

The Experience of International Students Studying in the UK

Introduction

The experience of Postgraduate Research (PGR) students studying and researching in the UK is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing a range of academic, social, and cultural dimensions. As they navigate the demands of advanced research training, they often encounter challenges related to adapting to new academic expectations, managing independent study, and building supportive networks. These challenges can be particularly pronounced for international students, who must also adjust to a new cultural and institutional context.

As a supervisor, you play a critical role in creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all PGR students. Proactive, empathetic supervision can make a significant difference in their academic success and overall wellbeing. This guide aims to support supervisors in fostering inclusive practice, drawing on research and evidence that highlight effective strategies for meeting the diverse needs of the PGR community.

The Deficit Model

One of the most prominent frameworks to explore is the deficit model, which has significant implications for understanding and addressing the challenges faced by many students. The deficit model is a theoretical perspective that attributes the difficulties and challenges faced by PGR students to their individual shortcomings and inadequacies. These perceptions can be heightened by unfamiliarity with both the broader national culture and institutional culture of a new academic environment. The deficit model in this context is where students may feel they are not worthy or capable of taking on the challenges of study. They may feel that they need to 'catch up' to what they perceive as the capabilities or ease of 'home students'. This perceived gap can often be the starting point of imposter syndrome, where students internalise the belief that they do not belong despite evidence of their capability. However, given that these students have been through robust selection processes in order to obtain their place on the course, they do have the requisite knowledge to be successful. As a tutor you have a pivotal role in shifting the perspective of your students from focusing on what they lack, to recognising the strengths and abilities they bring to your university. Actively acknowledging the diverse forms of knowledge and experience that students possess and clarifying institutional norms can help dismantle the effect of the deficit model in research supervision.

Supervisors may also need support themselves in developing confidence to challenge deficit thinking. Navigating the complexities of structural inequalities, cultural differences, and institutional expectations can be difficult without adequate preparation. Therefore, it is the responsibility of institutions to provide ongoing training and resources for supervisors – particularly in developing inclusive supervision practices. This can include workshops, mentoring, and communities of practice where staff reflect together on inclusive pedagogy and the emotional demands of supervisory relationships. Institutions must play an

active role in creating enabling environments that support both supervisors and students.

Societal and systemic biases can create an environment where Black and minority ethnic (BME) students feel they do not belong or are not good enough. Negative stereotypes can impair the academic performance of marginalised students by affecting their self-perception and confidence. These feelings of inadequacy can be deeply ingrained and may manifest in various ways, such as reluctance to participate in discussions, hesitation to seek help, or a general lack of confidence in their abilities. Supervisors need to be aware of these potential signs and take proactive steps to address them. Regular check-ins with the students and open communication are essential tools for supervisors to understand their students' experiences and challenges. A supervisor can obtain a strengths-based approach which acknowledges students' prior experiences, cultural knowledge and resilience. For example, rather than emphasising a student's lack of academic writing experience, a supervisor might highlight their ability to communicate complex ideas orally or draw on multilingual skills. Encouraging reflective practice, co-creating goals and affirming student agency can help shift the focus from perceived deficiencies to potential growth.

What these students will need in order to enable them to excel in their studies further are support with language proficiency, familiarity with the UK's educational norms, and cultural differences. It is crucial that international students are given the appropriate information as well as specialised services and support that will enable them to achieve their best whilst studying at your university.

Practical support strategies, such as mentorship programmes, peer support groups, and professional development opportunities, are vital for the success of Black minority students. Mentorship programmes can be helpful for providing students with role models who have navigated similar challenges and can offer valuable advice and support. Peer support groups create a sense of community and belonging, allowing students to share their experiences and learn from one another. Professional development opportunities, such as workshops and conferences, can help students build skills and expand their networks. Empathy and understanding are key components in building a supportive environment where students feel valued and capable. By creating conditions that consciously use students' strengths in the learning process, supervisors can foster a more inclusive and empowering academic experience.

