (2021). *Supporting staff wellbeing in higher education*. Education Support. https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/47038/

Yuan, X., Yang, Y., & McGill, C. (2024). The impact of academic advising activities on international students' sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students*, *14*(1), 424–448. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.5227

Zacharias, N., & Shleykina, G. (2021). Collaborative autoethnography as a pathway for teacher learning. *American Journal of Qualitative Research, 5*(2), 10–21. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/11030

Author details

Anthony David Cliffe is a Senior Academic Skills Adviser and Project Developer at the University of Chester in the Academic Skills team. Anthony has a keen interest in Students as Partners and advocates for students to be in the research space. Anthony is a former Senior Lecturer, Editor of the International Journal for Students as Partners, Chair of Ethics, and Assessment Officer, bringing different experiences across into the third space of academic professional services.

Lin Chou is a recent international postgraduate student graduate in art therapy from the University of Chester. Passionate about research, she enjoys exploring diverse topics, particularly those related to human behaviour and psychology. Her curiosity about people has led her to develop a keen interest in personality disorders. Lin is also deeply fascinated by diversity and captivated by different cultures, which enriches her understanding of the human experience. She works with both children and adults, using art therapy to foster understanding and healing. Lin continually seeks challenges that expand her perspective and deepen her expertise in her field.

ORCID

Anthony D. Cliffe https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2627-3678

Lin Chou https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9157-9736