

‘We Belong Here Too’: Assessing Postgraduate Taught Satisfaction Across Three UK Higher Education Institutions

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Keywords

Postgraduate, questionnaire, student belonging, student experience, Higher Education,

Abstract

Undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students account for most of the student body within UK Higher Education Institutions (UK HEIs). Research effort investigating student experience and belonging disproportionately focuses on UGs. In this study we quantitatively assess the satisfaction and experience of PGT students from three UK HEIs (XXXX) across 11 questions representing three broad categories (Overall Experience, Connections, and Events). We test whether two key characteristics, study status (full-time and part-time) and if a student had previous experience at the same university (yes and no), influenced student satisfaction. We found evidence to suggest students were less likely to engage with events, form meaningful connections, and experience a sense of belonging, if they were studying on a part-time basis or if they had studied previously at the same university. We suggest that PGT cohorts need bespoke, flexible support and events over activities designed for their UG counterparts.

Introduction

The vast majority of research exploring student experience within UK Higher Education (HE) has focused on the experience and satisfaction of undergraduate students (UGs e.g., levels 4, 5 and 6) (Felby & Ashwin, 2026; Geertshuis & Liu, 2026; Sydney & Edmunds, 2026), particularly those entering their first year (level 4) of study (Felby and Ashwin, 2026; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026). In contrast, students studying postgraduate taught degrees (PGTs, e.g. level 7 Masters level), which typically last only one year, are far less researched (Sydney and Edmunds, 2026), despite PGT students being 24% of the UK HE cohort in 2024/5 ($n = 675,375$ out of 2,863,180; HESA, 2026).

This apparent devaluation of the PGT experience can be observed at all levels in the sector, leading to an “invisibility in both published research and institutional strategy” (Edmunds and Strudwick, 2026). These observations are also seen through the National Student Survey (NSS) led by the UK Office for Students, as a final year UG survey aimed at assessing overall satisfaction for UK students. NSS, since its introduction in 2005, has gained significant global attention and directly influences university rankings and institutional strategies across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Bell and Brooks, 2018; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026). In contrast, the PGT equivalent in the UK, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), led by Advance HE, has no such influence on university rankings, is mainly used for internal data insight purposes, with limited strategic importance (Canning, 2014; Edmunds and Strudwick, 2026; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026). Where the NSS 2026 achieved a 71.8% response rate (Office for Students, 2018), PTES 2025 (the most recent survey which has released national data) achieved a 12.4% response rate (PTES 2025). All of this contributes to the narrative that PGTs are an ‘overlooked’ or ‘forgotten’ HE cohort (Coneyworth *et al.*, 2020; Hubbard, 2025; Edmunds and Strudwick, 2026).

Recently this UG-centric view of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has received significant attention and criticism, particularly signposting the differences between UG and PGT students (Bell and Edmunds, 2025; Grove, 2026; Rowsell, 2026). Arguably, PGT students face different stressors and challenges to their UG counterparts (Marshall *et al.*, 2026; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026), these may include those related to study (e.g., understanding workload and coursework differences from UG to PGT; McPherson *et al.*, 2017; White, 2024) and/or work-life balance (e.g. affordability of studying and juggling family life; Marvell, 2022; Sydney & Edmunds, 2026).

In response to such reflections, there have been recent calls for far more bespoke and tailored support for PGTs (Edmunds and Strudwick, 2026; Grove, 2026; Strudwick and Miller, 2026; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026), particularly for those transitioning from UG to PGT (McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017; Sydney and Edmunds, 2026). To effectively initiate this change, the satisfaction level of PGTs must be fully assessed and understood, for universities to accurately identify, and thus cater to, the needs of this specific group of students.

