International Students' First Encounters with Exams in the UK: Superficially Similar But Deeply Different

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Although end of course exams remain a key mode of assessment in higher education, little research has focused on international students' experiences of exams. There seems to be a tacit assumption in most literature that exam preparation and strategies are universal, although differences in other areas of learning exist. As an exemplar, this article focuses on international students' first encounters with UK exams and shows that while exams may appear universal, students perceive real differences between the exams they experienced in their home countries and those in the UK. International students' previous experiences shaped their expectations and impacted on how they prepared for, undertook, and made sense of exams. We draw on findings from a questionnaire answered by 168 international students and in-depth "before" and "after" interviews with 21 students. The data show variety in previous experiences and expectations regarding how international students prepared for exams, the exam environment, and, most importantly, in exam answers students produced. We recommend that in addition to exploring differences in other areas of learning for international students, lecturers clarify what is expected in exams early on and use more exam-type tasks to expose and explore contrasts that lie hidden below the surface of exams.

While there has been a well-documented movement towards more innovative approaches to assessment over the last 15 years (see Hounsell et al., 2007), the end of course exam remains an important part of the assessment diet (Mullins & Roberts, 1996). It is widely used to determine degree classifications and high stakes decisions such as progression to the dissertation stage of a master's program or subsequent years of an undergraduate course. Despite this, there is still a paucity of research into end of course exams, and that which exists focuses on national systems or on how exams compare to other forms of assessment (e.g., Knight, 2002) rather than on differences between international exam systems. It is possible that there may be differences in exam systems around the world and that this may surprise or unnerve students. There is, however, no comparative descriptive or critical research in this area. This paper aims to redress this through the presentation of a study exploring international students' perceptions of the differences between taking exams in the UK when compared to taking exams in their home countries. We focus on international students' first experiences of UK-based exams in order to gain an understanding of differences between previous (home) and current (UK-based) exam experiences without the interference of multiple UK experiences which would have shaped how students prepare for, approach, and talk about exams.

Regarding the international student experience of education, there is much research and guidance into the academic tasks and practices that international students have to manage (e.g., see Caruana & Spurling, 2007). Indeed, a number of areas have been the subject of research for some time: overall differences in academic cultures (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Byram & Feng, 2004); practices of supervision (e.g., Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007; Spencer-Oatey, 1997); written discourse styles (e.g., Johnson & Duver, 1996; Tran, 2009); and perceptions of plagiarism (e.g., Amsberry, 2010; Duff, Rogers, & Harris, 2006) to name but four. However, regarding exams, the international student experience has been little researched. Research around the international student experience of exams that does exist has highlighted how international students can be disadvantaged compared to home students when exams are used as the assessment mechanism (De Vita, 2002), while recent research has shown that students who have English as a primary language (EPL) perform better when compared to students who have English as a second language (ESL), particularly in examinations requiring more discursive responses (Smith, 2011). Such research sheds much light on the international student performance *vis à vis* that of home students, and it often suggests that cultural differences may exist in test types (De Vita, 2002). De Vita (2002) argues that international students are unfairly penalized by examinations when compared to UK students as international students perform worse in UK exams than UK students. De Vita speculates that this may be due to the timed nature of the exam. In this paper we complement such research through an investigation of the "before" and "after" of international students' taking exams for the first time in another country. We investigate these experiences and shed light on the reasons for any difficulties experienced.

With regard to preparation and guidance materials to help students with exams there is, not surprisingly, a large range available (e.g., Blass, 2009; Evans, 2004; McMillan & Weyers, 2010; Tracy, 2002). Few guides, however, focus on international students specifically. Some do raise the issue of particular challenges for

international students (Lowes, Peters, & Turner, 2004), but the vast majority do not, with many not even mentioning international students at all (e.g., Acres, 1992; Blass, 2009; Duncalf, 1999; Evans, 2004; Leader, 1990; McMillan & Weyers, 2010). Even when guides are specific to international students, it is often the case that the advice is broadly similar to that given to home students (Reinders, Moore, & Lewis, 2008; McMillan & Weyers, 2011). In short, for home students and international students there is little difference in the advice given. There is either a tacit assumption that exams are similar or, perhaps, an assumption that students will have learned about all the contrasts between their own education system and that in the UK by the time they arrive in the exam hall. In terms of the UK examinations themselves, these consist of principally three types of questions: multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions (Blass, 2009; Duncalf, 1999; McMillan & Weyers, 2010, 2011). In addition to these classifications, essay questions have been subdivided into descriptive and analytical types of questions (Acres, 1992; Leader, 1990), and multiple choice questions have been referred to as objective-type questions (Leader, 1990). While there is no published literature which surveys the extent to which exams are used in UK higher education when compared to other forms of assessment, exams are prevalent in the system, and it is likely that most students will have an exam-element in their courses (although some master's level courses may comprise only coursework elements).

