International postgraduate student learning journeys

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Executive summary

This research set out to explore the learning journey of international students, moving from a pre-sessional English (PSE) course at UWE Bristol to postgraduate (PG) study at the University. Eight students each completed four interviews between July 2022 and July 2023, sharing their experiences of teaching and learning and how the support offered by the University impacted on how they felt about this.

Common challenges in the learning experience of students included the amount of independent learning, reading and new subject vocabulary. The main factors that supported students in their learning were the pre-sessional English course; models, formative feedback, and dialogue with lecturers; and development of relevant academic skills within their PG programme.

Recommendations for further consideration in improving the learning experience for international students include pastoral support, clear expectations for assignments, integrated and scaffolded academic skills development, and where possible, longer periods for master's study.

Introduction

International students are an important part of UWE Bristol's student body and more widely in UK Higher Education, particularly at PG level (Bond, 2019). It has long been recognised that universities need to explore the needs of these students and whether the resources offered by universities help them sufficiently (Harris, 1995). Comrie (2015) highlighted that home students often outperform overseas students at UWE Bristol and other UK Higher Education Institutions.

At UWE Bristol there has been previous research into the experience of undergraduate direct entrant international students (Comrie, 2015; Saville and Hewish, 2015). Elsewhere, research has taken place into the student experience on PSE courses (McKee, 2012; Bond, 2019). This study set out to explore the learning journey of international students making the transition onto a PSE course at UWE Bristol, and then onto PG study here. It aimed to help us understand students' experiences at different points of this journey and how their interactions with the University influenced their learning. To this end, the following research questions were created:

Aim: How do PG international students interpret their learning journey and what impact does the University have on that?

Objective 1:

a) What are students' experiences of their learning as they move through their journey at UWE Bristol?

b) To what extent is students' affective engagement influenced by learning environments and teaching styles?

Objective 2

a) To what extent do students feel supported with their learning throughout their journey at UWE Bristol?

b) To what extent are students aware of and do they engage with the English and academic skills support offered by UWE Bristol throughout their learning journey?

Methodology

Participants

As students' personal reflections on their learning experiences were sought, a qualitative approach was chosen. Students on the summer 2022 PSE course at UWE Bristol were

approached to take part in the research. The two researchers verbally outlined the research to the group and students were provided with participant information sheets and consent forms to indicate if they would like to take part.

The sample of students was purposefully chosen from the group undertaking the PSE course so that students could compare experiences from this period of study to their prior education and their subsequent master's programmes. Participants were not chosen to be representative of the wider UWE Bristol PG international student body. Twelve students agreed to participate in the research and eight of these completed all four interviews (Table 1).

Table 1: Information on the original participants and those who completed all interviews

	Original 12 participants	**8 participants who completed all interviews**
Gender:	10 male, 2 female	6 male, 2 female
Nationality:	1 Chinese, 1 Japanese, 2 Jordanian, 8 Saudi	1 Chinese, 1 Japanese, 6 Saudi
Age:	2 x aged 20-29, 9 x 30-39, 2 x 40-50	7 x aged 30-39, 1 x 40-50
College:	9 from College of Arts, Technology and Environment; 3 from College of Business and Law	7 from College of Arts, Technology and Environment; 1 from College of Business and Law

Interviews

Participants in the research were asked to take part in a series of four, individual interviews, with the following timeframe:

- Interview 1: July/August 2022 – towards the end of PSE course (12 participants completed):
- Interview 2: November 2022 – a few weeks into their first block of learning (9 participants completed)
- Interview 3: March 2023 – in their second block of learning (8 participants completed)
- Interview 4: July 2023 – after their second block of learning (8 participants completed)

Interviews were semi-structured. We used a distinct interview guide for each set of interviews, which included several prompt questions. However, discussions were allowed to freely develop beyond these questions to explore participants' experiences more fully.

