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Understanding and Enhancing Academic and Well-Being Support for International and Mature Postgraduate Students

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ABSTRACT:

International and mature students bring their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs to higher education institutions every year. The needs of international and mature international students vary widely, posing a challenge for lecturers in determining how best to support them. Using a qualitative, critical realist and contextualist approach, this exploratory, focus group study examines the academic and well-being needs of international and mature students in two taught postgraduate programs in the United Kingdom. The participant included international students (nonmature), mature international students, home students (nonmature), and mature home students. Findings using Reflexive Thematic Analysis suggest that academic pressures and language differences create stress for all taught postgraduate students, but only international students reported impacts on their well-being. Recommendations for how academic teaching teams can better support the needs of international students, especially those of mature status, are provided.

Keywords: International students, postgraduate students, wellbeing, academic needs, support, mature students

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INTRODUCTION:

In the United Kingdom (UK), postgraduate taught (PGT) students represent a quarter of the higher education population, with an estimated 880,000 students per year (HESA, 2024a). Of those, 71% are international students (HESA, 2024b), and 55% are classified as 'mature' (i.e., aged over 25) (HESA, 2019). This diversity in the student population creates challenges for higher education lecturers in addressing the needs of PGT students.

Previous research highlights that international PGT students, particularly those of mature status, bring unique experiences and backgrounds to the higher education classroom (Grapin et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021). They can struggle with emotional stressors associated with being a graduate student, such as a high workload or the high academic standards of graduate courses (Ingram & White, 2020). The fast pace of taught master's programs in the United Kingdom, typically lasting only 12 months, leaves students little time to adjust to the high demands and expectations of their PGT program (Evans et al., 2018). These stressors can have impacts on their academic and wellbeing needs while they are studying (Dickson et al., 2024; Jiang, 2018; Shi, 2013; Trenkic & Warmington, 2019).

In this exploratory study, we examine the intersection of the academic and emotional needs of MSc Psychology in Education and MA TESOL students at a UK university and develop practical ways to support these needs. In this context, "International" students are defined as those having a permanent address outside the UK (HESA, 2024a). "Mature" students are defined as those over the age of 25 years old (HESA, n.k.). "Home" students are those who are residents and 'settled' (without length restrictions on their stay) in the UK (House of

Commons Library, 2025). In the following sections, we provide an overview of research on the variety of challenges faced by PGT students, in particular international and/or mature students, on ways to address these challenges proposed to date, and the current context and study.

International Student Experiences

Research shows that international students experience particular struggles linked to language barriers and cultural differences in learning expectations and pedagogy (Agostinelli, 2021; Bhojwani, 2023; Broughton, 2023; Grapin et al., 2023; Kit et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2006). In recent years, a systematic review has highlighted that international students experience higher rates of stress, partly due to acculturative stress (challenges related to adjusting to a new environment and country) and discrimination, as well as higher levels of academic stress (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). This review included two studies set in the UK, two from New Zealand, nine from Australia, and the majority set in the United States; students of country of origin for the included studies were from all over the world, Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). It shows how higher rates of stress can affect students from diverse cultures studying at English-speaking universities. Research suggests that this stress is due to encountering bias, discrimination, and racism (particularly due to accent or linguistic barriers); some international PGT students report that they were not effectively supported by the institution or department they studied at (Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023).

In some studies, these issues were reported to lead to student burn-out and wellbeing concerns (Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023; Lim et al., 2023). In one study, both home and international students identified academic stress and the pressures of study as the primary drivers of their mental health and wellbeing challenges, although focus on perfectionism in academic work was found only to be maladaptive for international students (Suh et al., 2022).

Previous research has reported that international PGT students also reported feeling socially isolated and experiencing difficulty with a lack of social support both in their program and outside, reportedly due to being a minority in programs or at a university as well as being disconnected from peers, both of which negatively impacted wellbeing (Brooker & Vu, 2020). Research has suggested that this experience may be contributed to by cultural background and contextual factors (Berl et al., 2025).