However, despite a lack of specific exam-related research and guidance for international students, a recent UK Teaching International Students project notes that assessment is the "most common" topic of conversation when staff talk about international students (Carroll, 2010, p. 1) and that research has shown that international students are very much afraid of exams, as they are often "unfamiliar with assessment practices and find it challenging to express themselves clearly in academic English" (Duhs, 2010, p. 3).

The research reported here helps fill this gap. It presents and discusses results from a study exploring international students' perceptions of the differences between taking exams in the UK when compared to taking exams in their home country. It seeks to challenge the notion that exams are universal and therefore unproblematic for international students once they have adjusted in other areas of their academic and personal lives. Although the study focuses on the UK as an exemplar, it is implicit that differences will exist in other countries where international students visit.

Method

This study was carried out within two post-92 UK universities, each with a growing international student cohort. Both institutions pride themselves on their international student support: one institution notes it has "excellent support services" for international students and has more non-European students than any other mainland UK university, and the other has been rated top in the UK for international student satisfaction four years in a row by i-graduate's International Student Barometer survey (i-graduate, 2013)

Data collection was twofold: two rounds of iterative interviews were carried out, and a questionnaire was administered. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted individually with 21 students by two interviewers with extensive experience from doctoral theses and externally funded projects. Interviews were chosen rather than other methods such as narratives as this allowed for more negotiation and "active" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) exploration of ideas and a much deeper understanding as the interviews were in-depth (Johnson, 2002). The students were recruited through a purposive sampling approach (Patton, 1990), whereby typical cases were asked to volunteer for the project by the researchers going to lectures, explaining about the project, and asking for help or through intermediaries such as the institutional international office or course leaders. The protocol for the interviews was to first explain the project, ask for any concerns, and then proceed to the main body of the interview before a list of reflexive questions (Jia, 2001) at the end to ask for interviewee feedback on whether the procedure could be improved and whether the interviewees felt anything needed to be added. The main body of the interview did not use written questions, employing instead "spider diagrams" for prompts, where a central-themed prompt (i.e., the theme format) was surrounded by sub-related prompts (i.e., the sub-related prompt question type). The approach is shown in Figure 1.

The prompts focused on the three areas of Preparation, Format, and Environment. These areas were chosen as being salient to exams following a review of exam guidebooks for students (e.g., Blass, 2009; McMillan & Weyers, 2010). Students were free to talk around these areas themselves or to be guided by the interviewer, whichever they preferred. This made the interviews more participatory (Fontana & Frey, 2005) by giving the students more say in the direction of the interview, and the use of spider diagrams in this way also shifted the balance of power in the interview more towards the interviewee (see Foucault, 2000) and made them more respectful and mutual (Christians, 2011). The second round of interviews, following the examination period, drew upon the transcripts from the first round. This allowed students to reflect on their previous expectations and whether there were (or were not) any surprises in the exams. Students were also e-mailed after they had received their results and asked if

Figure 1
"Spider Diagram" Interview Prompt
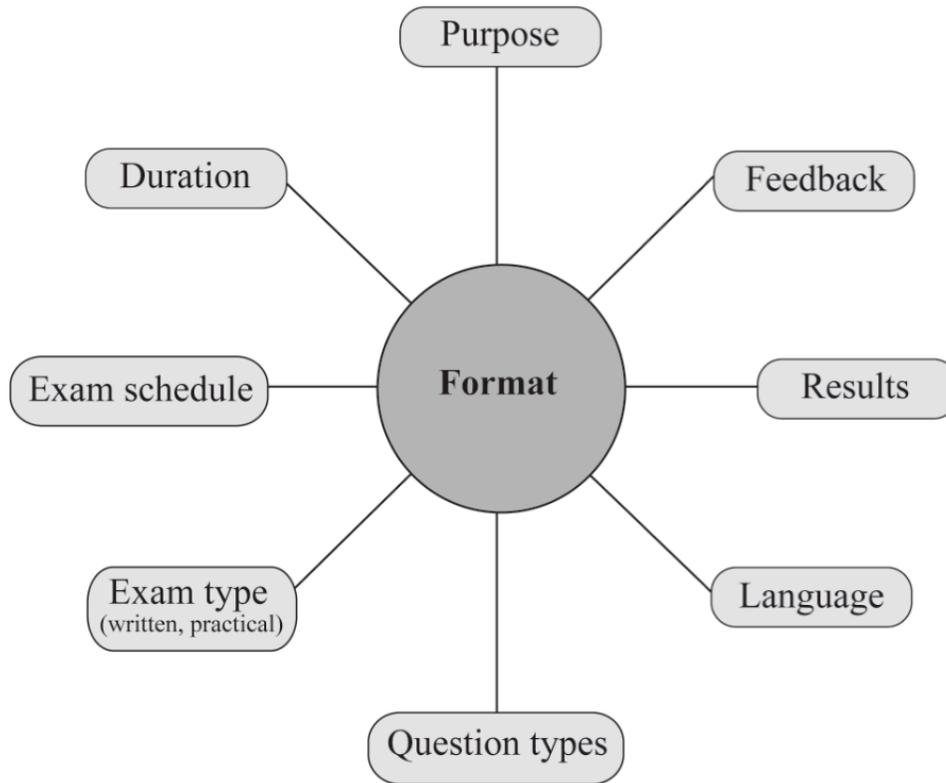
they felt their results reflected their expectations (19 of the 21 responded).

