

Being a mobile international postgraduate research student with family in the United Kingdom: Conflict, contestation and contradictions

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Abstract

The internationalisation of higher education has influenced the dramatic rise in the mobility of students, academics and knowledge across borders. There has been growing research interest focusing on international students studying abroad. While the student experience is an area of education that is often researched, most research focuses on experiences of undergraduate students. Also in the context of international students, greater research emphasis has been placed on the academic experiences and support available for undergraduates. While such research is important, less attention has been paid to the non-academic experiences of International Post-Graduate Research Students with Families (IPGRSF). This article seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the social worlds of IPGRSF in the UK, examining students' nuclear family contexts that are often marginalised in discourse. The article legitimises the IPGRSF subaltern world by focusing on how students negotiate its demands; how they negotiate their roles as research students with their other roles as spouses and parents, and the interrelationships among these roles; and how the university as an institution interacts with the students' subaltern world. The findings show that language plays a significant role in shaping the process of mobility as well as influencing the students' and their families' integration and networking in the host country. Also, the findings suggest that students often had positive experiences at departmental level, but felt let down by the wider university support.

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education (HE) has resulted in a dramatic rise in the mobility of students across borders (Kritz 2015; Nachatar Singh, Schapper, and Jack 2014; Verbik and Lasanowski 2007). The number of globally mobile students has increased from 2.1 million in 2002 to 3.7 million in 2011 (Choudaha and Chnag 2012; OECD 2011). Every year, a large number of international students travel to the UK to pursue higher education. In 2012/13, of the UK higher education student population, 18% comprised international students (HESA 2014). At postgraduate level, this rose to 37% in 2013 (ibid 2014). This meant that, in the UK, more than one in three postgraduate students were international. However, no clear statistics are available regarding

international postgraduate students that come to the UK with their families. Only Scotland has such data – for instance, in the academic year 2014/15 a total of 5515 postgraduate students were studying there. Of these, 1275 were what we would refer to as IPGRSF; 3940 did not have family members with them. For the remaining 300 students, it was not known whether they did or not have family members or dependants with them (HESA 2016). However, despite the lack of clear statistics the increasing numbers of international students contribute greatly to the UK economy (BBC News 2012).

The term ‘internationalisation of higher education’ is a complex and contested concept. For some, internationalisation of higher education is related to the provision of education in relation to the networks of universities spread across the globe. For others, it refers to the internationalisation of knowledge, in that knowledge production is harmonised through the creation of unified global research communities (Luxon and Peelo 2009; Qiang 2003). This article refers to the internationalisation of HE as one way in which educational institutions respond to the impact of globalisation. This includes ways in which they respond to the individuality and cultural identities of migrant students in their organisation and provision of HE in terms of teaching, learning and other support services (Knight 1993; Qiang 2003). This definition suggests that internationalisation is an active and interlinked process that includes integration and contributes to the financial sustainability of the international dimension of the institution.

Responding to the needs of increasing numbers of international students, UK HE policies have become increasingly internationalised (Altbach 2015; Bartram 2008; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Stier 2002). This internationalisation can be categorised into ‘symbolic’ and ‘transformative’ (Turner and Robson 2008). As symbolic, universities are represented as active players in the global market, with the primary concern of generating revenue from international students (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009). Thus international students are viewed as clients who have to be offered a range of support services to meet their academic needs (Bartram and Terano 2011). The transformative internationalisation of education perceives universities as primarily concerned with knowledge sharing, cooperation and integration of the international dimension into the teaching, research and support services (ibid, 464).

Internationalisation of HE has resulted in an increased research focus on the motivation of international students regarding their mobility (Heczková and Jašková 2010), interculturality (Denman and Hilal 2011; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009), language (Toohey and Norton 2010), integration and networking (Bennett 2006, 2009). Although these various studies discuss aspects of international student education, they do not seem to fully address the complexity of needs and

experiences of international postgraduate students with families (IPGRSF). Most of the discussion seems to assume a degree of homogeneity among students, with the major focus being on undergraduate bachelor student experiences. This has left unexplored the unseen family world of IPGRSF, thereby raising questions about the significance that this unseen world may have for the students' educational experiences. This article addresses this gap by considering the experience of this particular group of international students.

