



## Between arrival and departure: The dual first-and-final year experience of one-year Master's students

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### ABSTRACT

Postgraduate taught (PGT) students typically occupy an unusual hybrid space of simultaneously experiencing both their first and only year of study. However, while the first-year experience of undergraduate students has been widely studied, the equivalent experience for postgraduate taught students remains underexplored. A comparative review of institutional strategies and academic literature reveals a striking imbalance: for every peer-reviewed article addressing belonging among postgraduate taught students, thirteen focus on undergraduates. This disparity is further inflated by the adoption of support models grounded in undergraduate data by universities, which assume greater independence and resilience among postgraduates. Such assumptions risk overlooking the unique needs of PGT cohorts, resulting in gaps in academic guidance, personal tutoring and community-building efforts. The intensive structure of one-year Master's programmes, commonly lasting one year in the UK, compounds these challenges, as students must manage demanding academic workloads with limited time for social integration.

This vignette underscores the research and support imbalance between undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. It advocates for targeted strategies to improve access to academic advice, streamline referral pathways, and tailor personal and professional development opportunities. Timely, equitable support during this critical year is essential to fostering student success, wellbeing and a genuine sense of belonging. By acknowledging the distinct pressures faced by postgraduate taught students, higher education institutions can create more inclusive, responsive and evidence-informed environments.

**Keywords:** postgraduate taught, Master's students, first-year experience, tailored student support, student belonging

### Introduction

The first-year experience of undergraduate (UG) students has been researched extensively in recent years (e.g. Felby & Ashwin, 2026; Kahu et al., 2022; Picton et al., 2018). However, the first year of postgraduate taught (PGT) students - a period that may constitute both their first and final year on UK Master's courses - remains underrepresented in the literature. A review of peer-reviewed literature reveals a stark disparity: for every peer-reviewed article published that explores belonging within the wider postgraduate (PG) community, thirteen articles are published which focus on their undergraduate counterparts (Sydney et al., 2026).

In this article, we highlight an imbalance in research between experiences of UG versus PG students and specifically, draw attention to the different needs of one-year PGT students. The disparity in research focus

leads us to call for a strategic prioritisation of tailored postgraduate support, rather than applying support models derived from knowledge of UG student community needs.

### Understanding the wider issue

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In the academic year 2023-24, UK institutions awarded more PGT qualifications than any other qualification (PGT: 467,765, UG first degrees: 465,240; HESA 2025a), generating an estimated £1.7 billion in revenue from the UK Higher Education (HE) sector in 2022-23 (Kernohan, 2024a). However, research effort and attention from the HE community remains largely focused on the UG experience and as such, is indicative of broader sector-wide challenges. For instance, one of the most influential metrics which institutions use to make strategic decisions is the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS seeks to understand the experiences of UG students at UK institutions and its results influence national league tables, including those run by *The Guardian* and the *Times Good University Guide*, and as a result gains significant media attention. The NSS 2025 results saw 71.5% of eligible UG students (around 357,000 final year students) participating in the survey (OfS 2025). By contrast, the PGT equivalent Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), which seeks to understand the experiences of PGT students in the UK, does not directly influence university league tables. Although PTES is used within universities for internal benchmarking and strategic planning, a limited 13% of the UK PGT population responded to the survey in 2024 (98,311 PGT students across 108 UK institutions) (Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, 2024).

Consequences of fragmented data collection on PGT experience include:

- Reduced transparency for prospective PGT students who may face difficulties in making data-informed decisions about the quality of the education and experience they can expect from a course and institution.
- Institutions applying uniform support models at all academic levels based on UG research and survey data, while assuming greater autonomy and resilience among PGT students.
- Reduced accountability for institutions due to reduced external scrutiny and the increased complexities of cross-institutional comparisons.
- Inconsistent quality assurance making it a challenge to identify systemic issues that may need resolution or to identify and champion good practice.

The studies and experience of current and prospective PGT students may be impacted as a result, as outlined below. Such impacts may also be disproportionately felt by students with reduced social and educational capital, such as those who are the first in their family to attend university and thus have less family experience to draw from, as well as those with reduced options for studying with alternative providers (for example, students who cannot relocate or study far from home due to care responsibilities, paid work commitments or through managing disabilities).

### Postgraduate taught students as first year students

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The majority of stand-alone full-time UK PGT courses last for one full academic year (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2015), encompassing both enrolment and completion of the degree. Therefore, PGT students have a unique HE identity as both first- and final-year students. In addition, due to the time-restricted and intensive nature of these one-year PGT programmes, the stakes are high for PGT students (McPherson et.al., 2017). They experience a compressed learning curve and must navigate rigorous academic workloads and develop new

higher-level skills alongside limited opportunities for social integration or peer support networks. These pressures may be exacerbated for the many international students undertaking PGT study who also balance cultural adjustments.

Since PG students have previously studied at university, it can be easy to assume that the transition back into university life will be a smooth one. However, this is not always the case, particularly if a PG student undertakes their studies at a different country or institution to their first degree, or after a long break from education. Such students must relearn study-, peer- and institutional-support systems and a new campus setting. With the average age of new PGT students being higher than that of their UG counterparts (HESA, 2025b), PGT students are often returning to study whilst managing additional responsibilities. These can include studying as part of continuing professional development for a professional role, caregiving, visa requirements, as well as juggling part-time work alongside their studies. The PTES 2024 survey found 16% of PGT student respondents had considered leaving their course, with balancing PGT study and life commitments cited as the most common reason (Advance HE, 2024) Comparatively, actual withdrawal rates for first-year undergraduates are less than 4% across each of 2022/23 and 2023/24 (Kernohan, 2024b).

### Taking action

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PGT students face different challenges to their UG counterparts, largely due to PGT loan amounts being insufficient to cover tuition fees, let alone any living costs and the consequences of this being felt most acutely by those from disadvantaged backgrounds with is further exacerbated by the lack of targeted equity policy for postgraduate students (Wakeling & Mateos-Gonzalez, 2021). To address the structural inequities facing PGT students, particularly those on one-year programmes, HE institutions must move beyond UG-centric models of support. It is time to reframe the PGT experience not as a footnote to undergraduate provision, but as a distinct and vital component of the HE landscape. Without targeted interventions, the sector risks perpetuating a cycle of under-recognition and under-support. We recommend that sector bodies and institutions:

1. Elevate the visibility and influence of the PTES by promoting the survey not only within their institutions but integrating the findings into public, national league tables and wider strategic planning.
2. Develop bespoke induction and academic support frameworks that reflect the compressed, high-stakes nature of PGT study in the UK, recognising that equitable, timely support in the first, and typically only, year of PGT study is essential to enhancing student success, wellbeing and fostering a genuine sense of belonging.
3. Invest in longitudinal research that captures the nuanced experiences of the diverse PGT cohort.

As the PGT student population continues to grow in size, diversity and strategic importance to the HE sector, it is no longer sufficient to treat their experience as an afterthought. The unique position of PGT students as simultaneous newcomers and near-graduates, demands a tailored, data-informed approach that recognises their specific academic, social and personal needs. By shifting institutional priorities and research, enhancing visibility of PGT experiences and embedding inclusive support structures from day one, universities can ensure that these students are not only retained, but truly thrive. Such action is long overdue. It is time to rebalance the narrative and give the PGT experience the attention it deserves.

## Biographies

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