

Why pursue postgraduate taught study?

*Motivations and expectations of
home and international students in
health and life sciences*

Dr Claire Hudson

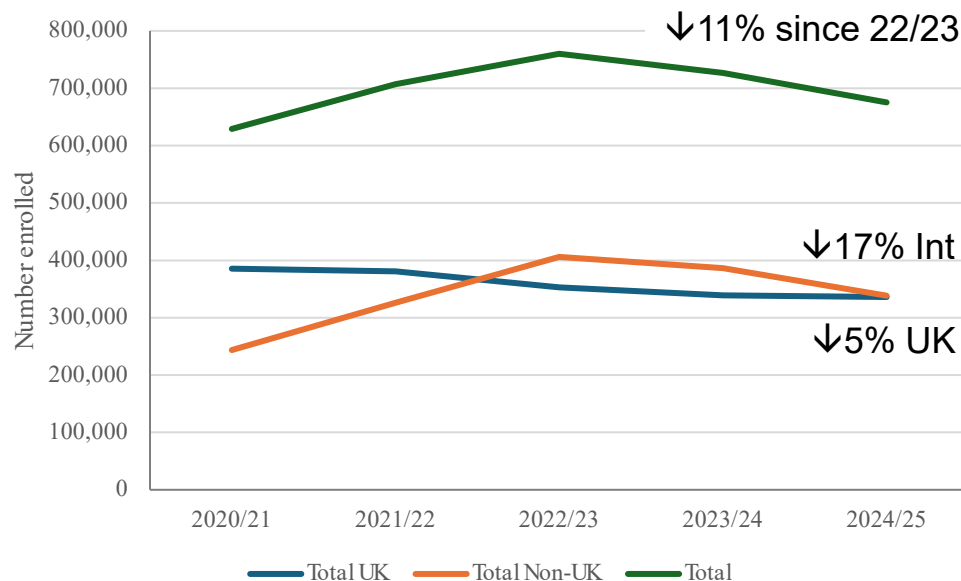
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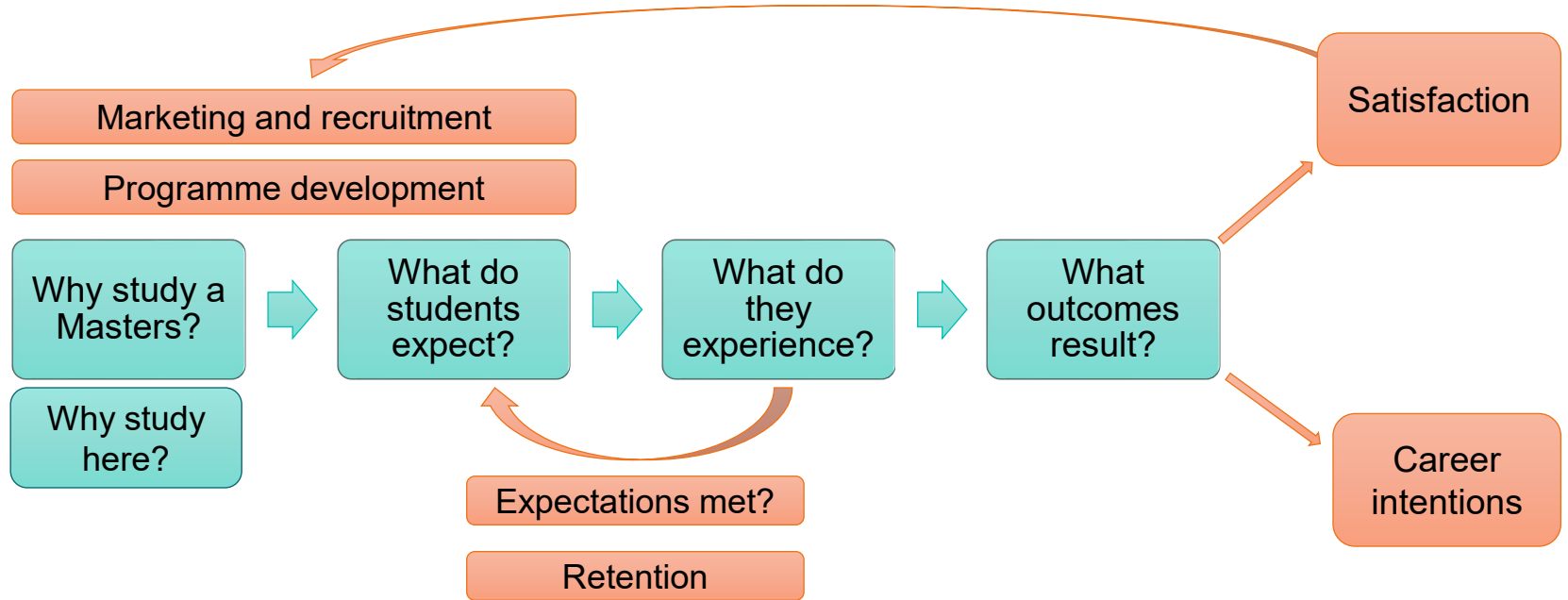
Why does this matter?