The post-Covid HE landscape has witnessed a significant diversification of university cohorts, with students from increasingly varied backgrounds, with different needs and educational experiences, being substantially heterogenous (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Seow and Makany, 2026). Certain groups within the PGT cohort will subsequently have different experiences of university, which may indeed result in differing levels of satisfaction. For instance, those who are balancing their PGT studies alongside employment or care responsibilities (part-time PGTs) have been found to suffer increased levels of failure, higher withdrawal rates, as well as experiencing

lowered well-being when they work more than 20 hours a week (Salamonson and Andrew, 2006; Sanchez-Gelabert, Figueroa and Elias, 2017; Béduwé and Giret, 2021). These outcomes may have significant impact on overall levels of satisfaction, as a result of balancing multiple conflicting responsibilities (e.g. paid work, caring responsibilities and study); particularly as a lack of social support at universities has previously been identified (Geertshuis and Liu, 2026).

We may also expect those who have previously studied at the same university in some capacity, for instance as an UG, may have a completely different experience to those entering a university as a PGT student for the first time. Although quantitative research in this area is distinctly lacking, several qualitative studies have highlighted that the transition from UG to PGT may be particularly challenging, which could affect a students' identity and social life (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010; McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017). As a result, students studying on a PGT course, having previously spent a significant portion of their life at the same university, may have different satisfaction levels based on their prior experiences.

Related to satisfaction, it has also been observed that there is a lack of informed understanding on the "Sense of Belonging" within PGT cohorts, and, importantly, the extent to which this influences the wider student experience. Sense of Belonging is arguably a complex, fluid, and multifaceted concept, related to connections, levels of engagement, inclusion, community, and diversity (Strudwick and Miller 2026; Edmunds and Gilani 2026). Research indicates there is substantial variability in Sense of Belonging across all cohorts (UG and PGT), but overall, it still remains widely misunderstood (Ahn and Davis, 2020; Gilani, Thomas and Mcarthur, 2026; Priestley *et al.*, 2026). Such reflections are built on the knowledge that post-pandemic learning has significantly disrupted traditional HE pathways, and therefore students' expectations have shifted and their needs have evolved. As such wider student experiences are shaped by uncertainty, transitions, and new or different forms of participation in HE. Strudwick and Miller (2026) reflect on current HE practices and strategies, alongside building a sense of belonging, and identify the need for a broader understanding from the sector which... "*underscores the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive learning communities*" (2026:240). There are further evident associations between student experience and belonging in HE, with research demonstrating initiatives to address inequalities, student success and loneliness (Edmunds and Gilani, 2026; Van Woezik *et al.*, 2026). Still, despite the sustained research and publication interest into student belonging, this research attention remains strongly biased towards the experiences of UG students (Edmunds and Strudwick, 2026).

In response to these reflections, we undertook a comparative study in 2025/26 to investigate student experiences, perceptions, and sense of belonging, among PGT students across the Universities of A, B and C [anonymised for peer review]. For this paper, the aim of the quantitative analysis was to measure PGT student satisfaction across three broad topic areas; Overall Experience, Connections, and Events. We focused on different groups of students, those studying full- or part-time, and whether they had studied at the university prior to the PGT course. Not only did the data allow us to measure overall PGT satisfaction across these three UK HEIs but also provided data-informed insights into the satisfaction of differing groups across three key areas of the university experience.

111 **Methods**

112 *Questionnaire methodology*

113 In the academic year 2025/6 a mixed-methods questionnaire was circulated to PGT students at the
114 Universities of A, B and C. The survey included four demographic questions (Studying part-time
115 or full-time; Student status (UK home student / EU registered student / International student);
116 Whether studied their undergraduate degree programme at the same institution and current
117 accommodation status), 16 multiple-choice questions (on a Likert scale; see Table 1 for the broad
118 themes of each related question), and four free-text questions (which are beyond the remit of this
119 paper aside from providing context in the discussion). We ensured that participation was entirely
120 voluntary, with a statement noting participants could choose not to take part, skip any questions,
121 or withdraw at any time by closing their browser. We were also transparent that non-participation
122 will have no impact on their academic standing, grades, or access to services.

123 We note that of these 16 questions, we received data from all three universities for 11 (see Table
124 1). As well, we chose to focus on on-campus PGTs rather than those learning from distance as
125 firstly, University A had no replies from distance learners, and secondly, the needs of distance
126 learners are likely to be significantly different to that of those attending and learning from campus.

