International Students' Social Experiences of Studying a Postgraduate Course in Britain: A Case Study of Cardiff University

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Abstract

The study explores international master's students' social experiences at Cardiff University and the support provided during the 2020 academic year, when COVID-19 was at its peak. This research draws upon rich qualitative data from 20 purposively selected participants. The selection criteria ensured gender balance, international representation, diverse undergraduate backgrounds, and inclusion of both remote and UK-based postgraduate students from various academic programs. Data were collected utilising semi-structured one-to-one Zoom interviews. The study used NVivo 12 Pro to conduct thematic data analysis. The study found that international postgraduate students at Cardiff University generally had positive social experiences, forming friendships and joining student societies. However, COVID-19 restrictions limited in-person interactions. The university provided support services, including English language help, counselling, well-being services, and international student support, such as scholarships. The findings of this research recommended that the university communicate frequently with international students about all the activities and student societies on campus. Likewise, the university should hold online events for students to meet other foreign students virtually. Universities must acknowledge that encouraging international postgraduate students to have a pleasant social experience is essential to advancing diversity, inclusivity, and cross-cultural interaction as well as academic achievement on campus. Similarly, COVID-19 constraints highlight the necessity for colleges to create adaptable and creative strategies for social interaction, such as growing online communities and virtual gatherings.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom has experienced a substantial increase in the number of international students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies. This surge has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the pursuit of world-class education and the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Findlay et al., 2012). As a result of the internationalisation of higher education markets, the UK has become the second most popular destination for international students (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). For instance, in the 2004/2005 academic year, 318,395 international students were enrolled in UK higher education institutions, and this figure rose to 435,230 by 2011/2012 (McDonald, 2014). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2021) indicated a continued upward trend, with

485,645 international students enrolled in 2018/2019, a significant increase from the 458,520 reported the previous year. Notably, full-time master's programs attracted the highest proportion of international students, accounting for approximately 45% of the total international student population during that period.

The growing presence of international students highlights the increasing importance of the internationalisation of higher education, which is beneficial not only for academic quality enhancement but also for economic and cultural development. Chien (2015) emphasises that internationalisation promotes educational excellence, economic growth, and cross-cultural understanding. In economic terms, international students represent a critical revenue source, contributing nearly one-third of university income through tuition fees (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). UKCISA (2012) projected that international students would contribute an estimated £26 billion to the British economy by 2025, illustrating their significant role in the country's higher education landscape.

Beyond economic gains, the presence of a diverse international student population enriches the cultural fabric of academic institutions. International students bring with them distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, facilitating intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural learning, and the formation of global networks essential for participation in a globalised knowledge economy (Owens & Loomes, 2010). These interactions not only enhance the personal development of students but also contribute to the international outlook of British universities.

Multiple factors influence international students' decisions to pursue postgraduate education in the UK. Among these are limited educational and career advancement opportunities in their home countries, which prompt students to seek international qualifications as a means of enhancing their employability (Chien, 2015). The appeal of UK postgraduate programs is further strengthened by their relatively short duration, typically one year, compared to longer programs elsewhere (Bamber, 2014). Additionally, the desire to improve English language proficiency remains a compelling motivator for many international students (Wawera & McCamley, 2020).

Despite these advantages, international students face a variety of challenges upon their arrival in the UK. The initial period of adjustment is often characterized by emotional stress, including self-doubt and diminished self-esteem, as students navigate unfamiliar academic and social environments (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). To ease this transition, Brown and Holloway (2008) advocate for proactive institutional support through regular personal tutoring and the promotion of cultural and social engagement.

Financial concerns also emerge as significant stressors. The high cost of living in the UK, combined with substantial tuition fees, imposes financial and emotional burdens on international students and their families. Many students report restricted social participation due to limited financial resources, which adversely affects their overall university experience (Bamber, 2014).

Social integration represents another area of difficulty. Many international postgraduate students report challenges in forming meaningful connections with British students, often citing a lack of shared social spaces or interests (Schartner, 2016). However, early access to internet communication tools has helped mitigate homesickness by facilitating ongoing contact with family and friends (Bartram, 2008). These virtual networks play a crucial role in providing psychological support and aiding students' emotional adaptation to the new environment (James, 2020). While online connectivity does not guarantee successful integration, Lee et al. (2011) note that its use for local networking enhances social adjustment.