Academic Language for PGT Students

Where English is a second language (L2), consideration of international student wellbeing necessitates questions of language proficiency and mastery that do not apply in the same way to home students or English-native-speaking international students (e.g., from the US, Canada, Australia). International students from English-L2 backgrounds have been found to be at a profound academic disadvantage due to differences in language proficiency and skills (Trenkic & Warmington, 2019). International students have reported that language proficiency (both objectively measured and self-perceived) is the biggest barrier to academic success, ultimately leading to greater academic stress and well-being difficulties (Jiang, 2018). Research has found that even for international students who do have high levels of English proficiency, this does not necessarily resolve difficulties learning academic terminology that is used in graduate programs (Shi, 2013). International psychology PGT students specifically have reported struggling in the past due to linguistic barriers and differences in pedagogy from their home country (Bhojwani, 2023; Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023). Along with language difficulties, PGT international students have reported difficulty understanding academic expectations, which leads to confusion and stress during their PGT program (Bamber et al., 2017).

Mature International Student Experiences

As with other international students, mature international students can struggle with challenges related to language barriers and lack social support (Dickson et al., 2024; González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). However, they often face other pressing challenges, such as caring responsibilities or feeling further disconnected from their peers due to age differences (Dickson et al., 2024; Haitova, 2023). Caring responsibilities for international students have been found to add pressures of time, as their schedule is restricted by school drop off and pick up, additional complications adjusting to a new country, such as finding housing quickly, on top of adjusting to their new program and study (Dickson et al., 2024). Female graduate international students with caring responsibilities have been shown to be impacted more than their male peers and experience difficulty balancing their academic work and caring responsibilities (Haitova, 2023). Mature students with caring responsibilities also often experience financial difficulties (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009), as international student fees are much higher than home student fees and such students must financially support both themselves and their family. All of these stresses mean that for international students with caring responsibilities, support (of different kinds) by the students' department and supervisor is especially important for academic success (Lyonette et al., 2015).

Social Support for PGT Students

Previous research has found that international PGT students also report feeling socially isolated and perceiving a lack of social support both in their program and outside; being a minority in their program or department as well as being disconnected from peers can negatively impact wellbeing (Brooker & Vu, 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced for PGT students with caring responsibilities, as they can feel isolated and have difficulty connecting socially with their peers due to the barriers of being international students and of caring responsibilities (Alsop et al., 2008).

Students who have less social support are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems (Campbell et al., 2022). It was found that when struggling with wellbeing concerns, international PGT students tended not to reach out to peers who were not from their country of origin or from university support services (Yang et al., 2021). This limited the social and emotional support that they had access to, especially if their program had only a few international students.

Wellbeing Challenges for PGT Students

Stressors such as language barriers, lack of social support, caring responsibilities, and academic workload all impact the level of stress PGT students experience. In addition, the percentage of postgraduate students entering university in the UK with a preexisting mental health challenge has increased, which, if not supported properly, can lead to challenges with academic success and wellbeing (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Students with preexisting mental health challenges have unique needs that need to be accommodated in the classroom and with pastoral support. Some experts recommend the use of supportive mentorship and professional supervision for diverse graduate students (Pham et al., 2021); one difficulty, although, is a mismatch in perspective or need. Previous research has demonstrated that, at times, there is a difference between students' and staff perspectives on the main drivers of stress and protective factors for students (Lister et al., 2024), highlighting the need for lecturers to better understand their students' unique needs. For example, a recent systematic review found that international students report lower well-being than domestic students (Xiong et al., 2024).

Referral to university-provided mental health support services is the typical solution for students who are struggling with their well-being or mental health. Research has found that international students are less likely to use services due to stigma, language differences, lack of awareness of how to access services, lack of mental health literacy around the type of services available, and long wait times for support (Newton et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2023). Some studies suggest, however, that while international students may use university support services more than community support services, they seek support at rates similar to home students (LaMontagne et al., 2023). The extent to which these challenges exist for students in the types of programs (MSc Psychology in Education and MA TESOL) focused on in the current study requires further exploration.

Recommendations for supporting PGT students

Previous literature has recommended that higher education lecturers should anticipate their PGT students' unique needs, creating as supportive an environment as possible and adjusting content so it connects with the diverse student population (Broughton, 2023; Heringer, 2019; Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023). Unfortunately, evidence also suggests that adaptation to students' needs can be led by stereotypes and false assumptions that students may be deficient due to language barriers or different backgrounds (Agostinelli, 2021; Heringer, 2019; Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023; Mohamed, 2006). This could be partly due to a lack of knowledge or formal teacher education on the instructors' part or a feeling that adaptation was not their responsibility (Agostinelli, 2021).