127 **Table 1.** The broad themes (Overall Experience, Connections, and Events) with their respective
128 survey questions, as asked to PGT students across three UK Higher Education Institutions.

Theme	Question
Overall Experience	“Overall, I am really enjoying my course”
	“Overall, I am very satisfied with my university experience so far”
	“Overall, I really like being a postgraduate student”
	“Overall, my university has supported me to feel like I belong”
Connections	“I feel connected with those that I am studying with”
	“I feel connected with the wider university community”
	“I have made close friends at university”
	“I had opportunities to make friends during Welcome Week”
Events	“Virtual social events help me connect with other students”
	In person social events help me connect with other students”
	“University organised central events help me connect with other students”

Participants

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the Research Ethics Committee of each participating institution (University C: ETH21220006, University B: project #9832 and University A: 2026_22769).

Statistical methods

All analyses were run in R v4.5.2 (R Core Team, 2021). Packages used for data tidying were from {tidyverse} v2.0.0 (Wickham, 2017) along with {hablar} v0.3.2 (Sjoberg, 2020) and {janitor} v2.2.1 (Firke, 2020). All graphs were created using {ggplot2} v4.0.3 (Wickham, 2011) and {ggstats} v0.13.0 (Larmarange, 2026) to visualise Likert scores. In addition, {emmeans} v2.0.3 (Lenth and Piaskowski, 2026) was used to calculate Tukey-corrected pairwise estimated marginal means of models across all levels of the fixed categories. Note that the pairwise tests were conducted on the latent scale, whereas the average likert scores (presented along with minimum and maximum values) are on the Likert scale (from 1-5). All cumulative link models were fitted using {ordinal} v.2025.12-29 (Christensen, 2018, 2026).

We fitted the same ordinal cumulative link model, comprising the full Likert data from all institutions, across all 11 parts of the questionnaire (Table 1). The first four corresponding to “Overall Experience”, the second four to “Connections” and, lastly, the last three to “Events”. Each model had had the fixed factors of University (A, B or C), student study status (part-time or full-time), in addition to whether the student had previously studied at the university (no or yes). The effects of each variable were then averaged across the other fixed factors using {emmeans} (see above). All models were checked for proportional odds, and, if a variable violated these assumptions, they were instead modelled as partial proportional odds. In two cases, this occurred for the questions 5 and 10 (Table 1) for the variables previous study and study status, respectively.

Results

Student Demographics

The number of PGT responses differed substantially across universities, with the most originating from University B ($n = 237$; Table 2). However, this only represented a response rate of 2.9% of the total PGT cohort. The highest response rate was from the University C, where 3.8% of PGTs had replied ($n = 127$; Table 2). In terms of the two studied variables, the number of students that had no previous study at the university was higher than those that did ($n = 343$ and 89 , respectively; Table 2). This pattern was consistent across all three universities. Similarly, students who attended the university on a full-time basis outnumbered those who undertook their studies part-time ($n = 374$ and 58 , respectively; Table 1). This pattern also held across all three university (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of PGT student respondents split by university, study status, and previous study. FT = full-time, PT = part-time. Values shown are counts. Response rates are calculated from total PGT numbers from HESA, 2026. Total numbers of PGT students: University B = 8230, University C = 3310, University A = 5980.

Study status	Previous study
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University and number of respondents	Response Rate	FT	PT	Yes	No
B = 237	2.9%	206	31	41	196
C = 127	3.8%	110	17	31	96
A = 68	1.1%	58	10	17	51
Total = 432	2.5%	Total = 374	Total = 58	Total = 89	Total = 343

General patterns

For the eleven questions, across all three universities, the number of positive responses was greater than the number of negatives (3.78 (3.31-4.30); Fig. 1A). In addition, for the most part, the average Likert scores for all three universities were lower for questions relating to Connections and Events compared to Overall Experience (3.60 (3.33-3.85) and 3.56 (3.31-3.70) compared to 4.14 (4.03-4.30); Fig. 1A). The question “Virtual social events help me connect with other students” received the lowest score across all three universities (3.31; Note: this was closely followed by “I feel connected with the wider university community”, 3.33; Fig. 1A).