The interviews were analyzed using both deductive coding based on the interview schedule and inductive codes, which emerged from the data. In this sense, the initial schedule provided the deductive code manual (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Taylor, 2008), but subsequent analysis generated new inductive codes. For example, the initial codes of Preparation, Environment, and Format allowed for the grouping of data under such deductive headings as "Schedule" and "Revision" but other key codes arose such as "Heterogeneity" and "Reading Time." The deductive codes thus provided a starting point from which additional inductive codes were constructed (see Appendix for a full list of both types of codes).

The questionnaire design was informed by the analysis of data from the first round of interviews. Questionnaires were anonymous and were completed online through Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/) after the student participants had completed their first examinations in the UK. The link to the questionnaire was sent to students via an international student e-mail distribution list in one institution and through appealing for volunteers via a Student Portal announcement in the other. Both approaches resulted in similar numbers of respondents. The questionnaire consisted of an introductory page that explained the aims and estimated time needed to complete the questionnaire. There were then four sections, which used a combination of Likert-scale and open-text questions. The first section collected participants' demographic details, including information on their previous education. The second and third sections focused on the students' previous experiences of exams and the environment in which they were taken in their home countries. The final section asked for comparisons between their exam preparation behavior in their home country and in the UK. The questionnaire focused on the same areas as the interview (i.e., exam question types, exam environment, and preparation for exams) and aimed to capture the extent of student concerns around these areas based on their experiences during their first period of examinations in the UK. The interview data informed the detail of questionnaire design, for example the decisions to ask about re-sit exams, about whether students were allowed to talk in the exam room, about whether students could influence the markers, and about including military and police personnel as

potential exam invigilators came directly from the interviews. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity to triangulate the interview data.

A total of 271 students answered the survey from two institutions. Out of these 271 respondents, 103 (38%) had previously taken exams in the UK and therefore played no further part in the study (as noted above, we focused specifically on students who were taking exams for the first time in the UK), leaving 168 students split 88 and 80 across the two institutions. A larger number of students than required was targeted (see Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003) with the aim of achieving a minimum of 50 respondents to enable a chi-square analysis. Chi-square analysis was utilized to assess whether an association (or relationship) between two variables in the sample was likely to reflect a real association between these two variables in the population; this was applied at the 5% level of significance. The number of students answering each question varied, but it was never less than 64 in questions analyzed via chi-square. The Likert scale used was labelled *never*, *occasionally*, *often*, and *always*. On occasion the categories were concatenated to enable the chi-square, and hence the degrees of freedom quoted vary as appropriate. All percentages are quoted based on the number of students answering the particular question.

Combined, this method generated wider context quantitative data from the questionnaire and more in-depth qualitative data from the interviews. The written questionnaires complemented the spoken interviews, and the choice of two approaches over different stages allowed for findings from one stage to inform and be explored in the next. The findings from the analyses are presented below. We start with a brief section detailing the biographical data of the participants before presenting and later discussing the findings.

The Participants

The 21 students we interviewed (20 in the second round) were direct entry undergraduate (four) and taught postgraduate (17), and they were studying a range of subjects (e.g., finance, tourism, computing, engineering). They represented a range of nationalities (14) and areas of the world (Indian subcontinent, Africa, Europe, North America, Asia). Although the interview sample size is relatively small, it nevertheless generated rich data, including over 24 hours of interviews. This data was also notable for the range of differences it showed regardless of where students were from. These findings were complemented and confirmed by the questionnaire data.

In the questionnaire 38% ($n = 41$), of the fulltime international students responding ($n = 108$) had entered directly to the third year of the four-year undergraduate degree and 62% ($n = 67$) were at postgraduate level. Others ($n = 60$) were on a variety of exchange programs.

The subjects studied were broadly categorized as business 38% ($n = 46$), science and technology 51% ($n = 63$), and health-related 11% ($n = 13$). Thirty-five different nationalities were represented. Only Nigerian, Indian, and Chinese students were respondents at both institutions.