Practical Steps

- **Shift Perspectives:** Actively work to move students from a deficit mindset (focusing on what they lack) to a strengths-based one, recognising the abilities and knowledge they bring.
- **Recognise Systemic Biases:** Be aware that societal and systemic biases can negatively impact BME students' sense of belonging and academic confidence.
- **Proactive Check-ins:** Regularly check in with students to understand their experiences and challenges, fostering open communication. Schedule regular,

structured check-ins with students to discuss their academic progress, any barriers to research, and how they are settling into the institutional environment.

- **Adopt a Strengths-Based Approach:** Acknowledge and leverage students' prior experiences, cultural knowledge, multilingual skills, and resilience. For example, if a student struggles with academic writing, highlight their oral communication skills.
- **Encourage Reflective Practice:** Help students reflect on their learning and progress.
- **Co-create Goals:** Work with students to set achievable academic and personal goals, affirming their agency.
- **Provide Information on UK Norms:** Point them in the right direction of where they can gain information regarding UK educational norms, language proficiency, and cultural differences. Where appropriate, signpost students to institutional resources on UK academic expectations, language support, and cultural orientation such as academic writing centres, skills workshops, or international support centres. If you supervise more than one student, creating supporting opportunities for them to network with each other such as informal group meetings or collaborative seminars would be helpful. The students union may also have a number of relevant networks for them to join. Encouraging peer networks can ease their transition and creating an inclusive academic community.
- **Facilitate Access to Support:** Ensure students are aware of and can access specialised services, mentorship programs, peer support groups, and professional development opportunities.
- **Foster Empathy and Understanding:** Create a supportive and safe environment where students feel valued and capable.

Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is a critical factor influencing the academic experiences of international students. While many are highly capable, students whose first language is not English often face significant challenges when engaging with academic English. Limited proficiency can hinder their ability to fully comprehend course content, contribute to discussions, and express complex ideas effectively in writing. This in turn, may impact their understanding of lectures, participation in seminars, and success in written assessment and projects. Research has consistently shown the strong link between language proficiency and academic success. For students studying abroad for the first time, Ramsay et al. (199) found that first year international students at an Australian university found difficulty adjusting to the pace and vocabulary of academic lectures, which can be particularly overwhelming. Although domestic students may also encounter difficulties with academic language, international students often face an additional layer of complexity due to unfamiliarity with cultural references, social cues embedded in colloquial English.

It is important to acknowledge and support students in navigating the gap between academic and informal language. For example, phrases like “write in more doctoral language’ can be ambiguous without clear guidance to what it means in practice. Supervisors may hesitate to address these issues directly, especially when cultural differences more noticeable. However, it is essential for students’ success to provide honest, constructive feedback with clarity and compassion. Lewthwaite’s (1996) research across universities in New Zealand found that academic adjustment can be aided by supervisors and small group seminars.

Universities should actively signpost language support resources, such as English language courses, writing centres, and debating clubs offered through student unions. Access to these services can enhance students’ language skills, improve confidence and support integration into the academic community. Supervisors also play a key role in offering regular, supportive tutorials that provide targeted academic guidance, helping students bridge the language gap and succeed in their studies.

Universities can offer further support through their language support services. For example, academic writing centres often provide one-to-one tutorials, workshops on referencing and argumentation, and proofreading guidance. At some institutions, peer mentoring schemes pair international students with native English-speaking students for conversational practice and mutual learning. Feedback from students suggests that these services not only improve their academic performance but also foster a greater sense of belonging and confidence. By integrating these resources into the academic journey and normalising their use, institutions can support students in navigating language-related challenges more effectively.