Language barriers are commonly reported by international students, particularly in informal settings. Despite high entry scores in English proficiency exams such as IELTS, many students struggle with regional accents, colloquialisms, and academic terminology (McDonald, 2014). These linguistic challenges often lead to miscommunication, heightened anxiety, and difficulties in understanding course material and engaging in academic activities (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011).

Cultural adjustment is another prominent challenge. Many students experience symptoms of culture shock, including homesickness, confusion, loneliness, and disorientation during their initial period of settlement (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Cultural proximity plays a role in the adjustment process, as students from North America tend to acclimate more easily to the UK context due to shared cultural norms (Chien, 2016).

Some international students also report feelings of isolation stemming from limited interaction with academic staff. For instance, students from China expressed frustration over the formalized relationship with tutors in the UK, contrasting it with the more personal connections common in their home institutions (Bamber, 2014). These differences in academic culture can contribute to feelings of alienation.

Further social difficulties arise from differences in social norms and values. Students report challenges in adapting to unfamiliar social activities and behaviors in student accommodations, which sometimes include disruptive behavior or lack of communal responsibility (McMahon, 2018). Cultural tensions also arise when students are encouraged to adopt more individualistic attitudes, which may conflict with the collectivist values upheld in their home cultures, as observed among Thai students in Tarry's (2011) study.

Despite limited participation in student societies, many international students report a sense of belonging within the broader multicultural university community. Interactions with peers from diverse national backgrounds foster intercultural sensitivity, broaden perspectives, and challenge preconceived notions (Coneyworth et al., 2020; Schartner, 2015). These experiences highlight the value of diversity in promoting mutual understanding and global citizenship.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the experiences of international postgraduate students during the 2020/2021 academic year. Public health restrictions led to the cancellation of in-person academic and social events (Tesar, 2020). Many students were unable to travel to the UK due to border closures and were consequently compelled to study remotely (Xiong et al., 2020). Universities responded by shifting from traditional face-to-face instruction to online and blended learning formats, leading to an unprecedented transformation in teaching and learning modalities (Burns et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore foreign postgraduate students' social experiences of studying at Cardiff University and the support offered to them by the institution. The findings of this study could help the universities in the UK and abroad develop policies and practices that will help international postgraduate students have a positive social experience. This is essential for fostering diversity, inclusion, and cultural exchange on campus, all of which help students succeed academically. Additionally, this study is significant because it draws attention to the difficulties posed by COVID-19 restrictions, which emphasise the necessity for colleges to create adaptable and creative strategies for social interaction, such as increasing online platforms and virtual social events, to guarantee that international students can continue to interact and form bonds even in situations where face-to-face meetings are impractical.

This research aims to a) explore the social experiences of international students studying a master's course at Cardiff University, and b) identify the type of support that Cardiff University offers to international students.

This research seeks to answer the following two questions:
1) What are the social experiences of international students studying a master's course at Cardiff University?
2) What type of support was offered to international students studying a master's course at Cardiff University?

METHODS

This investigation employed a qualitative approach to gather in-depth data regarding the social experiences of foreign students studying a postgraduate course at Cardiff University and the support offered to them by the institution. Data were collected utilising semi-structured one-to-one Zoom interviews. Each participant was given an information sheet outlining the study's goals, methods, voluntary nature, and ethical considerations before the interviews. Participants agreed to participate in the study by signing a consent form after reading the information leaflet. Every interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted according to a pre-made interview schedule that included open-ended questions related to the goals of the study. In this study, interview questions were developed by the researcher to explore the social experiences of foreign postgraduate students at Cardiff University and the support provided to them by the institution. The questions were designed in alignment with the research objectives to ensure that the data collected would provide deep insights into students' lived experiences, challenges, and the nature of institutional support. To validate the interview guide, it was reviewed by an academic peer, a research supervisor familiar with qualitative research and the topic area. Feedback focused on question clarity, cultural sensitivity, and the extent to which the questions addressed the research aims. Revisions were made based on this feedback to improve the guide's quality and appropriateness. Furthermore, a pilot interview was conducted via Zoom with a foreign postgraduate student who was not part of the main study sample. This helped test the clarity and flow of the questions, as well as the technical aspects of conducting virtual interviews. Minor adjustments were made to the interview schedule based on this pilot, ensuring that the final version effectively guided the interviews while allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. The main theme of the interviews was to explore in depth the social experiences of international students enrolled in postgraduate programmes at Cardiff University. Additionally, the interviews aimed to identify the types of support the university provides to these international students. To guarantee that the responses were accurately recorded, authorisation was sought in advance to audio-record the interviews, which were conducted in English. Qualitative data was generated from the interviews. All information was safely kept on a password-protected computer, and to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used in reports and transcripts.