Findings

The international students' experiences of their first UK exams were varied. Of those who had recently received exam results ($n = 99$), only 42% ($n = 41$) achieved the results they expected. Of the 68 answering the question "Which (if any) exam system was more effective at allowing you to show what you know?", 38.2% ($n = 26$) chose their home exam system and 27.9% ($n = 19$) the UK system. For those students interviewed, at one institution the majority of students were pleased with their results, but at the other students were generally disappointed with their results.

We now detail how students' previous experiences and expectations impacted on how they prepared for, undertook, and made sense of their first exams in the UK. Results are presented by three areas or topics: preparation and revision for exams, exam room environment, and exam questions and answers. We briefly explain what we mean by these concepts at the start of each section. The results from both the interviews and the questionnaires are presented together in order to show how they complemented each other. In the subsequent discussion section these results are also addressed in the same order.

Preparation and Revision for Exams

By preparation and revision we mean resources used and behaviors followed when preparing to sit an exam. In terms of resources, the questionnaire focused on whether students differed in their use of a variety of revision materials in their home countries compared to the UK. Table 1 presents the three significant results: with respect to notes taken by the student during the lecture, students made significantly less use of these in the UK than they did at home but significantly more use of both recommended and searched-for web resources. Regarding differences between postgraduate and undergraduate students, postgraduate students were generally more proactive in sourcing study materials than undergraduates both at home and in the UK.

The interviews complemented these findings. In their own countries, many students prepared for exams by reading through lecture notes, slides, and textbooks. For some, reading textbooks and memorizing material

Table 1
Differing Revision Behaviors at Home and in the UK

	Lecture notes taken by you		Recommended Web sources		Searched for Web sources	
	At home	In the UK	At home	In the UK	At home	In the UK
Never	0	0	15	9	24	14
Occasionally	6	19	38	22	29	24
Often	12	9	10	20	11	11
Always	53	38	5	15	5	7
	$\chi^2 = 9.491$, $df = 2$, p < 0.01		$\chi^2 = 14.073$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.01$		$\chi^2 = 9.587$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$	

Note. Question: "When revising did you make use of the following?"

guaranteed a pass (Slovenia, Slovakia), for example, "It's usually just textbook material and like some slides from lecturers. . . . I just read through that a couple of times" (Slovenia). Most home universities did not provide specific exam preparation support, though some lecturers would give hints about which areas would be covered (e.g., China), or more detailed information about exam content (Iran). Sometimes not all the syllabus was covered, leaving students much work to do independently (India, Nigeria), as the following analogy drawn by a student between the extent of material covered and the distance covered in a race shows:

> Using an analogy, supposing that you were supposed to have covered say 100 meters in a course and then you could only cover, or the lecturer decides that you should cover, 40, and then he expects you to go on and get the other 60 on your own . . . when you get to the exam you discover that most of the questions are from that 60 as against the 40 that you've been taught. (Nigeria)

In terms of preparation, the questionnaire showed no significant differences between student preparation and revision in the UK and at home. Statistically there were no significant differences in study behaviors at home and in the UK when utilizing past papers ($\chi^2 = 2.547$, $df = 3$, $p > 0.05$) and seeking individual assistance from members of staff ($\chi^2 = 2.459$, $df = 3$, $p > 0.05$), showing that students' behavior did not change from what they did at home, even though the learning experience and the assessment format may be different. This had implications for how students performed. For some students, preparing in the same way worked: "Personally I spent only one week [preparing]." When the interviewer asked if this was enough time, the student responded, "More than enough" (Pakistan). However, others realized after the exam that there were differences between the UK and their own country and that they should have prepared differently. In the first interview one student noted the increased requirement

for independent study in the UK: "In my country I'm depending on myself 80%; here it's 200%" (Oman). In the second interview, however, this same student still regretted not preparing enough himself/herself and said:

> I realized really late the night before or the day before the test only that our teacher is expecting a lot from us . . . he was like "Read more and more of this stuff." . . . [I]f we knew this before we would work really hard. . . . I did my best in it but I do feel really guilty. (Oman)

Others only realized after the exam that they should have worked harder, for example: "I regret . . . next semester I will revise" (China), and that they "should have gone through the coursework and look for similar questions in the textbooks. . . . [I] will do this in the next semester" (Nigeria). Thus, until these international students had actually experienced taking UK exams, most prepared in the same way as they had at home. They were clearly unaware that there could be any differences in what the exam marker expected of them when compared to their previous educational system: differences which might have led them to change how they prepared.