Some previous evidence suggests that students can react negatively, at times behaving rudely in class, for example, due to their lecturers not meeting their cultural expectations for a higher education instructor (Katsara, 2014). These problems led to less supportive relationships with their lecturers and had an impact on student feedback (Katsara, 2014).

The Current Study

There have been calls for further research on the link between stress and wellbeing in PGT students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Amanvermez et al., 2024). In 2019, the University Charter attempted to standardize good practices that UK universities should engage in to support the well-being of students and staff; however, one challenge that was identified was understanding the diversity in need for students in different departments and on different programs of study (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). While there has been a small amount of research into this area focused on UK universities, most have small sample sizes and limited generalizability, showing the need for more research to build a greater understanding of the UK higher education context (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). In addition, some evidence suggests disciplinary differences in how academic requirements and content

affect study stress (Coneyworth et al., 2020); these considerations emphasize the need to understand the unique contexts and experiences of different student groups regarding academic and well-being needs. The lack of available literature detailing the diversity of needs among PGT international and mature students, and their utilization of and perspectives on the supports offered to them, reveals a clear gap in scholarship.

Aims:

The current research aimed to (1) examine the intersection between postgraduate taught international and mature international students' academic and emotional needs and (2) develop practical ways of supporting these needs (e.g., socio-emotional learning programs for PGT students).

METHODS:

Setting:

The current project took place in the Education Department at a prestigious university in northern England, focused on the Psychology in Education (PiE) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program. In 2023-2024, the PiE MSc had 32 students enrolled, 43% were international ($n = 14$) and 56% home ($n = 18$), while 69% ($n = 14$) were mature (over 25 years of age) and 31% ($n = 18$) were nonmature (under 25 years of age). For 2023-2024, TESOL had 56 students enrolled, comprising 100% international students (0 home), with 25% ($n = 14$) mature and 75% under 25 years of age. All home students were native English speakers, and all international student participants were nonnative English speakers.

Context of Current Study

MSc PiE conversion programs are designed for learners who do not have a British Psychology Society (BPS)-accredited undergraduate degree but wish to train as an Educational Psychologist or for those without psychology in their undergraduate degree who wish to switch disciplines and study educational psychology. This means that MSc PiE students are often new to or unfamiliar with psychological theory, research, and practice as taught in the UK.

MSc Psychology in Education (PiE) conversion programs in the UK are designed for learners who do not have a British Psychology Society (BPS)-accredited undergraduate degree. They are aimed at students without a Psychology Undergraduate degree, meaning that MSc PiE students are often new to or unfamiliar with psychological theory, research, and practice as taught in the UK. The course is the first step toward attaining Chartered Psychologist status in the UK, so the program is popular among those aspiring toward careers in Educational and/or Clinical Psychology.

Both home and international mature PGT students in conversion courses have reported struggling with academic challenges as they adapt to a new learning environment and higher academic expectations in a different academic discipline to their first degree (Coneyworth et al., 2020). Discipline-related language can impact this as well, as each has its own academic terminology beyond regular English, which can be challenging for international students, and discipline-specific expectations that add to the difficulty of learning.

In contrast, MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages is a graduate degree designed for students who have an undergraduate degree in English, Linguistics, or Education who also have some teaching experience. Students enrolling in this course are presumed to have the necessary skills and academic background, so they are assumed to not struggle as much with discipline-specific expectations. Thus, both programs attract different types of students for different reasons, providing an interesting sample of HE programs for studying learner needs.

Design

This exploratory qualitative study examined student experiences and reported academic and well-being needs. Exploratory research approaches aim to build an understanding of participants' interpretations in context rather than confirm researchers' interpretations or hypotheses (Cohen et al., 2017). Using semi-structured focus groups to engage students in conversations around their needs, support they were offered, and their suggestions for improving support, this research sought to explore their perspectives while understanding their unique contexts. This research used a critical realist and contextualist perspective, acknowledging participants' and researchers' subjective experiences while considering context and how it may shape experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Participants and Procedure

Three focus groups took place in June 2024 and were facilitated by the author (VHJ), an international PhD student who was not part of the program teaching teams. The facilitator is fluent in both English and Mandarin (as the majority of international students on both programs are Chinese), allowing her to adjust the language used if necessary. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Recordings lasted 49-89 minutes. Participants were PGT students enrolled in the MSc PiE and MA TESOL programs. Recruitment took place over email and through announcements in teaching sessions. Participants filled out an interest form and were then contacted to arrange the focus groups. Due to scheduling issues and travel difficulties, the final focus group was conducted via Zoom video conferencing.

