International students' transitions to UK Higher Education – revisiting the concept and practice of academic hospitality

Josef Ploner

Abstract

With the increasing mobility of international students to the UK, the appropriate facilitation of their transition remains a critical issue in terms of higher education practice and research. Much existing research and practice is characterised by assimilationist approaches to transition where international students are seen to 'adapt to' and 'fit in' seemingly uniform host environments. This study however draws on the concept of 'academic hospitality' (Bennett, 2000; Phipps & Barnett, 2007) to develop a more nuanced stance which emphasises reciprocity between academic 'hosts' and 'guests'. The findings presented here emerge from semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of international students who spent their first year abroad at a well-established UK university. Elaborating on different experiences and forms of academic hospitality (i.e. material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic and touristic), the paper contributes to a refined theorisation of international student transition. It also offers valuable insights for academic practitioners and policy makers who seek sensible approaches to internationalisation.

Keywords: international student transition; internationalisation; UK higher education; academic hospitality; first-year experience;

Introduction

Over the past 20 years or so, the continuous rise of international student numbers in UK higher education (HE), has posed new challenges as well as opportunities for the learning, teaching and assessment of students who emanate from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Before discussing some of these challenges and opportunities, however, it is worthwhile reflecting on the term 'international student/s' which remains contested and weakly defined in academic and policy literature. In the UK, the term is applied to students who are not 'domiciled' in the country and emanate from countries within the European Union (approximately 5.6% of the total UK student population, HESA, 2016), 'other European' and 'non-European Economic Area (EEA)' countries (5%), as well as 'non-EU' countries (13.6%). Students who study for a UK HE degree outside the UK are generally referred to as 'overseas' students by national HE statistics and advisory bodies (HESA, 2016; UKCISA, 2018), although the term is also widely associated with non-European students studying in the UK (Taylor and Ali, 2017; Foreign & Commonwealth Office,2018). In line with the above definitions, this study employs the term 'international' for EU, EEA as well as non-EU students.

Regardless of their assigned classification and immigration status, most international students have been brought up in educational and social environments which can be quite different in comparison with UK and/or Anglophone 'traditions'. Reflecting on the increase of international student numbers in so-called 'receiving' countries, a growing body of scholarly work is concerned with the complexities that surround international student mobilities and the ways in which the 'internationalisation of higher education' impacts on the learning, life trajectories, and identity formations of those involved. For example, scholars have explored how international student mobilities tie in with concurrent forms of global movement, diaspora and migration (Brookes and Waters, 2011; Ploner, 2017), reproduce cultural capital and social (dis)advantages (Waters, 2012), or reshape notions of place, belonging and

community (Collins, 2012; Nada and Araujo, 2017). Likewise, research has focused on experiences of 'transition', 'orientation' or 'adjustment' (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Simpson et al., 2009 Briggs et al., 2012) of international students and looked at the ways equality and inclusion are played out within increasingly diverse academic environments (Jones, 2009). Scholars have also emphasised the 'internationalisation of curricula' as a way to enhance student's intercultural skills development, world-mindedness and employability (Leask & Bridge, 2013; Lamberton & Ashton-Hay, 2016).

This paper concentrates on one of these key research themes, namely, the 'transition' of international students into UK Higher Education. Going beyond being a move from one (educational, geographical, or social) environment to another, 'transition' has been described as a crucial phase for students' identity formation, which involves a wide range of stakeholders and is tightly entangled with contested issues such as social class, age, gender, nationality, ethnicity or minority status (Briggs et al., 2012).

Drawing on existing research on international student transition(s) and adapting the concept of 'academic hospitality' the paper explores, from a 'guest' perspective, the transition experiences of international students to a well-established UK university. It starts from the assumption that academic hospitality constitutes a core component of (international) student transition and can generate a sense of place and belonging within academic communities. This, in turn, impacts on the long-term success of students from different social and cultural backgrounds (Hellsten, 2007).

Although the concept of academic hospitality has received a fair amount of recognition in the academic literature (Bennett, 2000; Phipps and Barnett, 2007, Kenway & Fahey, 2009; Lugosi, 2016), so far, it has been limited to the professional and scholarly mobility of academics (i.e. academic travel, conference attendances, visiting scholarships, etc.). As such, it has not been discussed in relation to the experiences of students who embark on short- or long term educational visits abroad. This is somewhat surprising since 'hospitality', understood as a set of values and practices encompassing welcomeness, reciprocity and trust towards others, could be considered an apt theme in view of increasingly restrictive national and institutional policies on immigration and residential status of international students (British Future & Universities UK, 2014).

