
*“First few weeks were quite difficult but
now everything is okay and its perfect”*

Qualitative findings from “Supporting Transition: Investigating students’ experiences of transferring from University of Reading Malaysia campus (UoRM) to the University of Reading UK campus (UoR)”

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The University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM) campus introduced the MPharm 2+2 (Malaysia) programme in the academic year 2016/17, as part of the University's expansion of its global portfolio. In addition to demonstrating the University's commitment to global education and internationalisation, it also presented excellent opportunities for further internationalisation within Pharmacy education. The University of Reading Malaysia offered a double accredited (General Pharmaceutical Council and Pharmacy Board Malaysia) 2+2 MPharm (Hons) degree, where students studied for two years at the Malaysia campus followed by two consecutive years in Reading. In September 2016, the pharmacy department at UoRM welcomed its first cohort of MPharm 2+2 students; these students study for 2 years at UoRM then transferred to the UK campus to complete the final 2 years of their studies. In September 2018, our first cohort made the transition to the UK.

This research project was undertaken to investigate students' experiences of transitioning to the UK, focusing on identifying "concerns and challenges" the students may have experienced as they entered the UK, and during the time that they settled into Part 3 studies. It also explored insight to the UK cohort's experiences of having a group of students join them part-way through their studies, along with those of staff involved in supporting the process. This report explores and illustrates using a qualitative method of enquiry MPharm 2+2 transition students' expectations and experiences of coming to the UK and joining the existing MPharm cohort, motivations for choosing the 2+2 programme, challenges they have faced and support that they feel is needed to facilitate successful transition. This report also outlines recommendations for improvements suggested by both the Malaysian and home (UK) student participants.

Aim of study:

To explore what support is required for MPharm 2+2 students to successfully transition to the UK

Study objectives:

- What were the experiences of MPharm 2+2 students as they transitioned to the UK?

- What were the experiences of UK MPharm students as the MPharm 2+2 cohort joined them in Part 3?

Study Design:

A mixed methods approach was used to explore student and staff experience. Online questionnaires were used to gain an overview of experiences (Part 3 MPharm students and staff involved in supporting 2+2 MPharm students) and focus groups were used to explore the experience associated with transition and settlement in UoR (MPharm 2+2 students and MPharm UK students).

Sample size, recruitment & informed consent:

All Part 3 students (n=121) and all MPharm 2+2 students (n=11) and staff (n = 49). A study information sheet and consent form were sent to the participants (interview & focus group) via email after they expressed their interest to take part in the study. A consent form was discussed and signed at the beginning of each interview and focus group discussion.

Data collection:

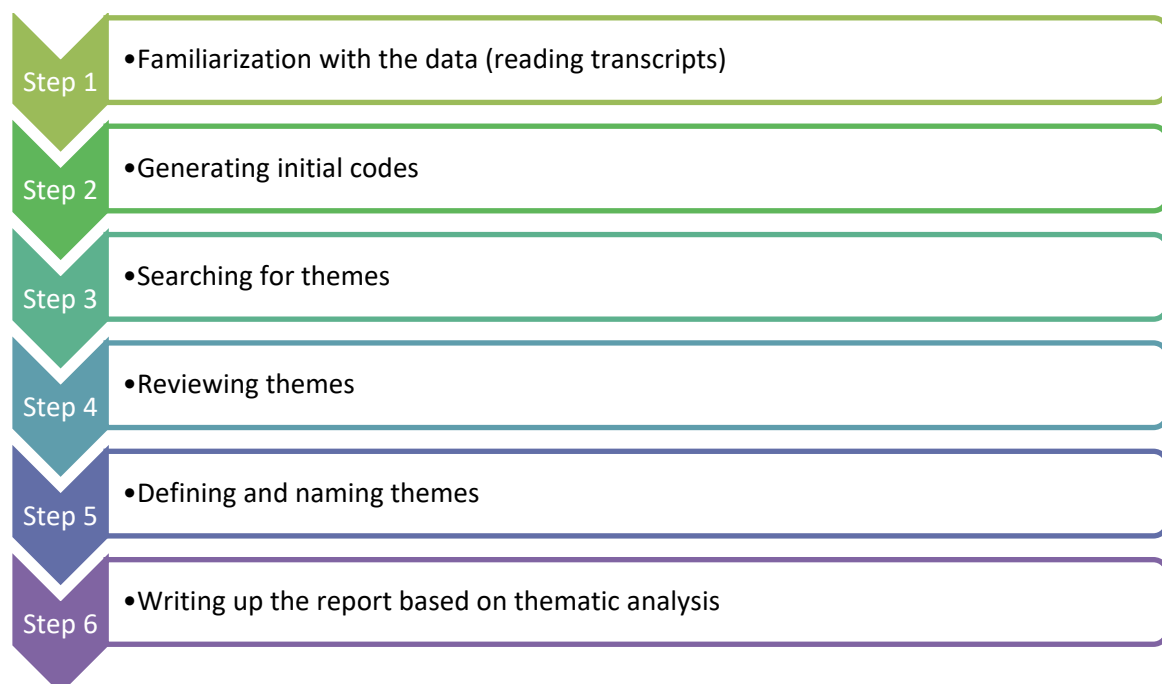
- The online questionnaire asked MPharm UK participants their expectations and experiences of having a new group of students join their existing cohort part way through their studies, and their opinions on support that may be required to make this process successful.
- Focus groups explored MPharm 2+2 transition students' expectations and experiences of coming to the UK and joining the existing MPharm cohort, motivations for choosing the 2+2 programme and support that they feel is needed to facilitate successful transition.