- PGT student numbers dropping since 2022/23 – driven by reductions in international students
- PGT recruitment (especially international) is increasingly important to the financial stability of universities



Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data

Why does this matter to us?



What do we already know?

- A wealth of data was collected (2014-15) during the **Postgraduate Experience Project** (*Morgan, 2016*).
- Motivations included enhancing employment prospects, subject interest, and gaining specialist skills and knowledge.
- Findings aligned with the PTES (Postgraduate taught experience survey), but this no longer collects motivations data.

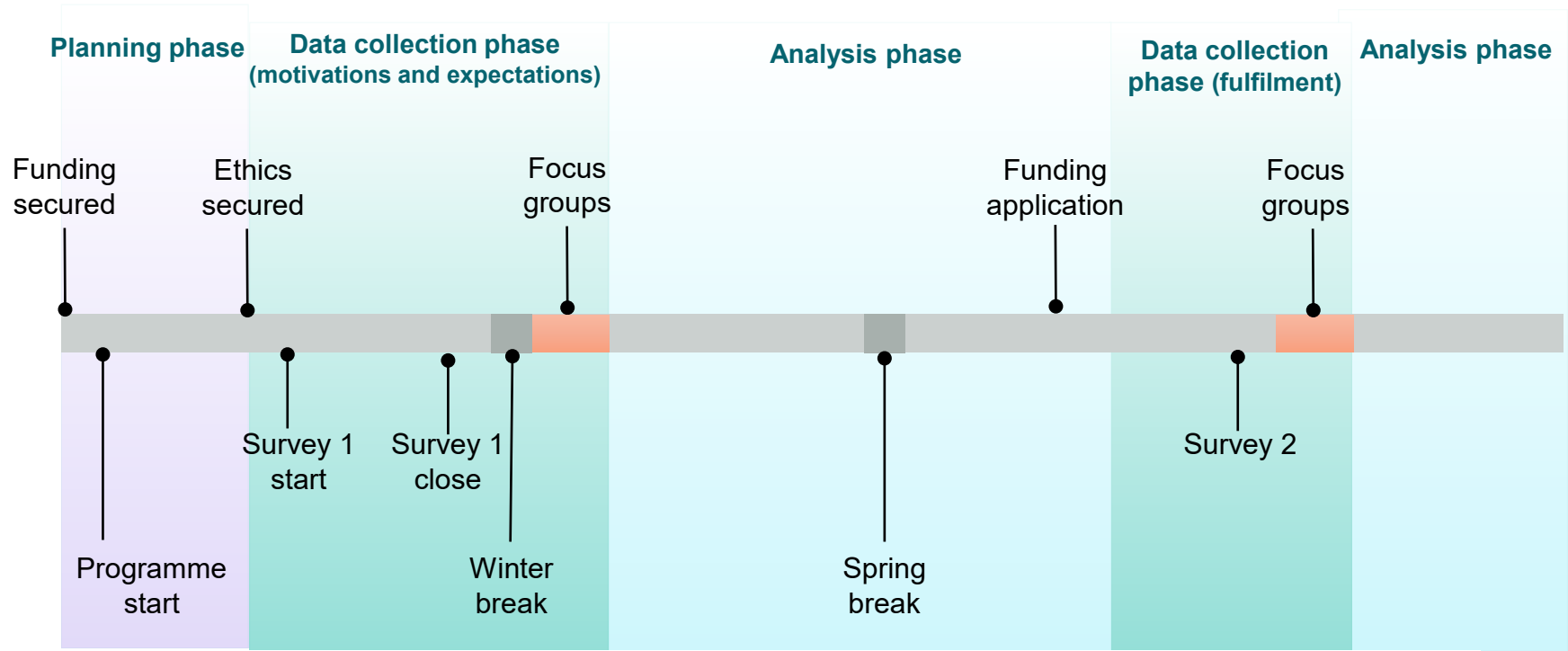
However, the sector has changed in the last decade:

1. More international students
2. Higher fees and living costs
3. Post-covid teaching context



Motivations

Longitudinal study design



Survey instruments

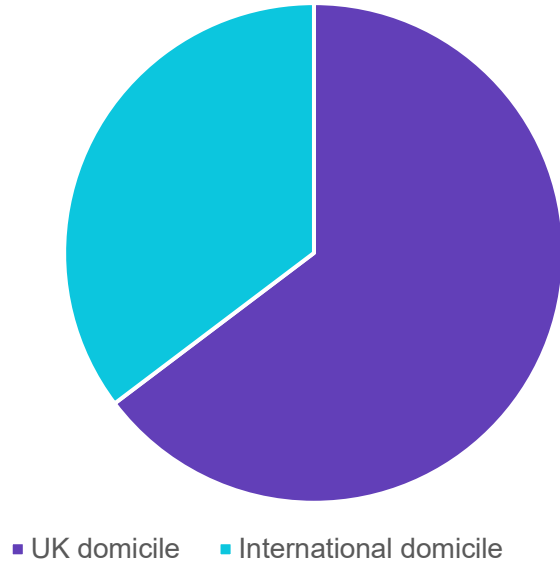
- **Motivational factors** (23 items), based on MSLQ (*Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire*) measured using 5-point Likert scales.
- Expectations on entry and **fulfilment** (14 items), calculate expectation gap, 5-point Likert
- Programme features that **influenced choice**
- Demographics
- Career intentions



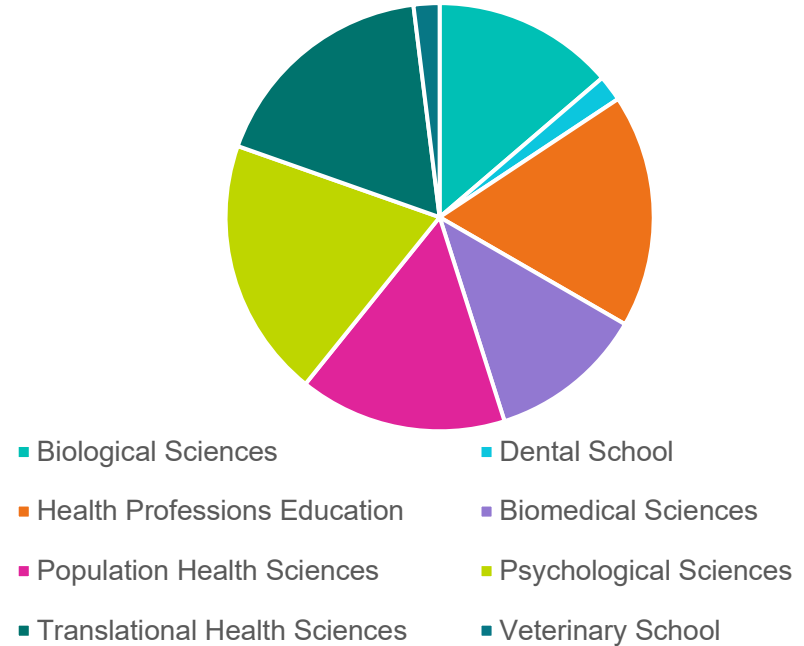
A magnifying glass with a silver rim and a black handle is positioned over a blue background. The background features a subtle, circular, textured pattern that resembles a ripple or a lens flare. The text "Quantitative Findings" is centered within the magnifying glass's lens.

