

## Share Your Voices: capturing the perspectives of international students

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### Abstract

International students have been a growing cohort in United Kingdom (UK) universities and remain a significant presence despite the impact of policy changes. However, the picture for international students joining UK institutions is complex, and their voices often unheard: proportionally less of the data on international students is drawn from international students themselves. Furthermore, there is little by way of a coordinated strategy to support the necessary adjustment processes of international students and their institutions. This paper argues that it is ethically important that universities understand how to better support these students, as well as culturally and economically vital for the continued growth and success of UK higher education.

The aim of this research was to give voice to the international students on an MA programme at one post-1992 university; to find out more about their experiences with a view to informing future teaching and support practices. This aim is reflected in the project methodology, Constructivist Grounded Theory, which can be a powerful catalyst by which to amplify voices and foster agency in change processes. The project team consisted of an academic member of staff and two international students currently undertaking the MA, the presence and insight of the latter has been instrumental in shaping the data collection and analysis. Though small-scale in nature, the project has succeeded in its aim of 'demuting' the voices of some of the students, going on to not only inform subsequent developments on the programme, but reaching a wider audience across the institution and its hierarchy.

### Introduction

The continual rise in the number of international students choosing to register at the authors' university in recent years has until now been very much in line with a broader trend seen in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the UK (see Bolton, Lewis & Gower 2024). Yet, even as those national numbers are beginning to drop off, numbers at this institution remain steady, perhaps owing to the number of professionally-oriented courses available, which our internal data shows as attracting the highest numbers of international applicants. Higher Education in the UK and further afield is now almost synonymous with internationalisation (however fuzzy that concept may be): it is suggested that international students are the embodiment of a globalised intellectual climate (Page & Chaboun, 2019) with some elite institutions trying to

claim 'post-internationalisation' (e.g. established global engagement) status as an indicator of global reach (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney 2023).

Universities in the UK have engaged with internationalisation in different ways, with some even opening campuses abroad, such as the University of Birmingham Dubai, a process also known as transnational education (per Bolton, Lewis & Gower 2024). However, possibly the most visible aspect of the internationalisation of UK HEIs has been the growing presence of international students, representing 25% of the total student population according to figures from 2023/24 (Bolton, Lewis & Gower 2024). This visibility has fuelled much public debate, perhaps even being 'Exploited for cheap headlines' (Phillipson, 2024). Nevertheless, while the process of internationalisation is a complex one, it undoubtedly serves to benefit the parties involved in many ways. However, it also presents a great many challenges as universities, their communities, and their diverse student bodies learn to adapt to each other.

Study abroad can provide international students with experiences and opportunities that may be unavailable in their home nations (Page & Chaboun, 2019). Shkoler & Rabenu's (2022) review of the literature on the motivations of international students identified perceived advantages that included the gain or increase of different forms of capital (human, financial, psychological), prestige and better quality of life and opportunity. Such motivations are recognised by the authors, all of whom have experiences as international students, past and present.

Maddy's brief time as an international student in Barcelona allowed her to integrate further into her chosen country at the time, enhancing her language proficiency and making her CV more appealing to future employers. Jumaima wanted to study in the UK *"because of its renowned high standards, rigour, emphasis on practical skills, and multicultural society. My first degree in English and literature inspired me to study and reside in the UK ... it will give me a great opportunity to improve my English language and teaching skills."* She also felt that employers around the world place a high value on degrees from the UK, and the universities offer good research facilities. For Oluwaseun, her motivations included experiencing what she viewed as the best education and an academic environment providing different ideas, cultures, techniques and teaching methods, which she hoped would enable her to grow as an educator. A French language tutor in Nigeria, she wanted to *"truly grasp and imbibe the concept of 'Education' in English to enhance my teaching. The UK, with its top-tier universities and rich academic culture, felt like the perfect place to do this."*

The presence of international students benefits the whole country, not just host institutions. Reviews of the literature surrounding internationalisation note emphases on positive outcomes such as cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and global status (Page & Chaboun, 2019; Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023), though there are questions regarding whether this potential can be fulfilled (Knight, 2011). Internationalisation might also enhance innovation: Csikszentmihalyi's (2014) systems model of creativity shows how creativity occurs where memes (concepts, ideas) change through contact with other cultures, a theory

supported through work such as the Global Creativity Index (Florida, Mellander & King, 2015) tying global hotspots of innovation to areas of greater social diversity. The dominant narrative in internationalisation policy is often economic (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023), baldly, the fees paid by international students in the UK mitigate significant financial shortfalls precipitated by factors including the freeze on home student fees and spiralling costs (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023; Bolton, Lewis & Gower, 2024). Beyond the university sector, and for all the negative rhetoric around international students, estimates for the 2021/2022 cohort indicate a net contribution of £37.4 billion to the economy (Bolton, Lewis & Gower, 2024).

