Article

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 15 (2026), pp. 55-80
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/51qbn076

Non-academic support helps international postgraduate researchers succeed in their studies

David J. Gilbert[1]; Keren Poliah[2]; Hannah Helm[2]; Maggie Milburn[3]; Katherine Yates[4]

[1]School of Health and Society, University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom; [2]School of Arts, Media and Creative Technology, University of Salford; [3]Learning and Teaching Enhancement Centre, University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom; [4]Doctoral School, University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: Dr David Junior Gilbert, University of Salford, School of Health and Society, Manchester, England, M6 6PU
d.j.gilbert1@salford.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0002-4812-2328.

ABSTRACT: *International postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are students who undertake postgraduate research in a country other than their country of origin. Following the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) is the second most common destination for PGRs. When international PGRs travel for educational purposes, they encounter multiple challenges. This article explores the experiences and needs of international PGRs as they settle into academic life in the UK, offering significant insights for the wider UK Higher Education sector. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through four focus groups. Thematic analysis identified three main themes and three subthemes. The main themes were: "wider factors impact the PhD," "sense of community empowers the PGR journey," and "the impact of support." Subthemes included accommodation challenges, the importance of pastoral support, and employment for income and experience. The findings show that international PGR progression depends on far more than academic support, addressing a critical gap in understanding their settlement challenges. Given that most existing research primarily examines academic needs, this study makes an important contribution to the literature.*

Keywords: International Postgraduate Researchers, Higher Education, Foreign Students, Academics, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

Received: Feb 10, 2026 | **Revised**: April 21, 2026 | **Accepted:** May 22, 2026

INTRODUCTION

International postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are students who undertake postgraduate research studies in a country other than their country of origin. Various terminologies may be employed in different settings to describe students studying in a country other than their country of origin (Haisley et al., 2021; Imai & Imai, 2019; Morrison et al., 2005). The context of this article is the University of Salford, United Kingdom (UK); hence, the phrase 'international' is employed to refer to postgraduate students whose country of origin is outside the UK and who pay between the range of £9000-£30000 'international' student fees per year (British Council, 2025). Postgraduate research studies in this article include level-seven Master's research degrees, such as Master of Philosophy (MPhil), as well as level eight doctoral degrees, such as Professional Doctorates (Prof.Doc) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

While international students come from all over the globe, Asia is regarded as the continent supplying the most international students, with China alone having 650,000 students abroad (UNESCO, 2022). The United States is estimated to have the highest number of international students. After the US, the UK was identified as one of the destinations of choice for PGRs (House of Commons, 2024). The Department of Education and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) highlight a steady increase in the number of international doctoral researchers in the UK. According to the HESA, the proportion of students enrolled in postgraduate courses increased from 23% in 2016/17 to 27% by 2020/21, primarily due to an increase in taught Master's course enrollment (HESA, 2021). Within the University of Salford, approximately 40% of PGRs are international students.

While the reasons PGRs choose to study abroad are not the focus of this article, it is important to have a brief understanding of why they do so and the benefits they bring to the country where they study, to interpret the challenges they face. Several reasons have been proposed as to why PGRs undertake their studies in foreign countries; for example, personal motivation, individual life goals, relationships with families, and self-development goals (Chirkov et al., 2007; Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Some students may be motivated by a single factor. However, a combination of factors may inform the decision to undertake studies in a foreign country (Potts, 2015; Salyers et al., 2015; Stroud, 2010). Studying in a foreign country also promotes global awareness, provides social and human

capital necessary to produce globally relevant work skills, and fosters intercultural openness and improved linguistic capabilities (Franklin, 2010; Slotkin et al., 2012; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013).

International PGRs make considerable contributions to the UK in several ways. For example, international PGRs inject diversity and much-needed variety into research topics and methodologies, offering fresh ideas, perspectives, and alternative approaches that foster innovation and a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009). Additionally, international PGRs serve as bridges between the UK and their home countries, establishing strong academic ties that facilitate knowledge exchange and extending their impact to benefit industries and governmental bodies (Marginson, 2014).

Although international PGRs make substantial contributions to research and teaching, they encounter several challenges when they change environments to pursue education abroad. In the wider literature, these challenges are described as a form of culture shock, including feelings of loneliness, homesickness, lack of belonging, and financial difficulties (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Sin and Schartner (2024) examine how informal caregiving, particularly involving family and friends, shapes international PGRs' emotional well-being and support needs, which can affect their ability to integrate into academic life in the UK. A strong sense of belonging is crucial for international PGRs' academic success. Mai et al. (2025) found that international graduate students' experiences of institutional support and access are strongly linked with their sense of belonging in Higher Education (HE) contexts, a factor crucial to their academic success. While an institution may not be able to address all the challenges faced by international PGRs, increased awareness of these challenges may encourage universities to review and improve support services that better respond to their individual needs (Ryan, 2011).

