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## PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

**Project Title: The English bonus?** Assessing the impact of non-credit English and academic writing programmes on the academic performance of non-native speaker PGT Chinese students at the University of Edinburgh

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**Project type** (delete as appropriate) :  
**A Research Project**

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**Principal Investigator** : Sophia Woodman  
**Schools/department** : SSPS

**Team members (including Schools and Departments)** : Cathy Benson (COL); Jill Northcott (COL); Ellen Boeren (MHSE, now at University of Glasgow)

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**For further details, please contact:**

Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project. Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

**Report (maximum 1500 words)**

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**What did you do?**

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This project involved collecting quantitative and qualitative data on the relationship between language and academic study, and academic performance of Chinese students in their year of masters study, including the impact of completing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessionals and support courses provided for international students by ELE. The research focused on UoE units with a high concentration of Chinese students, but also sought to cover disciplinary range. We studied students in seven schools: Business, ECA, Education, Engineering, Law, SPS and Biology.

For the quantitative data, we obtained and analysed university-level data (from Student Systems) on the academic performance of international Chinese PGT students for three cohort years, drawing out findings on specific Schools where possible.

On the qualitative side, we spoke to staff responsible for PGT teaching in the seven schools we studied about how they address language needs among these students, and what concerns are expressed by staff. We also conducted qualitative interviews with a total of 37 students in 25 programmes from the seven schools exploring their educational backgrounds and language preparation (including pre-sessional courses); the language-



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related challenges they've faced in studying at Edinburgh and how they dealt with them; and suggestions for the university, their schools and their programmes, as well as for other students. These interviews were conducted in Chinese by two PhD student research assistants who received training and support in carrying out this work.

### **What did you find out?**

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Our research generated several important findings. First, our conversations with staff in the different schools showed that disciplinary cultures and practices shape expectations around students' English language use and needs in very significant ways. We also showed that while participation in a pre-sessional EAP course does not overcome the advantage gained from a higher IELTS score on application to academic performance in PGT programmes for most students, where the pre-sessional is tailored to the disciplinary language and requirements of the particular programme students have applied to, students with a lower IELTS score can achieve similar results to their peers with higher scores.

Our interviews provide rich material on the varied experience of our target group. An overall point from the student interviews is that Chinese international students are a heterogeneous group, with variable needs. One-size-fits-all solutions to the issues they face are a mistake.

The interviews pointed to many difficulties with English in PGT programmes being related to the disciplinary switching that often occurs, with students studying an MSc that is unrelated to their first degree finding it particularly hard to adapt to and acquire the language of the new discipline. Students also told us that informal interaction matters a great deal in their language development, and that programmes provide highly variable conditions for promoting such interaction. The peer environment matters a great deal to students' language skills, and in those programmes where students encounter few others outside their co-national group, there is little opportunity for such interaction. Students from mainland China sometimes bring their experience of group study into their programmes, supporting each other by setting up their own study circles. Our student interviewees also provided a series of thoughtful recommendations to the university on how to address the issues outlined above, as well as suggestions to their peers on language-related strategies to make the most of a PGT programme. Key points are as follows:

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#### On English language support at UoE:

- Publicize opportunities for English language support better
- Provide English language support in places where people study, e.g. King's Buildings, via courses and programmes; where possible, embed it in programmes
- Extend provision of one-to-one consultation for English language, e.g. for written assignments as currently provided by ELE's Graduate Writing Centre
- Provide a cheap and reliable proofreading service for students

#### On teaching and programme organization:



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- Promote interaction
    - Create opportunities for cross-national teamwork
    - Support extra-curricular activities
  - Avoid over-concentration of Chinese students in programmes
  - Recordings of lectures can be useful
  - Integrate language advice/preparation into programmes
    - Provide preparatory resources, e.g. disciplinary vocabulary
    - Give feedback on e.g. writing in assignments

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### **How did you disseminate your findings?**

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Drawing on the data collected for this project, we presented our study to UoE staff on 7 November 2019 in an event hosted by the Confucius Institute for Scotland that was attended by around 35 staff from across the university. We shared our slides with attendees, and people who expressed interest but could not attend. Sophia has also used findings from the study in a number of presentations, including one organized by the British Council in Edinburgh for student support staff from the region and an invited talk at the University of Glasgow. Our research has also been used to inform proposals on future provision of language support in the university by COL.

We are working on a written summary of our findings and a journal article. We proposed a session at the Learning and Teaching 2020 conference, but this was rejected. We plan to hold some further workshops, in partnership with the IAD or with specific schools, on our findings in the coming academic year.

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### **What have been the benefits to student learning?**

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As outlined above, our project generated a rich variety of detailed information about PGT Chinese international students and their language needs at the University, including some useful recommendations. How these are taken forward depends on the various Schools and the university as a whole. We will continue to disseminate our findings and encourage the university to act on them.

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### **How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?**

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While Chinese international students are the largest group of non-native speaker international students at UoE, our findings apply equally to many other non-native speaker PGT students, and implementing some of the recommendations would benefit these students as well.



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**Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):**

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

**Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:**

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