Where preparation differences did exist, these were environmental, either in terms of who people worked with or, interestingly, due to the climate. In terms of who the students prepared for exams with, the tendency to revise with friends ($\chi^2 = 7.164$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.067$) although not statistically significant, indicates there may be an increase in this behavior in the UK. This was reflected in the interviews. One student from China noted in the first interview that at home s/he worked alone, as, "Chinese people always study alone. They seldom talk or discuss in groups. I think it doesn't help too much" (China). However, in the UK, this changed, and this same student from China said, "We lead the teamwork." The interviewer clarified with this student that work was individual in China, while in the UK the expectation was to work in teams. It was also the case that students sought help from others who were in the

year above them (Slovakia, Nigeria, India). The reverse could also happen; for example, one student revised alone at home but were constantly signed into Microsoft Messenger to ask friends questions. However, they did not do this in the UK (Holland).

For some students, the UK climate brought unaccustomed cold weather, particularly if they were from a warm climate such as that in Nigeria:

> In Nigeria when exams approach . . . you would typically wake up in the middle of the night and put in an hour or two and then sleep back. It's difficult here you know as when you wake up it's cold you wouldn't want to leave that bed so you lie down with your book and you spend like 10/15 minutes and you realize you are just deceiving yourself and close the book. (Nigeria)

For many others, the weight of having to do all their other assessments meant they had little time to revise: "The course just finished. . . . After one week we take the exam, so we don't have so much time to prepare" (China). Thus, in terms of preparation for their first exams in the UK, students mostly followed similar ways of preparing as in their home countries. Environmental differences existed, but in terms of how they prepared for the content, few changes existed. It was clear that exams were expected to be similar, yet as we show below, this often transpired to be a false expectation.

Exam Room Environment

In terms of the exam environment (for example size of the room, regulations and procedures), the questionnaire revealed a range of acceptable behaviors in the students' home countries that would not be tolerated in the UK. As Tables 2 and 3 show, each behavior was always tolerated somewhere, and some behaviors, such as passing stationery or calculators, were widely prevalent. Although certain practices, such as taking notes into exams, could be interpreted as being perfectly legal and pedagogically sound (for example in an open book exam), buying the exam prior to the exam and influencing the marker would not. Notably, a number of practices showed dissimilarity with what occurs in the UK, and some of these practices impacted upon student performance as the new experience was very unsettling (see Tables 2 and 3).

The interview data gave more details on the exam environment. For some interviewees, the exam environment was a highly formal space with specific seats, ID checks, and strict rules about what can and cannot be taken into the exam hall (India, Oman). Sometimes even the atmospheric environment was controlled: one student said that in the United States, "They keep the classrooms colder usually because it helps you stay awake" (US). For others, the environment at home was highly informal, and in Spain

Table 2
Exam Protocol at Home: Tolerated Behaviors

Answer Options	Always %	Sometimes %	Never %
Use of mobile phones	2.5	2.5	94.9
Use of MP3 players	2.5	2.5	94.9
General talking	2.5	6.3	91.1
Talking about the exam	2.5	3.8	93.7
Passing notes to each other	2.5	1.3	96.2
Passing stationery to each other	3.8	35.4	60.8
Passing calculators to each other	3.8	44.3	51.9
Leaving the room for a break	12.7	21.5	64.6
Going to the rest rooms	39.2	26.6	32.9

Note. Question: "In your home country were any of the following tolerated in the exam room?" ($n = 79$)

Table 3
Exam Protocol at Home: Awareness of Behaviors

Answer Options	Always %	Sometimes %	Never %
Buying the exam paper prior to the exam	--	15.6	84.4
Taking notes into the exam	5.1	39.2	55.7
Gaining knowledge of the questions in advance	3.8	34.6	61.5
Influencing the marker	--	18.2	81.8

Note. Question: "In your home country were you aware of any of the following happening?" ($n = 79$)

there was lots of talking, for example, "I think that's more like the way that the Spanish behave, . . . we're like kind of noisy" (Spain), or disorganized, for example in Holland, "They want you to be quiet and that is understandable but no one is quiet. . . . They're all chatting away and waiting and some people get their exam. . . . You hear people whispering the answers to each other" (Holland). The environment could also be lacking in comfortable space, and corrupt, for example one student said that in Nigeria,

> Almost everyone in the exam room will be cheating—but only 1% will get caught. And even when they do, many still get As or Bs. It is only the very disciplined lecturer who does not accept a bribe to help a student avoid punishment. (Nigeria)

Worryingly, this student also noted, "95% of students will bribe their lecturers to get a better mark. Male students pay in cash, female students in cash and kind" (Nigeria).

What constituted cheating differed. Some education systems were extremely strict (India, Oman) with serious monitoring. One Taiwanese student said, "They have some GPS or some police they call 'technology police' . . . [who] test if anyone . . . [makes a] text message or something very like spy things" (Taiwan), while students from elsewhere commented on the passive acceptance of cheating (Ukraine, Spain). Nevertheless, some interviewees recounted how students risked cheating because a degree certificate is such a valued document (Nigeria). Other students felt there was an actual scale of cheating behaviors and did not perceive carrying notes as serious cheating; in the words of one student from Spain: "Well, I got away a few times, . . . but I suppose it was only . . . maybe key words to remember parts of things, but no proper cheating" (Spain).