Data analysis:

- Questionnaire data analysed using simple percentage agreement with statements and reporting of any qualitative comments received.
- Focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis - Master themes were identified following identification of crosscutting patterns and themes within and across interview data.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic approach was used to analyse all face to face in-depth interview and focus group data. Thematic analysis is one of the prominent methods of enquiry in qualitative research that is widely used to explore and answer a range of epistemological and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al 2017). It is a method used for identifying and analysing research data into specific categories, organizing categories into themes, describing and reporting themes found within a data set (Nowell et al 2017).

Figure 1: Steps of Thematic analysis



After reading the transcripts, an inductive thematic approach was used to form the initial categories and themes. The researcher conducted initial line-by-line coding and categorisation independently with the aid of NVivo12, a qualitative data management software system. Later, these categories were discussed with the principle investigator of this project. Other members of the research team coded a few excerpts of interviews and focus group data using the same technique. Differences in interpretation was resolved through discussion between coders and the wider research team. This is an established method to increase the trustworthiness of research. Initial themes derived from the analysis of data was also discussed within the research team. Dominant major themes were identified following identification of crosscutting patterns and themes within and across

interview data. Later the thematic structure was discussed within the research team and refined according to the suggestions.

Results:

Data analysis based on the primary accounts from the interviews and the focus group discussion identified thirteen recurrent categories of sub themes which are later merged and refined into four major themes.

Table 1: Refinement of major themes

Initial recurrent categories/sub themes	Refined themes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Expectations from 2+2 MPharm course 2. Attractions of 2+2 MPharm course 3. Motivations for applying to 2+2 MPharm course 	<p>Aspirations towards 2+2 MPharm course</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Feelings about moving to the UK 5. Challenges faced before moving to UK/before arrival 6. Support received from UoRM & UoR staff, and volunteer buddy before arrival 	<p>Experience of pre transition phase (MPharm 2+2 cohort students)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Study related challenges faced after moving to UK 8. Day to day challenges after moving to UK 9. Support received from UoR staff or “buddy” after arrival 10. MPharm student’s perspective on 2+2 students (challenges they face, integration) and perspective on buddy system. 11. Challenges experienced by MPharm students 	<p>Experience of transition (MPharm 2+2 cohort)</p> <p>(MPharm students)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Reflections on the transition experiences 13. Room for improvement 	<p>Future recommendations</p>

Theme 1: Aspirations towards the study program

This theme explores and presents the range of accounts MPharm 2+2 participants shared about their reasons, attractions and motivating factors for applying to the 2+2 course.

Reasons and motivations for applying to the course varies. Some of the students were very

clear and focused about what they wanted out of the course whereas a few didn't have any specific motivations or reasons for applying to this specific program. The main reason for applying to the course were: University of Reading's reputation; obtaining a degree from a well reputed UK university; the opportunity to travel and live in the UK; experiencing UK education and culture; value of a UK qualification in the job market and the lower cost of tuition compared to other UK universities offering a similar programme.