The review of literature about academic hospitality also suggests that authors have largely focused on discussing the theoretical dimensions of academic hospitality, and studies putting the concept empirically 'to the test' remain scarce. Likewise, it is fair to state that both the idea and practice of academic hospitality would deserve more attention in view of a frequently diagnosed 'marketization' of higher education where students are increasingly associated with the status of 'consumers' or 'customers' who ought to be 'served' appropriately in the wider context of a competitive and globalised academic market place (Bunce et al., 2016). Focussing on international students' perspectives of transition and their experiences of academic hospitality, the paper aims at narrowing the existing gap in research, and seeks to generate valuable insights for practitioners and educators working in increasingly diverse inter- and transnational higher education settings.

International student transition into UK Higher Education
Numerous authors have explored the transitions of international students into their host institutions and the ways they adapt to these new educational environments (Zhou et al., 2008; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Russell et al., 2010). Described as liminal 'in-between' state of detachment, transit, and re-attachment (Simpson et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2009), or form of displacement (Briggs et al. 2012), transition has been identified as a key personal and

existential condition which can hugely impact on the overall experience and future educational success of international students (Krause et al., 2005; Hellsten, 2007).

From the perspective of host institutions, the notion of 'transition' is often underpinned by concerns that international students lack the necessary skills to manage their learning experience. These range from insufficient language and literacy skills to the assumed inability to understand disciplinary learning cultures, or to engage in pedagogies that encourage autonomy and independence on part of the students. Such a 'deficit model' (Montgomery & McDowell, 2008) is often accompanied by a terminology of passivity which assumes that international students need to 'adapt', 'adjust', 'integrate' or 'acculturate' into a seemingly coherent cohort of students. Hellsten (2007, p. 80) identifies one of the main shortcomings of such a reductionist approach, which primarily

"…belies in a schematic grouping which conceptually unifies international students into one homogenous category. Such unifying of individuality in turn lends itself well in defence of conservative and ill-informed assumptions about cultural distinction."

In a similar vein, Briggs (1999, quoted in Hellsten 2007) argues that the deficit (or assimilationist) approach also assumes unfounded correlations between cultural maladjustment and cognitive deficit, particularly among so-called 'Asian' students whose learning modes (e.g. Confucian) are often misinterpreted as being in conflict with 'traditional western' pedagogies. This critique is also picked up by Brooks and Waters (2013) who speak of a 'methodical nationalism' that both policy makers and academics tend to employ as a homogenising and simplistic reference for international students and 'other' learning styles.

Whilst the stigmatisation of 'international' students and simplistic approaches towards their academic 'adjustment' remain problematic, there is strong evidence to suggest that many of them experience real difficulties when entering new social, cultural and educational environments (Sherry et al., 2010). In the literature, these problems have been related to the lack of English language proficiency and communication skills (Halic et al., 2009), experiences of 'culture shock' (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008) and 'acculturation stress' (Yakunina et al., 2013). Other authors have indicated that international students often suffer from loneliness, social isolation and homesickness (Sawir et al., 2007; Hendrickson et al., 2011), as well as tacit forms of everyday exclusion, discrimination and even racism (Karuppan and Barari, 2011).

In light of this evidence, it is not surprising that host institutions put great efforts in ensuring that international students' transition is smooth, inclusive and well-managed. In most UK universities, this is reflected in a multitude of induction programmes and initiatives, including welcome events and special induction packages; guided tours and day trips; language training facilities and peer mentoring schemes; as well as handbooks, guides and special tutorials tailored around the social and educational needs of international students (Hyde, 2012). It is also worthwhile noting that universities' induction events for international students frequently take on a festive or event-like character in order to 'celebrate diversity'. This is meant to accentuate local equality and diversity policies, or otherwise augment the status of institutions as internationally attractive places to work or study (Caruana and Ploner, 2010).

Complementary to various institutional initiatives devised to help students 'settle in' and overcome the various tribulations associated with transition, Moores and Popadiuk (2011) found that transition can be perceived very positively by international students. Analysing interviews and reporting on critical incidents, the authors identify a range of positive 'categories' within the process of international students' transition, including personal and academic growth; change of perspective; feeling valued, guided and supported; developing a

sense of belonging and independence; discovering and recognising academic differences; as well as the enjoyment of developing new social and academic skills.

As the above examples show, the constant interplay between universities' induction efforts and individual experiences in the process of international students' transition becomes evident in much research undertaken so far. This is equally reflected in the prevailing vocabulary of 'host' and 'guest' cultures in the context of transition, which suggests a binary relationship between two different, and potentially conflicting poles. This paper considers 'academic hospitality' a useful concept which might help bridge the latent host/guest divide, so as to establish more nuanced and relational approaches to transition in international higher education.

