The University of the West of England (UWE) has a mix of students from different countries all over the world. Some students come here to study for their full degree and some only come for the final year. They study a wide range of courses that they share with UK students however many international and home students prefer to socialise in groups that they share similarities with instead of mixing. In order to help improve relationships and create empathy across different cultures I will conduct research as to why this is the case. Using this information I will design an app that students can use to help them branch out and interact with students from different cultures.

I started by reading an article about cross cultural communication that discussed how different nationalities have different negotiation styles (hbr.org), and how this can affect business relationships. It was interesting as it provided insight into how different cultures express themselves and what levels of emotional intimacy they are comfortable with. I realised I could apply the same principles to students at UWE to aid the formation of cross cultural friendships; as this was something that had also come up during a class discussion held by Ms Windy Hon (UWE’s Global Student Support Co-ordinator). Students from the UK will go for long stretches without talking to their friends, which was something a student from Russia
said was strange to them as they would only consider someone a friend if they had regular contact. These are cultural barriers that could be causing students to feel uncertain, or receive mixed signals, when they interact with one another across cultures.

With this in mind I met with Mr Ian Yemm who is the University Coordinating Chaplain for the UWE Faith and Spirituality Team. He works very closely with overseas students to help facilitate religious practises on campus. We spoke about the relationship between international and home students and he said that, while UWE is very ‘diverse and accepting’, ‘religious literacy’ was an issue. UK students can be put off from talking to international students as the topic of religion can cause them to worry they may say something to offend or they may feel as though they shouldn’t ask questions in the first place. He felt that if students had easy access to information they would feel less daunted and it would make it easier for people to make friends. This gave me some great insight that was consistent with my earlier research; having more information on different cultures would help to bridge the gap and help friendships form.

I wrote some interview questions (fig 1-2) and then went and spoke to Patse Ninyamasiri (fig 3) who is a student from Thailand. She lives in the Students Castle (UWE accommodation) where most of the students are from China; these are the people she spends most of her time with. When asked if she had experienced any cultural barriers she said that some UK students had assumed she was Chinese, sworn at her, and told her to ‘go back to her own country’. She said that people needed to want to change their bad habits for relationships to improve. I agree that for an app to be successful the individual user needs to want to learn, and having an easily accessible resource would make this more likely.

I also spoke with Amarachi Ihuoma (fig 4) who is a student from Nigeria currently studying Computer Science at UWE. She said that she spends a lot of time with international students but does mix with UK students as well. Sometimes she does not understand UK students but will go out of her way to research what they mean; this is something my app could help with. However she felt that face to face conversation is best for making friends, so having a feature that helps bring students together to bond over an activity is something I will incorporate into my app.

To get well rounded primary research I also interviewed a UK student called Aaron Drinkwater (fig 5). He said he shared a house with a student from Africa called Demi who exhibited sexist opinions about women not being able to work. Culturally this point of view was normal for Demi as his home country has certain gender roles, but Aaron did not know this and was offended. However Demi was not against women working it was just something he was not used to. This is a situation where knowing more about other cultures would have helped them to better understand one another.

To get a deeper understanding of these cultural issues I conducted more in-depth research and found a paper (Wu et al, 2014) that has written extensively about the difficult adjustments overseas students face when entering higher education. They interviewed international students on what cultural barriers they had experienced during their time in college. Many of
the participants said that they experienced ‘misunderstanding and uneasiness’ when faced with different cultural norms. One international student stated that in the face of discrimination they wanted to be able to ‘share’ their ‘background’ with other students to help ‘change their thinking’. My app could provide a platform for international and UK students to share their world views and learn about different cultural norms to combat these obstacles. The problem of cross-cultural misunderstanding is echoed in a paper that focuses on Chinese students in higher education (Edwards, Ran, 2006). It states that many Chinese students are ‘lonely, isolated and vulnerable’ because they find ‘the negotiation of relationships’ to be ‘challenging’ due to ‘different cultural conventions’. The paper suggests that a ‘conscious awareness of cultural differences’ should be ‘explored’ which is something I am hoping students will do using my apps guides and forums. However I want my app to encourage discussions between students and to aid in educating people and not to re-enforce stereotypes.