Quantitative Findings

Survey participants (N = 51)



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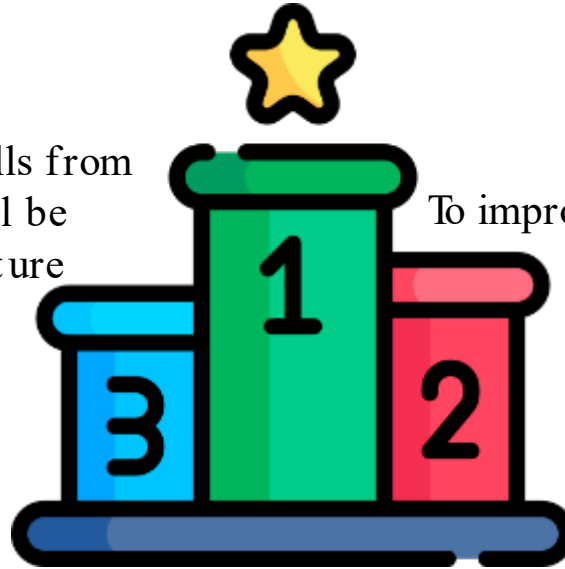


16 different PGT programmes

Students primarily viewed PGT as a career investment

To improve my career prospects.

Knowledge and skills from this programme will be valuable for my future career.



To improve my knowledge of the subject

International versus home student motivations

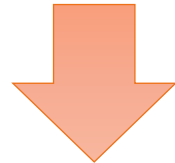
Comparisons using **composite** motivation variables:



Greater '**utility (study) value**' motivations in international students ($p = .033$)



Greater '**professional and community**' motivations in international students ($p = .001$)



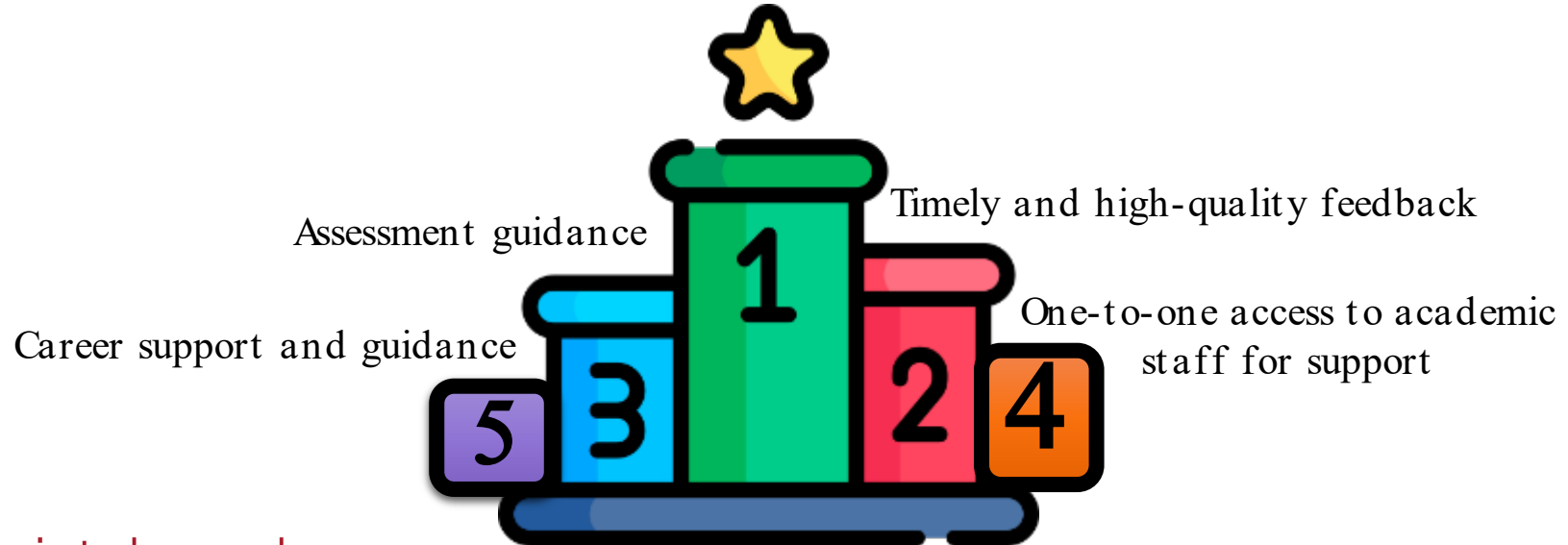
Lower '**practical and personal**' considerations in international students ($p = .023$)