Academic hospitality in the context of international students' transitions
Whilst there is a long tradition of research into 'hospitality' as a set of rules, practices and rituals of 'welcoming' and accommodating others (i.e. in anthropology and tourism studies, see for example Selwyn, 2001; Lynch et al., 2011; Candea & Da Col, 2012), the notion of 'academic hospitality' was first coined by John B. Bennett in his much-cited article *'The Academy and Hospitality'* (Bennett, 2000). In this text, Bennett defines academic hospitality as a 'key virtue' within the academy which represents the "…extension of self in order to welcome the other by sharing and receiving intellectual resources and insights." (Bennett, 2000, p.1). Expanding on the idea of 'intellectual' hospitality, he states that academic hospitality goes far beyond courteous and civil acts of welcoming and accommodation. Rather, academic hospitality involves openness and reciprocity towards others by ways of *sharing* and *receiving*, and by developing meaningful conversations with knowledges that are perceived as 'other' or opposite to one's own believes, ethics and values.

In Bennett's diction, the notion of 'receiving' is central to the concept and practice of academic hospitality as it enables "…awareness that, however initially strange, the perspective of the other could easily supplement and perhaps correct one's own work or even transform one's self-understanding." (Bennett, 2000, p. 1). As such, the (perceived) otherness and diversity of students "…can enrich us and draw us out of our own parochialism even as it also confronts us with our own limitations." (Bennett, 2000, p. 2). What is striking in Bennet's account, and key to the question of international students' transition, is that academic hospitality is not limited to choreographed rituals and routines of welcoming the 'other'. Instead, it is presented as an ongoing work in progress that permeates all aspects of academic life – teaching, scholarship and service – and thus may lead to positive personal and institutional change (Bennett, 2000, p. 2).

Picking up on Bennett's initial ideas and equally drawing on the influential writings of Jacques Derrida (2000) and Paul Ricoeur (2004), Phipps and Barnett (2007) further extend the idea of academic hospitality by outlining a number of 'forms' it can adapt. They argue that these forms can be *material* (i.e. institutions, classrooms, libraries, archives, etc.), *virtual* (digital technology and media, online platforms, e-learning, etc.), *epistemological* (scholarship, inter/disciplinary knowledge, etc.), *linguistic* (communication, English as *lingua franca*, practices of translation, etc.), as well as *touristic* (travel, leisure, accommodation, etc.). Beyond its different forms, academic hospitality can also be characterised by different modalities which can be 'celebratory', 'communicative' and/or 'critical' (Phipps and Barnett, 2007, p. 243-244). In line with Bennett's reading, Phipps and Barnett share the view that academic hospitality is an 'epistemological necessity' and are critical towards one-way interpretations of academic hospitality as mere routines of welcoming and accommodating others. Instead, they describe it as a 'culture' in its own right as well as an 'ethics' of encounter "…between the co-extensive fragilities of self and other; self-as-other; other-as-

self." (Phipps and Barnett, 2007, p. 244). Although they conceptualise academic hospitality as a holistic and epistemic concept that cannot be reduced to the (international) student experience alone, they also stress that "[t]he increase in academic and student mobility, the internationalizing and multilingual nature of the universities places a renewed responsibility on the structures and practices of hospitality within the academy." (Phipps and Barnett, 2007, p. 243).

Phipps' and Barnett's assessment is meaningful in light of current debates around international academic mobilities, which seek to overcome solely responsive and structural forms of hospitality on part of the 'host' countries and institutions. This is in line with recent research that suggests more holistic understandings of international student mobility as an ongoing process that transcends both geographical (i.e. nation state) and temporal (i.e. 'lifelong learning') boundaries and considers the formation of student identities as an intrinsically relational process (Waters, 2017). At the same time, academic hospitality has gained currency in view of increased state immigration control impacting on inter- and transnational academic mobilities, particularly those of non-European students and academics. According to Mavroudi and Warren (2013), these are in stark contrast with romanticised assumptions about academic mobility as being easy and overly positive and are felt by students quite personally as 'unwelcoming' and 'discouraging'.

Methodology
To date, academic hospitality only exists as a scholarly concept and has not yet been explored in relation to the lived experiences, practices and perceptions associated with it. One purpose of this study was thus to 'test' this idea empirically and to develop appropriate tools to examine how students' experience their transitions into new and different academic and social environments.

Whilst the existing literature suggests that transition and academic hospitality rely on a wide variety of actors and institutional practices, this paper focuses on the 'receiving' end (in Bennet's sense) of academic hospitality. It draws on the sample of seven 'international' students (6 female, 1 male) who currently study at a well-established UK university in the North of England. Although the sample is small, and the choice of one UK university allows to develop only an exploratory case study, participants were recruited purposefully and according to the maximum variation sampling technique. This allows for a wide, yet empirically consistent, spectrum of perspectives (Patton, 2015; Thomas, 2013). Firstly, this variation relates to the subject areas of students which included disciplines as diverse as Business and Management, Chemistry, Engineering, Education, Law, as well as International Relations. Secondly, the students represent a number of diverse countries both within and outside the European Economic Area and EU. Finally, students also fell in different study modes, ranging from self-funded full-time enrolment to partly or fully funded exchange programmes (e.g. the European ERASMUS and overseas student exchange agreements).