Factors influencing PGT satisfaction

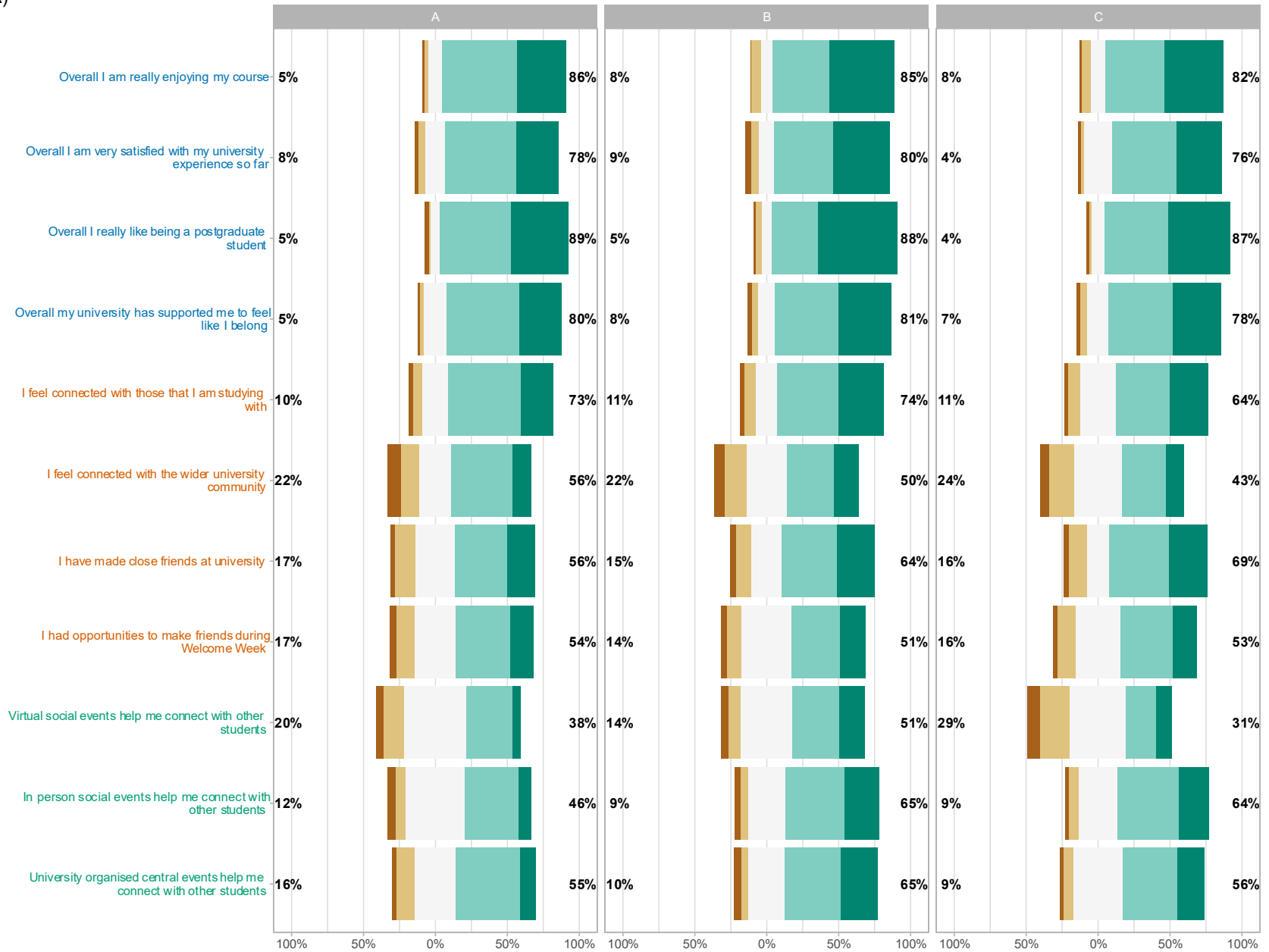
The university that a PGT student attended significantly influenced satisfaction in two out of the 11 questions (both in the Events category). University B had a greater average Likert score for PGT students responding to “Virtual social events help me connect with other students” in comparison to University C (3.49 compared to 3.01; Est = 0.847, SE = 0.206, $p = 0.0001$; Fig. 1A). Similarly, University B also had greater average Likert scores for “In person social events help me connect with other students” (3.76 compared to 3.39; Est = -0.699, SE = 0.269, $p = 0.025$; Fig. 1A) in comparison to University A. No other significant differences in responses between institutions were detected.