Ultimately, the research shows that international students enrich the country in a multitude of ways, directly and indirectly. We further suggest they allow the UK, identified as a declining power following the end of WWII (militarily, economically and technologically: see Rasler & Thompson, 2021), to have a real stake in global development: ideas and values learned in the UK follow each student across in the world. This is the very definition of soft power (Bolton, Lewis & Gower, 2024), if perhaps smacking of colonialism under a different guise: internationalisation may be integral to ensuring the UK remains competitive and influential in a changing world.

Despite the value of internationalisation to both international students and their universities, the emerging field of literature on internationalisation provides evidence to show that the process is not yet functioning optimally. There is 'mixed messaging' in government policy, concerns about English language proficiency and the potential for supplanting or affecting home students (Bolton, Lewis & Gower, 2024), all of which influence the welcome offered to international students. The experiences of international students are often 'unequal' depending on background and prior experiences, they may also experience exclusion and discrimination and, while there is evidence of pockets of good practice across HEIs, there is little evidence yet of comprehensive strategy at national and institutional level that focuses on areas including training, teaching & learning, and inequalities in relation to internationalisation (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

The present project came about as a result of Maddy taking on a new role as International Lead – hired specifically to meet the needs of a growing cohort of students. Meeting and talking with international students, including Jumaima and Oluwaseun, and academic colleagues, not feeling understood or not knowing what was needed were common themes: each side unclear about how to reach the other. As Freire (1970) and many other educationalists have noted: changes in education need to be informed by dialogue between the interested parties. This project therefore aimed to give voice to the international students on the programme and find out more about their experiences with a view to informing future teaching and support practices.

This aim is reflected in the project methodology, Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), which promotes the opportunity for participants to express their perspectives and to become agents

for change (Miller, 2023). The contributions of Jumaima and Oluwaseun as members of the research team has helped to shape the data collection and provided valued insight into the analysis, resulting in a piece of work that has helped to inform not just the development of this programme, but wider pieces of work across the University. The prioritisation of the voice of international students at participant and researcher level might be viewed as overly subjective, however, Miller (2023) argues that subjectivity matters in this kind of research. Furthermore, given the fact that student voices are usually under-privileged in the discourse around internationalisation, the subjectivity of this research makes for a refreshing inversion of the status quo, hopefully empowering to the students. It goes without saying that these findings are context-specific and that institutions are known to take diverse approaches to internationalisation (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023), however, there may be some points for reflection that could be of interest to colleagues elsewhere.

## Literature review

As has been highlighted above, the field of literature around internationalisation is still emerging. This situation justifies the CGT approach, which is recommended for examining under-explored subject matter (Miller, 2023). Though ‘true’ grounded theory starts with a blank slate, CGT advocates for familiarisation with extant literature in order to ‘sensitise’ (Miller, 2023 p.4) the researcher(s) to the kinds of topics that might arise through the data collection. The short review that was carried out for this project focused on what is known about the experiences of international students and what the conditions for their success would look like.

Firstly, it should be noted that the term “international student” does not reflect the heterogeneity of students who fall under that umbrella (Jones, 2017; Findon & Malik, 2025). International student experiences are therefore influenced by a range of different factors, including levels of familiarity with academic practices, that can also impact students categorised as “domestic” (Clough *et al.*, 2024). However, there do remain concerns such as those reflected by the research from Malay, Otten & Coelen (2023) that there is often a greater gap for international students to cross in terms of adjustment to a new academic environment. Despite the positive potential of internationalisation, actual experiences as felt by students and university staff vary. Data from various sources (see UCAS, 2022; etio, 2024) indicates that the overall satisfaction levels of international students in the UK with their programmes are around 90%, however certain aspects of their experiences remain problematic. According to UCAS (2022), about half of the international students surveyed did not feel ready to begin their course and 72% would have liked more information about what their studies would look like. Perhaps relatedly, the QAA (2023) states that ‘International students are overrepresented in complaints submitted to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE)’ (p4), which is a worrying indicator of things going wrong between students and their institutions.

It is likely that failures in the internationalisation processes are down to a lack of understanding and effective strategy; certainly, there seems to be little policy focus across the sector beyond recruitment (Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023). There is some research available from different contexts that indicates that academic staff often feel unprepared to teach interculturally (Chen et al., 2020; Markey et al., 2023). In terms of how that preparation should take place, the role of student voice has long been highlighted as an essential catalyst for review and change (Cook-Sather, 2002): if it is not known what international students need to succeed, perhaps they should be asked? Sadly, the voices of international students are rarely listened to by their universities: while the body of research on internationalisation may be growing, little of this data is gathered from international students themselves (Streitweiser & Light, 2017; Page & Chaboun, 2019). Given the vital role these students play in the academic sector and the wider economy and the duty of care universities have towards their students, a powerful ethical and instrumental argument can be made for universities to make a concerted effort to 'de-mute' (Page & Chaboun, 2019, p.872) the voices of international students.