What all participants have in common, though, is that, at the time of the research, all of them were 'first year' students which was considered a key criterion in view of transition experiences and academic hospitality (for a similar approach, see Briggs et al, 2012). Here, the status of 'first year' does not relate to the initial study level (i.e. year 1) but the first year students attended a programme in a university abroad, independent of their study level.

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate and effective research instrument to approach and record first-hand experiences of transition and academic hospitality. The interview questions-were designed around three chronological and quasi-

biographical stages of students' transition: a) pre-arrival in the country/university and students' expectations b) experiences upon arrival to the country and university, and c) retrospective reflections and prospective views on the overall nature and experience of transition and academic hospitality. The interview featured opening questions with the purpose of 'easing' students into the interview process, and prompting questions to help co-construct and elaborate potentially abstract ideas (i.e. 'academic hospitality'), or to allow for feedback or alternative reflections on the overall topic

As for the analysis of the interviews, the researcher focussed on a number of key themes which emerged from students' narratives and allowed for a synopsis of common experiences and characteristics in the ways students perceive transition and 'academic hospitality'. Here, Phipps' and Barnett's (2007) differentiation between different 'forms' of academic hospitality (i.e. material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic and touristic) provided a useful analytical reference point.

In order to adhere to the ethical standards of anonymity and confidentiality, both the names of the university and the participants were anonymised.

Students' experiences of transition

Returning to Bennett's notion of academic hospitality, this is described as a reciprocal process that requires 'openness' towards other beliefs, ethics and values. In other words, academic hospitality means "…relinquishing protective and controlling mechanisms, and abandoning careful calculations about the quantity of good one extends over against what one anticipates receiving." (Bennett, 2000, p. 2). This interpretation of academic hospitality is not only relevant for the academic 'hosts', but equally for transitioning international students, who leave behind protective and familiar 'comfort zones' in anticipation of less calculable academic and social experiences. Considering this, and conceptualising 'transition' as the process encompassing students' journeys from their home to their 'host' settings, students were asked about their expectations and how confident and 'prepared' they felt when entering a new academic and social environment. Whilst most students felt well prepared and ready (i.e. in terms of passing IELTS exams and meeting other graded entry requirements), some students voiced different approaches of 'detachment' from their home or previous academic environments. For example, Theresa, a German ERASMUS student in Education, stated:

"I don't like to prepare a lot, I like to be surprised, so I think, academically, I felt quite prepared, but I didn't know a lot about England, I never have been here before..."

In a similar vein, Natasha, an international law student from Slovakia, indicated that her decision to study in the UK was somewhat "last minute" and "rushed" and was largely determined by the recommendation of a friend who had previously studied at this particular university. As such, the question as to whether she felt prepared or not was somewhat obsolete and did not constitute a major issue of concern in her transition. Five out of the seven interviewed students expressed that they felt very confident about their transition, partly due to previous study and work experiences abroad or their educational backgrounds in international schools. However, the assumption that previously acquired cultural and linguistic capital was a guarantee for a smooth transition, was challenged by some students. For example, Ines, a Supply Chain Management student from Mexico, who had already worked and studied English in the U.S.A. and Canada, said that the thought of moving from a 'developing' to a 'developed' country to study for a degree was intimidating at first:

"Well first, I have to be honest, I was pretty afraid that when I arrive here, it would not be enough, cos' this is the first world and we are a developing country or whatever… so I was afraid that I was not able to give, like, my everything…like, in the other exchange programmes, I did not have to prove my knowledge,

actually, because it was working, or just practicing English, so I didn't have to show anything actually..., but here, it was like real, it would be grades, it would be exams... so I was a little bit afraid at first."

Students raised a number of additional reasons that hampered their transition from 'home' to 'host' country, most of which related to obstructive bureaucracy and visa procedures (from both the sending and receiving countries/institutions). Likewise, special arrangements that had to be made in view of individual study levels or specialist, cross-disciplinary, subject areas required additional time and planning.

In terms of pre-arrival communication with the host university, most students expressed that they were generally pleased with the ways in which they were informed, received emails and even had the opportunity to go through a 'virtual induction' programme. Ines, who proudly considers herself as an 'ambassador' for Mexican culture, outlines some of the benefits of this pre-arrival service, but also highlights some of its shortcomings:

"And we received a virtual induction one month before we arrived, also, that helped me a lot, but it also made me confused about some things. For example, I was supposed to register with a GP... but it didn't say how, when, or where...?"