"The certificate of UK is very good, and I also want to experience the life and the culture." (2+2 MPharm Student)

"I want to study in the UK where pharmacy is very expensive, so I just thinking maybe I try something like 2+2 and just one day I found University of Reading Malaysia and then there is 2+2 and oh it's cheaper than Nottingham and I also can get the 20% discount for the 1st and 2nd year..." (2+2 MPharm Student)

"It's actually the opportunity to come to the UK 'cause I like this country very much" (2+2 MPharm student)

"I didn't expect to come here. I wanted to stay in Malaysia I didn't expect it to happen...I asked but there was no confirmed answer (from the office) ... at the end I was prepared, and it was alright" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"Before I took my foundation course, I have heard that Pharmacy course in Reading is very well known" (2+2 MPharm student)

"It's the weather... you have four seasons here, in Malaysia there is only one season (laughs). Opportunity to interact with local and other international students and the opportunity to experience it personally.... mix with different types of student and to experience the culture of UK" (2+2 MPharm student)

"This course will provide me exposure on how pharmacy course/work is different here and in Malaysia. Give me more experience, more exposure and opportunity to make new friends" (2+2 MPharm student)

Theme 2: Experience of pre-transition phase

MPharm 2+2 students described an array of feelings they had experienced before moving to the UK. This included feeling stressed, anxious, worried and nervous. Participants also expressed feeling excited and thrilled by the prospect of going to the UK. Although most of

the students felt positive and excited initially, when the transition process started they experienced stress and anxiety due to several factors associated with obtaining Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies (CAS) letter, applying to the home immigration office and waiting for their visa. Another major stressor was obtaining the vaccination papers and going through blood tests to determine whether they had immunity against specific diseases (measles, mumps, rubella, chicken pox and tuberculosis), which was required due to the clinical placements they would be undertaking during the course. Before arriving in the UK, students were also worried about arranging their accommodation. Some also mentioned worrying about the weather and food, and being nervous about speaking in English. However, one student mentioned that he was mentally prepared for all these and felt indifferent.

"I was excited" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"Before arriving to UK, I was thinking about the cultural differences, the language, how people will behave, pace of life in the UK and also about the expensive accommodation... it was stressful" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"Actually, I was very worried before I came here. I was worried about the CAS because I was waiting for so long before I get one. The time (waiting) made me very anxious" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"It's just the waiting period (obtaining the CAS and Visa) make us stressful" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"The first thing that I was nervous about that I am the only student from part 1, so I am worried about not getting any friends here. But fortunately, everyone welcomed me. The second thing I was worried about is the language as well.... English is not our first language and they all speak English very fast.... it took me around two three weeks to understand lectures and what the lecturers talking about... but now everything is nice and perfect" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"In pharmacy course we need to have more vaccination.... That one is also kind of troublesome because we need to check whether we have all the vaccination and then we need to take a blood test.

It cost me a lot of money to do the blood test... but no choice” (2+2 MPharm Student)

Apart from the issues described above, some 2+2 participants also felt that there was a lack of communication or an information gap between the University of Reading Malaysia staff (UoRM) and students regarding the preparation for the move (to the UK). Participants felt they were underinformed about the vaccination records, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) procedures, applying for accommodation and visa processing.

“We didn’t really know about the DBS. We didn’t really know about what to prepare to open a bank account for the DBS...guess it’s the lack of communication between the campuses (UoRM &UoR)” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“During the time (in Malaysia) we didn’t receive the CAS letter and we didn’t get the accommodation confirmation.... Asked couple of times but no one knows nothing” (2+2 MPharm Student)

Theme 3: Experience during transition

This theme explores the actual challenges 2+2 MPharm students faced after their arrival to UK and the support they received from the staff and volunteer student “buddy”. This theme further explores Part 3 MPharm students’ perceptions and experiences regarding transition and assimilation with 2+2 MPharm students. At the end, this theme will discuss the recommendations from 2+2 and Part 3 students towards ensuring a smooth transition and enhancing the support system required for better transition experience.

A variety of sub themes emerged from the focus group discussion with 2+2 MPharm students as well as with Part 3 MPharm participants. Challenges that 2+2 students faced were both academic/study related and related to day-to-day living/practicalities. Challenges mentioned by participants that were academic in nature were related to language skills – both verbal and listening. They reported that this caused challenges in participation in group work/assignments/activities, understanding the lecture due to fast speaking or the lecturer having an accent, and understanding patients in the pharmacy. They suggested that early feedback on written work (particularly scientific writing) would be beneficial. They

also noted a difference in study methods and institutional culture, despite University of Reading Malaysia adopting similar teaching practices to those followed at the UK campus. Other aspects that students found challenging included: getting from the airport to the university campus and their accommodation, getting around/navigating through the university for study or lectures, opening a bank account, DBS procedures, and getting additional vaccinations.