Coding

Microsoft Teams was used to record and transcribe the interviews. Before the first interview, the two researchers developed an initial set of codes based on the research questions and questions for the interview. After the first set of interviews, the researchers read and coded the transcripts together. Discussion of codes generated amendments and additions to the initial set of codes. This process was repeated for the subsequent interviews.

Questionnaire

To further explore the students' learning journeys, in August 2023 the eight students who took part in all four interviews were sent a questionnaire asking them to reflect on their experience across their PSE and master's course. Participants were asked to look back and rate how positive they felt about a) their learning and b) the support from the University for their learning at five points:

      1) during the PSE course

      2) during Starting Block

      3) during Term 1 (Autumn)

      4) during Term 2 (Spring)

      5) during Term 3 (Summer).

They were also asked why they felt this way and if they had anything else they'd like to share about their learning or support received.

Results

Interview 1 – July/August 2022

In the first interview, students were asked about their previous studies and English language learning experiences. Seven of the twelve students described having studied (to some extent) in English at university in their home country. Eight students had had a gap between studies in their home country and their master's course. Ten students had attended a general English language school in the UK. Four students described how family or friends who had done a master's course previously had given them information about what to expect.

Students were very positive about their PSE course. They felt supported by friendly, approachable teachers who helped them both academically and pastorally, for example in helping with applications and issues related to housing, bills and registering with a doctor. This

was very important for these students as several encountered difficulties with passports/visas, bringing family members across to the UK and finding accommodation.

There was a sense that time was made for students, and this assisted in them feeling comfortable and unpressured in the learning environment. Several students commented that the teaching style was different from what they had experienced in their home countries and that they enjoyed the fun and playful nature of their PSE studies.

Students felt the PSE course had prepared them for their PG course and identified a range of academic skills the course had helped them develop (Figure 1).
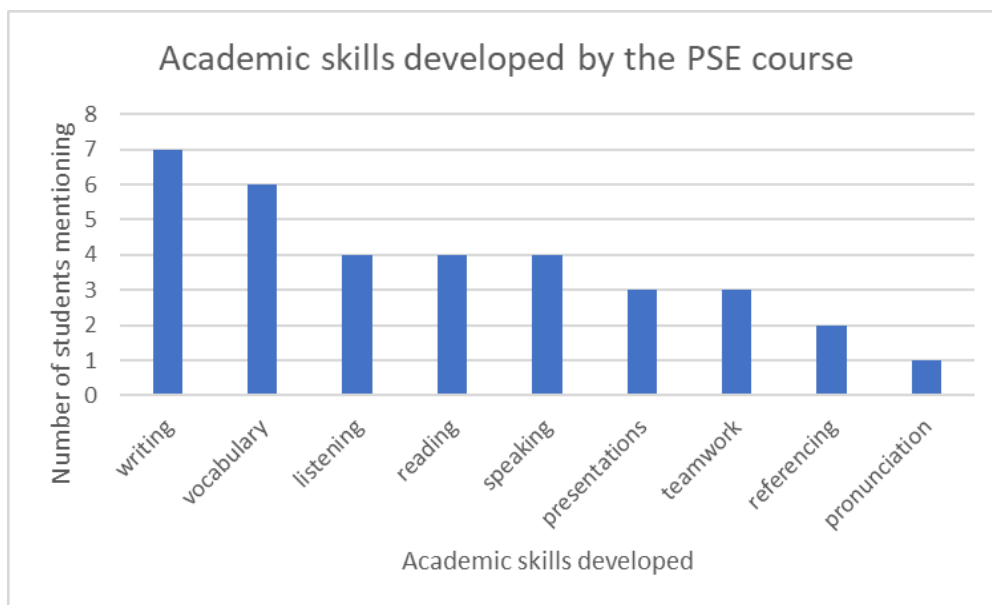

Figure 1: Academic skills developed by the PSE course

Two students commented that they were unaware of further academic skills support at the University, while a further six were aware of support but had not engaged with it at this point.