This research typically employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) aspect of thematic analysis. Moreover, NVivo 12 Pro Software was employed to analyze data thematically. There was a mixture of in vivo codes and descriptive coding. Thematic analysis was mainly achieved in an "inductive data-driven manner" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83), where the themes were developed from the interview data itself. This approach was preferred because there is scant research regarding this area of investigation and themes thus emerged from the interview data.

The study gathered qualitative evidence from a sample of 20 purposively selected foreign postgraduate scholars. The study needed 20 participants to fulfil its goal. To guarantee data saturation and get a range of viewpoints on the social experiences of foreign students studying a postgraduate course at Cardiff University and the support offered to them by the institution, a sample of 20 students was selected. This number is manageable for qualitative analysis while enabling deep, rich insights. The selection requirements were that students should serve both genders and that some foreign students

should have completed their undergraduate studies in Britain and others in their home countries. Moreover, students should be studying remotely in their home countries or have moved to the UK to study a postgraduate course. Finally, students should be from different countries and study various courses at the university.

The following table summarises the criteria of the study participants. Among the 20 participants, 15 were female and five were male. Three students completed their undergraduate studies in Britain, while 17 studied outside the UK. Furthermore, four participants studied remotely, while 16 participants moved to the UK to pursue a postgraduate course at Cardiff University.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Participant Pseudonym	Participant's course of study	Participant's Country of origin	Moved to the UK	Studying remotely	Gender	Undergraduate course	
						In the UK	Outside the UK
Amber	MSc Accounting and Finance	Botswana	✓		Female	✓	
Selma	MSc Accounting and Finance	Malaysia	✓		Female	✓	
Kimberly	MSc Arts and Political Communication	Malta	✓		Female		✓
Jesicca	MSc Water Engineering	Malawi	✓		Female		✓
Angela	MSc Child Psychological disorders	Egypt		✓	Female		✓
Clement	MSc Advanced computer science	India	✓		Male		✓
Perry	MSc in Computer and IT management	Pakistan	✓		Female		✓
Maria	MSc Computing	Pakistan	✓		Female		✓
Adam	MSc Structural Engineering	Indonesia	✓		Male		✓
Monica	MSc Financial Economics	China	✓		Female		✓
Simon	MSc Data Science Analysis	India		✓	Male		✓
Rejoice	MSc Arts and Political Communication	Cameroon		✓	Female		✓
Scott	MSc Leadership management	Panama, USA	✓		Male		✓
Meisie	MSc Education	China	✓		Female		✓
Kylie	MSc Education	China	✓		Female		✓
Jacob	MSc Data Science	Tanzania		✓	Male		✓
Julliet	MSc Radiography	Ghana	✓		Female		✓
Caroline	MSc Education	China	✓		Female		✓

| Tokyo | MSc Structural Engineering | Uganda | ✓ | Female | | ✓ |
| Michelle | MSc Political communication | Egypt | ✓ | Female | ✓ | |

RESULTS

Theme 1: The university's social life

Table 2 depicts the three sub-themes that were identified during the analysis of data about international students' social experiences of studying a postgraduate course at Cardiff University.

Table 2: Sub-themes: The university's social life

Sub-themes
1. Peer companion
2. Students' societies
3. Extracurricular activities

Peer companion

Seventy-five percent of participants who travelled to the UK claimed they made occasional friends in the UK. Clement commented:

Basically, I made friends with students at my accommodation and with classmates through group work. So, students who were doing group work with me were my friends.

The quote highlights that friendships were formed both through group work and shared accommodation, suggesting that academic and living spaces are vital for social integration among international postgraduate students.

Moreover, 20% of participants who travelled to the UK made some friends from outside the UK only. These were still classmates that they had only met online. Perry remarked as follows:

Yes, whenever I make friends in my class is either they are having their studies remotely because they cannot travel to the UK due to the Covid-19 pandemic. So I only have online friends, no friends here. All the people who are here [in the UK] are like they don't know me or I don't know them. But I have made good online friends through projects and group assignments and it was nice to have many international [online] friends. It was a nice experience.

The quote reflects how the pandemic shifted social interactions online, limiting in-person connections for international postgraduate students. Despite this, virtual group work enabled meaningful friendships and a positive sense of global connectedness.

