Addressing and Enhancing Language Support for International PGT Students at the University of Aberdeen: Survey Results

Currently, there are over 500,000 international students enrolled at UK universities, with nearly 40% of postgraduate students being international students. Many of these students have English as an additional language (EAL), and language barriers can present unique challenges in their academic and daily life. International students have reported difficulty in comprehending lectures in English-medium universities and face challenges in academic writing, particularly at the master’s level. Moreover, language barriers have been found to contribute to acculturative stress, perfectionism, and depression in international students, and may hinder their access to psychological help. This study aims to gain an insight into perceived language barriers experienced by international PGT students at the University of Aberdeen (UoA). The survey also includes questions on awareness and access of language support services at the University of Aberdeen, as well as questions on reasons for accessing or not accessing these services.

1. Demographics

The majority of respondents fell within the 20-24 age group (62%), with a smaller percentage in the 25-29 age group (31%). The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with both male (45%) and female (55%) respondents.

The respondents represented a variety of countries, including India, China, Bangladesh, Germany, South Korea, and others. Respondents held citisenship in countries such as India, China, Germany, Bangladesh, and the USA, which may be seen visualised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Visualisation of participant demographics

The majority of participants completed their undergraduate degrees in the UK, while others did so in countries like India, China, and the USA. Furthermore, were enrolled in various schools, such as the School of Social Science (17%), Divinity, History and Philosophy (10%), and Medicine, Medical Sciences, and Nutrition (10%), and others, with the School of Psychology being the most represented (48%). The majority of respondents (74%) started their postgraduate courses in September, while a smaller percentage (26%) began in January.

* 1. Plans after Graduation

The results show that a significant majority of respondents (83%) plan to seek employment in the UK after graduation, indicating their interest in establishing a career in the country where they pursued their postgraduate studies. Additionally, a substantial number of respondents plan to seek employment in their home country (43%) or pursue higher education in the UK (41%). A noteworthy portion of respondents also expressed interest in seeking employment in another country (29%) or pursuing higher education in a different country (26%). This suggests a globally mobile student population with aspirations beyond the UK.

* 1. Demographics Discussion

These demographics indicate that a significant portion of postgraduate students at the university are in their early twenties, likely pursuing further education soon after completing their undergraduate degrees, and the diversity in citisenship highlights the international character of the student population at the University. With most participants having completed their undergraduate degrees in the UK, a significant portion of the international postgraduate students have prior experience in the British education system, potentially easing their transition into postgraduate studies at the same institution. With regards to plans after graduation, it's worth noting that a smaller percentage are undecided (7%) about their post-graduation plans, indicating the need for career counselling and support services to assist these students in making informed decisions. Overall, these findings provide insights into the diverse and ambitious goals of postgraduate students, with a significant focus on both career development and further academic pursuits.

1. Language and Communication
   1. Results

Regarding the frequency of communication with friends in English, the survey revealed that a significant majority of respondents, 76%, reported communicating frequently in English. In contrast, 19% communicated with friends in English occasionally, while only 5% indicated rare use of English for such interactions. When examining the impact of communicating with friends in English on language development, most respondents, accounting for 81%, expressed that it significantly helped their language skills. A smaller portion, 17%, believed it somewhat helped, while a mere 2% felt it did not contribute to their language development.

In terms of confidence levels in conversational English, the results demonstrated that 81% of respondents strongly agreed that they were confident in their conversational English skills. Additionally, 14% agreed with this statement, whereas 5% neither agreed nor disagreed. Similarly, a substantial proportion of respondents, 81%, strongly agreed that they were confident in their academic English skills. A smaller group, 10%, agreed with this statement, and another 5% remained neutral. However, it's noteworthy that 5% of respondents disagreed with this assertion, indicating varying degrees of confidence in their academic English abilities.

* 1. Language and Communication Discussion

The findings from this section of the survey reveal several significant insights into the language proficiency and communication habits of international postgraduate students at UoA. The majority of respondents (76%) reported frequently communicating with their friends in English. This is a notable observation as it suggests that English serves as a primary mode of communication for many international students, even in informal social contexts. The prevalence of English in these interactions can significantly contribute to language acquisition and fluency.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (81%) indicated that communicating with friends in English significantly helped their language development. This result shows the importance of peer interactions in language acquisition. The immersive environment created by conversing with friends in English appears to be highly beneficial for improving language skills.