Therefore, this study aimed to identify the needs of international PGRs as they settle into their academic studies in the UK. The findings presented in this article contribute to a clearer picture for HE institutions seeking to understand their international PGRs and create an environment where diversity and equity in research thrive. While some existing studies explore the topic of international students more generally, the literature is sparse on the lived experiences of international PGRs, particularly regarding their support needs in settling into UK academia. This article provides insight into ways to better support the international PGR community and positively contributes to making the HE sector more inclusive for researchers of all backgrounds.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that explores how non-academic support influences the academic success and integration of international PGRs in UK HE. International PGRs may face a range of challenges, including cultural adjustment, social isolation, financial stress, and academic pressure. Drawing on theories such as self-determination theory (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) and cultural

capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), the framework positions nonacademic support—such as peer networks, lived-experience-informed programming, and flexible institutional services—as critical for fostering belonging, confidence, and academic resilience. The framework identifies key constructs: the identity and motivations of international PGRs; the barriers they face in adapting to a new academic and cultural environment; and the role of non-academic support in mitigating these barriers. It proposes that such support enhances integration, promotes equity, and contributes to academic success and retention.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design using focus groups as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups were selected for their capacity to generate rich, contextually grounded data through collaborative participant interaction, particularly suited to exploring socially embedded experiences such as those of international PGRs navigating a new academic environment (Morgan, 1997).

Ethics and study context

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Salford Ethics Committee (ID 10243). The study forms part of a broader institutional research programme at the University of Salford's Doctoral School, designed to deepen understanding of and improve support for international PGRs. It sits alongside two related investigations: a widening participation study examining equity and inclusion in doctoral education (Helm et al., 2024) and a complementary project addressing the decolonisation of research practices within the same institutional context (Poliah et al., 2024).

Research Question and Study Design

The research question was: 'What are the support needs of international PGRs settling into academic study in the UK?'

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach was employed since it is particularly suited to exploring context-dependent phenomena. A qualitative research design allows for the collection and analysis of nonnumerical data (Taylor et al., 2015), which is essential for understanding the nuanced experiences and subjective realities of international PGRs (PGRs) settling into a new academic environment. Given the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by international PGRs, ranging from cultural adjustment to academic support needs, a qualitative approach enables a deeper exploration of these aspects than quantitative methods, such as surveys.

While survey-based methods may offer broader generalisability, they are often limited in their ability to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences. In contrast, the use of focus groups provided an opportunity to

engage participants in dynamic discussions, allowing them to share their experiences in a collaborative setting. Focus groups are particularly valuable when exploring issues involving social interactions and cultural contexts, as they allow participants to reflect on and learn from one another's experiences.

The inclusion criteria for this study included international PGRs studying at the University of Salford undertaking MRes, MPhil, DProf, or PhD degrees, including full-time and part-time onsite researchers, as well as researchers involved in distance learning.

Sample description and data collection

Four focus groups were conducted with 14 PGRs, with 13 being full-time and one part-time, while out of the 14, two were distance learning researchers. The PGRs were purposefully selected from across the four Schools within the University of Salford: the School of Health and Society, the Business School, the School of Arts and Media, and the School of Science, Engineering and Environment. Five were female, nine were male; three were from Asia, and eleven were from the African continent.

Positionality and reflexivity statement

The first author, who led this project and undertook the data collection, identifies as an 'insider researcher' with lived experience as an international PGR at the institution where the study was conducted. This insider status is substantial, as the author's familiarity with the university's academic culture, support systems, and challenges may have influenced the design and interpretation of the research. As a young, multilingual, nondisabled, heterosexual, married male of African ancestry, the first author was acutely aware of the cultural dynamics that shaped the PGR experience, both through personal experience and by recognising how this background could affect participants' responses. Given this position, the first author adopted a pragmatic lens in conducting the research, guided by the belief that the most suitable research method should be employed to address the research questions effectively. The lens led to the choice of a qualitative design, which was deemed the most appropriate for capturing the nuanced experiences of international PGRs at the University of Salford. However, the first author recognises that their insider status may have shaped both the data collection process and the analysis. The researcher's background could have influenced how certain questions were framed and how participants' responses were interpreted, particularly in areas where the researcher shared a common experience with participants.

To mitigate the potential biases stemming from this positionality, steps were taken to ensure that participants' voices were authentically represented. These steps included ensuring confidentiality, encouraging honest and open sharing of experiences, and being conscious of the power dynamics that may have influenced participants' willingness to share. Additionally, during data analysis, strategies such as member checking were employed to minimise the influence of the

researcher's insider perspective (Birt et al., 2016), ensuring that the findings truly reflected the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's preconceived notions.

Data Collection

The focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and were audio-recorded using a focus group guide. Microsoft Teams provided initial transcripts from the focus groups. Sample questions asked during the focus groups included:

- 'As an international PGR, what are the main challenges you have experienced in settling into academic life at the university?'
- 'How do you think the university, as an institution, could support you better?
- 'What do you need in the form of support to settle better into your PGR study?'