Students expected strong academic and career support

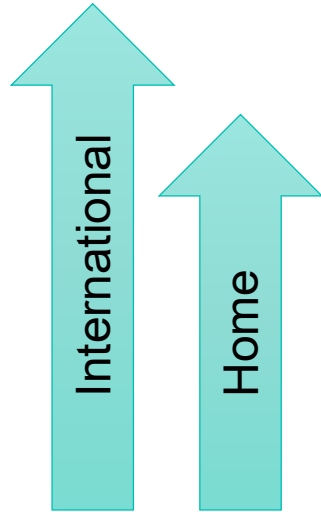
Students rated their **importance** on a Likert scale

Top expectations:

Skills and experience relevant
to my future career.



4. International students reported higher expectations...



....relative to Home students

Higher standard of teaching compared to undergraduate ($p = .025$)

Sufficient contact hours ($p = .035$)

Manageable workload to support work-life balance ($p = .02$)

Clear guidance on assessments and marking criteria

Feeling part of a community of postgraduate-taught (PGT) students

Programme features that influenced choice

Rank 1-6 for ALL students	All N = 51	Home n = 33	International n = 18	Fisher's exact <i>p</i>
1. Reputation of the University or Faculty	39%	24%	67%	.006
2. Breadth of topics taught	37%	33%	44%	.547
3. Research skills training	31%	21%	50%	.057
4. Focus on a narrow discipline	27%	27%	28%	1.00
5. Flexible learning, allowing scope for work or caring commitments	27%	30%	22%	.744
6. Nature of assessment (e.g. coursework or exams)	24%	30%	11%	.174
Features with additional differences				
Option for part-time study	20%	30%	0	.009
Required for professional registration or accreditation	12%	6%	22%	.168
Cost of fees	10%	15%	0	.148

Programme features that influenced choice - International

Rank 1-6 for ALL students	All N = 51	Home n = 33	International n = 18	Fisher's exact p
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=> International choice: **institutional “pull” factors** (institutional reputation, research expertise, professional opportunities), **utility value motivations**.

Programme features that influenced choice - Home

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=> International choice: **institutional “pull” factors** (institutional reputation, research expertise, professional opportunities), **utility value motivations**.