Drawing on the notion of internationalisation of HE, the current study attempts to bridge this gap and shed further light on the complexity of the needs of international students by analysing the perspectives of IPGRSF. This notion is used as it gives voice not only to these students but also to their families. Using a qualitative case study approach and basing the findings on interviews with five families, this study highlights different though interrelated aspects of IPGRSF in relation to their mobility for education, including their attempts to integrate and university support.

2. International students' experiences

A review of the literature highlights multiple dimensions influencing international students' experiences. In particular, this article focuses on how language and institutional support influence the educational experiences of IPGRSF. Obviously there are many factors that affect IPGRSF, including the gendered nature of mobility, value conflicts, social networking, provision of childcare or schooling and funding opportunities, to name but a few. Due to limited space, this article focuses on language and institutional support. In addition to the other issues mentioned earlier, these two issues are useful indicators of the extent to which universities posit and handle the needs of IPGRSF as clients rather students in a classic sense.

2.1. Language

The English language can be seen as a language of elitism, power and prosperity, thus playing a vital role in influencing decisions about study migration destinations. Denman and Hilal (2011), for instance, argue that the English language has significant impact on Arab student educational migrations. They state that most Arab students prefer to migrate to countries such as the UK, the US and Australia where education is obtained through the medium of English. Bartram and Terano (2011, 30) support this view in their observation that international students migrate to the UK and the US, 'where the perceived currency of improved English language competence as a result of residence and study acts as a major draw'. In addition, Altbach (2015) suggests that one of the reasons why students choose English-speaking countries is that some scholarship providers

encourage students to study in countries like the UK, the US and Australia because they believe that HE education in these countries has an outstanding reputation. Researchers (Gallucci 2011; Ibrahim 1999; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Toohey and Norton 2010) consider English language as one of the crucial factors that can influence students' experience. Regarding language, this article focuses on how competency in English language influences the experiences of IPGRSF.

Language can act simultaneously as a vehicle for both empowerment and disempowerment. Level of competency in English language prior to migration impacts on how students communicate with native English speakers and integrate in the host community (Toohey and Norton 2010). This suggests that lack of English language competency can negatively impact on students' ability to negotiate their way through a new country's cultural codes and access services. Failure to master the language results in isolation, which in turn increases homesickness, which subsequently affects the educational experience (ibid). Inability to adequately use the host country's language can be disempowering, in that people feel as though they have become insignificant entities.

Language is likewise closely linked to issues of identity and citizenship. Ibrahim (1999) and Gallucci (2011) suggest that lack of ability to speak the host country language (both in terms of accent and cultural understanding) contributes to the development of the concept of the 'other'; instead of integrating, the students start to regard the people of the host countries as others. This is thus likely to be a problem for most IPGRSF as some of their family members might not have adequate language skills to socialise and access services. This can also be a problem for the students themselves. Maclean (2010) highlighted challenges that international students may face related to lack of proficiency in the English language, such as its negative impact on academic performance and self-confidence.

The literature on language and student mobility also suggests that students migrate to countries where they expect to find people who speak their native language and understand their culture (Bennett 2006, 2009; Skeldon 1997). These people were found in religious and national groups that are organised by students or those they identify with in the host country (CSSA 2009; SSCL 2012; USISOC 2012) and with whom they may share languages. This illustrates the significance of language in mobility decisions. Although such people might be considered to provide a reliable source of information in the decision-making process and assistance and support in the host countries, sometimes their usefulness to the migrant student's academic development can be contested. Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) argue that the congregation of international students with those with whom they share languages limits their opportunities to interact with the multicultural environment inside and outside the university.

