

Stepping Up, Standing Out: A Longitudinal Case Study on Engaging with International PGT Student Voices through Co-Creation in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

In the diverse and dynamic landscape of United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE), the challenges and opportunities faced by international Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students have become a focal point for institutions striving to create an inclusive environment. The influx of international students highlights their importance to the UK HE sector, yet despite HE institutional efforts to provide support, students often report ongoing challenges and feeling limited in their opportunities to share their student voices in shaping institutional actions. This creates gaps in a feedback loop between problem and solution. We report here on a case-study arising from a recent three-year mixed-methods project in a UK university, exploring student engagement with academic support. Based on a participatory approach, we included students in each year of the project through surveys, focus groups and workshops. Findings from each stage were evaluated by students to feed into the next, leading to the co-creation of practical, inclusive, interculturally-aware resources on how to make the most of a Masters' experience, from the students' perspective. These resources are now refreshing student recruitment and staff practice at our University, to ensure a welcoming, empathetic, and inclusive environment. This project highlights the importance of a collaborative approach in supporting international PGT students, valuing their unique contributions to the academic community, and demonstrating the central role played by student partners in closing the feedback loop.

Introduction

In the increasingly diverse, dynamic and at times contentious landscape for PGT students in UK HE, the challenges and opportunities have become a focal point for institutions striving to create a truly inclusive environment. Recent influxes of international students to UK universities has flagged their importance to the UK HE sector with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, 2024) and the UK Higher Education Policy Institute (Ebel, 2024) calling for universities to do more to value the social and cultural contributions international students bring to the UK learning experience. Yet evidence suggests that international students continue to encounter a deficit narrative arising from intercultural, linguistic and academic challenges, which universities have a duty of care to address appropriately (Leman, 2023; UKCISA, 2022). The intensity of a UK one-year taught Masters, compared to longer PGT programmes in many other countries (e.g. U.S., China) exacerbates such challenges, limiting opportunities for students to share their experiences and shape institutional actions.

Our experience over more than 30 years of supporting international PGT students in UK universities has highlighted how these challenges can impact on their academic success, mental wellbeing, personal development and sense of belonging. These barriers are well documented in the literature (e.g. Edwards & Ran, 2006; Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016). Yet findings suggest that student voices are still not adequately engaged with, and that institutions are slow to change their own practices in response. Our case study demonstrates one way in which we have taken action in partnership with students to address this tension.

Research Context and Rationale for Case Study Approach

This project is grounded in participatory action research and theories of student-as-partner pedagogy (Bovill et al., 2015; Healey et al., 2014). Our university, like many others, spends substantial time and resources creating a range of study materials, wellbeing support, and social networking initiatives to help all students improve their academic and personal development. Nevertheless, our international PGT students report ongoing academic challenges and personal difficulties affecting their ability to thrive, not least due to feeling overwhelmed in how to navigate the plethora of resources on offer. Identifying engagement with academic support as a key area for improvement, we ran a three-year University-funded research project, from 2022 to 2025, to explore international PGT students' experiences. Employing a sequential mixed-methods case study approach allowed us to build a nuanced understanding of the complexities of these experiences. Statistical and thematic analysis of the data from surveys and focus groups, together with co-creation workshops, resulted in a robust set of recommendations and resources that can be widely disseminated, not just in our institution but other similar providers with large international cohorts.

Students from our two respective schools and faculties in the University (Languages, Cultures and Societies in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, and Sociology and Social Policy in the Faculty of Social Sciences), were involved as partners throughout the research process, allowing for a dialogic, transdisciplinary and transcultural approach. Their role was repositioned as individuals offering valuable insights, with equitable opportunities for academic success, rather than objectified in homogenised deficit cohorts. By offering several cycles for engaging with the project, students were able to contribute their voices throughout their learning cycle, not just in a single snapshot survey. While surveys can be an easy and common method of engaging 'the student voice', they can fail to be a genuine or inclusive reflection of views (Brown, 2019), so we wanted to offer more varied partnering opportunities. In particular, we aimed to create a sense of student empowerment in working with us as consultants (Bovill et al., 2015); key partners in co-creating a bank of practical, inclusive, interculturally-aware resources, written from the students' perspective, actively demonstrating how we valued their input and expertise (Ajjawi et al., 2023). The three years enabled us to loop student voices effectively back into all stages of the project, as we will now demonstrate.