Furthermore, the remaining 5% of participants reported having made no friendships with peers due to this year's Covid-19 situation. For example, Jacob made no friends as "*there has been no opportunity to meet each other in social settings.*"

Similarly, Adam claimed that "*I expected to make more friends so that we can discuss class materials during our free time, but this did not happen. I have been all alone at home.*"

The quotes highlight the negative impact of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions on the social experiences of international postgraduate students. The lack of in-person interaction led to isolation and unmet expectations of academic and social engagement.

Lastly, all students who were studying remotely made no friends because they did not travel. Simon who studied remotely joylessly, expressed that:

I did not make any friends] because you know I am studying remotely and I am not in [UK]. I feel like I did not get that chance to make friends, I did not travel and that strong bond between me and the university is not there because now I am studying remotely.

The above quote highlights how remote learning, driven by COVID-19 restrictions, hindered international postgraduate students from forming friendships and building a sense of connection with peers and the university community.

Students' societies

Some students who travelled to the UK participated in various student societies at the university. Scott, one of them, sadly stated:

I joined the Volleyball society, but it was just active for 2 weeks, and after 2 sessions, it stopped because of the restrictions back in November. Everything was cancelled and they decided to do outside exercises but it is not the same as what I paid for about £70.00. So it was a waste of money on my side.

The quote illustrates how COVID-19 restrictions disrupted international postgraduate students' involvement in university societies, limiting social engagement and leading to feelings of disappointment and financial loss.

In addition, participants from Africa participated in the Zim Society which aims for international students from Africa to meet each other and socialise together. Selma shared her experience,

I joined the Zim Society whereby we meet at the park and just chill. The benefit is that the Zim society was more of a social thing where we meet with [African] people and chill together.

This quote shows that despite COVID-19 restrictions, informal gatherings through cultural societies provided international postgraduate students with valuable social interaction and a sense of community with peers from similar backgrounds.

Moreover, other participants joined the dancing club to learn dancing skills. Rejoice asserted that:

I joined the dancing club, but due to covid-19, they didn't arrange many sessions. So, that was my interest in joining. I didn't check any other clubs. I will check, but maybe not this year because of COVID-19.

The quote reflects how COVID-19 restrictions limited international postgraduate students' opportunities to participate in university clubs, discouraging further involvement and affecting their overall social experience.

Lastly, several participants also joined the Athletic Union whereby students meet with the society's members and do physical exercises. For instance, Kimberly briefly expressed that:

I joined the Athletic Union so we will go running [sic] like on Wednesday and Tuesday evening. From 6 pm, we go to the park for a run but then we have to stop because new Covid-19 laws were introduced for lockdown. We have to stop because we have to avoid public gatherings. We do Zoom meetings but since lockdown, we have not met in person. Athletic Society is more [of] an exercise thing.

This quote highlights how COVID-19 lockdown measures disrupted in-person activities within university societies, limiting international postgraduate students' opportunities for social interaction and reducing engagement to virtual meetings with less personal connection.

On the contrary, all participants who were studying remotely noted that they failed to partake in these societies as they did not travel to the UK. Rejoice cheerlessly responded that:

[I did not participate] because I am not in the UK and I am not at the university. So it makes it impossible for me to participate in any social groups.

The quote reveals how studying remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions prevented international postgraduate students from engaging in university social groups, leading to missed opportunities for connection and campus involvement.

Some students did not partake in the university societies due to the Covid-19 pandemic's regulations, which prohibited social gatherings. For example, Scott stated explicitly that:

I didn't participate in any [societies] because I think the Covid-19 restrictions played quite a big role. It wouldn't be of any use to register for a society when you know people won't be meeting, but instead, you will only be meeting online. I want to meet people physically.

The quote emphasises how the shift to online interactions due to COVID-19 discouraged international postgraduate students from joining societies, as the lack of in-person engagement reduced the appeal and perceived value of participation.

Other international students did not partake in the school societies. For instance, Jesicca revealed,

I did not participate in any society because I am not aware if there are societies in the school." Adam, who was *asked* what the university can do to ensure students are acquainted with student societies on campus suggested that "*the university can reach out to the international students individually to tell them [that] you can access these services without any cost. This is because students are unaware of these services and need to be aware."*

The quotes reveal that a lack of awareness, compounded by COVID-19 restrictions, limited international postgraduate students' participation in university societies. They suggest the need for more proactive communication from universities to ensure students are informed and engaged despite the challenges.