In terms of interviewees' observations on cheating behaviors in the UK, some felt unable to comment; one student from Iran said, "I didn't see clearly, . . . I had to put my head down I don't know if anybody do it" (Iran). Other students, however, did witness cheating pass unnoticed in the UK, for example: "there were a few people cheating . . . that I could see, but no one was kicked out" (Slovakia). Despite this, the UK was generally felt to be much stricter, for example: "I think it would be easier to cheat in the States because I did it all the time" (US). One interviewee even voluntarily confessed to an exam invigilator that s/he had cheated in the exam due to the immense pressure and stress of the environment:

> I think I do a dishonest thing so unfair. . . . This note, I pull it out my pocket. [It] didn't mean I want to do that, but I just panic. I'm so afraid, I

wanted to answer all the questions, but I can't remember anything. (nationality withheld for reasons of anonymity)

There were thus numerous differences between home and UK exam environments. When combined with deeper contrasts in the expectations of the very different type of answers from seemingly similar questions, these environmental differences had a significant impact upon many students.

Exam Questions and Answers

The data from both the interviews and questionnaire showed that in most cases students had experienced a range of question types during exams within their own countries. The only unfamiliar format, according to the questionnaire data, was poster presentations, with only around 10% of students having experienced these before (Europe and Africa). Similarly, for most interviewees exams consisted of short and long written questions, with (India, Pakistan, Nigeria) or without (Holland, Slovakia, Slovenia) a choice of questions. Sometimes there would be multiple choice questions (Pakistan, US), but not always (India, Nigeria), and occasionally exams involved an oral element (Ukraine).

While the questions might appear the same, many students felt that the motives for asking them were not necessarily the same. Although for one student, exams anywhere were "just a matter of grading" (Dubai), for others the purposes were different, for example in Nigeria some of the questions "were designed to kind of intimidate." These different purposes could create different expectations of answers. While questions seemed familiar, underlying educational philosophies and expectations of answers could differ greatly.

One student from Holland stressed the contrast between the expectations of the length of exam answers at home and in the UK:

> I would definitely change the advice I would give to other students. The way they want an answer to the question is really different here in the UK than in the Netherlands. Here they want you to write a complete essay as an answer to every question while in Holland they just want the answer and that's it. I think this might be where I went wrong. (Holland)

Notably, and somewhat worryingly, the student's use of the phrase, "I think this might be where I went wrong," clearly shows this student was unaware of this difference prior to taking the exam.

Another difference was in how much to use personal opinions or arguments in exams. Some

interviewees had not expected exam answers to require them to state their own opinion, one student from Slovakia said,

> It's completely different even the questions are given so that they're asking you more about the opinion [whereas even at masters level, at home] they would ask you for an exact topic about the exact topic, and they would expect you to write exact things. (Slovakia)

In fact, using a personal opinion in an exam in their own country could mean a fail, as one student from the Ukraine noted: "For example, if you have a different point of view from the one stated in the book and you write it, you might not have any marks" (Ukraine). In the UK, however, the expectation is directly converse: if no argument or opinion is given, this equates to a low mark awarded. There was thus significant difference between expectations of answers with regard to how and if students' own opinions were expressed.

Connected to the expression of opinion was the need to support opinions through reference to other authors. This was evident with both native and non-native English speaking international students. One student from the US said,

> One thing that was new that I've never done before and . . . I think it hurt me on my exams: it was to source. . . . I didn't realize I had to read a document and then think about who wrote that and remember that and source it while writing. (US)

Another student from France said, "What was surprising . . . was the referencing work that we had to do because in France we don't have to refer to a source or stuff like that that much. If you don't read it's okay" (France). Similarly, students were surprised at the requirement to use examples from course materials to support their answers:

> I was very regret because in a class in the day teacher gave us examples about each topic. We do tutorial every week. I would never think it's important. . . . I don't think this would be useful for the exam, . . . [but] they are similar topic if you do not want to find other example you can use the examples in class. (China)

Another student found a clear relationship between what was taught and what was on the exam in the UK, which did not always happen at home in Nigeria: "Lecturers make a close connection between exams and what is taught. It was not like that in Nigeria" (Nigeria).