Sample Characteristics

Nine PGT students took part in the three focus groups. Participant data are shown in Table 1, alongside enrollment information for each program. Seven of the participants were from the PiE program, and two were from the TESOL program; 21% of students from the MSc PiE program and only 3.5% of students from the MA TESOL program took part. As shown, there were nonmature international, mature international, and mature home students in the sample.

Table 1: Enrolled Students and Participant Sample

	Enrolled Students 23–24 N (% of students on program)	Participant Sample
PiE	32 (100%)	7 (21%)
International	14 (43%)	3 (21%*)
Home	18 (56%)	4 (22%*)
Male	3 (9%)	0
Female	28 (88%)	6 (21%*)
Nonbinary	1 (3%)	1 (100%*)
Mature (over 25)	22 (69%)	6 (27%*)
TESOL	56	
International	100%	2 (3%*)
Male	8 (14%)	1 (13%*)
Female	46 (85%)	1 (2%*)
Nonbinary	0	0
Mature (over 25)	14 (26%)	1 (7%*)

*Percentage of subgroup, not all enrolled students

Data Analysis

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is an analytical method that can be used with multiple theoretical perspectives, making it adaptable to different projects.

RTA was also chosen to encourage reflexivity among researchers, as most members of the research team are employed to teach the participants' students. Our roles as academic teaching staff mean that the findings of this project have the potential to directly inform our teaching practices and understanding of student needs.

Therefore, the analysis was guided by team-based triangulation, reflexivity, and inclusion of a research member who is not part of the teaching team (VHJ). These measures were performed to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings. The first two team members coded the transcripts independently (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Initial codes were then gathered, and a consensus was reached, allowing for researcher triangulation of analysis (Patton, 2014).

Groupings and initial themes were then discussed with other members of the research team (JL & DO) for discussion and further refinement. Through discussion, the team sought to engage in further reflexivity on findings and how our perspective is shaped by our roles. VHJ offered her insights as a non-member of the teaching team and as an international student herself. There was also a focus on the research aims and on how the initial themes address them. Themes were refined in the discussion, and the focus of findings was outlined.

FINDINGS:

Four overarching themes were developed: Language, Academic and Emotional Stress, Support Offered and Used, and Recommendations. Recommendations have two subthemes: Wellbeing Support Needs and Academic Support Needs. A visual representation of themes and subthemes can be found in Figure 1. Participants are identified by participant number (P), for participant characteristics: focus group, student status (home/international), program, and whether they are mature (see Table 2).

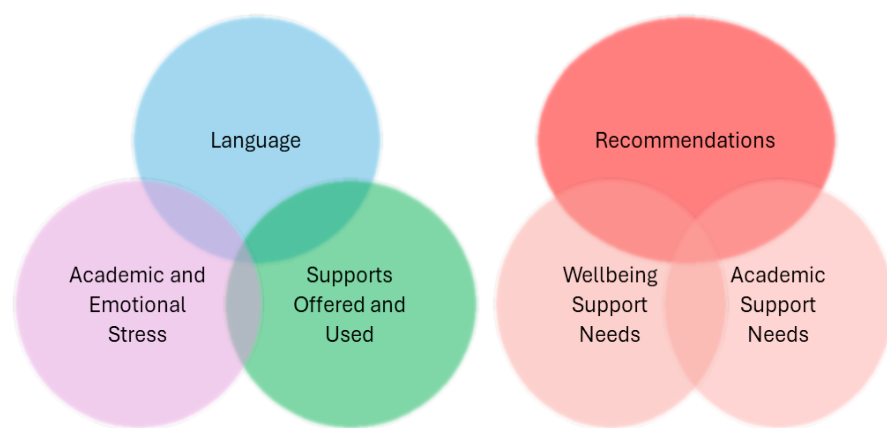


Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

Table 2: Participant Characteristics

Focus Group	Participant Number	International/Home	Program	Mature
1	Participant 1	international	MA TESOL	Yes
1	Participant 2	international	MA TESOL	Yes
1	Participant 3	international	MSc PiE	No
2	Participant 4	home	MSc PiE	No
2	Participant 5	home	MSc PiE	Yes
3	Participant 6	home	MSc PiE	Yes
3	Participant 7	international	MSc PiE	Yes
3	Participant 8	home	MSc PiE	Yes
3	Participant 9:	international	MSc PiE	Yes