Implementation

Year 1: Baseline Evaluation

In our first year, following full institutional ethical approval (reference FREC 2023-0304-408), we began with a quantitative and qualitative baseline evaluation of existing university resources, including in-session academic literacies classes, and self-study materials offered by the University library or other platforms, aimed at building key academic skills. Using gatekeepers who had contact with students as programme leaders, we recruited international PGT students in our two schools to respond to a survey and participate in a follow-up focus group led by a research assistant. The survey questionnaire and focus group protocols were piloted with a former international student and colleague to ensure they were appropriate for our participants, and data collection took place in early semester two, half-way through the academic year. Twenty-four students responded to the survey, but due to recruitment challenges, only two took up invitations to the focus group. However, this allowed for a more natural exchange of experiences and several themes emerged from what enabled students to thrive and what prevented them using existing support on offer. Both from the quantitative survey data, and the qualitative focus group interview data, it was clear that students took most of semester one to settle in and manage their time. Although transactional motivations for doing a Masters were high, many of our respondents told us they also valued the opportunity to develop personally by studying abroad. Some reported feeling overwhelmed navigating the many different types of advice available, especially via the University's online learning platform and webpages. While some told us they felt nervous meeting academic staff or personal tutors individually, most appreciated one-to-one support especially when staff showed willingness in taking time to explain. These findings informed early recommendations for greater contextualisation and personalisation of support, particularly acknowledging the personal cost of navigating a Master's programme.

Year 2: Consolidation and Co-Creation

In the second year of our study, we consolidated our baseline findings to extend our understanding of key themes, through a larger scale survey (43 respondents) and two task-based focus groups. In the first focus group, research assistants asked eight students to co-create a timeline, using post-it notes across a flipchart, to clarify when they most needed contextualized support. Students noted which resources they had engaged with most and their usefulness. This timeline created a clear visual representation of their academic support journeys, as illustrated in Figure 1.

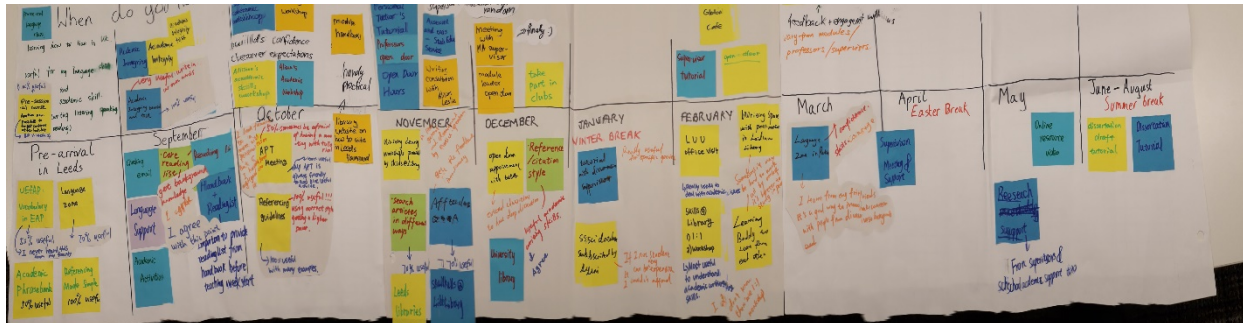


Figure 1. Timeline of support

Findings re-emphasised the importance of advice early in the academic year with reiterations throughout the year. Students recognised there was plenty of online information about academic support but again found it overwhelming or difficult to access due to having to click through multiple series of links. Students emphasised the value of individual staff, such as academic personal tutors, in explaining the hidden curriculum, but also the challenges in learning to communicate effectively with staff or finding out about available support outside contact hours, for example in the summer when students can feel alone or disengaged. In response to these comments, we created an infographic as a stand-alone communicative tool, valued for ease of creation and dissemination (Jaleniauskiene & Kasperuniene, 2023), through digital platforms such as Canva. Our infographic simplified the academic support resources across the University along a timeline from pre-arrival to end of year dissertation writing, adding accessible QR codes which could be scanned for further information.

In a second workshop we recruited seven students to work with us and a digital learning advisor in more resource creation. They were invited to evaluate our infographic and given training in how to create similar digital tools, allowing them to distil key findings into culturally relevant and engaging peer-to-peer guidance (Henderson & Whitelaw, 2013). The participants identified key lessons they had learned from their own experiences and shared their top recommendations for future international PGT students on what resources can help at different stages of the year including pre-arrival. These tasks resulted in three additional peer-to-peer infographic and storyboard guides, including how to communicate with your lecturer. To ensure these voices were heard more widely and had impact, we disseminated the resources through relevant teams responsible for student success and induction activities across the University, where they were well-received by the incoming cohort of students. We also included one of our student partners in two dissemination events, foregrounding their voice in the research process.