For some non-native speakers there was the added issue of expressing themselves in English. The two institutions had different approaches to supporting international students. At one institution, both international and home students sometimes received an additional 15 minutes reading time (with no opportunity to write). Some students appreciated this, one student saying it was "like a joy, really was a precious joy" (Spain), yet the majority were either less positive: "It was just ridiculous I would say it's a stupid thing to do" (Iran); or were puzzled by it: "I don't know why they give us time to read about the papers though. . . . I think it's a just . . . [a] waste [of] our time for writing" (China). At the other institution international students who were doing their first exam in the UK, and students whose first language was not English, were given an extra 15 minutes per hour for their exams. Reaction to this was also mixed: some students felt this unnecessary (Holland), yet others, greatly appreciated it, one student from Slovenia said s/he "found those extra 45 minutes very useful because . . . it's enough time to really write something extra. For three hours you would be like really like just rushing*"* (Slovenia).

Although the two institutions approached language differently (one recognizing it as an issue and the other treating all students equally), non-native speakers experienced particular challenges due to the need to perform numerous cognitive tasks. In the words of one student from China:

> First you must know what the question is talking about, second you must remember the which part of it, and the hardest part is even you know what is it, how do you describe it, how do you write it down, . . . you have to tell the reason so that is hard. . . . I guess it's not hard to pass the exam, it's hard to get high mark . (China)

The issue here is not vocabulary; it is the form of the language required in the answer. Some students felt there were a number of questions hidden within the question, unlike in the student's home country. One student from China said,

> I cannot get used to . . . the question arrangement. . . . [I]n China just one part one point but here one part several points. . . . [T]he answer so I have to divide it in several parts and explain many points; . . . it's much [more] difficult to get higher points. (China)

It is, however, difficult to generalize about language, as one student from China, studying a technical subject, noted prior to taking the exams that "language is a very big problem," but afterwards said, "I think there is no problem now" (China). Nor were difficulties with languages solely limited to non-native speakers, as this North American student highlights: "I even speak English and half my friends are international students

that don't speak English and . . . they're asking me for help, and I'm just like, 'I can't help you, I don't know either'" (US).

Given the above, it was understandable that timing was an issue; for example, one student left out two parts of the exam "because there was not enough time" (Oman). Although timing is an issue for any student, for international students the pressure of timing often affected other aspects critical to exam success, such as referencing. Indeed, one Spanish student was aware s/he needed to reference, but lack of time meant that the student did not do this:

> I just worry about the reference. . . . I didn't have time to say according to "someone." . . . I don't know why because I already learned how to referencing doing the essays, but exam was kind of like little bit stress and more concerned about the topics. (Spain)

Another student ran out of time when told to remove a personal mobile phone and had no other timepiece; upon finally seeing how little time remained, the student just "did the best I could do within the limited time. . . . I wasn't able to answer everything" (Nigeria). Here, false expectations of the exam environment impacted on student success. Such differences did not need to be large to be significant, one student noting that the quantity of small differences could have an unsettling quality all of its own:

> I imagine, you know you think it's an exam, it's quiet, it's uniformed, you don't cheat but this like these small difference that add up and I don't even think you can put into words and I think that's going to make me slightly more like, what am I doing? (US)

Thus, significant differences existed for many students with regard to referencing, stating opinions, using examples, structuring longer answers, and subdividing answers. These differences were compounded by environmental ones, and yet students prepared in almost exactly the same way. In short, there were differences, regardless of where the student was from, or whether the student was from a UK protectorate, or even an English language medium delivered education system. Notably, these differences were not anticipated; we now discuss why they were not.

Discussion

In terms of preparation and revision for exams, most international students used familiar strategies. Indeed, there is little guidance to persuade them of any

need to do otherwise. Almost all guides on exam practice are written for all students, and not separately for international students, and they implicitly reinforce the idea that the same preparation strategies should be used. Understandably then, most international students used the same preparation strategies they had used previously, and sometimes increased the amount of time they used them (e.g., memorization). For those who did adapt, group revision provided the collegial support that many international students draw on when studying abroad (McClure, 2007) as their new external environment forced them to change and impacted on their dispositions to learn (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007), but it did not, as shown above, necessarily impact upon the content of what they prepared.

With regard to the environment in which the exams took place, this was in many cases unfamiliar to the students, and this increased the stress of exams for international students. Even seemingly small factors, such as not being able to use a mobile phone as a clock, had a large impact on student performance. Different expectations of regulations and protocol were also apparent, such as varied constructs of cheating behaviors (e.g., talking, taking notes into the exam room, or influencing the marker). Perceptions of what constitutes cheating are not clear cut within the UK (Ashworth, Bannister, Thorne, & Unit, 1997), so this can be bewildering when coming from another culture (Ninnes, Aitchison, & Kalos, 1999). Students have to come to terms with this unfamiliar exam environment under considerable time pressure. This is even more of a challenge if English is not their first language (Smith, 2011) and some felt that as they were writing in a second language, their marks would be lower. The issue of UK academic English was highly complex and problematic to both non-native and native speakers. Language was thus intrinsically linked to familiarity with UK academic culture.