The survey data also indicates a high level of confidence among respondents in conversational English, with 81% strongly agreeing that they are confident in this regard. An additional 14% agreed, further reinforcing the notion that international postgraduate students at UoA feel assured in their ability to engage in everyday conversations in English. This high level of confidence can enhance their overall university experience and social integration.

In terms of academic English proficiency, the results are consistent with conversational English. A significant majority (81%) expressed strong agreement regarding their confidence in using academic English, such as with lecturers, supervisors, in workshops, seminars, or presentations.

These findings suggest that international postgraduate students at UoA are actively engaging with the English language, both in informal social settings and in academic contexts. The positive impact of frequent communication with friends in English on language development is evident, contributing to their confidence in both conversational and academic English. These results affirm the importance of continued language support and resources for international students to ensure their success and integration into the academic and social life of the university.

1. Pre-sessional English Summer Course
   1. Results

Regarding the rates of completion of the Pre-sessional English Summer Course, the survey results indicated that most respondents, accounting for 76%, had not completed this course. In contrast, 24% of respondents had successfully completed the course. When examining the perceived helpfulness of the Pre-sessional English Summer Course among those who completed it, the findings revealed that 80% of respondents found the course to be very helpful, and they felt it prepared them adequately for the commencement of their academic programs. Conversely, 10% of respondents expressed that the course did not assist them in preparing for the start of their courses, while an equal percentage preferred not to provide an opinion on its effectiveness.

* 1. Pre-sessional English Summer Course Discussion

The majority of respondents (71%) did not complete the pre-sessional English summer course. A possible explanation of the low rates may be seen cited two respondents, where the course's cost was too high, indicating that financial considerations may deter some students from enrolling in such programs.

Among the respondents who completed the pre-sessional English summer course, the majority (80%) found it to be very helpful and believed that it prepared them well for the start of their postgraduate courses. This is a positive outcome, as it indicates that for those who did participate, the course had a substantial positive impact on their language preparedness and overall readiness for their academic programs. However, one participant expressed dissatisfaction, stating that it did not help them prepare for the start of their course. This feedback highlights the importance of continuously evaluating and improving the quality and effectiveness of such preparatory programs to ensure that they meet the diverse needs of international students that may have different levels of English proficiency.

In conclusion, the data suggests that while a significant number of international postgraduate students at UoA did not complete the pre-sessional English summer course, those who did found it to be beneficial in preparing them for their academic journey. Addressing the cost concerns raised by some students and addressing any areas of improvement identified through student feedback can further enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of such preparatory courses.

1. EAL Support
   1. Results

International postgraduate students employ a range of tools and support services to enhance their academic English writing. A substantial majority rely on grammar checking software (76%) and translation tools (43%) to aid their writing processes. Additionally, some students use language learning apps (10%) and writing assistance software (7%) to support their academic works. Notably, a few respondents (12%) identified "other" resources, such as being partners with a native English speaker, or feeling that do not need to use any tools as they are confident in their abilities. 2% preferred not to disclose their preferences.

In terms of university support, the Language Centre stands out as a frequently used resource, with 9 respondents mentioning its utilisation. Beyond that, students seek assistance from various sources, including classmates, tutors, and participation in tutorials. A significant proportion of students expressed being satisfied with the help they receive from the centre. Nonetheless, it's important to acknowledge that a notable portion of respondents (36%) do not receive any English as an Additional Language (EAL) support from the university.

At the individual schools, students report having a lot of help from their lecturers and supervisors. Some students also mentioned seeking assistance from their fellow classmates. Tutorials, in particular, were highlighted as highly beneficial. The satisfaction levels with EAL support from schools show respondents expressing being satisfied with the help they receive. Similar to the university level, a significant proportion (33%) reported not receiving any EAL support from their schools.

* 1. EAL Support Discussion

The survey results illuminate the multifaceted ways in which international postgraduate students are supported in enhancing their academic English writing skills. Notably, technology plays a substantial role, with students frequently using grammar checking software and translation tools. This indicates a strong reliance on digital resources to aid their writing processes.

In terms of university support, the utilisation of the Language Centre and positive feedback regarding satisfaction levels suggest that UoA is providing valuable services to assist students in their language development. However, the notable percentage of students who reported not receiving any EAL support calls for attention. The University should consider improving communication and accessibility of these services to ensure that all students can benefit.

At the school level, students continue to utilise various support mechanisms, with tutorials and interactions with supervisors being especially beneficial. The satisfaction with school-level support indicate that these services are effective in meeting students' needs.