Interview 2 – November 2022

Participants were asked about their experience of Starting Block and the responses were mixed. Three of the students were unable to attend sessions due to external factors, including registration issues related to delayed payment from sponsors, and visa problems. One of these students described feeling like he was "going through a cave, dark cave and see nothing." Among the students who did attend, some experienced online delivery and would have liked some face-to-face sessions, while others had an in-person experience but would have preferred online. One student mentioned that it was not useful, while two said it was.

The participants found the start of their main programmes challenging. Some had issues with admissions and timetable errors, which meant missing lectures. One student said they did not know where to get help after starting late. Most challenges were, however, related to academic culture and expectations. Five students mentioned the amount of independent study, as well as working on multiple, varied modules at the same time. Three participants highlighted the challenge of having four different presentation groups, one for each module. Some participants felt that they did not have the educational background expected of them, with one saying, "Sometimes I feel like I don't understand anything."

The participants had mixed feelings about the teaching approach and learning environment. Seven students mentioned positive factors, including cooperative lecturers, friendly staff, feeling supported, and the sharing of materials and recordings on Blackboard. Eight students noted negative issues, such as limited time to speak to lecturers, no reply from tutors, and teachers appearing to just go through the slides. In terms of assessment, some students noted differences with assessment types compared to their previous studies, and that groupwork presented some difficulties. One student would have liked more formative assessment before summative submissions.

The participants were able to see the positive impact the PSE course had on their master's study. As in Interview 1, students mentioned numerous skills, including their ability to reference, with two of them noting how students who had not done a PSE course struggled more with this. There was, however, one participant who described referencing as new and challenging despite having been introduced to it on the PSE course. Some students also described struggling with the reading and writing expectations on their main course compared to their previous studies.

In terms of academic skills teaching, only one student had engaged with the non-embedded offering. Most participants were aware of the support, but did not engage for various reasons, including believing that having been through the PSE course they did not need this, not having time, and thinking they could find the information from friends or online. Three students referred to embedded sessions they had received, and one described using library resources.

Interview 3 – March 2023

Most students described being more positive about their learning at this stage, with several mentioning feeling more confident. Reasons for this included being more familiar with the method of study, having more subject knowledge, and belief in their ability to write assignments. One student spoke about how difficult and stressful it was, but that it felt great when they finished and passed an assignment. Another student highlighted how tough studying a master's in the UK is, making comments such as, "I feel my body without bones", "living in another planet" and "There is no words to describe master's in the UK." Nonetheless, this student described being proud of themselves and knowing they would be fine.

Several students discussed difficulties with time management at this stage of their course, with multiple modules, assignments, and dissertation proposals to complete. These students noted that one year is not enough for deep learning, and three of them thought offering a longer master's would be beneficial. Furthermore, although two participants felt supported by lecturers, three once again mentioned the difficulty of contacting lecturers and the lack of email responses.

Challenges with various academic skills were highlighted. These included reading (4 students), subject-specific vocabulary (3), referencing (2), independent study (2), writing (1) and research skills (1). Some students had adopted strategies to help them with reading. These included translating texts into their first language to get the main ideas, using abstracts to narrow down what to read and using dictionaries to assist with unknown vocabulary. Studiosity was also identified as useful by four students. However, one student was confused to get critical feedback from a lecturer after positive feedback from Studiosity, and three students had not heard of it at all. One student mentioned not using ChatGPT as they were concerned about plagiarism, while another student found it helpful to get a general understanding of concepts. Four participants mentioned improvement throughout their learning journey, including their reading, writing, language, and independent study skills. However, one student described problems with not citing sources, and another student mentioned committing an assessment offence (collusion).

The library support was generally recognised as important to the students. Those who engaged with embedded sessions found them helpful, especially when related to research project/dissertation writing. However, two students thought that the embedded sessions were more useful for students who had not done a PSE course, with one saying, "They gave us good information, but I already know that". Most participants still had not engaged with non-embedded sessions, stating that they did not have time or did not need them. The three students who did attend non-embedded sessions were positive about them, though. Other comments about the library included enquiry support from staff regarding referencing and reading, useful online resources, and the importance of the physical space to study away from family.