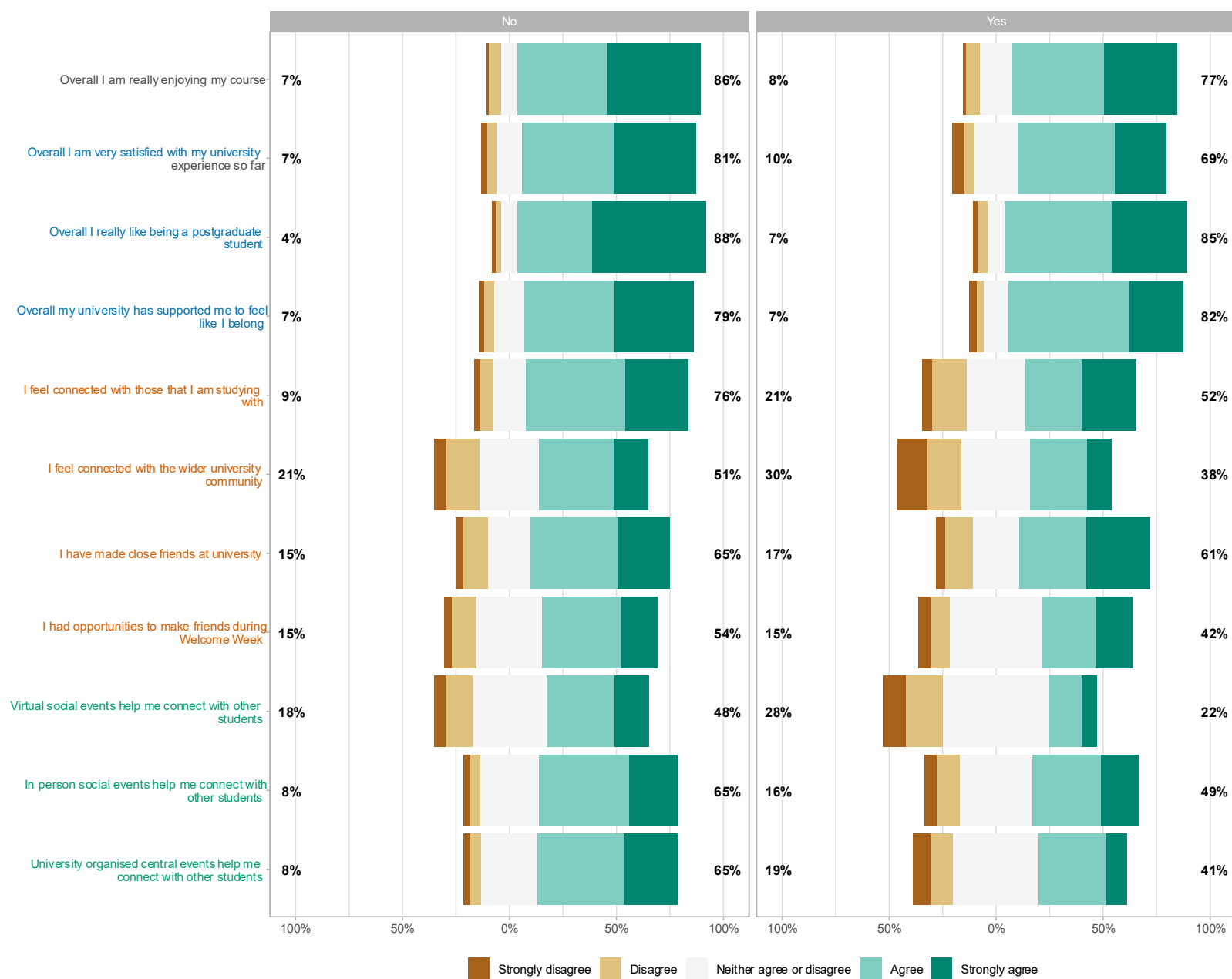
On average, full-time students were more positive in their responses in comparison to those studying part-time (3.82 (3.34-4.32) compared to 3.56 (3.03-4.18); Fig. 1B). For four questions, two corresponding to Connections and two to Events, there were significant differences between the two groups, namely, “I feel connected with the wider university community” and “I have made close friends at university” (Connections; Est = 0.559, SE = 0.262, $p = 0.033$; Est = 0.728, SE = 0.264, $p = 0.006$; Fig. 1B) and “In person social events help me connect with other students” (specifically, part-time PGTs had a greater likelihood of responding “Neither agree or disagree” and less likely to respond “Agree” in comparison to full-time PGTs; Est = -0.199, SE = 0.070, $p = 0.004$ and Est = 0.255, SE = 0.059, $p < 0.0001$, respectively) and “University organised central events help me connect with other students” (Est = 0.78, SE = 0.270, $p = 0.004$; Fig. 1B). This indicates that part-time students felt comparatively lower satisfaction towards Connections made at university and particularly university-organised Events, delivered centrally or in person.