Extracurricular activities

Three participants represented other students, respectively, as a student representative in MSc Finance and MSc Finance and Accounting, a postgraduate representative of the students' Cyber Union, and the well-being officer. Amber briefly explained her role:

I am a student representative for students in MSc Finance and MSc in Finance and Accounting. So, I joined meetings with [university] staff and I organize things, collect data from students, share it with staff, and give correct feedback to students. I am the chairperson, and I used to do a lot of things. The benefit is that I get more exposure and learn more about leadership, chair meetings, and talk to lecturers and other administrative people in the school.

This quote shows that despite COVID-19 restrictions, some international postgraduate students engaged in extracurricular roles like student representation, which offered valuable leadership experience and enhanced interaction with university staff and peers.

On the contrary, certain participants did not partake in extra-curricular activities due to limited academic time. Michelle gave her response as to why she failed to engage in extracurricular tasks:

 [I did not participate in any extracurricular activities] because I had to study. I have to do some research. So I spent most of my time on that, and I was unable to participate in any of

those.

This quote highlights how academic demands, intensified by the remote and isolated learning environment during COVID-19, limited international postgraduate students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities, further reducing opportunities for social interaction.

Similarly, students' lack of awareness of extra-curricular activities on campus resulted in their lack of participation in such activities. Adam claimed that:

I did not know if they had any extra-curricular activities going on in the school, even online,
I did not know about them. I could have taken part in volunteering and such things.

The quote reveals that poor communication during COVID-19 left international postgraduate students unaware of available extracurricular activities, resulting in missed opportunities for social engagement and personal development.

Tokyo was asked to suggest what the university can do to boost the international students' social experience. This is what he has to say:

I think the university should organise activities for international students to come together and interact as well as share their culture, because some of these international students are from Africa, America, Australia, and Asia. It is good for them to have at least 2-3 days of them coming together to introduce themselves and share cultural norms. It will create a good bond between people from different cultural backgrounds.

The above quote emphasises the need for culturally inclusive activities to enhance international postgraduate students' social experience. It suggests that post-COVID efforts should focus on creating spaces for intercultural interaction to foster connection and community.

Similarly, students who completed their undergraduate studies in the UK recommended that the university implement similar activities that were carried out at their former universities. Maria expressed that:

I think they should hold more international student events because at the university that I went to before, we would have Christmas dinner and New Year dinner. All these major events for international students, where we would mingle, talk to each other… and feel welcomed.

This quote highlights that inclusive events, like those at previous universities, help international postgraduate students feel welcomed. Reintroducing such activities post-COVID could improve social engagement and belonging.

Theme 2: The university support services

Table 3 presents the three sub-themes that were revealed during the analysis of data regarding the support offered to international students by the institution.

Table 3. Sub-themes: The university's support services

Sub-themes
1. English language support services
2. Counselling and wellbeing services
3. International student support services

English language support services

International students whose first language is not English experience difficulties as a result of their poor English language skills. Monica briefly explained the challenge she experienced with British pronunciation:

My first language is not English so there are many difficulties. Sometimes I can't follow the native speaker. It is very hard for me to understand the native speakers with a strong accent. This was an issue as there was a time I lost my way, and then I got direction from people. I got lost because I don't understand them due to their strong accent.

The quote highlights how language barriers, especially understanding strong native accents, posed challenges for international postgraduate students. These difficulties, intensified by limited social interaction during COVID-19, affected both communication and daily experiences.

Fortunately, the university provided English language support classes. Sixty percent of the participants claimed that they took advantage of the support classes. Meisie elaborated that:

They teach us some grammar, that kind of stuff and also they offer one-to-one [English] tutorials. The tutors are very helpful and you can just sign up for a one-to-one tutorial and they will check your work like they proofread my work. So they were very helpful.

The quote shows that language support services, such as one-to-one English tutorials, were helpful for international postgraduate students, providing personalized assistance to overcome language barriers and improve academic writing.

On the contrary, English for dissertation writing classes and one-to-one English tutorials were criticised by several participants. Adam argued that:

They were good, but I feel they were more basic than I thought. They were for someone who was about to start working on their dissertation, given that I attended them at the end of the semester. I was kind of ahead of what they taught in this class. But they were good. I don't regret attending them. They made some things clearer. In general, they were a bit basic.

This finding suggests that while the English writing support was helpful, it was too basic for advanced international postgraduate students, though it still provided some clarity.