In terms of assessment, participants commented on time, briefs, model answers, groupwork and feedback. Two students liked that they had more time/longer notice of deadlines for assignments this semester. One of them recognised that they had learnt from mistakes with time management in the first semester. Four participants mentioned the importance of clear and detailed assignment briefs so that they can understand what is being asked of them. One student said, "When I get this materials I feel confused. It's like a nightmare for me." Two students said they had been shown models/examples of assignments in certain modules and found this helpful, giving them more confidence in those modules compared to others. Several students highlighted group presentations as difficult for several reasons, for example different cultures, not always being able to choose groups, and differing abilities between home and international students. There were mixed comments on feedback from lecturers. Some participants spoke positively about constructive feedback, while others felt feedback was not detailed enough.

There are various other factors which influenced the participants' learning. Four students noted the positive impact of peer support. However, two students highlighted the difficulties with balancing time between family (here in the UK with them) and study. One student experienced a technical issue out of their control with the Home Office and said, "Really I can't focus during that time." This student spoke with PSE lecturers and immigration staff about this as they did not feel programme staff could help.

Interview 4 – July 2023

In these final interviews, the participants once again spoke positively about their experience on the PSE course. Friendly, helpful tutors, feeling supported, good feedback, the chance to adapt and enjoying being part of a group of students were all mentioned. One student had negative thoughts about their abilities on the first day of the course "What's the master's study? I can't cope. I can't understand everything", but noticed their improvement as they received feedback. One student said it was "the best decision in my life when I joined the pre-sessional course", and another said they think all students should do the course.

Several students reiterated that one year was not enough time for master's study. One participant said that they only had time to focus on their assignments, saying, "If you asked me about something inside these modules, I remember some of them, but the majority is just to finish it." Another student mentioned that they could not enjoy their studies in just one year, and a different student suggested two years for a master's instead of one. The same student commented that they "felt like a baby compared to some classmates" because of their different educational background.

The experiences with their lecturers on their main courses were mixed. Some students were positive about supportive and passionate lecturers and the feedback they received. However, some participants once again mentioned the lack of support they felt due to lecturers not replying to emails. Specific negative situations which were raised included lab sessions, old content on a module, a Programme Leader leaving during the year and "aggressive" feedback without constructive suggestions for improvement.

Participants were positive about various forms of support from the University. Studiosity was noted as useful by four students, whilst three participants mentioned the importance of the library (space, staff, and resources). Lecture recordings, the SafeAssign plagiarism tool, online resources and apps, and IT support were also highlighted as strengths. In terms of library-led teaching sessions, four students said that the embedded sessions (research papers, dissertations, referencing, academic research) were helpful. Three students found it useful when lecturers recommended specific reading. One participant expressed being envious of students on a different course because they received sessions about dissertation writing. This student said, "They teach me everything [...] I want to attend that course with them." With regards to non-embedded support, there continued to be little engagement with this, with only one student saying they had attended a workshop. Three participants mentioned attending 1-2-1s for personalised support.

The difficulties involved in writing a dissertation were highlighted by five participants. These challenges included deciding on a topic, the quantity of reading, research skills, the rationale for their research and research methods. One student said reading for the dissertation was "really tough and stressful", whilst another recognised that they gained a lot of experience doing research.