A similar effect was found for those who previously studied at their PGT university (Fig. 1C). Across multiple questions, students who had experience of previous study at the institution had significantly lower ratings across multiple broad themes in comparison to those that had no prior experience (3.60 (2.97-4.13) compared to 3.83 (3.38-4.35); Overall Experience (“Overall I am very satisfied with my university experience so far” and “Overall I really like being a postgraduate student”; Est = 0.582, SE = 0.227, $p = 0.010$; Est = 0.506, SE = 0.228, $p = 0.027$; Fig. 1C), but

also with Connections (“I feel connected with those that I am studying with”). More specifically, those that studied previously had a greater likelihood of responding “Disagree” or “Neither agree or disagree” and less likely to respond “Agree” in comparison to those with no previous experience at that university; Est = -0.086, SE = 0.040, $p = 0.030$, Est = -0.117, SE = 0.051, $p = 0.023$, Est = 0.196, SE = 0.055, $p = 0.0004$ respectively; Fig. 1C) and Events (“Virtual social events help me connect with other students” and “University organised central events help me connect with other students”; Est = 0.751, SE = 0.225, $p = 0.0009$; Est = 0.866, SE = 0.23, $p = 0.0002$; Fig. 1C). As above, the biggest differences between the two groups were for Events run by the university.

A)





212 **Figure 1.** Likert responses for postgraduate taught students (PGTs) asked 11 questions across three universities, the Universities of A,
213 B and C (n = 68, 237, and 127, respectively; A) for institution specific responses, B) for full- and part-time postgraduate students (n =
214 374 and 58, respectively; C), and for those that had not or had not studied previously at the university (n = 89 and 343; The full breakdown
215 of sample sizes is shown in Table 1. The Likert colours represent whether the responses are positive (green) or negative (brown). The
216 question colours correspond to Overall Experience (blue), Connections (orange), and Events (green). The percentages on the left or right
217 are approximations of the combined negative (left) and positive (right) scores.

218

219 Discussion

220 The central aim of this paper was to assess PGT satisfaction across three HEIs across the United
221 Kingdom, the Universities of A, B and C. Overall, the Likert responses from the three cohorts of
222 students were remarkably similar across all universities, with differences detected in only two of
223 the Event questions, relating to virtual and in-person socials. In contrast, we found important
224 evidence that student satisfaction was linked to whether a student was a) a full- or part-time student
225 and b) had or had not previously studied at the university in some capacity prior to their PGT. More
226 specifically, we found that part-time students and those who had previously studied at their
227 respective university before starting their PGT, were less likely to respond positively when
228 answering questions relating to Events and Connections.