2.2 Institutional support

Institutional support in relation to the experience of international students is driven by the concept of consumerism, whereby many educational institutions perceive international students as consumers who are buying the educational service provided by the institution. This is reflected in the high fees paid by international students in comparison to local students. Bartram (2008) and Tian and Lowe (2009) explain that, because of the high fees that international students pay, they are often viewed by UK and US universities as clients who pay for and therefore should be provided with services and support. These include services to address different aspects of integration, including academic support, as well as campus facilities, e.g. accommodation, banking and health care. In addition, provision of well-structured and accessible material and moral support for students plays an important role in enhancing students' educational experience.

However, this analysis of needs is often biased towards single and younger students without family and childcare responsibilities. The way these services are provided demonstrates the tendency by universities to view international students as a homogenous group with similar needs. Such a view of students points to ways in which educational institutions may fail to address the needs of IPGRSF. Accordingly, the needs of IPGRSF are often misrecognised as being the same as those of younger single students or even as absent. As a consequence, IPGRSF may not engage effectively in their academic work as they have to manage their myriad needs and responsibilities.

Although there might exist some slight similarities between the needs of the domestic mature students with family and international postgraduate research students, in regards to the demands of family responsibilities for instance, the needs of IPGRSF are different, specifically in relation to the fact that IPGRSF migrate to a different cultural context and thus have a lot of adjusting to do compared to their counterparts. Therefore, the experiences and needs of IPGRSF should be researched in their own right. Specifically, this article focuses on the experiences of these students in relation to language and institutional support. Within this framework, this article explores how language and institutional support impact the experiences of IPGRSF.

3. Methodology

To explore the issues highlighted above, we adopted a qualitative case study approach to understand the experiences of IPGRSF from their own perspectives. The approach was appropriate because of its usefulness in providing a contextual understanding of people's experiences (Mwale 2014). It also illuminates the 'contextualised exploration of conflicts' and 'contradictions' (139) of

the participants' experiences. The participants in this study were IPGRSF at a UK institution and were selected purposively according to the following specific criteria: (a) being registered full-time students at the time of the interview; (b) having completed at least six months of study; and (c) having at least one child. The purpose of the approach used in this article is not to generalise findings but rather to provide a contextual understanding of people's lived experiences (Mwale 2014). To ensure confidentiality, names of participants and universities are omitted or replaced with pseudonyms. We identified participants by family, to which we ascribed a number, followed by a description regarding whether they were the student or not. The countries of origin of the participants are not mentioned but reference is made to the regions they are from.

We selected seven individuals who represent five families. Where possible, we interviewed both adults of the family unit (i.e. husband and wife). This was not possible in all cases due to cultural barriers or to partners not being present in the UK at the time of the interview. In such cases, we used the voice of one unit of the family as reflective of the entire family. We categorised the five families into the following four types:

Type 1: Husband and wife both live in university accommodation in the UK. We interviewed the husbands and wives separately in two families of this type.

The student in Family 1 is a qualified psychologist from the Far East. She worked as a university lecturer and was about to complete her PhD in Psychology at the time of the interview. She had been living in the university's family accommodation with her husband and two children, but for health reasons had needed to send her elder daughter (aged two) home to live with grandparents. The student's husband, who is also from the Far East, is a qualified primary school teacher.

The student in Family 2 is a qualified psychologist from South-East Latin America. She was in her first year of a PhD programme in Psychology. She was living in the university's family accommodation with her husband and a son. Her husband is also a qualified psychologist from South-East Latin America.

Type 2: Husband and wife both live in an off-campus rented property in the UK. We interviewed one family in this category, referred to as Family 3. The student is a qualified educationalist from the Arabian Gulf. He was in the third year of a PhD in Education at the time of interview. He was living in the UK with his wife and two children. As a result of cultural norms we were able to interview only the husband from this family.