In terms of exam questions and answers, this research shows that exam question types are perceived to be similar around the world. Indeed, the only format many students were unfamiliar with was the poster presentation, and arguably many UK students would be unfamiliar with this, too. On the surface then, the picture is uncomplicated; however, this can lull both international students and UK staff into a false sense of security and belief that exams are similar. Despite preparing in the same way for what they considered to be similar question types, this research shows that expectations of what was required in answer to these question types were very different. Such contrasts revolved around purpose, use of references, use of examples, extent of inclusion of own opinion, level of detail, and a loose relationship between course content and exam content. This can be highly problematic because the students realize too late, often not until

after the exam, that such contrasts exist. This explains why some students were disappointed with their results, as well as why a majority felt that the examinations in their own countries more effectively allowed them to show what they knew. These findings suggest that students need to familiarize themselves with a different culture of learning (Ridley, 2004) as their expectations of exams are grounded in the society in which they had previously experienced exams (McClure, 207). Such familiarization is made all the more difficult by the fact that these students had very often not been in the academic culture of the UK long enough to acculturate (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The urgency of acculturation is intensified when the extremely stressful high stakes nature (Price, Carroll, Donovan, & Rust, 2011) of the exams is taken into account.

To summarize, the students in this study felt that exams they were doing were going to be the same as the kinds of exams they had done before. They had not realized that they might be required to reference or use examples or state their own opinions, for example. Many students commented upon these features of UK exams following their first experience of exams, but not before. It would appear that these students had grasped these concepts for their continuous pieces of work (i.e., coursework) but had not transferred them to the exam room context. Thus, these fundamental differences were not apparent until after the exams were taken; this clearly affected many international students' performances.

Conclusions

This paper has questioned how universal the exam experience is. The exemplar discussed detailed a variety of previous examination experiences for international students before they arrived in the UK. These experiences undoubtedly impacted on the students' expectations of how to prepare for, how to approach, and how to answer exam questions. Exam question types might be considered to be the same by international students, but when they write their answers and receive their marks, students realize what is required is very different. Students from many countries (France, China, the US) were unfamiliar with using references in exam answers. This was "surprising" for one student, and not using references in the exams was believed to have "hurt" another student's results. How personal opinions are managed also differed greatly, and in some cases the use of such opinions could be contrary to previous experiences. In the UK such use was encouraged, but in the Ukraine, for example, expressing a different point of view to the one in the book would mean the answer "might not have any marks." Use of examples and the subdivision and discourse management of longer questions also showed variation in approach, and one student from China expressed much "regret" at not having used more examples in his or her exam answer. When compounded with environmental differences, these can have a profound impact on international students' performance in exams, often regardless of whether they are native English speakers or not. This may lead to disappointment with their results. Based on the data from this exemplar, further research with larger numbers of students from different countries will shed more light on the differences between examination systems and the impact these differences can have on student performance.

Although it is impossible for lecturers to be aware of all the permutations of students' previous examination experiences, they need to be sensitive to the difference and to create spaces where these differences could be discussed. Lecturers need to clarify what is expected in an exam (Price et al., 2011), to encourage active participation and interaction in assessment matters (Ridley, 2004; Tran, 2009), and to give feedback on exam-like assessment tasks as early as possible in the semester (Yorke, 2001). These interventions would help develop assessment literacy (Price et al., 2011), thus benefitting international and home students alike (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). They would allow for the exploration and exposure of the contrasts that lie hidden below the surface of the exam, and they would help international students better focus their preparation for exams and perform better in them. To repeat the words of one student, reflecting with the benefit of hindsight:

> I would definitely change the advice I would give to other students. The way they want an answer to the question is really different here in the UK than in the Netherlands. Here they want you to write a complete essay as an answer to every question while in Holland they just want the answer and that's it. I think this might be where I went wrong. (Holland)

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Appendix
Coding

Deductive and Inductive Codes

The left column (A) details the deductive codes. These were areas that the students were asked to speak about in the schedule. The column on the right (B) shows the inductive codes that arose from the analysis of the transcripts. Additional inductive codes that did not fit the main three deductive code areas are placed directly below

Exams: Experiences and Expectations	
(A) Deductive codes	**(B) Inductive codes**

Format
    (Duration, Purpose, Feedback, Results, Exam Schedule, Exam Type [e.g., written, practical], Question Types, Language)
	Format
	    (Re-sits, Unfamiliar Assessment Types)

Environment
    (Exam Room "Protocol," Rules and Regulations, Nerves / Adrenalin, Where? "Cheating")
	Environment
	    (Pressure)

Preparation
    (Strategies, Alone/Groups, Support Materials, Mock Exams/Quizzes, Revision)
	Preparation
	    (Strategies [pre-exam and during exam], Reading Time)

	Definition of international student, Experience, Heterogeneity, IELTS, Method, Miscellaneous, Value of project