“lots of challenges. The first is language sometimes they don’t understand what I am saying and sometimes I don’t understand what they are saying.... Find it difficult how to express myself to others because of language. The second is teaching, the class size is huge. I am always very focused about what the lecturer says but sometimes I don’t understand...and I can’t ask the lecturer to go back to the presentation slide. Our class size is huge so we can’t ask that, it will be a waste of time. Whereas in Malaysia we were eleven students and can ask our lecturer anything during the lecture.” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“English is not our first language and they all speak English very fast.... it took me around two three weeks to understand lectures and what the lecturers talking about. It also happens in the pharmacy where the patients speak too fast or with an accent.... I can’t even understand what their last name is clearly” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Now I understand the lectures clearly...before that I had to record it for myself. Its not only the lectures, even for group assignments/group work when my group members speak, I don’t clearly understand them.... Now everything is okay” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“In Malaysia we have a spoon feeding system...whatever the lecturer said to the small batch of students is important to us, they lecture and we listen, and here you give ideas to the lecturer to discuss it together....here people are able to generate ideas in a short amount of time which affects me a lot ‘cause I couldn’t really think fast” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Luckily I have done the blood test before I arrive but some of my friends had trouble with that in the UK” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“We were having trouble applying for the bank account to get the address for DBS. Applying for DBS required a proof of address and for that you need a bank account....and applying opening a bank account is not easy. Especially during September there are lots of students... we need like appointments ...we need to wait for few weeks and then can open a bank account and then can do the DBS” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“It was hard getting into students’ groups because we came here in Part 3 and they were together for two years.” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“From airport to accommodation we managed on our own. Though someone is supposed to be there to receive us but there was no one.” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“We have other things to settle in the university. We didn’t have anyone to show us around. Like we didn’t know where the Carrington building is to get our BRPs (Biometric Residence Permit). And for Blackboard as well, we were given a new username that was done a week before our class started and in the lab Dr X (tutor) still need to manually enter me.” (2+2 MPharm Student)

The Part 3 MPharm students who took part in the focus groups felt that the Malaysian students faced challenges regarding their English language skills (both writing and verbal), integration/assimilation with the existing cohort, and participating in social events arranged by the student union/student societies.

“I think writing in academic English “(Part 3 MPharm student)

“I feel for some of the Malaysian students as their English isn’t spectacular or as fluent so I feel they can be helped by extra classes. I see some disparities between Malaysian students and us” (Part 3 MPharm student)

“Malaysian students tend to group together.” (Part 3 MPharm student)

“local students join in different societies and social events whereas I feel international students don’t join to the societies that much.” (Part 3 MPharm student)

Day-to-day challenges that 2+2 MPharm students faced included understanding English as spoken by the locals/their peers, not having access to a UK debit or bank card, engaging into

verbal conversation (English) both on and off campus, unavailability of Malaysian food/groceries nearby, people's attitude towards Asians, the weather and differences in culture.

"Maybe food...I missed home food very much. 'Cause in here it's quite difficult to get Asian (Malaysian) foods. Here you can get a lot of pizza and pasta but no nasi-goreng, nasi-lemak. In the events or buffets, you will get pizza/pasta and sandwiches but in Malaysia it's totally different" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"The weather and it is quite unstable right now" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"Some people here are quite rude to us foreigners. I think that was okay as it was outside of the university. Like when we are going out to buy our groceries. But everyone inside the university, the staff are quite good to us" (2+2 MPharm Student)

"In Malaysia we used to pay with cash, here everyone uses card. It was very challenging during first week as I didn't have my card with me." (2+2 MPharm Student)

"Last spring actually the temperature was very low. They (student hall authorities) don't want to turn on the heating because they say "oh its spring...". The temperature was very low, and I need to wear three layers. I am still not homesick but its just the weather... the wind ...the wind is very strong and its very scary" (2+2 MPharm Student)

Participants from the MPharm 2+2 course were mostly positive towards the support they had received from UoRM during the pre-transition phase in Malaysia. However, a few participants expressed their dissatisfaction with a perceived lack of communication between the campuses which hindered the flow of information. Some of the participants felt that UoRM was not able to provide the required information about vaccinations, DBS processes, opening a bank account in the UK and other information required for visa applications. It was also mentioned by several participants that the pre-transition presentation by one of the UoRM staff was very helpful. Most participants agreed that meeting the personal tutor via Skype before arriving in the UK was very helpful.

"I think Malaysian campus they brief us well and gave quite a lot of information. However, I feel they should help us with the visa application process...like how to fill in the stuff for home immigration application." (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Getting MMR vaccination is one of those things which required more information from Malaysia campus and make sure all the vaccines are checked before you leave ... so it’s easier when you do the DBS” (2+2 MPharm Student)

*“In Malaysia campus K (the person in charge of 2+2 program) briefed us well about clothing, weather, showed us the city map, bus map.... where the shops are so it was good”
“I think for my case it is quite useful (meeting with the personal tutor via skype before coming to UK) ... at least I know her face and know who your personal tutor is” (2+2 MPharm Student)*

Student participants from the 2+2 MPharm programme expressed mixed feelings regarding volunteer buddies. Depending on the personal level of interaction with the buddy some students’ experiences were more positive than others. Some students felt that, while it was nice to know the buddies were there “just in case”, they did not really need them. The majority of participants agreed that the UoR staff (pharmacy department) supported them well throughout their transition.