On the other hand, some participants did not utilise the English service because they believe that their English language skills are good. For instance, Kylie stated that:

"I did not participate] because my English is quite efficient for the university."

The quote suggests that some international postgraduate students felt their English skills were sufficient and chose not to use language support services.

Counselling and well-being services

Thirty-five percent of postgraduate students used the counselling and well-being service at the institution. Julliet applauded the university's counselling and well-being team:

They were good. They were a great team. They responded to me quite quickly, and they arranged a therapy session for me. They were very helpful. I used it because I was not coping with school due to problems in my personal life. I just came back from home, from my dad's funeral, and I felt like my school work was suffering so I reached out to the university and I told them I needed help, so they found me a therapist and I had therapy sessions and they gave me materials that I could use as well.

The quote highlights the effectiveness of the university's counselling and well-being services, demonstrating how they provided timely support and tailored resources to help international postgraduate students cope with personal challenges affecting their academic performance.

On the contrary, 25% of participants inferred that they did not make use of the counselling and well-being service. For instance, Clement clearly expressed that:

[I did not use the counselling and wellbeing service] because I know how to take care of

myself … and I am self-independent. I know how to handle myself, and I know how to handle my problems. So I do not need any kind of counselling.

The quote reflects that some international postgraduate students, like Clement, prefer to handle personal issues independently and feel no need for counselling services, highlighting a sense of self-reliance despite the availability of support.

Moreover, all four participants who were studying remotely did not use the counselling and well-being service, pointing to the distance factor as an issue in accessing the service. For example, Jacob asserted that "*I did not use the counselling service because I did not travel.*" Additionally, students who were studying remotely were not able to make use of the counselling and wellbeing services because the university could not currently offer well-being or counselling appointments for students outside of the UK, as the working regulations and insurance requirements of other countries were not the same as the UK.

The quote highlights how the inability to access in-person services due to remote study and logistical barriers prevented international postgraduate students from utilising the university's counselling and well-being services, emphasising the challenges of offering support across borders.

International student support services

All 80% of participants who travelled to the UK made use of the international student support service. For example, Michelle divulged that "*I got my BRP [biometric residence permit] and the student ID [identification document]. They were very quick and efficient.*"

The quote shows that most international postgraduate students who travelled to the UK benefited from efficient international student support services, particularly in handling essential documents like BRPs and student IDs.

Moreover, the university made every effort to reach and attend to international students' difficulties. Amber articulated that:

Yes, I used the international student support service. There was a WhatsApp group chat that was set up by someone from the International Office. Her name is [real name of person omitted] and I asked her a lot of questions and she was really helpful. I also emailed the office twice, and they gave me the answers I was looking for.

This finding highlights that international student support services were accessible and responsive, with platforms like WhatsApp and email helping international postgraduate students receive timely and helpful guidance.

Furthermore, the international student support service acquainted international students with opportunities that were available to them after the completion of their studies. Adam asserted that:

Currently, I have joined the seminars held by the International Support Service about the graduate visa route. They are all very helpful. I like that they give support by giving a quick reply to my questions.

The quote shows that the International Student Support Service provided helpful guidance on post-study opportunities through timely seminars and quick responses.

The international office also supported international students financially during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Caroline clarified that:

I got the £350 COVID-19 fund from the university, it is not very much but still good. You need a UK bank account to access the money though.

The quote highlights that the university provided financial support to international students residing in the UK during the pandemic, which, though modest, was appreciated.

All four participants who were studying remotely did not make use of the international student support service as they did not travel. Angela stated that

I did not use the services because I did not travel

This finding reveals that remote international students did not access support services, mainly because they had not travelled to the UK and felt disconnected from on-campus provisions.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The university's social life

Peer companion

The findings suggest that international postgraduate students who travelled to the UK were more likely to form friendships compared to those studying remotely. Most friendships were formed through academic collaboration, such as group work, and in shared living spaces. However, despite these opportunities, many students expressed dissatisfaction with their social experiences, as the COVID-19 pandemic hindered their ability to develop meaningful, supportive relationships. Interestingly, some students in the UK, like Perry, made friends online due to ongoing restrictions, which contrasts with the assumption that being physically present would guarantee social connections. In contrast, students studying remotely, like Simon, reported having no opportunities to form friendships at all, highlighting the limitations of virtual learning in fostering a sense of belonging. These findings emphasise the importance of creating both in-person and virtual opportunities for peer interaction to support international students' social integration, particularly during challenging times like the pandemic.