Language

Language was cited as a barrier to education in all focus group discussions. All participants reported that academic language and technical terminology were difficult to understand and adjust to. Only international students discussed how language issues could affect their understanding in classrooms:

“academic terms..... but like the term, you know, working memory.” (P2)

“Oh, yeah, yeah, in the second language acquisition.” (P1)

“Yeah, our working memory will breakdown. Yeah. So, you know, when I encounter a new term and to check and after the checking “Oh, where am I?” (Laughter) Yeah. But after this program, I think my reading ability has improved.” (P2)

They also described how language could also be a barrier to interacting with peers:

"A language barrier is definitely a problem in my study experience..... I cannot understand some of our classmates or lecturers because of language barriers." (P7)

While language barriers are expected to be an issue, having both PiE and TESOL students describe their difficulties showed that international students need additional consideration and support. Home students did not report any language or vocabulary issues that significantly impacted their classroom experience.

Academic and Emotional Stress

Both home and international participants reported having difficulty with the workload and pressures of PGT study. All participants reported that the academic stress of having only one year of modules while conducting a research dissertation made the program feel intense and that the workload was often overwhelming. However, the home students reported that overall, they felt the program contributed positively to their well-being.

“in general I think the course has had a good effect on my wellbeing just because, yeah, I’m working towards something I want to do and it’s interesting.” (P8)

Home students discussed how, while they found the workload was heavy and academically difficult, ultimately the program was a positive experience, and the information they learned was worth it.

“It’s definitely been a lot of work.” (P4)

“Yeah.” (P5)

“Yeah, but no fascinating. Yeah.” (P4)

“Yeah, I've really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. And my overall experience has been good, I think.” (P5)

“Yeah, I've really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. And my overall experience has been good, I think. I thought the lecturers have been, yeah, I've thought they've been able to communicate like some of the more complex topics really clearly. And it's felt to me like there's been a lot of offer of support if we need it, for me anyway.” (P4)

Some home students complained that they expected to build closer relationships with their lecturers but that they found the program too large to do so, and they shared disappointment that their peers did not speak much in class discussions. However, the overall experience was reported to be positive.

For international students, there was the same experience of overwhelm at the academic workload, but differences between the students on different programs. While the two TESOL international students reported that the pressure and stress from the workload did not impact their wellbeing negatively, the three international PiE students reported that the high workload and the stress associated with the pressure to do well impacted their wellbeing negatively. Some reported experiencing mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and increased sadness, that they felt negatively impacted their academic and social life.

“Yes, I do think it negatively affected my performance, especially, for example, during the dissertation period I also felt stressed. I become inefficient so I always... Because of my worries I always like to put things behind so I waste a lot of time worrying and feeling pressured so those negative feelings can negatively impact our performance, I think. (Pause) That's all.” (P9)

“... also need to spend much more time on reading all the materials that makes me feel stressed and pressured. Especially during the exam breaks there's no connections with classmates and lecturers, I felt quite lonely and also felt pressured about writing essays because in China we don't write in this way to cite others.....I'm not familiar with this education system- I feel stressed.” (P7).

International students from both programs also reported feeling lonely during nonteaching weeks, particularly during winter breaks, spring breaks, and summer assessment periods.

Support offered and used:

The second aim of this study was to understand the awareness and utilization of university support services, in addition to understanding how useful students found the services offered. All participants reported awareness of university academic and wellbeing support, such as personal supervisors, academic writing support workshops, and Open Door (university mental health support). The use of support services by students seemed to vary depending on the student and the type of support needed. Both home and international students reported using academic support, highly praising the support offered:

“They are really helpful. Like you can book tutorial with them and then also there's the writing center you can do, right, that's really helpful.” (P2)

In another focus group, two home students had similar praise:

“And sort of the study skills support that a lot of people are making use of with [academic skills tutor], those are great sessions and even if I can't make it to all of them it's nice to have those resources on the VLE and things like that for me to dip in and out of there, yeah.” (P5)

“Definitely. And I think when I was at uni we didn't have...do my undergraduate, we didn't have like a math skills center or anything like that, a writing skills center. So to have that here I thought that that was really good to be able to have a separate place to go and to ask questions too, I thought that was useful.” (P4)

Participants did have some recommendations for improving academic support, primarily that they would like more things available online, particularly academic writing support seminars:

"Although I do wish the like academic skills sessions were recorded and the practicals. They weren't for some reason and I think they could have, it would have made a difference. I'm not sure why they weren't because often they were more informative" (P6)

"I would completely agree with [P6]'s points that the academic skills would be really useful to have online." (P8)

Other feedback was around career support for international students; although career support is provided both in the department and by central universities, it is focused on UK career paths rather than international careers.