Practical Steps

- **Signpost to Language Support Services:** Direct students to university resources such as English language courses, writing centres, and debating clubs via the Students Union.
- **Normalise Resource Use:** Encourage the use of these support services and integrate them into the academic journey to reduce any stigma.
- **Provide Regular Tutorials:** Offer consistent tutorial support to address language-related challenges and provide individualised guidance.
- **Be Mindful of Pace and Vocabulary:** When in discussions, be conscious of the language used and the speed of delivery, as this can be challenging for students unfamiliar with academic English or local dialects.
- **Acknowledge Social and Cultural Nuances:** Understand that international students may not be familiar with local social cues and innuendos and be prepared to clarify these if necessary. Recognise that international students may not be familiar with local idioms or social cues. Encourage a collaborative activity where both your student and you share samples of writing you both admire to discuss style, clarify expectations, and find common ground in academic language.

- **Recommend Peer Mentoring:** If available at your institution, suggest peer mentoring schemes where international students can practice conversational English with native speakers.
- **Explain Academic Writing Conventions:** Guide students on academic writing expectations, including referencing, argumentation, and structure, through one-to-one feedback.

Educational Norms

Adjusting to UK educational norms and expectations is another challenge. International students may be unfamiliar with UK teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic integrity standards. Emphasise critical thinking, independent learning, and academic writing from the outset. Provide clear guidance on both what to write and how to write it. Universities should offer mandatory orientation, writing workshops, and mentorship with regular tutor check-ins during the first year. Supervisors can also reflect on their own educational backgrounds and the diversity within UK HE cultures (e.g. differences between post 92 and Russell Group institutions), using this as a starting point for empathetic, reflective discussions with students.

Practical Steps

- **Explain UK Educational Emphasis:** Clearly articulate the UK's emphasis on critical thinking, independent learning, and the correct citing of sources, contrasting this with memorisation techniques if applicable.
- **Clarify Academic Writing Requirements:** Coach students not only on *what* to write for assignments and exams (content areas) but also on *how* to write academically to achieve success.
- **Conduct Periodic Follow-ups:** After initial orientation sessions and workshops provided by the university, conduct regular check-ins, especially during the first year, to ensure students have fully grasped these academic concepts.
- **Provide Clear Guidance on Expectations:** Offer ongoing, clear guidance on academic expectations to help students adapt more effectively.
- **Reinforce Understanding of Academic Integrity:** Ensure students understand the university's policies on academic integrity from the outset.

Cultural Differences or Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is essential in a diverse academic environment. It involves understanding and appreciating the various cultural backgrounds that students come from and how these can impact their academic experience. Being aware of cultural norms, values, and communication styles is crucial for supervisors to effectively

support their students. Practical strategies for enhancing cultural awareness include attending cultural competency training and seeking out resources on different cultures. Creating an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and respected is also important.

Students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, each with its own norms, values, and communication styles. These cultural differences can impact students' academic experiences and interactions with supervisors. For example, some cultures may place a high value on respect for authority, which can make students hesitant to speak up or challenge their supervisors. Other cultures may prioritize collective achievement over individual success, which can influence how students approach group work and collaboration. Understanding these cultural differences is essential for supervisors to provide effective support and guidance. By being aware of and sensitive to cultural norms and values, supervisors can create an environment where all students feel understood and respected.

International students will also need to navigate and understand the cultural differences of daily life in the UK, from social interactions to classroom behaviour, where questions and critical thinking are encouraged. Supporting international students requires specific attention to their unique needs, such as navigating the academic system, understanding visa and immigration issues, and providing resources for language support. Incorporating diverse curriculum materials and intercultural activities can further enhance cultural awareness and inclusivity. By fostering a culturally inclusive environment, supervisors can better support a diverse student body and contribute to their overall success.

International students face unique challenges, such as navigating the academic system, understanding visa and immigration issues, and adapting to a new cultural environment. Supervisors can provide specific support to help international students succeed. This includes helping students understand the academic expectations and requirements, providing resources for language support, and offering guidance on visa and immigration issues. Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where international students feel supported and valued is essential. Supervisors can also connect international students with peer support groups and cultural organizations to help them build a sense of community and belonging.