Year 3: Co-Creation and Dissemination

In the final year of the project, we aimed to explore further the individuality of international student experiences, especially among those from large monocultural compatriot groups, for example, China. The commonly used term ‘international student experience’ is often critiqued

for its false premise that there is only one experience which all international students share, and which is different to that of domestic students (for example, Heng, 2019; Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Merabet, 2025). Furthermore, studies (e.g. Edwards & Ran, 2006; Heng, 2019) particularly caution against treating Chinese students as a homogenous body, challenging essentialist assumptions that geographical or national context impacts most on an incoming student's expectations and experiences. Therefore, we wanted to evaluate to what extent our existing co-created resources represented the lived experiences of academic success of a third cohort of international PGT students. Recruiting five students for a co-creation workshop, again with a digital learning adviser, they had training in creating new digital resources which captured their voices individually rather than in small groups as previously. We also gave them a choice on what key messages they wanted to share and with whom; it was not limited to recommendations for future students. Students chose to capture what was important to them; again, the need for support throughout the student journey, and also the need for staff support, in particular with intercultural and inclusivity training. These resources were added to the existing bank of resources, made available to the University and shared externally through the Open Science Framework with a Creative Commons licence so that they can be adapted to different contexts (<https://osf.io/j3ts6/>). For ease of reference, they are listed in Table 2.

Resource title	Intended audience
Academic Support	Students
Master Your Masters	Students
How to Make the Most of Your Time in a UK University	Students
Your Lecturer and You	Students
Reflecting on Your Postgraduate Year in the UK	Students
How to Create Meaningful Connections	Staff
Reflecting on Your Teaching	Staff

Table 2: Table of student co-created resources

Discussion

One of the virtues of doing a longitudinal study is that we could work with three diverse and unique cohorts of international PGTs. Co-creation of learning support resources was pivotal in our research study as it enabled us to position our students at the centre of both process and product and help us close the feedback loop between identifying the problem and taking action. We recognise that our students have agency in how they adapt to new learning contexts (Heng, 2019); they provide crucial perspectives as guides to navigating university systems and are "experts in states of becoming and self-actualization" (Riddell, 2024, p.65). The process of 'becoming' for students (Morgan & O'Hara, 2023) requires extra resilience so creating a welcoming, empathetic and inclusive environment at programme and school level is essential for students' well-being and success. Our final recommendations are rooted in our student

partnerships and their co-created resources, which offer practical actions for the University to take to show it is listening.

However, as previous studies on student partnerships show (for example, Bovill et al., 2015; Brown, 2019; Ravi et al., 2024), true empowerment relies on relationships of trust. Our consciousness of power differentials shaped decisions about our involvement in the focus group workshops. Employing research assistants helped alleviate any researcher bias at the early stages of gathering data and therefore supported more equitable student partnerships. Yet, we felt the co-creation stage of implementing the data relied on our direct collaboration with students in the workshops in the second year. As one of us is an academic support tutor to the students, providing embedded in-session support in the School, a relationship of trust already existed. However, it was still important to ensure that students felt safe voicing their experiences. Creating safe spaces can signal to students that their voices really matter and for 'belonging' or 'mattering' to be authentic, students must be given the opportunity to show multiple identities without rejection (Gravett, 2023). Given the fact that not all international student identities are visible, it is just as important to consider the intersectionality of their experience as it is for 'home' students (Lomer et al., 2021). Fernández et al. (2023, p.685) highlight the importance of safe spaces for being authentic and accepted for who you are, rather than 'fitting in' or assimilating to the norm. Acculturation can often be the default expectation placed on international students, but in safe spaces our students had the courage to tell us that they expect their lecturers and academic personal tutors to embrace intercultural adaptation too, as illustrated in their infographic guides, suggesting that the deficit may be ours.

In a similar international student voice project, Ravi et al. (2024) conclude that the process of building safe spaces for co-creation is just as important as the final product, for staff as well as students. We would concur that the co-creation process has been as valuable for us as researcher-practitioners and our student partners as the final products. Not only has our project resulted in initial recommendations which we have implemented into our own practice through updating and reframing our existing resources, but our co-created resources are proving to be an accessible and welcome tool for more inclusive and tailored student induction. The staff guides are now included in academic personal tutor training and the University's webpages on inclusivity. The peer-to-peer guides are being used in student recruitment and pre-arrival induction in our parent faculties, and other departments across the University have requested them for their own use, thus closing the feedback loop. This 'closure' is not intended in the sense that the University demonstrates to students that it has met its responsibility through a 'You said, We did' approach, which closes down further meaningful dialogue (Young and Jerome, 2020). Rather, as Young and Jerome (2020) advocate, we have opened the loop by involving, and therefore empowering, students in understanding how their voices matter in the feedback process.

Conclusion

Supporting international PGT students requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach that recognises and values their unique and individual contributions to the academic community. Through our student partnerships to hone more focused and interculturally appropriate support at critical points, student voices have been central to shaping future strategies and provision in our institution. Most significantly, our PGT students have been afforded the opportunity to witness for themselves how their voices have had impact before the end of their academic journey. As researcher-practitioners, we have also developed our own abilities to work with student partners in an engaging and positive way. Our project thus serves as a case-study to encourage staff in our own institution, and other international HE contexts, to meet our obligations to provide a more equitable learning experience and opportunities for international students' voices to really matter during their studies.

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