In this study, a key transition 'moment' was considered to be the actual arrival and initial induction of students to their new academic and social environments. Here, student recounted a wealth of experiences, some of which are presented in the following paragraphs. Overall, students felt very positive and reassured during their first couple of days and weeks at their 'host' institution. In particular, they emphasised certain 'gestures' of hospitality which made them feel welcome and helped them to shake off anxiety or settle in comfortably. Among other students, Natasha (Slovakia) pointed out how good it felt to be welcomed at the airport upon arrival in the UK:

"...and I think that the staff at university are very, very helpful, so I took a flight from Paris to Manchester and they basically waited for me, ..., and then there was a coach ordered, that took us straight from Manchester to [name of university city], *that was really nice, ...so I had zero difficulties, I just had to get to Manchester, and that was it..."*

Likewise, students emphasised other gestures of hospitality, courtesy and 'welcomeness' on part of their host university. Emily, a French Chemistry student, put it like this:

"At the beginning there are a lot of people in the university to help you. Even if you'd look a bit lost, they come and help you, so that's a good welcome, I think, that's nice... And there are a lot of events, too, at the beginning to meet new people and socialise, so, yeah, that's very welcoming, a welcoming place..."

Although students generally accepted and cherished the help provided by support staff, student volunteers and academics during the welcome/induction phase, some also expressed feelings of confusion and 'being lost', like Ines (Mexico), makes clear when recalling her experiences during induction/welcome week:

"If you are from Europe, it will be pretty clear..., I was just asking whoever was around..., because sometimes we would talk to the people from the International Office, ... and then it was with the international officer in the Business School, and then it was my module leader..., it was, whoever was available and could have an answer...because we were given instructions to do A, B and C, but at the same time B was happening also in the Business School and we were supposed to be in another place at the same time...so it was a mess"

Most of the students also emphasised the relevance of induction packages (both general and within subject areas), for gaining useful insights into academic practices and 'traditions' different to what they were used to. Anna, a Lithuanian student in International Business and Management, who previously attended a French University, stated:

"For example, what I really like here is the workshops they had, they helped really a lot...and I went to all of them". [Interviewer: For example?] *"Like, they were literature review, critical thinking, referencing..., I*

didn't know how to do that, and, for example, how to collect information. All those workshops helped me so much, without them I could not do anything I think... So it gave me, like, a better understanding, and in this case, like, it makes you more confident..."

In addition to acquiring 'UK-standard' academic skills, most interviewees also emphasised the importance of induction as a social space to meet fellow students as well as an opportunity to learn about everyday i.e. previously unfamiliar practicalities of student life. In Natasha's (Slovakia) words:

"I tried to go to all the induction lectures, and there was this really big one in particular where I even met some of the law classmates, which was a really a good coincidence..., so yes, this was really helpful, not just education-wise, but also, kind of, talking about living in the UK, like, how the fire alarms work, and, I don't know, how you should take out the bins..."

The above interview excerpts reveal that anticipation, risk taking, and seeking accessible entry points are crucial components in students' international transition experiences. While some students demonstrate a fair amount of 'openness' (if not indifference) towards what they anticipate receiving, others felt anxious about whether, and how, they would 'fit in' the host environment. This is particularly reflected in the quote by the non-EU students who felt that perceived disparities between the 'developed' and 'developing' world might negatively impact on her academic and social experience. Equally embedded in students' narratives are some of the principal forms of academic hospitality as defined by Phipps and Barnett. These include virtual (e.g. pre-arrival online induction), epistemological ('understanding' UK academic practice, critical thinking, etc.), as well as material and touristic (being approached when looking 'lost'; being picked up upon arrival, learning about 'everyday' UK culture, etc.). In the following sections, these forms of academic hospitality will be presented in greater detail through students' personal accounts. A more thorough analysis of these accounts will be provided in the subsequent discussion section.

Material and virtual forms of hospitality

As Phipps and Barnett (2007) outlined, 'academic hospitality' can take various forms, some of which can be material or virtual. These are also reverberated in student narratives and relate to a variety of experiences students went through during their transition period. As for material hospitality, the majority of students highlighted the overall 'welcoming' structure and arrangement of university buildings, facilities, classrooms and accommodation. Besides communal areas like cafes, shops or the student union, students also referred to study areas and/or the university library. For example, Yi, a Chinese undergraduate student in Education, pointed out:

"The basic facilities are very...good, ...much better than I can ever imagine. I think there is a difference between a developed country and a developing country..., like the library, the computers in the library, very convenient. I feel like I can solve all my problems myself and don't need others. Very, very convenient..."

In a similar vein, Natasha (Slovakia) referred to the library as a 'second home' from home, by saying:

"The library is a great place to study, and I, basically..., ever since I came here I don't think I can study at home anymore, so I always go to the library, because I'm just distracted when studying at home, so I would definitely recommend the library..."