229 We found compelling evidence that part-time PGTs have reduced satisfaction (lowered average
230 Likert scores) in comparison to their full-time counterparts when considering university-related
231 Connections and Events. Intuitively, this makes sense, as part-time students have less time with
232 their course peers and may also have less campus-based free-time to spend on event attendance
233 and friend-forming activities if their part-time status is due to managing other time commitments.
234 This is exemplified in two quotes from the free-text section of the questionnaire,

235 *“As a mature student, working full time I feel I haven't had the opportunity to experience being part of the uni except*
236 *for lectures where no interaction with other learners take place”.* (University B Student)

237 *“The flexibility works well for me alongside work commitments, but there is much less interaction with other students*
238 *and I often feel that I am navigating the course independently”.* (University B Student)

239 Indeed, several studies have highlighted that juggling employment with study often leads to a
240 sacrifice of social life and a lack of belonging as comprising work or study is not possible (Kember
241 and Leung, 2004; Lee, 2017; Geertshuis and Liu, 2026). Notably, in a recent qualitative survey,
242 several part-time PGTs responded saying that due to significant work and study commitments,
243 they had limited time available for family and friends (Geertshuis and Liu, 2026). This resulting
244 overload and time strain for part-time students all resulted in reduced wellbeing (Geertshuis and
245 Liu, 2026) and ultimately, linking back to the results of this present survey, could explain the
246 lowered satisfaction with university Connections and Events. This highlights a need for more
247 focused effort to support part-time students to make and maintain connections to their peers and
248 the wider institution. A 2017 survey of 875 part-time college students in Canada reported that
249 support through either a student advisor or through dedicated workshops about career and time-
250 management was key to improved success (including presumably more free-time) and an increased
251 sense of belonging (Lee, 2017). The same survey also revealed a distinct lack of time, but not
252 reduced desire, to attend events and make social connections amongst part-time students; however,
253 these events needed to be more flexible and geared towards all ages, not simply younger students
254 (Lee, 2017). As a result, there is clearly the desire to make connections and engage with events
255 amongst those studying part-time. Universities, therefore, have a duty of care to provide more
256 support and flexibility for these students, particularly at the PGT-level where part-time students
257 make up 34% of the total PGT number ($n = 229,685$ out of $675,375$; HESA, 2026).

258 Our study also found evidence that those who had previously studied at their respective universities
259 prior to their PGT course were less satisfied across several different areas relating to Overall
260 Experience, Connections, and Events. Again, this may make intuitive sense if you consider that

some students may be less satisfied with university events and the wider university community if they are repeated year-on-year, compared to those attending for the first time, who are exposed to a novel environment. Indeed, a study of student engagement over time found that across multiple years, participation in multiple events (physical, social, creative) decreased (Yao *et al.*, 2023). The exact reason for the decline was not given, but as suggested above, could be linked to a lack of novelty in conducting the same extracurricular activities every year. We may therefore expect a similar event exhaustion from the PGT students who had returned to the same university; for instance, those returning may not want or even need to attend a second Welcome Week, or indeed have different needs for that induction week, that institutions may not be delivering. It may also highlight that events on offer to UGs compared to PGTs may not be of equal quality. This is evidenced by a quote from one student,

“Also welcome week always felt very catered towards undergraduates which although is correct as starting university at a younger age is a more daunting experience the postgraduates need more opportunities to meet people as well so that life doesnt become isolating.” (University A Student)

Conversely, the differences in satisfaction, between those attending for the first time and those who attended previously, could be simply due to a reduced need to attend these events as the anxiety around making connections and being social has decreased due to previous attendance (McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017). It may also be related to the significant change in identity that many experience from UG to PGT and results in differing opinions of their overall education, social events and connections across multiple years in the same institution (Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit, 2010; McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017). Therefore, as with part-time PGTs, universities could provide more flexible and tailored support with events designed for both those attending a UK HEI for the first time and those returning for further study, either across multiple UG years or from UG to PGT. Such an endeavour would help with increased sense of belonging and community building that multiple students had identified in the survey,

“At times I feel that PGT students receive less focus than undergraduates in terms of community-building and tailored resources”. (University B Student).