The success of international students is predicated on their adjustment to the new academic environment (Malay, Otten & Coelen, 2023). However, as Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig (2015) point out, while all students must undergo adjustment, there are usually a greater range of variables in the process for international students, making it harder – this is where universities can help. The process of adjustment is described as involving psychological and sociocultural processes (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). The first of these might be described as how the individual feels in their new environment (comfortable, sad) while the second is about how they get on in that environment (meeting goals, fitting in) (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). Malay, Otten & Coelen's (2023) work on predicting the adjustment of international students suggests that the rate of adjustment is affected by levels of Perceived Cultural Distance (perceived variance in cultural values) and Cultural Intelligence (ability to adapt and operate across diverse cultural environments). Another interesting point raised by Malay, Otten & Coelen (2023) is that adjustment, as well as predicting success, also affects the likelihood of those students recommending their university. Given the importance to UK institutions of maintain their international recruitment, it seems vitally important that universities play their part in the adjustment process.

Fundamentally, the literature suggests that universities can help most by ensuring that international students are considered in relation to their equality, diversity and inclusion remit (Tavares, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2022). Other, specific suggestions such as supporting intercultural awareness and building intercultural skills, utilising a range of pedagogic approaches and scaffolding learning competences must all be underpinned by a comprehensive strategic approach (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

## Methodology

As highlighted earlier, this study specifically aligns with the methodological approach of CGT. As well as the fact that CGT is helpful where little is known about the intended research area (Miller, 2023), the fact that CGT utilises shared experiences and relationships with participants to generate data and analysis (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012) was attractive. Working on the principles of co-construction, conscientisation and empowerment (Mies, 1993 in Kosny, 2003; Freire, 1970), two members of the cohort of international students, Jumaima and Oluwaseun, would become co-researchers, a role that would include collecting data from the participants and contributing to the data analysis.

The choice of method was key for this study, because it was felt that the intended participants might experience additional barriers to participation relating to their status. The study utilised a focus group to collect data, an approach increasingly in use in CGT, which Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) also highlight as being more efficient than interviews. It was hoped this method would minimize the time needed to collect the data, reducing the burden on students and ensuring the findings could begin to inform practice sooner. Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) further note that the focus group environment may be more conducive to participants from marginalized groups disclosing their real feelings. To further facilitate participant comfort, Jumaima and Oluwaseun would act as moderators for the focus groups: Maddy would not attend to avoid any sense of risk that personal views could be identified by a member of the University staff.

The research team were unsure of the level of engagement the project would receive: international students seemed keen to share their stories informally, but we were aware of some hesitation about using more formal channels. Under these circumstances, it was decided to be flexible about the number and size of focus groups held – we would take what we could get. The project succeeded in recruiting six participants, though two were ultimately unable to attend. The four participants included one relatively new-starter, two students about mid-way through the programme and one nearing completion. Three of the participants were from the same country where English is an official language, but mother tongues are commonly in use. The other student came from an English-speaking country.

The focus group was 90 minutes long. Five areas for discussion were selected by the authors as being the most important topics for the University to understand, specifically based on the experiences of the two co-researchers. While the choice of topics clearly came pre-loaded with certain assumptions about the experiences of international students, the point was that they were questions that had been identified as valuable by the co-researchers, who were themselves members of this group. CGT acknowledges the subjective influence of researchers and endeavours to amplify marginalised voices (Miller, 2023): it was therefore hoped that the inherent subjectivity of the topic selection process would work as an amplifier in this case, by highlighting meaningful areas for discussion. Table 1 shows the topics and prompting questions the facilitators used:

Discussion topics	Prompting questions
Arriving in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how did you feel about arriving in this country?</li> <li>- how easy or difficult did you find getting to the University to start your course?</li> </ul>
Teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how prepared did you feel for your first modules?</li> <li>- how much did you have to adapt your understandings of teaching and learning?</li> </ul>
Life in a foreign land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what have been the greatest changes for you in terms of lifestyle?</li> <li>- how do you feel about your life in this country?</li> </ul>
Challenges and lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what has been the greatest obstacle for you to overcome in adapting to life as an international student?</li> <li>- what one piece of advice would you offer to future international students?</li> </ul>
Areas for further discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are there any topics that you feel need to be discussed further and fed back to the University?</li> </ul>

*Table 1 – Focus group Discussion Topics and Prompting Questions*

Ethical approval was secured from the University a couple of months prior to the focus group. The role of the co-researchers was highlighted as valuable by the ethics panel to reduce any potential conflict relating to learner/tutor relationships as well as perceived risk by participants. As Jumaima and Oluwaseun were novice researchers, Maddy provided them with a list of notes to ensure that all practical and ethical procedures were adhered to. The data was initially transcribed by Jumaima and Oluwaseun using the transcription function in Word to expedite the process, they then listening to the recorded materials and checked through the automatically created transcriptions. Having removed any identifying features, they then sent the transcriptions to Maddy, who checked them again for inconsistencies and queried them as necessary. Once all were happy that the transcripts represented an accurate record of what was said, the original audio recordings were deleted.