Questionnaire – August/September 2023

Seven students completed the questionnaire during August and September 2023, reflecting on their learning experience during the PSE and master's course. Students were universally very positive about their learning during the PSE course, but this dipped for a couple of students during Starting Block and Term 1 (Figure 2). Although all students reported feeling positive about their learning in Terms 2 and 3 there was a mixture of 'very' and 'quite' positive responses.
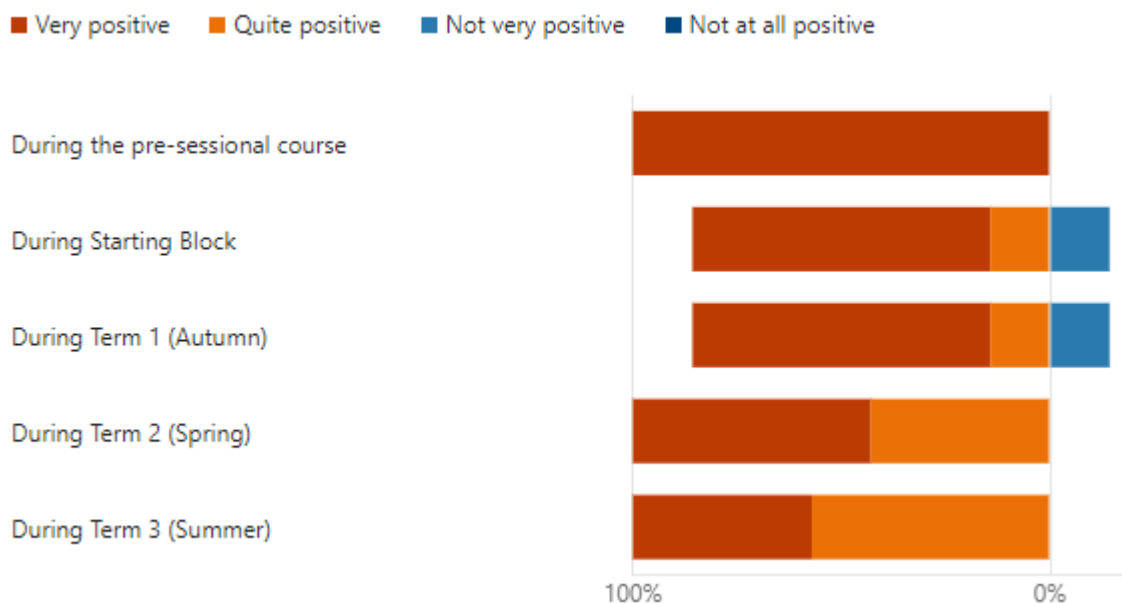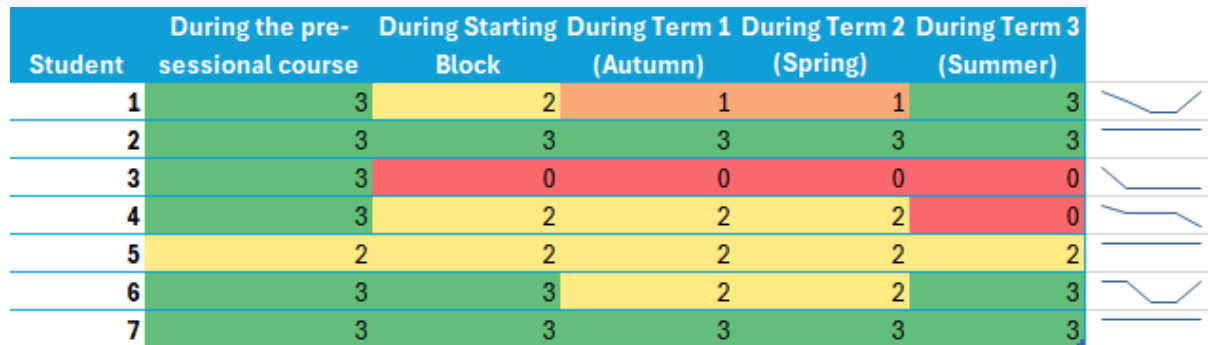

Figure 2: How positive did you feel about your learning?

When asked why they felt this way, answers included increased confidence, learning new things about their subject and improved English skills. Responses also reflected the challenges highlighted in the interviews:

> "…one master year every thing come soon so it's hard to take a long rest through the study!"