“Compared to my undergraduate experience, there is less emphasis on social integration and structured support, which can sometimes make the experience feel more isolating. During my undergraduate studies, there were more opportunities to build a sense of community through regular contact hours, societies, and informal peer interactions.” (University A Student)

“I don’t feel as supported or welcomed as a mature student as I did during undergraduate study” (University C Student)

We therefore suggest that future research should explore how bespoke support and extracurricular activities influences PGT satisfaction for those returning to study at the same university.

Limitations

We note that despite the important findings listed above, this study has some limitations. First, the unequal sampling of the universities that were surveyed in addition to the overall low response rate of the questionnaire. Over half of all of the responses were from University B ($n = 237$ out of 432), which although is partly to be expected as it currently has the highest number of PGT students across the three sampled UK HEIs ($n = 8230$; HESA, 2026), still means that a low number of PGT

students responded (2.9%). In contrast, the University A provided the lowest number of responses, with an even lower PGT response rate ($n = 68$ out of 431; representing 1.1%), which, from 2024/25 PGT numbers has the second highest PGT numbers out of the three UK HEI sampled ($n = 5980$; HESA, 2026). It could therefore mean that the sampled individuals were a select cohort that are not representative of the wider PGT population in University A and across the three HEIs. However, only in two questions were there significant differences between universities, implying that despite differences in sample size and the low response rates across the three HEIs, the results were remarkably homogenous. In addition, as we compared marginal means from a single model across all questions, we corrected for the influence of university in all our results.

Secondly, despite involving three universities, we technically only captured the responses of one PGT cohort at one specific time point. As a result, these may only be reflective of this specific group of students in this current academic climate. Previous studies have shown how significant events can influence student satisfaction, particularly amongst PGTs (e.g., COVID-19; Marshall *et al.*, 2026). Therefore, this survey should be repeated in the future to determine the consistency of responses across multiple PGT cohorts, and, if strategies are put in place to address the results of this study, to reassess satisfaction amongst PGTs. Lastly, we focused on two identifiable groups from our surveys, those related to study status and those related to previous study. There are many more characteristics that can be explored as PGTs, along with the general student body, vary markedly (White and Ingram, 2021). Future research should look to investigate additional student groups that may influence offer different perspectives and satisfaction levels, and crucially, may highlight the need for further support across other areas of university life.

Practical suggestions for HEIs

From this survey, we have highlighted several key areas for improvement that HEIs could look to act upon. Below are some practical recommendations and suggestions.

1. Continue surveying PGT students in future years.

This survey revealed a lack of belonging in multiple PGT groups across, predominantly, the Events and Connections themes of questions. HEIs should continue to monitor and survey PGTs annually to gauge whether their actions are changing (not simply improving) the satisfaction, and thus, sense of belonging, of these groups of students.

2. Offer bespoke events and opportunities for connection for new and returning PGTs.

Whilst UGs are vitally important to HEIs, the PGT experience should not take a backseat. Offering events that are specifically tailored to more mature or returning students, in addition, alongside introductory events for new PGTs would enable a greater sense of community building and formation of social interactions.

3. Provide events that are flexible for a wide range of PGT students

In this survey, we found that part-time PGTs were significantly less satisfied with Events and Connections formed during their studies, presumably owing to the need to juggle their work and study with having a social life. Having more flexible events, for instance either occurring when part-time students must be on campus for lectures or during lunch periods, or on a rotational basis

occurring at multiple times during the day, in addition to providing asynchronous events and community building online would provide more opportunities for part-time students to meet and build connections with their peers.

Conclusion

In this cross-HEI-study, we highlight that more still needs to be done to support PGT students to increase their feeling of connectedness with peers, general belonging, and overall engagement with university-led social events. We observe that part-time and returning PGT students require more flexible and bespoke support and engagement that will, we hope, improve satisfaction across these broad areas.

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