## Findings

A key recommendation of CGT is that researchers should keep memos (notes, *aides memoires*, thoughts) throughout the research process that can be used guide the analysis (Miller, 2023). One such memo made by Jumaima and Oluwaseun was of their perceptions of the key themes emerging from the data and how they reflected their own experiences. They highlighted:

- Arrival and settling into the country
- Adapting to study
- Ongoing challenges
- Academic issues
- Feeling unwelcome

Though this last theme arguably featured within many of the preceding ones, Jumaima and Oluwaseun felt that it was such a powerful theme that it ought to be drawn out separately. The data then went through a second stage of coding that explored the different elements informing those original themes and was then re-sorted into a pattern that showed how the aspects of the students' experiences fitted together. Jumaima and Oluwaseun's original memo proved correct: feeling unwelcome was a recurrent theme, as was the topic of preparation: these two could be framed as cross-cutting themes, appearing in relation to each of the other specific themes, though in slightly different contexts, as can be seen from Table 2, below.

Specific Themes	Cross-cutting themes				
	Preparation			Feeling Unwelcome	
	Subthemes			Subthemes	
	Of Self	Of students by University	Of University	At the University	In the UK
	Academic Cultural Distance				
	Community				
	Communication				
	Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing				
	Adjustment				
	Living and working				

*Table 2 – Mapping the themes*

The following sections explore the findings relating to the themes in detail. Owing to the extensive data obtained through the focus groups, quotes have been limited to one per point. However, we have tried to make clear where perspectives are shared or diverged.

### *Academic Cultural Distance*

The name of this theme builds on the work of (Malay, Otten & Coelen, 2023) and refers specifically to the differences encountered by students between their prior academic environments and the current one. During the discussion, the students drew out several significant differences including a more academic or theoretical approach than they were used to, different teaching approaches, new knowledge, critical thinking, an unwelcome emphasis on ungraded formative tasks, expectations of independent study and high-stakes assignments. Though one student did talk about embracing the changes and challenges, the discourse around these differences was generally negative e.g.:

*... when you come to an environment that you are learning something new, it is different from where you are coming from, definitely you face one or two difficulties, (Participant 3)*



Thinking about Academic Cultural Distance in relation to the cross-cutting theme of preparation, the participants articulated how this connected to each of the subthemes in that category. All participants identified that either they, or their classmates were unprepared for how different Masters study in the UK would be, regardless of country of origin, as expressed here:

*We are international and our system of teaching, especially from [...], is not the same, it is completely different. (Participant 1)*

For some, these differences were unsettling and confusing:

*Meanwhile, I've done my degree, I'm like, 'are you sure you graduated?' Because what exactly do they want? (Participant 3)*

However, some members of the group acknowledged role of their own agency here. One student admitted that they had missed induction while another felt that they had an advantage because they registered for the course but then delayed their start owing to visa refusals. This gave them the chance to engage with many of the course materials on the VLE beforehand.

*I knew how to use the platform, the University portal platform ... so I was familiar... So when I got here, it was like, it wasn't new... That was it, so for me it was not hard getting into the course because I already started it before in January. (Participant 1)*

It was clear that the students felt that being prepared for the nature of the course could have helped them and their classmates, and that the University should play a part in this. Suggestions included:

*That period you're already in contact with the University, you're already sending emails, and I think the way the University can prepare you for maybe like an outline or something that one can do to prepare you for the courses you're coming to study, (Participant 1)*

Furthermore, this participant encapsulated the discussion about how the University could prepare itself better in terms of understanding the extent to which Academic Cultural Distance impacts international students:

*No, we are not already in the system, we are just trying, so they should understand that the [...] system is different or maybe the [...] system and other countries, their system of assignment is kind of different and how we go about it. (Participant 1)*

The discussion also showed how failures to bridge Academic Cultural Distance contributed to Feeling Unwelcome in the University, subtheme 1 in the second cross-cutting theme, as expressed here:

*Imagine myself after my degree: I am now coming to put all my effort to write an assignment and fail. I really don't know how they can do it. And what they should do, I think they should look into that aspect, honestly. (Participant 4)*

## Community

This concerns the need for community and how inclusion or exclusion affected the students' experiences. As with the previous theme, it was possible to see how the themes of Preparation and Feeling Unwelcome cut through.