Data analyses

Microsoft Teams provided audio recordings and transcripts of the focus groups. The transcripts were proofread and uploaded to NVivo software for further analysis. The collected data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as documented by Clarke and Braun (2021). This method is a six-step approach commencing with familiarisation, coding, subtheme development, theme development, theme review, and the write-up stage. The data analysis was conducted using a combination of experiential and critical realist approaches by the first author (Clarke & Braun, 2021). While the experiential approach provided an opportunity to understand and explore data as directly expressed through participants' subjective views, the critical realist approach offered an opportunity to 'interrogate' the data provided by participants to extract meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Both semantic and latent codes were employed while coding data, and the first author served as the sole coder in the analysis; semantic codes are 'surface' codes, whereas latent codes are codes that are meant to extract the underlying meanings of statements made by participants (Clarke & Braun, 2021). A codebook in NVivo was developed, totalling 192 codes from the transcripts, while coauthor 2 and coauthor 5 were debriefed on the codes as the analysis progressed. With successive rounds of peer debriefing, saturation was determined when no new codes were generated from the data. Following the coding process, all similar codes were clustered into subthemes, and similar subthemes were collated into themes, which were then reviewed and finalised.

RESULTS

The challenges international PGRs face and their perception of support needs to settle into UK academia were explored in focus groups, and thematic analysis of participants' responses identified three main themes and three subthemes. The themes generated from the respondents' own words were 'wider factors impact the PhD', 'sense of community empowers the PGR journey', and 'the impact of support'. The generated subthemes include 'accommodation challenges', 'pastoral support is crucial', and 'jobs for income and experience'. All the names employed in the manuscript are pseudonyms, and Figure 1 presents a pictorial presentation of the themes generated from the data.

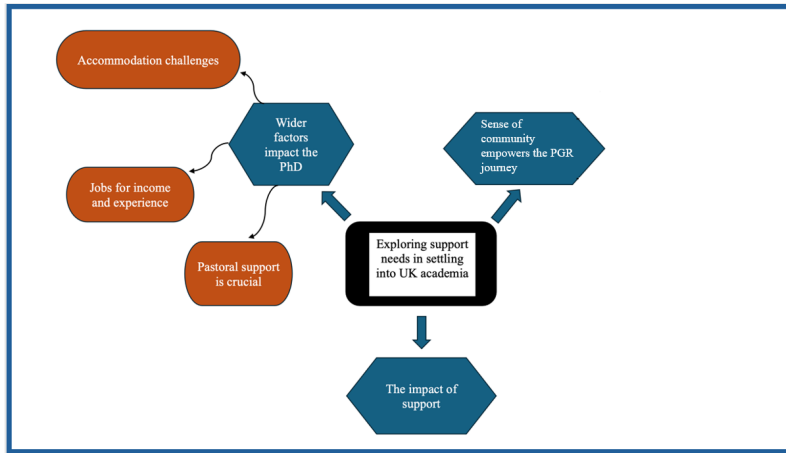

Figure 1: Themes Found in Qualitative Analysis

1. Wider factors impact the PhD.

Across all focus group sessions, international PGRs identified a range of broader factors that impact their PhD journeys, including barriers to settling into UK academia. Within the theme of wider factors impacting the PhD, general challenges around accommodation were raised as central to the international student's PhD experience. In addition, respondents mentioned the importance of pastoral support and of job opportunities for both income and experience. These three subthemes are explored in turn.

i) Accommodation challenges:

Accommodation came up in all focus groups as a crucial determinant of the international PGR academic experience in the UK. Multiple participants highlighted how accommodation can have a substantial negative impact on the overall academic experience. The example below shows how, for international

students, finding accommodation can constitute a challenge due to some of the requirements from landlords as a UK-wide issue:

> "OK, umm, you know, in the UK, before anyone rents an apartment to you, you must have lived here for a certain period. Therefore, for someone that is coming into the system for the first time, it is always difficult for the person to get a landlord that will accept, even if you have the money, you know, proof of funds is not necessarily an issue. You might have the money but getting someone that will accommodate…will accept the money and accommodate you and your family and your dependents." – Martha

In the quote above, Martha mentions that *'you must have lived here for a certain period',* referring to the references and job history from the UK that landlords may require. As Martha explains in the next statement (…s*o, for someone that is coming into the system for the first time*), this presents a barrier for international PGRs who do not have work or rental history in the UK. This underscores the cultural capital gap described in Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), where newcomers lack the local knowledge and connections necessary to navigate complex housing systems. Despite having sufficient financial resources, this lack of local capital makes it significantly harder for international PGRs to find accommodations, which can lead to increased stress and academic disengagement as they struggle to secure stable housing. Omale, quoted below, further articulates accommodation as a concern by saying:

> "Especially because I came here with my family, you know, and the kinds of things the landlords were requesting for, you know, work permits, job experience in the UK and things like that, just to rent an apartment."
>
> – Omale

Omale's statement emphasises the additional complexity international PGRs face when seeking accommodation, particularly those with families. The demand for UK-based work permits and job experience acts as a substantial barrier, limiting the types of housing they can secure. This restriction excludes more flexible accommodation options, such as shared student housing, which are more accessible to undergraduate students. As highlighted by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), this gap in local cultural capital (e.g., a lack of UK job history) directly affects international students' ability to integrate smoothly into the housing system. The financial and emotional stress this causes can further impede their academic focus and overall well-being.

i) Pastoral support is crucial.