"Until Autumn, I was very positive. After that, the level of positivity goes a little bit down because the number of modules to much and the Master's degree within 1 year."

When asked how they felt about University support for their learning at different points of their studies, all students responded positively when reflecting on their PSE course but, as Figure 3 shows, after that point there was not a common trend in feelings.

Student	During the pre-sessional course	During Starting Block	During Term 1 (Autumn)	During Term 2 (Spring)	During Term 3 (Summer)	
1	3	2	1	1	3	
2	3	3	3	3	3	
3	3	0	0	0	0	
4	3	2	2	2	0	
5	2	2	2	2	2	
6	3	3	2	2	3	
7	3	3	3	3	3	

(3 = very positive, 2 = quite positive, 1 = not very positive, 0 = not at all positive)

Figure 3: How positive did you feel about the support from the University for your learning?

When asked why they felt this way, the two students who consistently felt very positive about the support commented:

"If I didn't join the pre-sessional course, I should struggle more for assignments or dissertation. Moreover, study skill classes also help me a lot to improve academic English."

"Because we had good teachers who supported us in learning at UWE and helped us in general life in the city."

Elements identified as leading to more negative feelings included lab sessions and a perceived lack of support and understanding around a late submission. There was also a request for more classes on how to do a dissertation.

Discussion

These results are based on a small sample size and from a group of students that is not representative of the wider UWE Bristol PG international student body. As such, results should not be assumed to be reflective of what is a large and diverse group. Common issues were highlighted by several students who took part in this research and there is some cross-over with findings of prior studies into the international direct entry UG student experience at UWE

Bristol. The following themes highlighted by students suggest areas for further consideration in improving the international student experience at the University.

Challenges in the learning experience

The first term was a major challenge for students as they coped with the transition onto a postgraduate programme. Part of this adjustment was moving from a learning environment on the PSE course with a small class size and lots of personal tutorials and pastoral support to larger cohorts on their main programmes where they received less in-depth feedback and support. Students were unprepared for the quantity of independent learning required. In addition, several students experienced difficulties with studying multiple, wide-ranging modules at the same time. This resulted in students feeling like they were not able to explore topics in depth. However, the students managed this better in semesters two and three once they were familiar with the way of studying.

The amount of reading and new subject vocabulary also proved difficult. There were often feelings of overwhelm and some students felt they lacked subject vocabulary, particularly for specialised modules. Some participants mentioned it being helpful when lecturers suggested reading to them, and this could be a useful strategy for all lecturers to employ to support international students who may have weaker reading skills. On a positive note, there were indications of students developing reading strategies, such as using abstracts to get the gist of articles and working out the meaning of vocabulary from context. Offering sessions on developing reading strategies early on could be helpful.

Students expected more contact with lecturers, for example through email and appointments. There was disappointment in the lack of replies to emails or the time taken for a reply. There were calls for more explicit detail in assignment briefs, and the more-widespread sharing of model answers. It is believed that focussing on these issues and clear expectation-setting around communication is likely to have a positive impact on how supported students feel with their learning.

Starting Block did not seem to help with the transition for all students, so it may be worth considering why. Starting Block is an ideal time for sessions around academic culture and expectations compared to previous learning experiences. However, it is important not to frontload all support in case some students begin late, but also because learners may be overloaded with information at a time when they are dealing with the practicalities of having recently moved to the UK. Students' interviews often highlighted that adapting to life in another country brings challenges in other areas of life as well as academic ones, and it is paramount that staff consider this when working with international students. It may be worth exploring the possibility of more scaffolded support for these students during the first semester while they adjust.

Factors supporting the learning experience

Although most students found semester one challenging, they were mainly feeling more confident by the interviews in the second semester. This echoes the adjustment experienced in culture shock as international students first struggle with new environments and then gain confidence with growing experience in their new setting (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2017). There was a sense of achievement attached to passing modules and students highlighted three main factors that supported their learning experience:

1) The PSE course was extremely useful in helping them gain academic English skills and adapt to expectations of studying in the UK. The personal, pastoral support for students during this time of transition was equally important.