Type 3: The husband is studying in the UK; his wife and children had accompanied him for a period of time, and then returned home. We interviewed one such family, referred to as Family 4. In this

case we interviewed only the husband, as the wife was no longer in the UK at that time. The husband is from West Africa and is a project manager for educational projects and enterprises. He was in his third year of a PhD in Education at the time of interview.

Type 4: The wife is studying in the UK and the husband is working in a different country. We interviewed one such family, referred to as Family 5. In this case, we interviewed the wife, who was living with her daughter in university accommodation. The student was in her first year of a PhD in Education at the time of interview. In West Africa, she had worked as a teacher. She had previously lived in Europe, the UK and North America.

Data were collected and recorded from the five families using semi-structured interviews. Using this approach meant we were able to understand the contradictions within their experiences and the difficulties they encountered. Two sets of interview schedules were used: one set with questions for students that included questions on their educational experiences at the institution; and another set for their spouses that mostly omitted questions on education and instead focused on their social interaction and experiences in the new environment. Each of our participants was interviewed separately. The data were analysed thematically using a six-stage analytical process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This includes thematising the data; transcribing the interview verbatim; and interpreting the data in relation to the emergent themes.

The methodological issues that arose in the process of this research include issues relating to sample size and also our positions as researchers and postgraduate research students. While it is common in qualitative research to have small sample sizes, to gain a fuller picture of the diverse experiences of IPGRSF a bigger sample would have been useful. However, as a result of financial and logistical limitations, such as finding willing participants, in this study we were able to interview only seven individuals. The participants were recruited using the techniques of snowballing and convenience sampling. Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience. Another methodological issue encountered was the need to consider our own prejudices as researchers who may have shared some of the experiences of the participants. For instance, two of the researchers were themselves IPGRSF at the time of the study. Therefore, there was a need to consider how our own experiences shaped the interview and even interactions with the participants. However, this situation was also useful in that we were able to comprehend some of the cultural issues that prevented some spouses from participating in the study; we were also able to craft questions and arrange for interviews bearing in mind our understanding of the cultural and family dynamics of the participants in a sensible manner. This is not in any way to question the integrity of this article; rather, it demonstrates an awareness of the fact that the accounts presented may have different

interpretations depending on how they are read. In addition, there was a need to take into account ethical concerns regarding confidentiality and cultural sensitivities by interviewing participants as couples where possible or, specifically in the case of female participants, where interviews with couples were not possible, conducting interviews in public spaces and ensuring their spouses were agreeable with the logistical arrangements.

4. Impact of language on the experiences of IPGRSF

The interviews with participants show that language is an influential factor in the experiences of IPGRSF in the UK. In this article, language is understood as a linguistic code that people use to communicate verbally or in written form. It is also seen as a reflection of culture, in that people use language to convey values and obtain understanding from others about their cultures and ways of doing things. Language was identified as a key factor in helping the IPGRSF to integrate in the host countries. 'Integration' here refers to the ways in which IPGRSF built relationships as part of the process of becoming established, thereby enabling the students to participate in cultural ways of life during the process of settling their families in these communities. This does not necessarily mean adoption of the local cultural norms of the host country.

Although initially the participants stated that studying abroad was an exciting process, they tended not to have thought about the importance of competence in the host country language or the challenges it presented for the family as a whole. Instead, it seems this was often considered to be an issue for the student alone. Thus, on arrival, some found that lack of proficiency in the English language was a limiting factor as it restricted their ability to socialise with locals. This was frustrating for most of the participants and it resulted in feelings of isolation and alienation:

Actually I found it scary when I came here, because ... my English was very weak.... So, on arrival I found it a bit scary because I always ... I [thought] I would cope with the new culture, with the new language, the new people ... but the reality was different....