For wellbeing needs, however, there was very little use of university mental health support services, with only one student reporting that they referred themselves for support and that they did not find it useful. This could be due to hesitancy to disclose their use of services in a focus group or hesitance to use services due to potential or perceived judgment from others. Home students reported that they tended to use friends and family as their support, and in some situations, they spoke with their personal supervisors.

International students, who also reported higher impacts of stress, reported that instead of accessing university or department pastoral support, they spoke with graduate teaching students (GTA) and used AI as a tool to talk with someone, and one person reported talking with people on dating apps when they felt lonely. International participants reported that they felt they shouldn't access university mental health services, as it is stigmatized in their home country "*Mental health support is frowned upon in China*" (P1) and that they felt it should be dealt with by themselves "*I need to solve these problems by myself.*" (P9).

For department support for wellbeing, such as personal supervisors or program leaders, international students reported feeling like they are less approachable due to being teaching staff who mark and supervise their work. They expressed that the GTAs were much more approachable, as they are students themselves, and most are also international students with shared or similar experiences.

Additionally, students' experience of their personal supervision seemed to vary depending on the student and their relationship with their supervisor:

"and with my supervisor I feel that sometimes almost like I'm inconveniencing them and that she's not very available." (P6)

contrasting with

"My pastoral supervisor is amazing as well. She's been such a great resource I wasn't really expecting to have" (P5).

The lack of use of university and department support services is of some concern for international students in these courses. While this finding might be due to hesitancy to disclose in a focus group, the international students who took part all reported high levels of stress and anxiety while also reporting that they did not feel comfortable accessing university or departmental pastoral support. Having international student participants report that their wellbeing was negatively impacted by the stress of their program and the reluctance they expressed in accessing support through the typical avenues provided is a finding that warrants further investigation.

DISCUSSION:

The present study aimed to examine the intersection between PGT international and mature international students' academic and emotional needs and develop practical ways of supporting these needs. The findings suggest that while students enrolled in these two PGT programs found the workload difficult, international students reported a higher degree of difficulty due to vocabulary and language differences, feeling lonely during low contact periods and feeling overwhelmed with the workload to an extent that it impacted their wellbeing. All the students who took part reported that they were aware of departmental and university support services; however, the international students reported less comfort with engaging with those services. Recommendations included improving mental health services, increasing student wellbeing support and offering more academic support available online.

Academic needs:

Participants indicated that academic pressures, short timelines, and high expectations of a PGT program cause significant stress. The findings showed, however, that while this stress was present for all the students who took part in our focus groups, some international and all the home students were able to weather this stress without

reporting wellbeing challenges; unfortunately, some of the international students felt it impacted their academic performance or reported wellbeing impacts. This aligns with previous research that shows that stressors, such as the pressure to do well, can impact academic progress and wellbeing (Dickson et al., 2024; Jiang, 2018; Shi, 2013; Trenkic & Warmington, 2019). While the experience of high academic pressure and the fast pace of PGT programs seems to be universal, there does seem to be a trend showing that the impacts on wellbeing, both in the short and long term, vary. One factor may be the added difficulty of studying in a second or third language, which is a challenge for many international students.

Language barriers are well known as a cause of stress and added difficulty (Trenkic & Warmington, 2019). Previous research focused on psychology international PGT students specifically suggested that academic and discipline-specific language would be challenging due to the nature of conversion programs (Bhojwani, 2023; Katsara, 2023; Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023). However, based upon our discussions with students, academic language and language in general was a challenge for all international PGT students, and interestingly, even the home students reported benefiting from academic language support, although this could be particularly due to the focus on assessment writing in these sessions. This finding is suggestive of the difficulty of learning and using academic language and terminology, regardless of students' background education or area of study. It is possible that there are other factors that impact how stressors affect wellbeing, such as self-perceived language proficiency (Jiang, 2018) or a focus on perfectionism, which becomes maladaptive (Suh et al., 2022).