Alongside these adjustments students might experience homesickness, or feelings of isolation as they adjust to a new cultural environment. When family and friends are far away a sense of isolation can creep in. Universities can support these students by fostering an inclusive and welcoming campus culture. Students should be encouraged to celebrate their heritage and culture and share their perspectives and experiences both in their academic and social settings. International students have their part to play in contributing to intercultural learning and increased understanding of diversity from a world view. They should be encouraged to interact positively with home students, who will also benefit from increased awareness of global diverse perspectives but also help them begin to form new social support structures. Initiatives such as peer support networks and buddy systems from current students in years two and three, can provide valuable opportunities for students to connect with others and

share their experiences. Additionally, promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity among the broader University body, where cultural differences are seen as a strength, can help create a more supportive and understanding community.

By recognising and addressing these challenges, you can better support your international students and help them succeed academically and socially. Rather than students focusing on what they lack, if they are supported to understand the values that your University operates by with regular check ins on how they are coping with their new cultural surroundings, you will be able to pick up any issues they may face and provide them with the right support.

Practical Steps

- **Create an Inclusive Environment:** Foster an atmosphere where all students feel valued, respected, and understood.
- **Be Sensitive to Communication Styles:** Recognise that cultural backgrounds can influence how students interact, such as hesitancy to speak up or different approaches to group work, and adapt your approach accordingly.
- **Explain UK Classroom Culture:** Clearly communicate expectations around classroom interactions in the UK, such as encouraging questions and critical thinking.
- **Guide Students on Navigating the Academic System:** Help international students understand academic expectations, requirements, and university procedures.
- **Be Aware of Visa and Immigration Issues:** Whilst you are not expected to be experts, be sensitive to the fact that students may be navigating these complexities and signpost to relevant university support services.
- **Connect Students with Support Networks:** Encourage international students to join peer support groups, buddy systems with students in later years, and cultural organisations within the Students Union to build community.
- **Encourage Sharing of Cultures:** Motivate students to celebrate their heritage and share their perspectives in both academic and social settings.
- **Conduct Regular Check-ins:** Regularly check in with students to understand how they are coping with their new cultural surroundings and identify any issues early.
- **Signpost to Support for Homesickness and Isolation:** Be aware that students may experience homesickness or isolation and direct them to appropriate university support services.

Structural inequalities

Structural inequalities in higher education refer to the systemic and institutional barriers that disproportionately affect students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. As part of its race equality work, it is essential that a university not only acknowledges these barriers but also actively works to dismantle them. It is also important that the University as part of its race equality work acknowledges the structural and institutional factors that contribute to challenges of BME students. Experiences that BME students may face of discrimination and microaggressions, and exclusionary practices that contribute to feelings of alienation and undermine their academic confidence and performance. These experiences are often compounded by a lack of representation, both in the curriculum and among the School, which can signal to students that their perspectives and personal histories are not valued.

One critical area where structural inequality is evidence is in the curriculum. Acknowledging the need for a diverse and inclusive curriculum is key to promoting equity in learning. Using London South Bank University as an example, they funded a project, co creating what this might mean with students, building on a project carried out in 2020 about closing the racial awarding gap. They resolved that by enhancing the curriculum and embedding justice and equity in the curriculum should be carried out as a matter of course. By expanding what authors, approaches and case studies were used in their curricula, would mean enhancing the impact of their education, by speaking to lived experience and preparing their students for career success in a global context. The disciplines taught would themselves be stronger and more relevant by building their foundations on a wider base of scholarship.

Having a curriculum that BME international students can identify with can create greater opportunity for their engagement with it, as they feel they can relate to it. This then can build a foundation for greater academic success. Decolonising the curriculum has been identified as the key to change to a 'decolonising learning' over the next decade by The Innovating Pedagogy Report (2019):

'A curriculum provides a way of identifying the knowledge we value. It structures the ways in which we are taught to think and talk about the world. As education has become increasingly global, communities have challenged the widespread assumption that the most valuable knowledge and the most valuable ways of teaching and learning come from a single European tradition. Decolonizing learning prompts us to consider everything we study from new perspectives. It draws attention to how often the only world view presented to learners is male, white, and European [...] Decolonizing learning helps us to recognize, understand, and challenge the ways in which our world is shaped by colonialism. It also prompts us to examine our professional practices. It is an approach that includes indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, enabling students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms.'