I always stayed at home, I became less confident to face people, so every day after Fajer [morning] prayer I spent one hour to learn English with a [BBC] website; it's a free website, just for one hour. (Non-studying partner of Family 1)

Although we have passed the required language test [IELTS], we still feel that we have some difficulties in dealing with the English language in real day to day communication.... Although

we are good when we use English for academic purposes we still struggle with communicating with people in the street. (Student partner in Family 3)

The above quotes demonstrate the significance of language in the mobility process as a medium of communication and culture, with the inability to express oneself resulting in feelings of isolation. Though this affected students as well, language difficulties were particularly problematic for the family members who were accompanying them, who were often excluded from the social/academic interactions in which the student participated. Such interactions play a key role in building relationships and networks, understanding the host country's culture and improving language skills. For the non-studying family members, building networks was closely linked with having a social life for themselves. Lack of proficiency in the language was often explicitly expressed as a source of frustration by male partners accompanying their wives who were studying. Most of the male participants, who saw their role as being guardians of their families, found their inability to articulate themselves disempowering. Therefore, in this context, language was not merely a tool of communication but also, and equally, an issue that had the potential to empower or disempower the students and their families in their new settings, as illustrated by the quote below:

When you look for others you look for those who are more similar to you, who speak your language, because then you know the rules, you know ... when you going to socialise... you not gonna step on anybody's toes. (Student in Family 2)

I always go to [name of mosque] or [another name of mosque] ... because I found the right group of people that speak my language, that live in these mosques [accommodation attached to these mosques]. We always arrange BBQ, football match and so on. (Non-studying partner in Family 1)

We identified two strong motivations behind the desire to associate with people from familiar cultures, on the part of both students and their families. First, it can be argued that lack of language proficiency leaves students feeling isolated; therefore communication with people who speak their language facilitates their settling in. Second, the migration process itself was, in part, supported by these networks of people in the host country; these individuals continue to act as hosts and guides in helping students to select which university to apply to and then helping them settle in when they arrive.

While these forms of association help students establish networks and support for their families, these relationships do not necessarily promote their academic achievements or contribute to improving their language skills. Instead, they make students stick with what they know and consequently they may not achieve what they came for. When they associate primarily with people from their home country, students and their families reduce their exposure to people who might support them in learning the local culture and way of life and offer information on how to access services. Even more significantly, this situation deprives them of the opportunity to improve their language skills, which was one of their primary motivations for studying abroad. Despite the disadvantages, students and their families clearly feel a strong attraction to these groups. The issue here is that, while IPGRSF express a desire to improve their language skills and experience the culture of the host country, they simultaneously do not want their families to feel isolated from 'home' and 'culture'. These situations reveal the contradictions within our participants' experiences of studying in a foreign country. On the one hand, their goal was to learn a new language and experience a new culture; on the other hand, they were drawn to people with whom they shared a common language and culture as they provided social interaction for their families and thus seemed to be an easy option.

This language dilemma illustrates the contradiction between what students and their families thought they wanted to achieve and the reality the host country presented for them. It demonstrates the way in which students and their families tend to emphasise their established cultural norms and beliefs, thus minimising the space in which the culture of their home country might be challenged. This is not to delegitimise non-British cultures or the significance of relationships students and their families form with people with whom they identify, but it is a demonstration of the possible inappropriateness of emphasising the learning culture of a host country in marketing discourses with international students that does not seem to consider the possible challenges that such students may encounter.

The discussion above highlights the complexity of the experiences of IPGRSF in relation to language, which are different to those of domestic research students who may not have to learn a whole new language or cultural way of life. It also illustrates the issue of balancing conflicting family and academic needs. Language was obviously an issue for our participants; it presented some difficulties because it made them feel disempowered, incapable of expressing themselves and thus limited their ability to socialise with English language speakers in the host country. The contradictions were thus explicit with regard to the choices that students made when responding to the language challenge,

that is, by building social networks with individuals or groups with whom they identified; in so doing, they were aware that this approach could limit opportunities for learning about new cultures while simultaneously challenging their own cultural upbringing and language, which was their primary goal for migrating. The challenges that a new language presented therefore had implications for students' experiences because the difficulties encountered by family members had to be dealt with by the students themselves; the universities viewed the students – the scholarship holders – as their primary responsibility.