International PGRs who attended the focus groups emphasized the importance of pastoral support for the international PGR journey. A participant highlighted the importance of roles such as personal tutors within universities as a platform for pastoral support.

> "If you ask me, the personal tutor is as important as umm, as a supervisor" – Omale

Omale's statement underscores the significance of personal tutors in addressing non-academic challenges faced by international PGRs. By equating personal tutors with supervisors, support goes beyond academic supervision. For international students, personal tutors may serve as more approachable figures, offering emotional and social guidance that supervisors may not be able to provide due to the more formal nature of the student-supervisor relationship. This reflects the core principles of self-determination theory, which emphasise the need for relatedness, a sense of connection and support, as vital for academic success and emotional well-being.

> "A person doing this PhD needs to have other aspects in her life. In addition, sort of maybe not perfect, but at least manageable. Therefore, I think the main thing I would say is, be compassionate, supportive, kind…because sometimes that student does not have any other relatives, does not have anyone else, does not even have a friend." – Liz

Liz's statement highlights the emotional and social isolation many international PGRs face, particularly those without family or social support in the UK. Her emphasis on compassion, support, and kindness underscores the importance of pastoral support in helping international students manage the emotional challenges of being away from home. Liz points out that for many international students, academic success is intricately linked to their emotional well-being. This aligns with self-determination theory, which asserts that fulfilling the need for relatedness, feeling cared for and connected, is essential for both academic persistence and overall well-being. Liz's reflection serves as a reminder of the holistic support international PGRs need, not only in their academic pursuits but also in their personal lives, to thrive in a new and challenging environment.

iii) Jobs for income and experience

Several participants emphasised the importance of securing jobs during their study period as international PGRs. Some noted that these jobs were valuable for gaining experience relevant to their future trajectory in academia, whereas others highlighted them as essential for survival, particularly for self-funded international PGRs.

> "As an international student, knowing that you spend so much coming here, then when you get here, you want to see as much as possible, maybe in the next few months, you need to get a job and get going. Especially for self-sponsored students... If, if you are on scholarship, then it is not truly a pressure…." – Collins

Collins' quote illustrates the financial pressure faced by self-funded international PGRs, who must balance academic work with the need to earn income for survival. The reference to the desire to "*see as much as possible*" further underscores the cultural adjustment international students undergo, as they navigate not only academic expectations but also the high cost of living. This highlights how economic stress can directly impact a student's ability to focus on their research, potentially affecting their academic success. Additionally, for self-funded students, pursuing income-generating jobs is a survival mechanism, whereas students on scholarships may experience less financial strain, allowing them to focus more on their studies. This dual reality for international PGRs reflects broader socioeconomic disparities, which may create inequities in how students experience and succeed in their academic journeys.

> "…like maybe teaching research, more work opportunities specifically for PGR students.
> I would imagine that the universities would have something like that for us." – Julie

Julie's statement underscores the expectations international PGRs have for the availability of institutional support, specifically in the form of work opportunities designed for them. By highlighting that universities should "*have something like that for us*," Julie points to the gap in institutional offerings for international PGRs seeking work aligned with their academic pursuits (e.g., teaching or research positions). This reflects a misalignment between international students' expectations and the opportunities available to them. Julie's expectation that universities provide such opportunities speaks to the broader need for academic and financial integration, in which institutions recognise the unique needs of international PGRs and provide structured support. Additionally, the absence of such opportunities may exacerbate economic stress and hinder academic focus, further reinforcing the importance of comprehensive institutional support.

2). Sense of community empowers the PGR journey

There were multiple contributions from participants showing how a PGR peer community can be invaluable in settling down into UK academia. Some of the participants in this study commenced studies during the COVID-19 restrictions, which impacted their ability to quickly settle down into academic study in the UK. Julie narrates that her challenge was connecting with the community due to the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions:

> "When I started I, I, felt like I did not know who my colleagues were. While trying to fit into the university system… then the COVID pandemic started… it still relates back to that sense of community engagement." – Julie

Julie's quote highlights the disruptive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ability of international PGRs to establish a sense of community. The lack of in-person interactions due to lockdowns exacerbated the isolation many international students feel upon arriving in a new academic environment. The absence of community engagement can delay their academic integration and emotional adaptation. This underscores the need for alternative structures (such as virtual networks or peer support groups) to foster a sense of belonging, even in restrictive circumstances. This ties into self-determination theory, where relatedness (the need to feel connected) is fundamental to academic success and motivation.