2) Models, formative feedback, and dialogue with lecturers where students felt able, and were given the time, to ask questions. Students were positive about the learning experience where this happened. They liked and acted on detailed feedback and benefitted from seeing examples of previous student work. Peer-support was sometimes found to be quicker than feedback from lecturers, but peers were not always able to help.

3) Development of relevant academic skills within the PG programme. For these students who have done a PSE course, embedding of academic skills that built on what they had learnt from the PSE course helped them apply their learning in a subject-specific context. There were positive comments on sessions related to research proposals and dissertations. While most students were aware of the sign-up academic skills offer available from the library, several commented that they found it difficult to engage with sessions outside of their timetable.

These findings suggest that encouraging more international students to complete the UWE Bristol PSE course before their main programme, even if their language score is already sufficient, could improve their overall learning experience, The time on the PSE allows students to adapt to life at the University and improve their academic skills, helping them to better manage the academic culture shock they are likely to experience starting their main programmes.

As mentioned previously, programme staff have a key role to play in helping international students feel supported at UWE Bristol and finding ways to highlight this to staff is crucial. It seems plausible that consistent implementation of some of the suggestions in this study, for example use of model answers, could lead to improved performance of some international students, which may reduce the load on programme staff in the long term.

The services offered by the library are clearly important for supporting the development of academic skills. The embedded offer was helpful to students, but what was offered varied between programmes. Exploring ways to offer timetabled sessions on more programmes to support further students is recommended. To ensure engagement and relevance to a diverse international student cohort, acknowledgement of and reflection on the existing skills and knowledge students bring to their programmes should be encouraged.

Other influences on the learning experience

While this research focussed on academic experiences, other factors also have an impact on the learning experience. While several students had spoken to family or friends who had studied a master's in the UK and were expecting an intensive learning experience, the actual reality of this was still a shock. Issues with passports/visas, bringing their families across to the UK and finding accommodation all impacted on their learning experience, particularly during their PSE course and start of their main programme. It is important to consider ways of making all UWE Bristol staff and students aware of these challenges to foster a culture of understanding and support in our university community. Sharing experiences of staff and students who have lived and/or studied abroad, for example on social media, is one suggestion of how to do this.

Conclusion

It is acknowledged that the findings of this study do not represent all international students. Even within this small sample, it is interesting to note the range of different experiences and views on their learning journeys. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates that there are opportunities to improve the PG international student experience. The PSE course was clearly a highlight of these students' UWE Bristol learning journey. It was a time of high affective engagement likely due to the small class size, interactive teaching methods, and high level of both academic and pastoral support. It seems that the high levels of support the participants received impacted how positively they felt about their learning on the PSE course. While it is not possible to offer this level of support throughout the whole learning journey, it is important to be more consistent in the support offered. The following recommendations could go some way to improving students' feelings about the support they receive and their overall learning experience:

- Students would benefit from greater personal, pastoral support, for example from mentors, throughout their main programme. The participants found the first semester challenging, so this support could be particularly useful during this time.
- International students come from different educational backgrounds and need clear expectations presented to them, to help adjust to a new academic culture. There needs to be a continued push for explicit expectations in academic assignments, including models and clear information in assignment briefs. Students need to be aware of where they can find complementary support, for example from library staff and student experience coaches, and these need to be visible as part of the programme teams.
- Integrated academic skills development for students in all programmes would be beneficial. This should be scaffolded throughout and not be front-loaded. The focus

should continue to be on consistently making this an embedded part of regular timetabled module sessions rather than an optional, extra-curricular activity.

- Where possible, giving the option to study a master's over a longer period is recommended as it would give international students like those in this study more time to adapt and the potential for deeper learning.

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