In addition to the provided learning spaces and facilities, students generally cherished the opportunity to access other amenities such as shops or restaurants as welcoming physical and social spaces outside study time. For some students, this assemblage of learning and consuming places *in situ* was experienced as different and novel, and often associated with

the scale and nature of a 'typical' UK campus-style university which generates a different, yet positive sense of space. Anna, a Lithuanian student who had previously studied at a French university, puts it like this:

"I like a lot, because this university is really big compared to my university in France, ehm, so I like that there are a lot of coffee places, restaurants, places to eat, and there is a night club in the university, to do something different, so, I like that a lot. And, I like a lot that the university campus is, like, another town, so you kind of have all the shops, like next to you, the grocer's shop, so I think that's very convenient and comfortable..."

Anna's description of the 'convenient' and 'comfortable' nature of the 'town-like' university campus is a telling account of how international students experience, and engage with, the built physical environment of a UK-style campus university. In her narrative, and unlike other students' accounts, material forms of hospitality mingle with those of touristic ones as spaces of leisure and consumption are often given preference over distinctly educational spaces.

In addition to material hospitality, students also emphasised the use of online/virtual platforms and the use of social media, not only during their transition phase but throughout their studies. This comes close to what Phipps and Bennett (2007) referred to as 'virtual hospitality'. Besides the already mentioned pre-arrival 'virtual induction' scheme, students found that online guides and learning resources, as well as student-led social media are of great help. Yi, a student from China, also felt relieved about being able to use her 'English-Chinese' translation app on her mobile phone during lectures and seminars. Emily, who visited the university's chemistry department as part of a one-semester exchange programme, revealed that she used a wide range of online information platforms and social media, but also points at the fact that there is, at times, 'too much' on offer:

"Before I came, I went a lot to the university website, particularly Chemistry part to find my courses, and a lot of that, to choose if I really want to come here. And for the events in the first weeks and so, yes, I subscribed to all the Facebook pages and all that, but I didn't use it that much. Yes, I don't know, it's well done, ... there are a lot of pages, but I didn't use it so much, well..."

Emily's narrative indicates that not all students are savvy users and recipients of virtual hospitality, for example in the form of university information websites and social media platforms. While information on the university website might have influenced Emily's decision to visit the university, the observation that *'there are a lot of pages'* may imply an over-abundance of virtual hospitality offers, many of which remained unused by her. The fact that Emily was only staying for one semester as part of an exchange programme, may also explain why she did not engage more intensely with university social media communities.

Epistemological hospitality
An important form of 'academic hospitality' encompasses the different epistemic ways in which students perceive and make sense of their new academic as well as social and cultural environment (Phipps & Barnett, 2007). This relates to the very nature in which students are able to 'understand' and conceptualise certain 'taken for granted' practices in relation to their own (academic, cultural or social) selves. Here, one of the concepts a majority of students struggled with was the notion of autonomous and independent learning, as many students stated that they came from educational backgrounds which are thoroughly structured and where they felt more 'guided'. The following narrative by Manuel, a Business top-up degree student form Spain, is representative of a majority of interview responses:

"...in Spain, it was much more about by-heart kind of knowledge and everything, just memorising..., and here is more of a principle to try to be independent..., and it is quite hard, you know, to teach yourself and accumulate the subject knowledge, I think. It is fine, but if you're not used to it, you can struggle..."

While most students admitted that they struggled with this unexpected autonomy and independence, some also highlighted the benefits of such a learning and teaching approach. For example, Anna (Lithuania) states:

"I don't know…here it's more independent and relates more to your personal interests, so you're doing everything yourself and they don't take care of you like babies, so it's more independent and I like that, and I'm feeling having less pressure here…and I feel more free and think it's better. Like, you have your own time, if you want you can study…and the assignments help a lot, because you are reading everything by yourself, and you can read what you need, and you get more information because you read on that subject …so you have more knowledge."

Besides coming to terms with the practice of independent learning, most students also emphasised how difficult it was to understand what they would refer to UK-specific approaches to learning and teaching such as 'critical thinking'. Moreover, students found it hard to distinguish different teaching formats such as 'lecture', 'seminar', 'tutorial' or 'workshop', etc. While many students admitted grappling with these issues, others related to more fundamental epistemic experiences of being 'pointed at' or 'labelled' as 'international student'. Theresa, from Germany, raises an interesting point when she says:

"…for example, in the courses, I think it's not good that you can feel that you are an international student, if they let you feel that you're international. Sometimes, when I felt I could not really say what I meant, I felt like everybody was looking at me, and, you know, the professor is a bit annoyed as well..."

Theresa's wish of not being singled out as being different opens up a range of questions relevant to the complex formation of student identities 'abroad' which will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of this paper. What it may indicate at first glance, though, is that schematic labelling approaches towards students, even if well-intended, can have real, emotional consequences on their confidence and sense of belonging.