Students' societies

According to the study's findings, formal societies like dance, volleyball, and athletic clubs were regularly shut down or moved online due to COVID-19 regulations, which reduced student involvement, squandered membership money, and stifled excitement. Conversely, unofficial cultural events that took place outside continued to strengthen social ties, highlighting the effectiveness of compact, adaptable formats for peer support. Ironically, some on-campus students continued to rely only on their online associations, while those who studied remotely had no chance to participate in society at all. This indicates that meaningful integration is not guaranteed by either physical presence or digital platforms alone. These inconsistencies emphasise the value of dependable, hybrid programming that combines high-calibre virtual events with secure in-person activities. Furthermore, to increase awareness of available societies, proactive, focused outreach and communication are crucial. Through clear instructions and flexible forms, universities may support overseas postgraduate students in creating the peer networks that are essential to their academic achievement and mental health, even in the face of interruptions related to public health.

Extracurricular activities

The study found that the extracurricular activities of overseas postgraduate students showed a remarkable contradiction. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, a minority took up formal responsibilities as well-being officers, union delegates, or program representatives and reported stronger institutional links, improved staff engagement, and important leadership experience. However, many of their peers were completely absent from extracurricular activities, either because they were unaware of the opportunities or because they were overwhelmed by their academic obligations. This paradox shows that although extracurricular activities might be a great way to advance professionally and integrate into society, most students were essentially prevented from participating due to communication breakdowns and isolation brought on by the pandemic. To ensure that all international postgraduate students can take advantage of the psychosocial and networking benefits that these activities offer, these findings suggest that universities should not only maintain leadership and volunteer channels in

hybrid formats but also actively distribute easily understandable information and plan culturally inclusive events, like international dinners or intercultural fairs.

Theme 2: The university support services

English language support services

International postgraduates in the UK encountered significant communication challenges due to unfamiliarity with strong local accents and colloquial usage, which often left them feeling vulnerable when seeking directions or academic help. In response, Cardiff University offered English for Dissertation Writing classes alongside one-to-one tutorial sessions, with 60 percent of students taking up these services and praising the personalised proofreading and grammar support they received. However, some advanced students found the content too basic, and others, confident in their existing proficiency, opted not to participate at all, revealing a tension between standardised support and diverse learner needs. These mixed outcomes mirror McDonald's (2014, p. 63) observations that "accent, enunciation, slang, technical terminology, problems with written English, reading and with comprehension" exacerbate international students' language difficulties, and align with Erichsen and Bolliger's (2011) findings that lack of linguistic familiarity breeds confusion and misunderstanding. Collectively, these results highlight the importance of designing tiered, level-specific language programs, including advanced dissertation workshops, accent-comprehension seminars, and ongoing, targeted communication, to ensure all international postgraduates can overcome linguistic barriers, enhance academic performance, and fully integrate into the university community.

Counselling and well-being services

Counselling and well-being support for overseas postgraduates in the UK shows a strong conflict between barriers to uptake and high-quality service provision. On the one hand, more than one-third of students who were experiencing academic or personal stressors, like loneliness or loss, sought help from the university's counselling team. They reported receiving timely responses, individualised therapy sessions, and helpful self-help resources that helped them regain emotional balance and academic focus. However, almost 25% of participants refused these services, citing their confidence in self-management and a reluctance to enlist the support of a "third party." This suggests that help-seeking may be stigmatised and that cultural norms regarding independence are at play. Complicating matters further, cross-border insurance and legal restrictions completely barred remotely enrolled students from counselling, highlighting unequal access to support. All of the aforementioned findings show that, although strong in-person counselling is essential, universities also need to de-stigmatize mental health services, provide culturally aware outreach, and create compliant tele-wellness programs to guarantee that all international postgraduate students, whether on campus or overseas, can get the emotional support they need for both their academic performance and general well-being.