I wanted to look into what other apps responsibly teach about cultural diversity and empathy. I found a game called ‘Who Am I? Race Awareness Game’ (graphite.org). This app has been designed for younger students to help them learn that it is okay to ask questions about other races, which is something that Mr Yemm said would help bring students at UWE together. To promote conversations about racial differences the game has school children ask questions about children from other countries based on the face presented in game. This is great because it helps children learn that it is ‘okay to ask questions about race and ethnicity’. However the app creators acknowledge that some racial stereotypes or assumptions could accidentally be re-enforced if information is taken out of context and suggest adult supervision. This is something that I will need to keep in mind as I want to include a section in my app that acts as a culture guide to allow people to discuss cultural norms and differences. I don’t want it to turn into a place for people to share untrue or hurtful information so all content will need to be researched and vetted properly before it is added.

Having completed my research I decided to take everything I had learned and create two proto-personas (fig 6-7) of students that would serve as my user base for the app I want to create. I started by creating Mei Lin who is a female Chinese international student studying Law. I then took this information and created a mind map scenario of her desire to connect with students from the UK, the difficulties she faces and any solutions that help her achieve this. I then did the same for a UK student called Chris who is looking to branch out and meet new people. Using these personas, and the interview feedback I had received I solidified my ideas for my app. I wanted something that would allow people to learn about one another from a cultural guide, to interact with one another on forums, and to be able to meet with one another to try new things with event listings. I made a checklist of pages (fig 8) and drew some rough wireframes (fig 9-10) making sure to keep my audience in mind. I want the app to be visually simplistic and to use basic English so that those with limited language skills can use it.

I put together a paper prototype (fig 11) based on my wireframes and created three tasks for my user to complete (fig 12-14). I explained to my tester that the app had been designed to help international and UK
students communicate with one another. I then asked them to press buttons to navigate the app like they would if it was a real application. They completed the first goal with ease but suggested I add a search function to the forums to allow users to search for thread names and content. For the second task they said the events listing page lacked important information which could be added in the form of tags and a small description. Both of which would draw the user into wanting to click on an event to find out more and increase the likelihood of user participation. He also said adding filters to the events page would make it easier for users to find events based on type or location. The ability to search for content is the biggest oversight in my app design as the third task yielded similar feedback. Adding a search function to the cultural guide’s page would stop users from having to scroll through a long list; making it much quicker for them find the nationality they want to research. Concern was also expressed over people being able to leave comments on the cultural guides as he did not want people to leave hateful comments. All comments made by users will be vetted for validity and to make sure that no offensive content is displayed.

With these user suggestions in mind I started to create a high fidelity app prototype using Invision (invisionapp.com). I used my wireframes as a guide so that I would not forget to include any of my pages and had copies of my paper-prototype test feedback to reference. I used Adobe Photoshop to mock up my designs and made sure to include the different search methods to my forums, events listings and cultural guide pages. I wanted the run through to feel realistic so I added some real text to my register/login page and added real place names to the cultural guide page. Once I linked together my pages using ‘hotspots’ I had my interviewee repeat the same three tasks as the paper prototype test. This time the feedback I received was about the aesthetics of my app; I had made my design look too ‘flat’ and ‘sparse’. They suggested adding arrows and boxes to create buttons to show the user what areas of the page are clickable. As well as this they suggested adding some images to add more interest as it would be nice to have more visual cues rather than it being all text based.

Overall I feel that my app covers a lot of the issues international students face when they come to study in the UK. I have addressed that UK and international students have different life experiences, and cultural norms, and have provided a way for students to come together to discuss their differences. If students learn more about one another, and come to understand different world views, they can start to empathise cross cultures to form new friendships. Feedback from the students I interviewed was consistent with the research papers I found which said that overseas students often spend more time with people that share their cultural norms. By giving the option for people to host different cultural events students will meet with one another to bond over new experiences. User testing my app prototype has shown me that it is easy to use which is important for the app to be successful, as a lot of the content will be user driven, so people will need to enjoy using it.

(Word count: 1997)
Figures

**Figure 1.** Interview questions for international students.

**Figure 2.** Interview questions for UK student.
Figure 3. Transcript from interview with Patse Ninyamasiri.

Figure 4. Transcript from interview with Amarachi Ihuoma.

Figure 5. Transcript from interview with Aaron Drinkwater.
Figure 6. Mei Lin proto-persona sheet.

Figure 7. Chris proto-persona sheet.

Figure 8. App planning page checklist.

Figure 9. App wireframe sketches.
Figure 10. App wireframe sketches.

Figure 11. Paper proto-type ready to test.
Figure 12. Paper prototype user test sheet task 1.

Figure 13. Paper prototype user test sheet task 2.

Figure 14. Paper prototype user test sheet task 3.
References
[4] International Students, (online), Available from: https://www.thestudentsunion.co.uk/community/international-students/ [Accessed 05/04/2016]