“For me at least you know someone from your class, and someone is there to help you if you need” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Buddy? (long laughter from participants) we don’t really talk. Some of them still says hi... maybe because of cultural differences you know.... quite hard for me... I don’t know about the others but for me it didn’t work...” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“ Yes, they are my buddy and actually he was quite helpful for me and I think for the first month coming here in the UK he said he will be there and can contact him or just go and ask him anything that we want to know. He was quite ready to help us. So, I think for future students buddy system will be really helpful.” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Although we were not close or friends but still, we would say each other hi and do small talk” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“I think support from the department and our tutors are very good” (2+2 MPharm Student)

“Some staff are quite good to us. They asked about how we are getting on with studies and other things etc. especially our personal tutor and the course director” (2+2 MPharm Student)

Participants from Part 3 MPharm were positive about the buddy program, although some felt it could have been better advertised /publicised to students. Some of the students wanted to take part in the volunteer programme but had been unable to because of previous commitments. Part 3 students were welcoming towards the 2+2 students and did not feel any awkwardness working with them for assignments/ group presentations. However, some Part 3 students noted the challenges faced in relation to integrating the new group of students to the existing cohort. Some of the participants also indicated that the 2+2 students could have been better introduced to the class and that many students in Part 3 had been confused about who the new students were. This was interesting as the new students had been specifically introduced to the cohort in the “Welcome back” lecture, which has compulsory attendance. However, it is possible that this was not the best time to make the introduction as the session contains a large quantity of information about the coming year, which may have lessened the focus on introducing the new cohort. Coursework groupings had been specifically set up to distribute the UoRM students across the UKL cohort to support integration; Part 3 students were positive about this change. Participants from Part 3 recommended that volunteer buddies could be something like a STaR mentor, helping 2+2 students throughout their transition phase and to promote the volunteer buddy programme more. In addition to this, Part 3 students recommended better introduction of 2+2 students at Welcome Week and suggested that it would be useful for buddies to provide a campus tour earlier on in the Welcome programme. They also suggested that the student bodies (e.g. students’ union) could provide more inclusive social events (alcohol free), such as movie or game nights, food events etc. It was felt that this would be beneficial to all students, not just those transitioning from UoRM.

“It would be better for them to have a buddy or videoconference collaboration with students from the same year I suppose” (Part 3 MPharm student)

“It took us two to three weeks to understand who they are, where they came from. We were confused if they are from

previous year. It was good... its good to see new faces...when we spoke to the Malaysian students, they shared their experience so it's good" (Part 3 MPharm student)

"I see them and know who they are, but I haven't done any group work with them this year. So, I haven't had the chance to interact with them." (Part 3 MPharm student)

"I think this (issue of integration) can be improved as they still hang out with each other. They are still like separated from the group even though I talk to some of them but still they are like not integrated. I think its understandable as we already spend two years together, made our friends and I think for them it's a bit hard to make friends" (Part 3 MPharm student)

"Having someone like a STaR mentor before the transition. So that they could talk via Skype or once they are here, they can show them around before the class starts." (Part 3 MPharm student)

"Maybe arrange a social that is dedicated towards them...food events, bowling...something that is not expensive. Just a place where food, good music, people.... Where we can talk to each other, games night" (Part 3 MPharm student)

Student participants from 2+2 MPharm also provided some suggestions for a smoother transition; these included helping students to prepare a *curriculum vitae* as per the UK style and standard, giving a campus tour prior to the introductory class, follow up by the personal tutors after the taught sessions start (especially at the beginning), providing more information about vaccination to the students in Malaysia (especially about chicken pox, MMR). Lastly, students highlighted that there is a good variety of facilities, organizations and associations that can help students throughout their transition. These facilities and organizations need to promote their existence so that they are more visible to students who need help and support.

Conclusion

Overall, the students transitioned effectively from Malaysia to the UK campus and have generally performed well in their academic studies. Whilst not specifically related to the welcome activities provided to the MPharm 2+2 students, the importance of holding more inclusive general social activities was a useful suggestion that has been discussed with the Pharmacy student society. Learning from the first cohort was taken forward to help improve

the experience of the following cohort and has also been considered more broadly in relation to the experiences of international students joining at the beginning of Part 1.