Julie also highlights that training offered by HE Institutions can have very positive effects on the academic work a postgraduate researcher seeks to undertake, as well as provide a platform for the community. Using an example from the host institution where this study was carried out, Julie says:

> "To be fair, from the time I started up until now, I have actually seen quite a massive change in the way of the doctoral school have umm, you know, looked after PGR students for instance, this cohort induction they do right at the start. It is very good because... you get to meet people starting the same time. You, you get to spend, I think approximately 11 or 12 weeks attending trainings together. Therefore, you kind of have enough time to develop a friendship with someone that you could that could continue throughout the duration of your PhD." – Julie

Julie's experience illustrates the positive impact of cohort-based induction training on international PGRs' ability to develop personal connections and integrate into academic life. The training not only prepares students for their academic journey but also offers structured opportunities to form lasting friendships that are crucial support networks throughout their PhD. This also reflects the importance of community-building activities early in the PGR journey, helping to combat feelings of isolation and disconnection. Omale highlights the benefits of buddy systems for PGRs upon resumption of studies, as piloted at the host institution where the research from this article was conducted:

> "As you are resuming, you are attached to somebody who was already there. Therefore, you get close to the person, you are able to talk to the person, they guide you and tell you how the society works. All kinds of trains you should not take, how you should move about at night. You know those kinds of simple, simple things that might sound simple, but they're very important for somebody who is just coming into a new country for the very first time." – Omale

Omale's quote highlights the value of buddy systems for international PGRs, where pairing new students with experienced peers can ease their transition into the academic and social environment. This mentorship provides practical guidance that helps international students navigate unfamiliar cultural and

academic norms. The mention of simple things, such as knowing how to move about at night, reflects how seemingly minor aspects of adaptation can substantially impact a student's sense of safety and comfort in a new environment. This system not only supports academic success but also fulfills the need for relatedness as described in self-determination theory.

Omale and Julie highlight the importance of guiding new PGRs to navigate a new country and connect to foster a sense of belonging in academia. They highlight the role of personal connections in successful adaptation. This is reflected in the following claim: "as you are resuming, you are attached to somebody who was already there." Such benefits of community engagement or a scheme where you are paired up with another PGR (as a buddy) are usually reproduced in more formal settings when PGRs have completed their studies. These are formally known as networking events where people meet, interact, and share connections or best practices for prospering in particular industries.

What Julie and Omale mention can be seen as the same need for such networking events to occur earlier in the life of a PGR, with less formality and more focus on building social relations. Eventually, such connections can also lead to future collaborations, research, and career opportunities. This article seeks to delineate the support international PGRs require for a more equitable research environment. This is consistent with efforts to reduce barriers faced by students in research (Helm et al., 2024) and to decolonise and include marginalised voices within research projects (Poliah et al., 2024).

3. The impact of support

While narrating the challenges they face, participants in the focus group also highlighted the impact of institutional support. There were several mentions of supervision, digital IT, and library support, as well as the importance of training delivered by the Doctoral School:

> "For me, I give it up to the IT department, I give it to the library. They gave me a brand-new laptop. They installed everything on it, and you do not know what that did to me…It is, it is made my work seamless…There was a day I needed SPSS and NVivo. I just walked there, and they installed it. You always get them, they are there, they are functional." – Soji

Soji's statement emphasises the importance of readily available institutional support, particularly from IT and library services, which directly contribute to the success of international PGRs. The ease of access to essential tools, such as SPSS and NVivo, helps alleviate the technical barriers students often face, enabling them to focus on their research. This highlights the role of institutional responsiveness in enabling PGRs to perform their academic tasks without hindrance, underscoring the institution's commitment to supporting academic progress.

Participants narrated their satisfaction with the level of support provided by the digital IT team and the library throughout their academic journey. Soji enthusiastically expresses this satisfaction by reiterating that it is important for university support teams to be available to international PGRs who may have IT issues, lack a functioning laptop, or need to develop more quantitative and qualitative research skills—particularly with research software tools. The IT support highlighted by the participant above demonstrates the readiness of institutions to enable the successful academic journeys of PGRs.

Soji's satisfaction with IT and library support reflects the critical role these services play in addressing the technological challenges international PGRs face. Access to up-to-date resources, such as laptops and software, enables students to stay on track with their academic responsibilities, ensuring that logistical issues do not interfere with research progress. The phrase "*made my work seamless*" highlights how functional institutional support contributes to a smooth academic experience, allowing international students to focus on their research and skills development.