Practical Steps

- **Reflect on your own biases and assumptions:** Be aware of how your own background and experiences might influence your interactions with students.
- **Encourage open dialogue about structural inequalities:** Create opportunities for students to discuss issues of race, power, and privilege in a respectful and constructive manner. Validate their experiences and perspectives.
- **Be attentive to potential feelings of alienation:** Proactively check in with students and offer support if they appear disengaged or isolated. Create opportunities for peer interaction and community building.
- **Advocate for systemic change:** Engage in discussions and initiatives within your department and the wider university to promote institutional changes that address structural inequalities. Support efforts to decolonise the curriculum and enhance representation at all levels.
- **Listen to and learn from students:** Value their feedback and experiences as valuable insights into the impact of structural inequalities. Use their perspectives to contribute to broader institutional change.

Affirmations

The importance of students practicing affirmations to themselves and fostering a positive mental attitude is paramount. Affirmations are powerful statements that can help international students challenge and overcome self-doubt and negative thoughts. When practiced consistently, they can significantly improve one's outlook on life and reinforce belief in one's abilities.

This is particularly important considering the deficit model, which suggests that BME students may internalise negative beliefs about their academic potential due to systemic and societal barriers. The lack of visible BME role models in academia can further complicate students' ability to imagine themselves succeeding or pursuing academic careers.

A positive mental attitude encourages resilience, enhances well-being, and supports academic success. By focusing on what is possible rather than on the challenges faced, students can learn to view challenges as opportunities for growth, developing a growth mindset that is particularly valuable as they adapt to a new academic and cultural environment. Having a growth mindset is especially beneficial for international students as they navigate the complexities of their new academic and social environment.

While supervisors have an important role to play, institutions must also ensure that supervisory staff are equipped, trained, and supported to nurture students' confidence and wellbeing. Supervisors are expected to provide critical, honest feedback, it is equally important that they act as critical friends, offering robust academic guidance while affirming students' potential and recognising their

efforts. This balance helps students stay motivated and build self-confidence, even in the face of challenging feedback.

Encouraging students to adopt affirmations and maintain a positive mental attitude can be a key part of their integration and success at university but it must be supported by reflective, compassionate supervision that understands the complex identity and emotional journey of international and BME students.

Practical Steps

Introduce the concept of affirmations: Explain what affirmations are, how they work, and their potential benefits for building confidence and overcoming negative thoughts, particularly in the context of being an international student and coming from a BME background.

Provide examples of relevant affirmations: Offer concrete examples of affirmations that students can adapt and use, such as "I am capable of academic success," "My unique perspectives are valuable," "I belong in this academic community," or "I am resilient and can overcome challenges."

Suggest practical ways to practice affirmations: Recommend incorporating affirmations into daily routines, such as saying them aloud in the morning, writing them down, or repeating them silently throughout the day.

Share the benefits of a positive mental attitude: Discuss how a positive mindset can enhance resilience, improve well-being, increase motivation, and contribute to better academic performance, especially when navigating a new cultural and academic environment.

Encourage a growth mindset: Explain the difference between a fixed and a growth mindset, emphasizing that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication and hard work. Frame challenges as learning opportunities.

Facilitate discussions on self-belief and overcoming self-doubt: Create a safe space for students to share their experiences with self-doubt and explore strategies for building self-confidence.

Highlight the importance of self-compassion: Encourage students to be kind and understanding towards themselves, especially when facing difficulties or setbacks.

Connect students with resources: Signpost students to university support services that offer guidance on mental well-being, stress management, and building confidence, such as counselling services or peer support groups.