Linguistic and touristic academic hospitality
Whilst the majority of interviewed student felt well prepared and confident about their English language skills, and went through thorough preparation courses, they also struggled initially to pick up the local accent or subject-specific jargon which they encountered both in their social and academic environment. In addition, the speed of speech in lectures and seminars, as well as the feeling of being 'overwhelmed' and 'confused' after long hours of working with lecturers and fellow students. Despite these struggles, students also pointed out the positive attitude of lecturers, e.g. in lowering the pace of speech and adapting to classroom audiences which were predominantly 'international' (e.g. in the Business School). Yi, the Chinese Education student, reflects on her experience with initial language difficulties:

"The first few weeks I feel anxious, really, I don't understand what others are saying, and I don't dare to speak. I'm very anxious… I seldom speak to a foreigner and…I often don't understand the teacher…all my teachers, I think they are very patient. Sometimes I would ask a question twice or three times, but every time they would answer me very patiently…I think I'm very touched." (laughs)."

In terms of 'touristic' forms of academic hospitality, the majority of students revealed that they make good use of touristic, sport and leisure activities offered by the university, particularly through the Student Union (i.e. societies, bars, night club) as well as through the International Office. While the latter offered students opportunities to participate in trips to well-known sites and historic cities across the UK, the former invited them to participate in numerous sport and leisure activities. During their transition and induction periods, almost all of the research participants were actively seeking the option to participate in different student societies, including fencing, hardball, swimming and boxing. Whilst students generally

cherished these offers as assisting them to settle in, keep fit, socialise and make friends, others stressed that they were disappointed by the prevailing 'drinking culture' within a lot of student societies, and even discontinued their membership.

Discussion

The narratives presented indicate that international students have, overall, very positive experiences of transition to UK higher education. In fact, much of the feedback provided by the interviewees adds validity to Moores' and Popadiuk's (2011) research findings, which highlight transition as an important period which affirms personal and academic growth, changes perspectives, enables discovery and recognition of academic differences, and forges a sense of belonging and independence. In view of international students' narratives, it also becomes evident that both the 'social' and 'academic' dimensions of transition are inextricably linked and impact on the overall success or failure of international students' 'settling in'. The former relates to general feelings of being welcomed, making friends or engaging in university social and leisure activities. The latter describes the ways in which students are being 'eased' into epistemologically abstract ideas about 'other' academic and educational cultures.

Although the significance of both social/personal and academic wellbeing during transition into university has been emphasised in previous studies (for example, Briggs et al., 2012), the concept (and practice) of 'academic hospitality' adds additional layers onto understanding the different ways in which students perceive their (first) encounters with, and 'fitting into' unfamiliar educational spaces. Considering a wide range of different transition experiences, the notion of academic hospitality thus helps to consolidate persistent binaries between host/guest or international/local, towards a more inclusive and relational understanding of (academic) belonging and community.

In view of the research findings, it becomes clear that experiences of transition and academic hospitality are underpinned by a wide range of subjective perceptions of identity and belonging. For example, this is reflected in the different epistemic ways international students perceive and perform 'otherness', which can range from an 'ambassadorial' conviction to celebrate national and cultural difference abroad (Ines), to the wish of 'blending in' by not being ostentatiously labelled as 'international student' amongst peers (Theresa). The recognition of diverse student identities (beyond 'methodical nationalism') is particularly relevant for accommodating and welcoming overseas (i.e. non-EU) students whose perceptions of spatial, cultural, academic and linguistic distance is often (but not always) greater than their European peers. Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not a coincidence that both overseas students (Yi and Ines) reported augmented feelings of anxiety which accompanied their transition from what they called a 'developing' to a 'developed' country.

Epistemological hospitality also relates to the ways in which international students encounter, and grapple with, certain 'local' pedagogies e.g. associated with autonomous and independent forms of learning, threshold concepts, as well as notions of 'critical thinking' - often emphasised as a key requirement expected from students in UK (and wider Anglophone) higher education. As for the latter, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that 'critical thinking', understood as an ongoing reflexive critique of seemingly commonplace knowledge and values, is fraught with cultural preconceptions. These tend to place international students in a disadvantaged position and commands assimilation rather than recognising the opportunities for 'critical' intercultural learning encounters within diverse classroom settings (Leask and Bridge, 2013). Such an approach to intercultural and reciprocal forms of critical thinking comes close to Bennett's idea of 'sharing' and 'receiving' in the

context of academic hospitality which values and accommodates 'other' perspectives as complementary, corrective and even transformative to established ways of self-understanding.