Another participant mentioned the impact of positive support from supervisors. Participants describe how supervisors' interactions with international PGRs are important because they make the latter feel valued, heard, seen, and included within academia. Such interactions can be as normal as the supervisor asking how the PGR is, how their family is, how they are getting on with developing their career, and then feeding all of that into the academic work they will produce. The participant expresses that the level of attention to their life outside academia makes them feel at ease with the supervisor and has positive benefits for their mental health.

> "She (supervisor) has treated me in a way that made it better. Therefore, and since then, she has shown interest about… She asks about my family. Are they coming in? Even my job references and all of that. Then, she reads. She's quite fast with reading (my work), and she sends her feedback." – Collins

Collins' quote highlights the impact of personal support from supervisors, where a genuine interest in students' well-being and personal lives plays a pivotal role in making international PGRs feel valued and supported. This kind of support helps students feel included in the academic community, fostering a sense of belonging that can enhance both their emotional well-being and academic engagement. By addressing the whole person, supervisors create a foundation of trust that supports students' academic success.

Other participants in the focus group also demonstrated a sense of appreciation for the positive support conveyed by supervisors who asked after their welfare before discussing the research. What stands out in Collins' account is that his supervisor's first gesture of support was to ask about his well-being and that of his family. This personal concern appears to be particularly meaningful to Collins, as he mentions before describing the academic support he has received. It also demonstrates support for the 'whole person' by the supervisors. Academic support is highlighted in the statement: "She's quite fast with reading (my work)

and she sends her feedback." While responsiveness and prompt feedback are necessary for all PGRs, for international PGRs navigating unfamiliar institutional cultures, communication norms, and academic expectations, they reduce uncertainty and signal care and inclusion. Supervisor support of this navigation is crucial to PGR success.

DISCUSSION

The current study focused on exploring the support needs of international PGRs as they settle into academia in the UK. Several factors make the PGR journey unique from the pursuit of other degrees. Across universities in the UK, PGRs typically work on research projects individually, and this experience may differ from that in other academic arrangements at other study levels. This is because PGRs may lack the default peer networks that come with classroom-based learning, as available in other levels of learning, such as undergraduate study. Being part of a community is well established as important for student success and mental health (Brunsting et al., 2018; Panayidou & Priest, 2021), but the very nature of PGR studies can make creating communities challenging, with well-known issues of isolation spanning across the sector (Jach, 2024). The potential for isolation is compounded for students who have left behind their home support systems and frequently struggle to integrate into broader university communities in foreign countries.

The results demonstrated international PGRs' desire to know their peers and to be part of a community, as well as a need to be considered as whole people. All of these factors are essential for building a sense of belonging when you have entered a foreign education system. The desire for community expressed by the participants aligns closely with self-determination theory (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), which emphasises the importance of relatedness as a fundamental psychological need. The participants' expressed yearning for social connection underscores the centrality of relatedness in fostering academic success. By implementing community-oriented interventions, such as cohort-based training programmes and peer-assisted buddy systems, HE institutions can address this intrinsic need. In doing so, they not only enhance students' sense of belonging but also cultivate the intrinsic motivation necessary for sustained academic achievement and integration.

From the perspective of cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), international PGRs often enter the UK academic system without the requisite social and academic capital to navigate the complexities of a new environment. The barriers these students face illustrate a deficiency in institutional cultural capital. The difficulties identified, ranging from navigating the private housing market to understanding the technicalities of ethics and open-access publishing, are not merely logistical; they are barriers created by an unfamiliarity with the UK's specific social and institutional habitus. By institutionalising support through structured cohorts and peer signposting, universities can effectively facilitate the transfer of cultural capital. This proactive approach helps "level the playing field," ensuring that international PGRs can convert their existing skills

into academic success while mitigating the stress and culture shock that arises when their background does not align with the expectations of the UK HE system.

Participants highlighted the value of the cohort-based trainings they had been offered in helping to create connections and build community. The cohort-based training ranged from ethics and research methods to the use of statistical software and open-access research publications. From the focus group feedback, it was evident that the training sessions served both academic and peer engagement purposes. We propose that the value of this cohort model—featuring weekly sessions during the first 12-week trimester—lies in its ability to support students' transition into postgraduate research, which is significantly less structured than any taught programmes previously undertaken. Not only does it provide essential information and align expectations and professional development, but it also facilitates the gradual development of human connections through the repeated coming together of peers at the same stage of the journey.

The value of developing cohorts of doctoral students is supported by studies that have shown a positive impact (Bista & Cox, 2014; Choy, S., Delahaye & Saggers, 2015). However, we suggest that the value is even greater for international students who are not just transitioning into the less-structured world of a postgraduate research degree but are doing so in an entirely new educational context. Participants also suggested implementing buddy systems to support international PGRs in transitioning into UK academia. Buddies, often fellow PGRs, offer relatability and accessibility that formal academic supervisors may lack. Peer status reduces the psychological barriers to asking for help, as there is no perceived judgment, authority, or power imbalance (Nagai, 2015). Buddies can provide guidance, shared lived experiences, and signpost resources: all of which are invaluable for international students navigating an unfamiliar academic and cultural landscape. Studies (Panayidou & Priest, 2021; Sun et al., 2025) have evidenced the benefits of buddy schemes in helping the integration of international students.