In relation to self-preparation, the comments were very much in line with the previous theme in that students had not anticipated quite how different the community in the UK would be to what they were used to:

*I don't know something about their cultures, like you know this mind your business kind of thing. It's so much. I don't know, I've not been to other countries so I don't know. So, I'm comparing this to my own country, in [...] we are kind of like very welcoming people, (Participant 1)*

While the discussion reflected the agency students had in deciding to study abroad, and they were clearly prepared to miss home and family, this did not stop it from being painful:

*I do miss my family a lot; I'm very, very close to my family so I do miss them a lot. (Participant 2)*

This participant shared the group's view that maintaining these links to their existing community were an essential part of their coping strategies:

*So, the biggest thing that I would tell people is just keep in touch because it sucks being alone, it sucks not having someone that you are used to having there all the time, (Participant 2)*

As to whether the University was able to prepare the students for becoming part of a new community, there was some acknowledgement that there were some schemes available through the University, but they were either not set out explicitly to the students, or were too new to have benefitted all of the group members:

*I didn't even know half of those things were available or half the things were even existing. And I've been here for almost a year now, so to not even know that was a thing and I'm learning it now is not great for the university. (Participant 2)*

A peer mentoring scheme was a very recent development, meaning that only the newest participant had accessed it while one of the students mid-way through the programme had acted as a mentor. The students who had not been mentored made it clear that they would have appreciated it:

*Where somebody is kind of like, OK, hold your hand through. It might not be through the whole journey, it might just go through the six months or two months when you arrive, where you need to go to if you need this, ... If you need just like a kind of the mentorship to like help you to integrate into the system gently because it was like they just dumped us, boom, to find your way. (Participant 1)*

The student who had been mentored appreciated the multiple ways in which their mentor was able to support them emotionally and with their studies, however, they also felt that the mentoring fell short of expectations.

*I expected it to be explicit. If we're setting a platform, let it be very effective. I observed that the mentors were not really free. I observed that they had some kind of restrictions, like maybe to the extent of you don't have to share your contact and all. (Participant 3)*

This participant later suggested that she felt either the mentor or the University might have been 'withholding' information. It is unclear exactly what was meant by this, but perhaps this student was hoping for a more professional and expert service than that offered by a voluntary scheme of peer support.

Regarding the preparation of the University to receive International students into its community, the group made clear that they felt it was inadequate, as expressed here:

*where I studied [before].... So they were like, welcoming when they see you, they already know they they're ready to help you. But in the UK, it's like, it's not like that... Maybe there's a way the community can be sensitized to. You people are the host of the University of Worcester, so this way you can kind of extend hospitality to foreigners that probably are here in the UK, (Participant 1)*

Following this, it was extremely clear from comments like the following that students often experienced Feeling Unwelcome both within the University and in the wider community.

*Yes, I think they should be more welcoming, not only to the University but to the society at large, they don't embrace... when you meet people, there should be this inclusivity; they should have it in mind. I don't know how the culture really is, but that's what I would ask them to improve. (Participant 3)*

## *Communication*

This theme mostly pertained to how the University communicated with students, but there were also comments about how students found getting in touch with necessary contacts at the University. Owing to the nature of this theme, not all the subthemes from Preparation and Feeling Unwelcome were relevant.

There were a few complaints about communication with the University, both leading up to the programme and as an ongoing issue:

*I feel it's been said a couple times just the lack of communication that happens with international students, and they just assume that we already know. (Participant 2)*

However, one student commended the communication of the programme team:

*I would like to say, express my gratitude to... [...] and [...] and I can tell you to some extent that they were really helpful in communication, most especially because I usually ask one or two questions and they do respond in no time. Then also to [...] she was of great help in passing information, I'm grateful for that too. (Participant 3)*

Once again, there were suggestions that the University was not adequately prepared to meet the needs of international students. Here in relation to whom they might need to speak to for particular aspects of their sojourn:

*... I also really wish that we had some sort of finance building or a point person that we could talk to about finances, because I'm still in e-mail back and forth and like ... and it is extremely stressful for someone coming internationally, you can't just show up and you need specific information to be able to do this, so better communication from the school would be great and really helpful. (Participant 2)*

Most concerning of all was the impact that University communications were having on students during their programme, which seemed to come loaded with a presumption that international students were likely to break visa restrictions and/or default on payments as this anecdote expresses:

*... all through semester 1, semester 2 I was present all through. I kind of was absent just one day. It was impromptu, I was out of [city]. Then the kind of e-mail they sent just one day, how can I be absent for once and you are sending me a horrible e-mail that the University cannot sponsor me because I was absent for once. In fact, it affected me, I wasn't happy at all, they need to do better. Threatening emails demoralize humans. (Participant 4)*

### *Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing*

This theme speaks to the affective dimension of the international students' experiences: how much agency they felt they had, how they were coping with things and how aspects of their time on the programme were affecting them. It is important to bring in another of the memos from the focus group facilitators at this point: even though Jumaima and Oluwaseun had previously discussed how their own mental health and wellbeing had been negatively impacted by aspects of their experiences, they were surprised to find that every focus group participant was brought to tears at some point in the session as they recounted their stories. Even those participants who had framed themselves as not having struggled were still affected emotionally by the challenges of adjusting to study abroad.