Looking forward, students expressed a desire for additional support services, including academic recap sessions and group discussions focused on academic topics to practice academic English. These insights can guide the University and its schools in tailoring their support services to better address the unique needs of international postgraduate students and ensure their academic success.

1. Language Barriers
   1. Results

14% of respondents frequently experience difficulties understanding lectures or coursework due to language barriers, 33% report they occasionally do, 19% report they rarely do, and 33% never do. This distribution suggests that while a third of respondents navigates academic coursework with relative ease, the majority of participants have previously struggled at least in an academic setting due to language barriers.

Turning to the daily use of English outside of academic studies, a notable majority of respondents (72%) reported frequent or occasional engagement with the language. In contrast, 10% indicated rare use, and a smaller proportion (5%) reported they never use English outside of an academic setting.

When it comes to the practice of translating assignments from their preferred language into English, 48% noted that they never employ this strategy. 29% reported occasional use, 12% frequent use and 12% rare use of engaging in such translation practices, indicating a diverse range of approaches to assignment preparation.

Regarding the utilisation of software for translating lectures and academic materials, 36% of respondents mentioned occasional use, while 12% reported frequent use and 7% rare usage. 45% stated that they never employ such software, indicating that reliance on translation software varies among students.

* 1. Language Barriers Discussion

The findings regarding language barriers in academic settings reveal that while a substantial number of international postgraduate students experience occasional difficulties in understanding lectures or coursework due to language barriers, an equally sizeable portion does not encounter such hindrances. This underscores the diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels within the student population. The university should take this variation into account when designing language support programs and resources to cater to students with varying needs.

The high percentage (62%) of students who reported frequent use of English outside of academic studies suggests that they have substantial exposure to the language in everyday life, potentially contributing to their language development. However, the population that reported occasional, rare or never using English outside of academics indicates that there is a population of students that are perhaps in fewer opportunities for immersive language experiences- this may be due to personal choice, lack of awareness, fear of rejection/failure, etc. This juxtaposition in experience highlights the importance of having a rich linguistic environment beyond the classroom, such as extracurricular activities.

The practice of translating assignments from one's preferred language into English is not uncommon among students, with both occasional and frequent usage reported. The varying degrees of reliance on translation software to assist with lectures and academic materials emphasise the importance of ensuring access to reliable translation tools for all students. Additionally, the University can provide training or workshops to help students effectively use these tools without compromising the integrity of their academic work. It's also notable that some students provided specific software names like DeepL, Youdao, Papago and Google Translate, indicating a preference for certain translation aids.

Overall, these findings offer insights into the challenges and language practices of international postgraduate students, which can inform strategies to enhance language support and promote a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

1. Language Centre (LC)
   1. Results

Firstly, when asked about their awareness of the Language Centre's services and resources, responses varied. 38%, indicated that they were aware of these services and had used them in the past and 19% were aware of the services but had not yet used them. 31% of respondents were unaware of the resources provided by the Language Centre.

With regards to frequency of usage and satisfaction with the services offered by the Language Centre, responses varied, however there was only one report of a service being used regularly which was the drop-in sessions. The following tables display the results of the services used and satisfaction.

Table 1. Percentage of responses of participants that have used the Language Centre resources, with the exact number of people who responded in parenthesis.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | I have not used this before | I use this every now and then | I have only used this once or twice | I use this regularly | Prefer Not to Say |
| 1-2-1 Sessions | 61.9 (26) | 9.5 (4) | 16.7 (7) | 0 (0) | 11.9 (5) |
| Drop-in Sessions | 61.9 (26) | 7.1 (3) | 16.7 (7) | 2.4 (1) | 11.9 (5) |
| English Language Courses | 31.8 (7) | 22.7 (5) | 22.7 (5) | 0 (0) | 22.7 (5) |
| Study Skills Workshops | 59.5 (25) | 11.9 (5) | 16.7 (7) | 0 (0) | 11.9 (5) |

Table 2. Percentage of responses regarding satisfaction of participants that have used the Language Centre resources, with the exact number of people who responded in parenthesis.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | I have not used this before | Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied | Prefer Not to Say |
| 1-2-1 Sessions | 59.5 (25) | 19.0 (8) | 4.8 (2) | 4.8 (2) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 11.9 (5) |
| Drop-in Sessions | 59.5 (25) | 19.0 (8) | 4.8 (2) | 2.4 (1) | 2.4 (1) | 0 (0) | 11.9 (5) |
| English Language Courses | 31.8 (7) | 31.8 (7) | 13.6 (3) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 22.7 (5) |
| Study Skills Workshops | 57.1 (24) | 21.4 (9) | 2.4 (1) | 4.8 (2) | 2.4 (1) | 0 (0) | 11.9 (5) |