Notably, across the focus groups, participants highlight the benefit of community as a factor that could support settling into UK academia. Participants relayed the impact of difficulty connecting with the community on international PGRs' journeys. Specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on social gatherings were imposed, was highlighted. Feelings of isolation among international students upon arriving in a foreign country have been reported in the broader literature (Girmay & Singh, 2019; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Yuan & Cheng, 2016). Therefore, this finding suggests that the lack of connection to the community was exacerbated by COVID-19-related restrictions during the global pandemic. The pandemic was unprecedented, but it provided a further avenue for the wider HE sector to appreciate the impact of isolation on international PGRs. Encouraging increased social interactions and providing resources to promote them could help alleviate feelings of isolation and cultural shock, as found in the current study (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). An improved sense of identity or belonging can positively impact the PGR journey for international students, as several authors have highlighted its contribution to the overall academic experience (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). As

evidence suggests that many communities, including PGR communities, have become more isolated since COVID-19 (Akpen et al., 2024) and many people are now working predominantly at home (McPhail et al., 2024), it has become all the more important for HE institutions to undertake activities that foster community early in the PGR journey. Schemes such as the cohort-based training and buddy systems, which can mitigate isolation, represent a meaningful way for UK HE institutions to facilitate the development of peer support and a sense of community. Resulting expanded networks can enable international PGRs to more rapidly settle in UK academia.

One of the barriers participants raised for settling into the UK was challenges around accommodation. PGRs—many of whom have families—must navigate the complexities of private housing, which presents affordability, suitability, and accessibility issues. These challenges are not only logistical; they can have profound consequences for the PGR journey. Housing instability or poor living conditions are significant sources of stress, contributing to mental health difficulties and ultimately reduced research productivity (Peterie et al., 2025). While housing may not traditionally be seen as an academic concern, it undermines academic engagement and progress. Researchers who are distracted by the search for a safe, affordable place to live—or who are dealing with overcrowding, long commutes, or insecure tenancy—may struggle to focus on their research, attend supervisory meetings, or participate in academic life. Residential status has also been shown to influence well-being, with students living in unstable or unsuitable housing reporting higher levels of stress and loneliness (Morris et al., 2023; Peterie et al., 2025). These stressors can substantially impact international PGRs, who may arrive with documentation or expectations shaped by their home country's systems—only to find that these are insufficient or incompatible with UK housing requirements. Therefore, institutions must acknowledge the role of housing in shaping the PGR experience. It will be beneficial for incoming students to receive information about what to expect in terms of accommodation—both costs and processes—and to be supported with practical guidance to help them navigate the UK housing system. This includes clarifying what documentation is needed, what types of housing are available, and how to avoid common pitfalls. By proactively addressing these issues, universities can help reduce the burden on PGRs, support their well-being, and create the conditions for academic success.

Generally, our participants demonstrated that non-academic support remains for the academic journey of international PGRs and enables them to succeed academically. Participants highlighted how IT support and library services can enhance the research experience of international PGRs, especially when technical assistance and academic resources are readily accessible, as also found by Palvia and colleagues (2018). Having IT support readily available supports integration and demonstrates that the institution values international PGR, which helps develop a sense of belonging. Furthermore, Baltaru (2019) showed that research productivity can be further enhanced by the availability of appropriate nonacademic support services for international PGRs.

The primary source of support for PGRs will be their supervisors, and our participants highlight the impact that supervision can have on international students and their PhD journeys. Supervision is central to the PGR experience, shaping not only research outcomes but also personal and academic development. For international PGRs, supervisors are vital guides through unfamiliar academic systems, helping to clarify expectations and institutional norms (San & Guo, 2023). Effective supervision requires cultural literacy—an understanding of how communication, authority, and academic engagement vary across cultures (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). Without this, cultural mismatches can intensify the inherent power imbalance in supervision, leaving students feeling disempowered or hesitant to seek support (Guarimata-Salinas et al., 2024). Conversely, culturally responsive supervision fosters trust, a sense of belonging, and academic confidence. Supervisors who engage with the whole person—not just the project—can have a transformative impact on wellbeing and success. A study by Smith and colleagues (2016) evidenced that supportive supervisors make cultural adjustments for international PGRs easier. This finding is consistent with publications by several authors that have highlighted the positive impact of supervisor support on successful PhD study (Sidhu et al., 2017). The uniqueness of the PGR supervisor relationship and role of the personal tutor is important to recognise, especially for international students, in which many of whom may come from contexts where questioning your supervisor or sharing personal challenges may not be deemed culturally appropriate (Guarimata-Salinas et al., 2024).