These findings do suggest that additional inquiry would be helpful to fully understand ways that academic support can be advertised or designed to meet the needs of international and mature international students. The participating students did have a recommendation that academic writing seminars be provided online, along with all other lecture materials which are already available online, to increase accessibility for students.

Wellbeing Needs:

The impacts of academic stress reported by the students who took part in our focus groups show how, for some students, stressors can impact their wellbeing and mental health. This aligns with previous research that shows that academic stress can impact international students' wellbeing (Amanvermez et al., 2024). Social support and feeling supported academically were both things that have been shown to positively impact wellbeing for international PGT students (Brooker & Vu, 2020). Similar to previous findings, the focus group participants reported that social and familial support were the primary coping strategies used by students struggling with the academic demands of their program. The challenge, however, is that international PGT students often feel more isolated from their peers, and mature international PGT students often find it even harder to build social support (Alsop et al., 2008; Brooker & Vu, 2020). As shown from our focus groups and enrollment data, the PiE program has a high proportion of mature students. This could mean that for the students in this program, in particular, there are added difficulties with building social support. An example from the focus groups is one student discussing using a dating application to have someone to talk to.

University and department-offered wellbeing support (such as university counseling services) was not commonly utilized, despite students having good awareness of them. Students were more likely to approach personal supervisors about their wellbeing, but there seemed to be variation in how supportive the students felt their supervisors were. The desire to approach supervisors rather than specialist support may reflect the severity of students' needs (i.e., students may have felt their needs were not sufficient to approach a specialist service), or they may reflect a reluctance to engage with the services. One difficulty faced by personal supervisors is that the main referral suggested for students struggling with wellbeing challenges is university mental health support or external mental health support, both of which are less likely to be utilized by international PGT students (LaMontagne et al., 2023; Newton, et al., 2021). Previous research has suggested that help seeking is linked to mental health literacy (Zeng et al., 2023), but the participants of the focus groups reported that they were unlikely to access university-provided or external mental health support despite being aware of them. This raises questions of how to provide support to international PGT students who are struggling with their wellbeing while in their program.

If social support is the primary way that international PGT students seek support for their wellbeing and mental health, then this raises questions on how academic staff can effectively assist students who are struggling. One potential solution would be for staff to find a way to assist students in the same program and department in building connections, but student societies and peer support services already exist within most universities. This leaves questions on what systems or supports can be designed to assist students who are unlikely to access mental health services but still need wellbeing support while in their PGT program.

CONCLUSION:

This exploratory study examined the academic and well-being needs of international and mature international students in two taught master's programs. The focus groups highlighted how the high academic pressure and workload created stress for students, both home and international, but only international students reported

experiencing wellbeing concerns. While these findings are not confirmatory, they are suggestive of how international students and mature international students may be struggling when studying in taught master's programs. The low use of university-provided support services also suggests the need for further exploration into what would support students' wellbeing needs. This study's findings suggest, aligning with previous findings, that international and mature international students have needs that are not being supported, which are unique to different cohorts and programs. More research is therefore needed to better understand different groups of students and their unique academic and wellbeing needs.

Limitations:

This project was designed as a qualitative case study of two PGT programs for international and mature students. Due to the small sample size, there are limitations with how applicable these findings would be to other international PGT students. A larger sample size and mixed methods approach would be one way to build a more generalizable understanding of students' experiences but was beyond the scope of this project.

There was a limitation in representation from the TESOL program, as only two students responded to the request for participants. Recruiting more TESOL students would have strengthened the reliability of the findings, and this limitation is one that would need to be addressed in future projects.

Recommendations and Future Directions:

This project examined the experiences of international and mature PGT students in two programs. The findings are suggestive of a need to better understand the types of support that are effective for international and mature PGT students. Traditional referrals offered, such as wellbeing support teams or mental health services, are utilized less by these students, so alternative supports would be useful to discover. Recommendations based upon our preliminary findings are suggested below:

- A more representative survey-based study examining international and mature PGT students' perspectives on mental health and well-being support services offered by UK universities to understand how widely themes in the present study are shared by the population more broadly.
- In-depth interviews to expand on the current findings by exploring participants' personal experiences, which they may not feel comfortable sharing in focus group research.
- A pre-post examination of students' experiences of stress and how it impacts their wellbeing in PGT programs.

More understanding in research on the different types of PGT students (international, mature, with caring responsibilities, etc.) and how these unique backgrounds impact academic achievement and wellbeing.

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x None

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