Students' narratives clearly indicate that seemingly ritualistic gestures of welcome and courtesy matter significantly in their transition experience (e.g. being picked up from the airport, being actively approached by staff, etc.). Yet, they also suggest that academic hospitality goes way beyond mere induction routines and 'adjustment' support offered by the host institution. Indeed, the findings add substance to the inherently reciprocal nature of academic hospitality which emerges between institutional structures and students' individual agency in terms of mobility, choice and taking risks (Waters, 2017). As such, academic hospitality becomes an integral part of the entire (international) student 'lifecycle' and requires an ongoing dialogue between different stakeholders to help facilitate complex processes of exchange, translation and communication (i.e. between sending and receiving institution, student and teacher, student and support staff, international and 'home' students, visa officers, accommodation providers, etc.).

As higher education environments are increasingly characterised by new technologies and digitisation, the notion of 'virtual hospitality' can be seen as particularly relevant in view of international students' transition experiences. All the interviewed students presented themselves as confident and savvy users of virtual learning platforms, social media and other technologies that aid their transition, success and progress in a foreign higher education setting. Although some students refer to digital technology as a convenient way to solve problems independently, it would be simplistic to assume that the mere availability and accessibility of online information could replace more traditional forms of (academic) hospitality such as face-to-face interactions and other corporeal gestures of welcome. In this context, students emphasised the significance of personal contact and engagement during their transition, i.e. by being actively approached by academic and support staff, enjoying socialising with peers, or valuing the presence (and patience) of lecturers in finding answers to pending questions.

As with the significance of 'real' hospitable encounters with teachers and peers during transition, this study also shows that the immediate 'non-human' physical environment matters greatly to international students in developing a sense of place and belonging. Here, students have highlighted the overall 'convenient' or 'comfortable' arrangement of both learning and social spaces on campus such as the library, classrooms, computer and study areas as well as cafes, restaurants or night clubs on campus. These 'material' spaces of hospitality, which extend to other areas of student life such as accommodation, leisure or transport, play a significant role for students' wellbeing, either as intimate refuges for learning, as 'home from home', or as arenas for social exchange and friendship. While UK universities are being increasingly challenged over laying out geographies of commerce and consumption (Brooks et al., 2015) and employing recruitment-enhancing 'trophy' architectures (Heathcote, 2014), the facilitation of welcoming physical spaces ought to be seen as a fundamental element in the wider facilitation of academic hospitality.

Conclusion and recommendations
With its focus on international students' experiences of transition and academic hospitality in a UK university context, this article offers valuable insights for researchers, university policy makers, teachers, students and service providers. Having contributed to both theory and practice in the context of international students' transition, one key outcome of this study was that prevailing deficit or assimilationist approaches to transition are limited in scope because they largely fail to account for the complex structural and subjective factors that characterise

students' mobilities from one (academic, social, cultural) environment to something very different.

In response to prevailing discourses of (one-way) 'adjustment' and 'assimilation' of international students to UK (and wider 'western') higher education, the idea (and practice) of academic hospitality provides a more nuanced approach to transition which prioritises reciprocity and openness and thus helps to overcome latent distinctions between 'host' and 'guest' cultures in diverse academic settings. In this context, Bennett's initial reading of academic hospitality as a way of 'sharing' and 'receiving' remains particularly useful as it challenges established parochialisms and helps to recognise the formation of multiple identities, alternative forms of communication and different approaches to knowledge production. For example, from a teacher's perspective, such a two-way 'hospitable' academic approach may add rigour and intercultural substance to established subject knowledge and help to refine widely used, yet often vaguely defined, modes of reasoning (i.e. 'critical thinking').

Similar to previous studies focussing on (domestic) students' transitions to university (Palmer et al., 2009; Briggs et al., 2012), specific findings from this study indicate that transition requires sensible management that neither overestimates (international) students' sense of autonomy, nor underestimates their (often unspoken) demands for guidance and support. Here, Phipps' and Barnett's differentiation of various 'forms' of academic hospitality (i.e. material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic and touristic) offers a valuable vantage point for the appropriate and bilateral management of students' transitions. For example, this may inform closer coordination (both virtually and physically) between sending and host institutions, between parents, students and university, between students and admission teams, immigration offices, student unions, induction facilitators, etc. In order to manage and improve such complex processes and flows of information, universities not only have to pay particular attention to adequate logistics, time, human and digital resources, but also need to demonstrate a great deal of flexibility, patience and empathy towards individual cases and circumstances. (7495 words)

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Author biography:
Josef Ploner is Lecturer in International Education at the Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education at the University of Hull, UK. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, Josef's academic portfolio features an MA in Cultural Anthropology (University of Vienna) and a PhD in Tourism and Heritage Studies (Leeds Beckett University). In his current lecturer role at the University of Hull, Josef teaches across a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate education programmes and supervises a number of PhD and EdD projects focusing on different aspects of international education.