Table 3. The types of marketing done by the Language Centre, and the number of people that had heard about the services provided through each method, with the exact number of people in parenthesis, in descending order.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Promotional Method | Percentage |
| The University of Aberdeen’s website | 12.6 (16) |
| Course guides | 12.6 (16) |
| Word of mouth (for example, from a friend or tutor recommending it) | 11.81 (15) |
| Course introduction sessions | 11.02 (14) |
| Plasma screens around campus | 11.02 (14) |
| Internal communications (for example, school-wide emails) | 10.24 (13) |
| I have not heard of the Language Centre and its resources | 10.24 (13) |
| Search engine (for example, when searching Google for academic English help resources) | 7.87 (10) |
| Posters (for example, in the library or international centre) | 5.51 (7) |
| Social media (for example, Facebook) | 4.72 (6) |
| Prefer Not to Say | 2.36 (3) |

Regarding motivations for seeking support from the Language Centre, underscore the multifaceted role of the Language Centre in meeting diverse student needs.

Table 4. Motivations for seeking support from the Language Centre, with the exact number of people in parenthesis, in descending order.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Reasoning | Percentage |
| To improve my English language proficiency | 18.18 (16) |
| To understand academic vocabulary and terminology specific to my field | 18.18 (16) |
| To improve my written English skills for coursework or assessments | 18.18 (16) |
| To increase my confidence in communicating with native speakers of English | 14.77 (13) |
| To improve my spoken English skills for presentations, seminars or discussions | 12.5 (11) |
| To enhance my employability and career prospects | 12.5 (11) |
| Prefer Not to Say | 4.55 (4) |
| Other | 1.14 (1) |

In terms of overall perceptions, the majority of respondents held positive views. Notably, 45.2% strongly agreed that the Language Centre provides the type of support they expected, while 26% agreed. A smaller portion, constituting 16.7%, neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 2.4% disagreed, with 9.5% preferring not to disclose.

In regard to if participants found the resources useful for their needs, 40.5% strongly agreed, with an additional 26.2% in agreement. Conversely, only 4.8% disagreed, 26.2% neither agreed nor disagrees and 7.1% preferred not to disclose.

* 1. Language Centre Discussion

The results from the survey on the awareness and utilisation of Language Centre services among international postgraduate students at the University of Aberdeen offer valuable insights into the effectiveness and reach of these support resources.

Firstly, the findings demonstrate a varied level of awareness among respondents. While a significant portion of students (38%) reported being aware of the Language Centre's services and having used them before, a substantial number (31%) were not aware of the services offered at the LC. These disparities in awareness highlight the need for enhanced communication strategies and outreach efforts to ensure that all international postgraduate students are informed about the available support. A substantial proportion of students have not yet tapped into these resources, which presents an opportunity for the Language Centre to engage a broader audience.

Satisfaction levels with Language Centre resources generally appeared positive among users. Notably, the majority of students who had engaged with these services reported being very satisfied, and strongly agreed that it provided the expected support and was useful for their needs. This reflects positively on the effectiveness of the services offered, but the feedback also underscores the importance of maintaining and continuously improving these resources to meet evolving student needs.

The survey findings display the importance of having several strategies for promoting awareness of Language Centre services. While university-wide promotions played a significant role in informing students, academic advisors and peer recommendations were also influential sources of information. This highlights the need for continued collaboration between faculty and student bodies to ensure that students are aware of and encouraged to use these resources.

The motivations for seeking support from the Language Centre were diverse, encompassing existing language proficiency, wanting to improve on academic vocabulary comprehension, and enhancing written and spoken English skills. This suggests that students have a variety of needs, and the University's ability to collaborate with the Language Centre to address these varied requirements positions it as a crucial asset in fostering academic success and language development.

1. Perceived Barriers to Using Language Centre Services
   1. Results

The survey investigated the extent to which international postgraduate students at the University of Aberdeen perceived that their experiences had improved due to their use of the Language Centre. Additionally, it sought to identify factors preventing some students from utilising these resources and explored alternative sources of English language support.