5. Impact of institutional support on the experiences of IPGRSF

The data suggest that our participants distinguished between two forms of institutional support. The first form addressed their direct academic needs via help and support that they received from their schools/departments, delivered particularly through their supervisors. The other form addressed their practical needs and those of their families (e.g. accommodation, children's playgrounds and health care). The data show that our participants did not consider the support provided by their supervisors in relation to their non-academic needs as part of the broader category of 'institutional support', while they defined the services addressing practical issues as institutional support that the university was obliged to provide. The participants seemed to appreciate most the support provided by supervisors in relation to non-academic issues; they refused to recognise it as institutional support. They believed that their supervisors went beyond their institutional duties to assist them in many aspects of their international experience, including supporting them to resolve issues in their social lives:

When I came from [Latin America] I was not sure about settling down in England. My supervisor was good; he introduced me to [a Latin American] family. They were helpful; it made me feel at home. He was also good at the fact that I had a family. He would reschedule meetings at short notice and meet me at times that were convenient for me. I think he is the only person who understands my family situation. (Student partner in Family 2)

My supervisor was the only person who really understood my situation. I was in tears over my daughter being away from me back home and he gave me time to go and visit her ... without my supervisor, this would not have happened. He also helped me find accommodation when I had to move house and he advised me about good schools for my daughter....(Student in Family 5)

The students perceived their supervisors as the human face of the university, as they provided the primary personal contact during students' everyday academic lives. They felt that supervisors understood them personally and academically, and hence appreciated their challenges more than did the university as an institution.

On a social and academic level, supervisors were thought to understand the challenges of being IPGRSF and thus provided more flexibility than others in terms of arranging meetings and tutorials. This included allowing sufficient time for meetings and encouraging students to address their issues and discuss their work without feeling rushed or pressured. The main point to be drawn here is that it is unsurprising that the support that the students received from the supervisors was not extended directly to the family by the university. This is what is generally expected; mostly, universities see the role of supervisors as being to focus only on the academic needs of students' lives. However, it is here that the problem seems to lie because IPGRSF tend to require support beyond academic guidance. They seem to require the type of personal support that some supervisors extend to the students. It is this human face, an awareness of the practical and material needs of IPGRSF, added to the institution by supervisors, that was useful in helping students to support their families. However, the students expressed dissatisfaction with the logistic and non-academic support provided by the university as an institution. Most of the participants felt that existing support services, including the inductions provided by the university, are more focused on the needs of single, young students and do not consider the complexity of IPGRSF needs, as reflected in the quotes below:

[T]he housing office is not very supportive; we haven't had that good an experience. To get anything from them you have to bother them all the time, which oddly enough seemed to annoy them. I complained about rubbish and noise from the neighbouring building because my children couldn't sleep because of the noise so I couldn't study as a result. They dismissed my complaints as just being too strict or something.... (Student in Family 2)

I don't think this university supports students with family at all. Most of the students who live on campus are international students and because of our lack of understanding our rights we don't get what we need, so it seems we have to demand things if we are going to have anything, but we can't complain cause we don't understand the rules. ... I don't think they support family here, they think all students are single and have not responsibilities at all.... (Student in Family 3)

Of note here is that, when our participants talked about the university, they differentiated between the supervision and other support they obtained from their schools and departments and the support obtained from other university service offices rather than seeing departmental support as part of a unified institutional whole. The support provided by the supervisors was not regarded as 'university support' but as something distinct and personal. This could have two possible explanations: first, it could be that because of the nature of the relationships they had with their supervisors, they considered this support to be separate from the less personal institutional university support mechanisms. This could be due to the nature of the PhD provision in the UK, whereby supervision is commonly provided by main and second supervisors, rather than teams of more than two supervisors. The consequent personal nature of the relationship between the student and the supervisor results in students viewing their supervisors through a Durkheimian lens (Davies 1994), given which the supervisor is not seen as embedded in the wider institutional support structure but rather as a separate entity. Second, it could be that because of their family situations, they felt that any institutional support should be organised as a whole, thus providing a seamless service that takes into account the wider socio-personal issues that affect them.