The students had approached the process of coming to the UK with a perhaps inevitable degree of positivity, it had been their choice, as expressed here:

*Coming to UK has always been my desire; I've always loved to, like after degree I will just go pursue my masters. (Participant 3)*

However, little was said about any concrete protective strategies that students might have made to safeguard their wellbeing, though they did mention factors that had made their experiences easier such as having family members in the country, having insights into the programme and pre-arranged accommodation. One student discussed the positive mindset they had adopted:

*In terms of life in the UK, it is a learning process and I have embraced it and I don't mind, I know I am expected to be here though I don't know if I'm figuring it out well, but I'm pushing. (Participant 3)*

However, they also revealed they felt a responsibility to adjust, and worried whether they were up to it:

*I had to go through a lot of figuring out how to go about this I just got here. It's a new country and I'm not really emotionally strong to hold on to all the challenges that come with it. (Participant 3)*

Some students were able to draw on the support provided by having their family around, whereas others were not (in some cases resulting from visa changes between the different starting points of these students). This student's perspective illustrated how lacking family support can compound wellbeing issues:

*So, one of the biggest challenges I had to overcome was I don't have my mom and I suffer from a lot of mental illnesses, extreme depression and anxieties. So, dealing with that on my own has been really interesting. (Participant 2)*

However, the students felt that they had learned and particularly had developed a bit more agency in relation to managing their sojourns, with some offering advice for future students:

*... take it easy on yourself, don't overburden yourself when you don't understand what you've been taught, ask questions. If you need to take some time off it, take some time off... (Participant 1)*

In terms of how the University might have better helped prepare the students, no explicit mention was made of this, but it was clear from comments like the following that had better strategies for aspects such as communication, accommodation, bridging academic cultural distance, welcoming etc. been in place, as discussed in the other themes, this could have had a positive impact on wellbeing:

*... because it's demoralizing, I was mentally affected, I've never failed in my life. (Participant 4)*

Regarding the extent to which the University was prepared to support the well-being and self-efficacy of international students, again, while not discussed explicitly, the students gave the impression that the University had not anticipated where there might be challenges, nor how these could be supported, as expressed here:

*You just got in, you're probably looking for a place to stay, you're probably not getting used to the food they eat here that's different from yours and they just like dump you and you're moving straight to class. Your head is trying to adapt to so many things at the same time, (Participant 1)*

It was suggested, however, that the *Share Your Voices* project itself was a step in the right direction, as per this comment:

*I so much appreciate this privilege given to me. (Participant 4)*

Thinking about the impact of Feeling Unwelcome, the students did not feel that the University was actively being unwelcoming, but that insufficient effort was being made, which (as expressed here) was having a negative impact on their wellbeing:

*The [University] community is fine. But the day I came in, I didn't get help and it was time I felt really terrible because I did not get help. (Participant 1)*

Though they did not explicitly link the ways in which they felt the wider community had failed to welcome them affected their wellbeing, this was implied in some statements like:

*... [the wider community] they don't embrace. Because of how I've been brought up and where I'm coming from, I felt more loved. (Participant 3)*

Connecting the two cross-cutting themes here, was the implication that the University could better prepare the local community to welcome international students, which would have improved their wellbeing.

### *Adjustment*

Following Malay, Otten & Coelen (2023), this theme refers to the ways in which students can bridge the gap between their prior experiences and the current environment and how this might be supported. Once again, it was possible to see interaction across the sub-themes with this thematic area.

As has been highlighted across the previous themes, the students were active in their decision to study abroad, but they did not really know what they were expecting, therefore there was little prior preparation they could do that could help them adjust, taking away some of their agency in the situation. Adjustment was thus something that they engaged with once they got here, and it was not easy:

*So, there are one or two difficulties trying to synchronize with the culture, the food, the environment, the weather. Altogether it is challenging and I'm trying to put myself in order. (Participant 3)*

They also felt they had very little time to adjust:

*We're learning new things here, but the fact that we're learning new things, we just came in and we are having classes once in a week... and the next thing after eight weeks, you're writing assignments. (Participant 1)*

It was certainly felt that the University could go some way to helping to prepare the students to adjust, by providing them with some idea of what study in the UK would be like. Participant 1 again had suggestions:

*So, if there's a way people are introduced to the course, of course you paid your school fees or you're processing your visas or something there's a way students are introduced to the course like pre or something like a pre of what to expect, if there's something like that it's going to help, (Participant 1)*

Furthermore, the assumption that the University had not sufficiently adjusted to meet the students' needs, as discussed across the previous themes, also fed into the cross-cutting theme of Feeling Unwelcome. The intentions of the University seemed positive to the students, particularly at a programme level, but there was still some work to do:

*Like other participants had said, the welcoming is warm. If the school can improve on that, we face challenges in the society, in the community; let's not face that in the school environment. (Participant 4)*

Whether within the University or beyond, the participants kept coming back to the issue of help: people did not offer it, or it was difficult to locate sources for it. While undoubtedly this contributed to stress and discomfort, these students had all succeeded in adjusting to their new circumstances, even expressing that they had got to *really like* (e.g. Participant 2) their experience, but it had not been easy.

### *Living and Working*

This theme referred to those aspects of the international student experience that ran alongside their studies but were essential to ensure a successful sojourn. It is worth noting that the demographic of these international students was often a little older, sometimes with family to support and usually needing to work to support themselves through their studies – the visa rules allow for international students to work for up to 20 hours a week during term time. Issues of accommodation dominated this theme.

The discussion presented a mixed picture regarding student preparation under this theme: some students were at an advantage in that they had some contacts already in the UK and one had been quite proactive in making prior arrangements:

*My arrival in the UK was a bit easy for me because I kind of prepare myself financially before coming. I paid for my accommodation of £600 a month before getting to the UK. (Participant 4)*

For those who did not have the contacts or had not been able to make advance arrangements, accommodation could be a major challenge, and, as highlighted here, sometimes resulting in outcomes the University would be horrified to learn about had students reported them:

*Most people don't even have people; I know some people that slept outside because accommodation you thought you had, people you thought were going to accommodate you in the UK by the time you got here, they kind of left them and now they're now left alone trying to like, OK, how do I navigate the system? (Participant 1)*

However, even the most prepared found that the realities of being in the UK undermined their plans, eroding the sense of agency that this student had begun with.

*... the money was actually too big for me. This was for one month then I really can't continue. I can't continue paying that, I have to start getting looking for accommodation outside which was mentally stressful... (Participant 4)*

The students felt that the University could have played a greater role in preparing them for their transition to living in the UK, specifically in relation to accommodation. Once again, the impact of different visa restrictions must be noted: earlier cohorts had been able to bring dependents, which impacted the availability of accommodation, both internal and external to the University. Some suggestions were again supplied about how the University could have helped, specifically:

*... the University could have just provided accommodations for students who just arrived. Meaning, of course, it's going to be like a temporary accommodation. (Participant 1)*

In relation to the earlier points made about mentoring, this student also raised that it was/would have been very valuable in terms of their day-to-day lives, as well as their studies:

*... if you need this, if you need that, if you need food this way you get it. If you need to buy [international] food this is where you get it. (Participant 1)*

Implicit within these suggestions was that the University could have better prepared itself by understanding the challenges that students face in terms of securing affordable and appropriate accommodation and considering strategies to address these. Relatedly, students felt that the University did not appreciate the contextual issues that were causing international students to struggle to meet requirements, as raised here:

*Then looking at the challenges, the major challenges I had was my finance, the payment of the tuition balance, the first, the initial payment we paid from home wasn't difficult for us because then the exchange rate was reasonable, we were able to pay, we never split it, coming here, [home country] went into recession... (Participant 4)*



Regarding the second cross-cutting theme of Feeling Unwelcome, the repeated refrain of not being able to get the help or interest in their problems from the University again emerged, as in this student's experience:

*Nobody to talk to, I'll go around. They keep telling me they can't provide an accommodation for a student. I can't get an accommodation as a student coming to [the helpdesk]. There was no help. I wasn't getting help and the support I actually needed from [the help desk].* (Participant 4)

Though Feeling Unwelcome was not explicitly mentioned in relation to living and working, the students demonstrated some awareness of prevailing social attitudes towards foreigners in the UK, and expressed a hope that things might change, perhaps, as per this suggestion, with the help of the University:

*... although I understand that there are other people in the UK for that did not come here for study, but the fact that university boosts houses in, I mean Worcester Community houses the university students, I think the community's attitudes like extend, help or support when even if it's information in any way to do that [is one suggestion for improvement]* (Participant 1)

Finally, it was very clear that the pressures of living and working, combined with their academic responsibilities could create a very heavy burden, as expressed here:

*I had a submission to do, I am thinking of writing and assignment, I have my family issue, I have other challenges not getting job in time. Mentally, I was down, I was mentally down. My BP went high.* (Participant 4)