International student support services

The study findings showed that overseas postgraduate students who came to the UK were greatly assisted by the international student support service. These students profited from quick and easy access to services, especially when it came to getting necessary documentation like university ID cards and biometric residency permits (BRPs). By setting up a WhatsApp group, which provided a useful and casual forum for students to express issues and get timely answers, the office further improved communication and engagement. In addition to providing logistical support, the office hosted educational seminars to help students make well-informed decisions about their future by introducing them to post-study opportunities like the graduate visa pathway. In addition, little but well-received financial assistance was given during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, an apparent

contradiction surfaced: these facilities were unavailable to international students studying remotely, mainly because they were physically absent from the UK. Financial aid, for example, required a UK bank account, which remote students lacked, and the support services were typically tailored to students who were in the country. This reveals a significant service delivery gap, indicating that although the university was successful in helping students on campus, its strategy was less inclusive of international students. The findings' implications highlight the necessity for universities to implement more adaptable, hybrid support systems that equally serve international students who attend classes on campus and those who attend remotely, guaranteeing fair access to necessary services and a feeling of institutional belonging regardless of physical location.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study is its purely qualitative research design, which focused on a small, purposively selected sample of only 20 international postgraduate students at Cardiff University in the UK. This narrow focus limits the generalisability of the findings to broader populations or international postgraduate students in different contexts. Additionally, the study exclusively explored the experiences of international postgraduate students, omitting the perspectives of British students who also play a significant role in shaping the social experiences of their international peers. As a result, the findings reflect only the views of international students, without accounting for the experiences or interactions from the perspective of British students. Furthermore, the sole use of semi-structured Zoom interviews as a data collection method presents another limitation. The lack of in-person field observations restricted the opportunity for data triangulation, potentially narrowing the depth and richness of insight into the real-life experiences of international postgraduate students at Cardiff University.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study recommends that the university should communicate and provide relevant information frequently to international students regarding all the activities and student societies on campus. Moreover, participants who moved to the UK encouraged the university to boost various in-person social events specifically for international students so they can mingle and exchange cultural norms. Although certain participants argued that Zoom social events do not fill the gap in social interaction, some international students who were studying remotely urged the university to hold social events online for students to meet fellow international students and form companionship.

To build on the findings of this study and address its limitations, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the generalisability and depth of understanding of international postgraduate students' experiences. Expanding the sample size to include a more diverse group of participants from multiple universities across the UK would allow for broader comparisons and more representative insights. Additionally, future studies could include British students as participants to capture a more holistic view of the social dynamics between international and domestic students. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural interactions and mutual influences. Incorporating observational methods could also enrich the data by capturing real-time social interactions and behaviours in natural settings, thereby improving data triangulation and the contextual validity of the findings.

CONCLUSION

The study's main findings are discussed based on the research questions.

What are the social experiences of international students studying a master's course at Cardiff University?

The research findings have shown that the social experiences of international students studying at Cardiff University vary. Seventy-five percent of students who moved to the UK reported that they made friends with classmates as well as at their accommodation. Twenty percent of students who studied remotely claimed that they made online friends while five percent made no friends at all due to Covid-19, which limited students from meeting in social settings.

Additionally, participants had a positive experience because they were engaged in various student societies offered by the university. These societies comprise of volleyball society, a Zim society, a dancing club, and an athletic union. These societies enriched the social experiences of these students. However, their experiences were severely discounted because these societies lasted a short time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 regulations of social distancing restricted students from joining various societies because social gathering was prohibited, and students desired to meet each other in person. Lastly, certain students failed to partake in any society because they did not travel to the UK as they were studying remotely, and some were not acquainted with such societies.

Moreover, it is apparent from the evidence provided that some students had a positive experience of university life as a result of being a representative for other students in MSc Finance and MSc Finance and Accounting. This is because the student acquired knowledge and skills such as communication skills, organizational skills, collaborative skills, and leadership skills. These skills are beneficial to the students because they can be transferred and applied to other situations outside of university life.

However, some students' inadequate knowledge of extracurricular activities resulted in them not engaging in them, despite their desire to partake in those activities. Because postgraduate study is demanding and students thus spend most of their time doing academic-related activities, most of them do not have time to engage in extramural activities.

What type of support is offered to international students studying a master's course at Cardiff University?

The university made several services available to students to assist them with transitioning and adjusting to the new British culture. Firstly, the university offered English support classes to international students because some students had poor English language skills despite scoring good marks on their English entry tests (IELTS). However, certain students claimed that the content of these classes was too basic for the assistance they needed.

Moreover, the university provides counselling and well-being services to international students. Students who were experiencing mental health obstacles took advantage of the counselling services. These students appreciated the counselling team because it was very supportive, effective and efficient in supporting and responding to students' requests.

Furthermore, the university has an international student support office which offers services specifically to foreign students. For instance, this office was responsible for issuing biometric residence permit cards and student cards to international students. In addition, this office's task was also to communicate to international students about any opportunities available to them, such as scholarships and internship opportunities. In case of emergencies, the international office created a WhatsApp group for students to communicate with the office and get immediate feedback.

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