While there are several studies on the topic of international students more broadly (Girmay & Singh, 2019; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Sverdlik et al., 2018), this study fills a critical gap in the existing scholarship by addressing the issues international PGRs may face when studying at UK universities. The literature primarily focuses on academic challenges, such as supervision, academic isolation, and cultural adjustment. However, few studies have systematically examined the broader, non-academic support needs of international PGRs, particularly in areas such as peer networks, accommodation, and pastoral care. This study contributes to the existing body of research by specifically addressing how these often-overlooked non-academic factors significantly influence the academic success and integration of international PGRs in the UK. Notably, most determinants of success that impact settling into PGR journeys (in the UK) by international students highlighted by this study were not directly 'academic'; yet, they significantly impact the academic journeys of international PGRs. This finding is ultimately consistent with the existing literature, which highlights the impact of broader factors on the PhD experience (Pyhältö et al., 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample size is not representative of the broader UK HE international PGR community, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Notably, the majority were from the African

continent, creating a demographic skew that may influence the findings. Specifically, the experiences shared by these participants may reflect challenges that are more pertinent to international PGRs from the African region, such as visa constraints, accommodation difficulties, and potential housing discrimination, which may not be as widely applicable to other international student populations. Second, there is the possibility that focus group participants were impacted by social desirability bias due to the presence of other participants, which may have influenced the authenticity of their responses. Finally, due to the focus group setting and time limitations, in-depth follow-up on some responses was not feasible. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the specific challenges faced by international PGRs and offers recommendations for improving their integration into UK academia.

CONCLUSION

International PGRs face unique challenges as they adapt to new academic and cultural environments while conducting research. This study explored the needs of international PGRs as they settle into academia in the UK. The article provides insights for the wider HE community on general factors that may help international PGRs settle into academia. As highlighted in the article, participants mention the positive potentials of buddy schemes, PGR community groups, and support from supervisors and personal tutors throughout their PGR journey beyond academic purposes. Community is essential—not just socially but also as a mechanism for knowledge transfer and a sense of belonging. However, barriers such as housing, isolation, and unfamiliar systems persist. The findings suggest that clear communication, culturally-literate supervision, effective onboarding, and practical guidance can be beneficial. There is a need for additional research to determine how international PGRs can have space to express their views and convey their needs to institutions, given their diverse backgrounds. The use of a mixed-method research approach will provide useful insight into this area of inquiry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the participants who took part in the focus groups. Additionally, assistance from the PGR support officers in advertising the study to participants at the University of Salford is appreciated. We extend thanks to Stephen Azumara for his independent review and comments on this article.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilised artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity: to clarify and expand unclear expressions within the manuscript. For instance, when the first author received feedback from the other coauthors on clarity and conciseness, ChatGPT was employed to support clarification of writing.

The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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Author bios

David Junior Gilbert, PhD, is a University Fellow in the School of Health and Society at the University of Salford, Manchester. Gilbert was the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) lead for international postgraduate researchers at the University of Salford in 2023. d.j.gilbert1@salford.ac.uk

Keren Poliah, PhD, is a researcher at the University of Salford. Her thesis, Words from World Watchers: Experiences with the Occult in Mauritius, resists conventional Anglo-centric PhDs and creates a space for the subaltern to be heard through research. Her interests include religious studies, indigenous research, marginalized subjects, deep listening, photography, and method writing.

Hannah Helm, PhD, is a sessional lecturer in English Literature and Widening Participation Manager in the Doctoral School at the University of Salford. Her major research interests lie in equality, diversity, and inclusion; access to higher education; and feminist, anti-sanist, and anti-ableist representations of women in literature and film. Email: drhannahhelm@hotmail.com

Maggie Hardman, PhD, SFHEA. Retired from University of Salford. Her research interests include the lived experiences of nonnative doctoral candidates in the completion of their studies. Email: maggie.hardman@outlook.com

Prof. Katherine Yates is Director of the Doctoral School at the University of Salford and has a strong commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable postgraduate research environment. Katherine's area of research interests are biodiversity conservation planning, marine spatial management, stakeholders, policy, marine protected areas, and fisheries management.
K.L.Yates@salford.ac.uk

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

APPENDIX 1: Participant invitation letter

Version 3 – 12/02/2023

Dear International PGR,

I am inviting you to take part in an online survey to explore the needs of International Postgraduate Researchers as a part of an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) project.

Kindly click this link/scan the QR Code to provide responses to the survey questions: (LINK)

We would also appreciate your participation in focus groups to assist us gain better insight about your experiences. Please kindly reply to the researcher's email (included below) if interested.

The findings from this study could inform future policies regarding International PGRs within the University of Salford and possibly, the wide higher education setting in the UK.

I hope that you will be able to contribute to the University's understanding of the needs of International PGRs.

Yours Sincerely,