## Discussion

The number of participants represented less than 10% of the total number of international students on the programme. It is not unusual for students to be less than eager to participate in research and we knew that other channels such as Student Staff Liaison Committees and surveys were not picking up many international concerns, however, as a research team that included international students, we were aware that there was a general appetite to discuss issues and concerns informally with peers and with certain members of staff who students felt they had a good relationship with. Considering this alongside the relatively modest amount of published research that gives voice to the perspectives of international students (Streitweiser & Light, 2017; Page & Chaboun, 2019), particularly those using research instruments created in partnership with international students (Ravi, de Blacquièrre-Clarkson & Chong, 2024) the project seemed like it would be welcome and helpful. However, during the recruitment process, Jumaima and Oluwaseun noted that the perceived formality of the research process (necessary consent forms etc.) was acting to put off potential participants. This was all standard procedure for research in the UK academic context, however, many of the cohort of international students were concerned about the potential risks of having their opinions on the record, irrespective of the commitment we had made to uphold confidentiality and

anonymity. Some students expressed fears that their comments might count against them in some way. This in itself points to the fact that there is a lack of trust in the relationship between international students and the University, on both sides in fact, as also evidenced by the reported “horrible” (Participant 4) emails sent to students.

In this sense, the project has been a step in the right direction, reflecting Freire (1972) and Cook-Sather’s (2002) championing of listening and dialogue as a foundation for change. As reported in the findings, the participants expressed during and after the session that they appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories. The *Share Your Voices* project, however, was not just about the focus group, it was about what would happen next. So far, the researchers have presented to the programme team and the project has fed into some specific actions including the planning of targeted sessions for students aimed at bridging Academic Cultural Distance and promoting Cultural Intelligence (Malay, Otten & Coelen, 2023). In addition to this, a new pre-induction booklet that supplies a lot more contextual information to new students has been developed. Mindful of unintentional othering, these strategies and other, existing ones have been opened to all students. Additionally, cognisant that adjustment is not solely the responsibility of students, the team have since engaged in a session on intercultural awareness that has further helped to develop awareness and understanding of cultural distance. While it would be disingenuous to claim that *Share Your Voices* has been the sole catalyst for these changes in practice, we have been able to inform and support the work of colleagues who were already wanting to make a difference.

Having met the immediate aim of the project, the work has taken on a life across the wider University in a way that reflects the literature that demonstrated there are a lot of good intentions and effective practices out there, but that these are not yet supported by comprehensive approaches to policy and strategy beyond recruitment and finance (Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Lomer, Mittelmeier & Courtney, 2023). We have presented to a cohort of early-career lecturers from across the University, some of whom have subsequently made contact seeking advice or wanting to discuss their own projects. A brief report of our findings went to a committee engaged in the development of a new programme aimed at the international market: peer mentoring was flagged as a particular area of good practice to develop. Links have been made with colleagues in other departments leading to several quotes from *Share Your Voices* being used as part of a presentation for senior leadership proposing a cross-institution approach to intercultural practice; a proposal that is now being reviewed in relation to the University’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion commitment. What has been striking about all of this has been the apparent appetite across the University hierarchy to begin joining up working and include international students in enhancing internationalisation processes. Again, it cannot be claimed that *Share Your Voices* has precipitated this, but it has certainly tapped into the zeitgeist.

In terms of ‘demuting’ (Page & Chaboun, 2019), those quiet voices in a vacant classroom have been amplified much more than we could have originally hoped. Regarding the empowering nature of the CGT approach, the participants all expressed their thanks for being given the

opportunity to speak, that this felt like the first time a real interest was shown. Jumaima and Oluwaseun have been pleasantly surprised at the reception this work has had, as well as appreciating the insight into conducting research and the fact this is now something that can go on their CVs and lead to a published piece of work. Jumaima told the class of lecturers that she had been quite demoralised by her experiences at the University before this project, to the point of trying to put other people off studying here; now she is the opposite, recommending the institution to everyone. As has been noted earlier in this article, the voices of these students cannot speak for all international students, but they have shed light on some of the realities of international student experiences on this programme that might otherwise have remained hidden, as well as amplifying their voices in relation to university strategies and practices, promoting their agency in this unfamiliar environment.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations posed by the small and local scale of the project, *Share Your Voices* has succeeded in 'demuting' (Page & Chaboun, 2019) the voices of some of the international students on this MA programme. This process has in turn helped to inform developments both at programme level and university-wide that are intended to enhance practices, benefiting both students and the wider institution. While the students' experiences of internationalisation were often difficult, confusing and frustrating, they did recognise the efforts the University was making to improve things and the subsequent response of the institution to this research has borne out their faith in it. *Share Your Voices* has helped to demonstrate the value of listening to the voices of international students, a message that will be carried forward into further projects within the University. Sometimes listening is all it takes to make a positive change.

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