Model a positive attitude: Demonstrate optimism and resilience in your own interactions with students. Your own positive demeanour can serve as an encouraging example.

Active Listening

Active listening is a fundamental skill in the supervisor-student relationship. It can greatly enhance communication and understanding, especially for international students facing language barriers. It involves paying full attention, withholding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing. Understanding both verbal and nonverbal communication is crucial for effective active listening. Supervisors can practice specific techniques such as maintaining eye contact, nodding, and using verbal affirmations to show they are engaged in the conversation. Asking open-ended questions and providing thoughtful responses further enhances communication and understanding.

However, supervisors may face challenges in practicing active listening, such as time constraints and personal biases.

It can help address the challenges faced by Black PhD students. By actively listening educators and mentors can better understand the specific needs and concerns of Black PhD students, allowing for tailored support and resources. Active listening helps build trust between students and faculty, creating a supportive environment where students feel heard and valued. This can counteract feelings of isolation and discrimination.

Active listening involves acknowledging and addressing the experiences and perspectives of Black students, which can help challenge and dismantle negative stereotypes. When educators and peers practice active listening, they become more aware of their own biases and can work to reduce them, fostering a more inclusive academic environment. Active listening allows mentors and peers to empathize with the struggles of Black PhD students, validating their experiences and emotions. This can alleviate feelings of impostor syndrome and self-doubt. By fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding, active listening promotes collaboration and teamwork, which are essential for research and academic projects.

Active listening is more than just hearing words; it involves fully engaging with the speaker and understanding their message. The core principles of active listening include paying full attention, withholding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing. Paying full attention means giving the speaker your undivided attention, which can be demonstrated through body language, such as maintaining eye contact and nodding. Withholding judgment involves listening without immediately forming opinions or interrupting. Reflecting involves paraphrasing what the speaker has said to show understanding and encourage further elaboration. Clarifying involves asking questions to ensure understanding, while summarizing involves restating the main points to confirm comprehension. Sharing involves providing feedback and responses that show you have understood the speaker's message.

Practical steps

Practice active listening: Give undivided attention, summarise, and paraphrase student points.

Provide constructive feedback: Acknowledge perspectives and offer practical support.

Regularly check student confidence: Ask if they feel comfortable participating and clarify assignment doubts.

Recognise your role in academic adjustment: Understand and support students navigating new academic demands.

Check on student welfare: Inquire about mental health, disability support (reasonable adjustments), carers support, and accommodation.

Signpost to support services: Direct students to relevant university resources for their welfare needs.

Encourage appropriate annual leave: Remind students to take breaks for mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Note sample sizes for some of the studies are small and based on volunteers. It is also important that we are mindful of the stereotypes and biases that we hold of students from other cultures and in terms of what challenges they may face whilst studying in the UK. Research findings can be mixed at times. Lewthwaite found that the first priority of international students was to adjust to academic life, but were less satisfied with social integration. However Senyshyn et al found that international students reported feeling accepted and were satisfied with their social adjustments.

What is clear is that whether it be academic adjustment or social interaction, international students will have a number of issues to grapple with as they adjust to student life here in the UK. As supervisors you have an important role to communicate with them and signpost them to the appropriate support services.

The studies we have referenced provide some key insights into how international students may adapt to their new social settings, which can then guide your role as supervisors in how best to support them:

- International students will have differing adjustment challenges to academic life in the UK. They need to adjust to the language and culture which may affect their academic and social adjustment. Being away from home, family and friends can cause loneliness and stress. Knowing the support services that your university provides to support academic integration as well as ways for students to become involved in wider social activities so they can form

friendships - such as them becoming aware of the various clubs that the students union offers can support their transition smoothly.

- The adjustment process although more intense in the first year will go beyond the first year and will be needed throughout their studies.
- International students want to succeed, which will mean sometimes they have a greater focus on academic success, rather than social integration.
- Investing in specific support mechanisms for international students will yield results in terms of social integration and academic success.

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