A noteworthy 77.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that using the Language Centre had improved their experience at the University of Aberdeen. This indicates a substantial positive impact on students who engaged with the Language Centre's services. Conversely, only a small percentage disagreed or expressed neutrality on this matter (13.6%), suggesting that for the majority, the Language Centre contributes significantly to their overall university experience.

The survey also inquired about factors hindering the use of Language Centre resources, with the results seen in Table 3 below.

Table 5. Motivations for not seeking support from the Language Centre, with the exact number of people in parenthesis, in descending order.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Reasoning | Percentage |
| Lack of need | 27.12 (16) |
| Lack of time | 23.73 (14) |
| Lack of awareness of available resources | 22.03 (13) |
| Uncertainty about the effectiveness of language Centre resources | 10.17 (6) |
| Prefer Not to Say | 6.78 (4) |
| Other commitments or priorities | 5.08 (3) |
| Other | 5.08 (3) |

For students who had not used the Language Centre's resources or had used them irregularly, alternative sources of English language support were explored. English-speaking friends or acquaintances were the most commonly mentioned, followed by private language tutors and online language courses or apps. This indicates that students are resourceful in seeking English language support, or may have had it from another institution in the past, even if they do not engage with formal university services.

The importance of improving English language skills to academic success and future career prospects was presented by most respondents, reflecting the high value placed on language proficiency in a global academic and professional landscape. Lastly, respondents who had chosen not to use the Language Centre's resources cited reasons such as not needing additional support, a preference for independent study, and a perceived lack of time. A smaller proportion expressed discomfort in asking for help and felt that the Centre's resources did not align with their specific needs. These insights highlight the diverse motivations and considerations of students when deciding to engage with language support services.

* 1. Discussion

The survey results reveal a positive impact of the Language Centre on the overall experience of international postgraduate students at the University of Aberdeen. The majority of respondents reported that their experiences had improved as a result of using the Centre's resources. This outcome is promising and suggests that the Language Centre plays a vital role in supporting students' language development and academic success. Furthermore, this positive perception can contribute to increased usage of the Centre's services as satisfied students are more likely to recommend them to peers.

Despite the positive impact, some students have not yet used the Language Centre's resources. The primary barrier identified was a perceived lack of need, indicating that a portion of students may possess sufficient language proficiency levels or feel confident in their abilities. This shows the importance of tailoring language support services to different proficiency levels and ensuring that students are aware that the Centre's services can benefit them at various stages of their academic journey.

The barriers related to lack of time and lack of awareness are also significant. To address these challenges, the Language Centre should consider offering flexible scheduling options and intensifying efforts to promote its services through various communication channels. Collaboration with the schools to place an emphasis on the language development of international students could also prove fruitful, such as set enrichment sessions for ESL students. Additionally, providing clearer information about the effectiveness of Language Centre resources can mitigate concerns about their impact.

The survey results also shed light on alternative sources of language support that students may turn to, such as English-speaking friends or acquaintances and private tutors. Acknowledging these alternative pathways is essential for the Centre to adapt and remain relevant in a dynamic educational landscape. In summary, the survey outcomes suggest that while the Language Centre has a positive impact on many students, there is an opportunity to expand its reach and address barriers. By offering a range of services that cater to diverse needs and by improving communication and outreach strategies, the Language Centre can better serve the international postgraduate student community and enhance their academic and personal experiences at the University of Aberdeen.

1. Conclusion

While English emerged as the predominant language for academic and social interactions, the survey also illuminated a noteworthy trend of students communicating with friends in English, which positively impacted their language development. Respondents expressed confidence in both conversational and academic English, emphasising the importance of these competencies for academic and career success.

The discussion surrounding the Language Centre's resources demonstrated their pivotal role in enhancing the university experience for international postgraduate students. A majority of respondents perceived positive impacts on their academic journeys, citing improvements in language skills and overall experience. However, barriers such as a perceived lack of need, time constraints, and awareness gaps were identified, underscoring the need for tailored language support services and improved outreach strategies.

Additionally, the survey uncovered alternative sources of language support, including peers and private tutors, highlighting the dynamic nature of language learning and the importance of adaptability in language support services.

In conclusion, the survey findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of language experiences among international postgraduate students at the University of Aberdeen. The positive impact of language support services is evident, but opportunities exist for further refinement and expansion. By addressing the identified barriers and leveraging the rich linguistic diversity of its student body, the University of Aberdeen can continue to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment for its international postgraduate community, ultimately enhancing their academic achievements and future prospects.

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