It was in this logistical aspect of institutional support that most of the participants felt let down by the university. Although the university has a structure in place through which it attends to international students in general, it lacks provisions and an awareness of the complexity of the needs of IPGRSF. Many services that the university offers do not seem to consider the needs of IPGRSF, such as in relation to accommodation, waste collection, noise control and playgrounds/space for children. Left unaddressed by university services, these issues add to the practical worries that IPGRSF need to handle, in addition to their family and academic responsibilities. While it can be argued that local students would face the same practical and logistical challenges, it should be noted that the situation for local research students with families is different as they are likely to be well-informed about the system in the country compared to IPGRSF. These reported student experiences are consistent with our view that the university conception of students is that of young, single undergraduates. Given this view of students, universities neglect the needs and experiences of IPGRSF. This adds to the many challenges that IPGRSF have to deal with.

6. Conclusion

The article has argued that educational mobility has a significant impact on IPGRSF. It has shown that

language plays a significant role in shaping the process of mobility as well as influencing the integration and ability to network of both students and their families in the host country. Language was a conflict encountered not only by the students but also by their family members, who were often excluded from social networking because the university focus and support is aimed at the student and not their families. These interactions were often crucial in developing the language skills which ultimately helped in networking and integration. Therefore, language became a tool for communication that on one hand empowered the students, while on the other disempowered their families because of their lack of proficiency in English. Thus, most of the family members felt vulnerable, isolated and disempowered. This had an impact on students' learning experiences as they found themselves having to support their families to settle down more than they had anticipated. In addition, language was equally an issue for some of the students, in that while most of them thought they understood and were proficient in the English language, on arrival in the host country they felt that their language skills were not as good as anticipated. Lack of proficiency in the language for both IPGRSF and their families resulted in a tendency to socialise and network with people who spoke their home languages and may share similar cultures. In doing so, they probably miss the opportunity to improve their English, learn about the culture and integrate with the host society. Their response to the challenges of language they face in the host country exposes the conflicts and difficulties of being IPGRSF. While one of their motivations for migration was to learn about new cultures and improve their language skills, their tendency to congregate with people who spoke their own language and understood their own cultures partially frustrated the achievement of this goal.

This constellation of circumstances places significant pressure on IPGRSF as a result of family and academic responsibilities. The students have demonstrated ways in which they manage these responsibilities. Also, they highlight how the support provided by the university helps or hinders them in their pursuit of academic success. The data showed that students often had positive experiences with their supervisors and staff at departmental level, but felt let down by the provision and organisation of wider university support. There is a sense that university support is geared towards single young students and lacks understanding of the complex needs and challenges faced by IPGRSF.

The way in which these factors interplay shapes the experiences of IPGRSF in the host country.

The existing logistic and non-academic support that the university provides for IPGRSF appears to be

insufficient. Students and their families found themselves having to negotiate a number of difficult and contradictory issues, which they had anticipated the university dealing with, in order to cope with their domestic, social and academic needs. There is need for further research in this area to better understand the experiences and difficulties of IPGRSF in their pursuit of higher education in the UK.

The research discussed in this article suggests that in order to enhance the support offered to IPGRSF, there is a need to challenge normative assumptions about the profile of international students. There should be a deliberate effort to deconstruct the notion of international postgraduate students which currently seems to conflate IPGRSF with the local or home young students and as having similar needs and concerns. Doing so would help bring about recognition of the diverse nature of the student population and provide a platform for provision of equally diverse services and solutions. Better support services for IPGRSF would recognise that they have families and would provide services to support them as families rather than as individual students only.

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