=> Home choice: **programme feasibility/lifestyle fit**

International vs home mindset when choosing PGT study



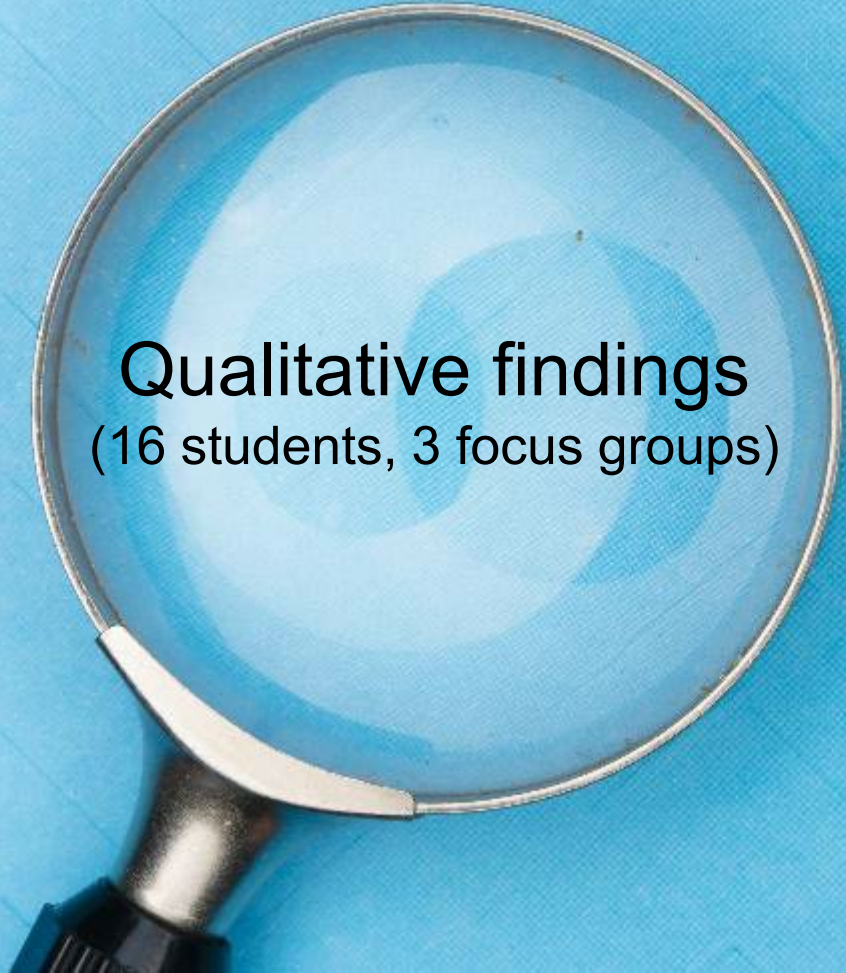
Investment mindset

"Which programme will maximise my future opportunities?"



Feasibility mindset

"Which programme can I realistically fit into my existing life?"

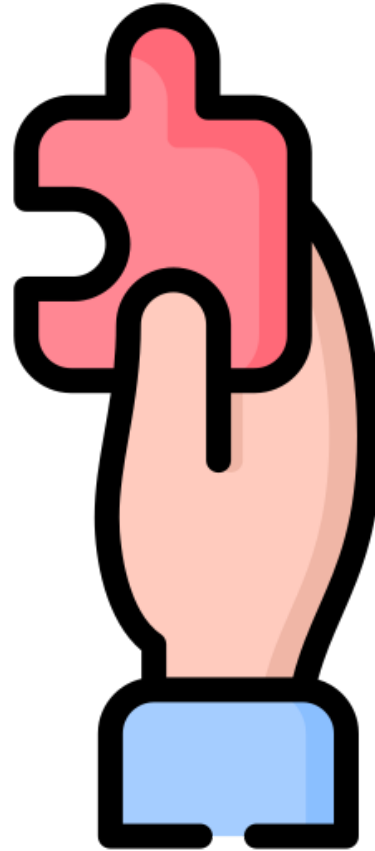
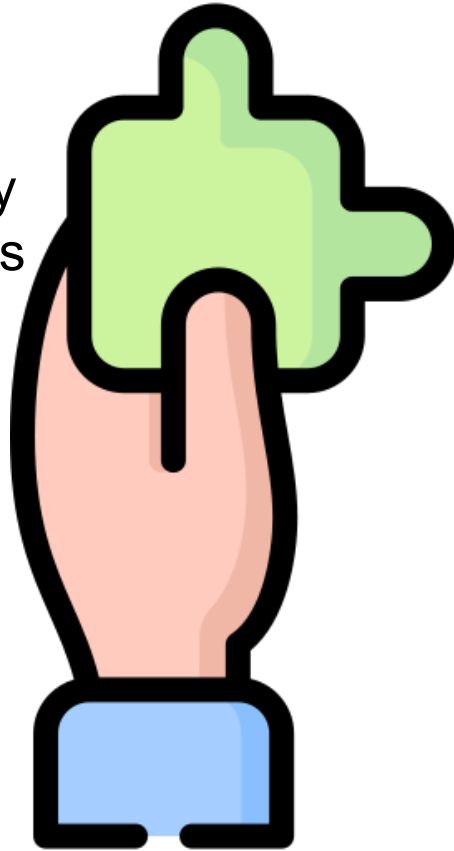
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Qualitative findings

(16 students, 3 focus groups)

What

Survey
findings



Focus
group
findings

Why

Career investment was dominant

= *Extrinsic and utility (study) value motivations*

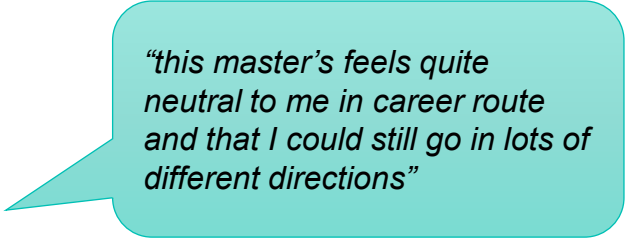
- Improve employability
- Progress to PhD or specialist training
- Professional advancement
- Research skills
- Return on investment

“...in my specific field, we value lab skills and research skills and I felt like my BSc didn't give me enough exposure to go for a higher level of job or well-paying jobs.”

“I don't view the MSc as an expenditure, rather an investment into my future. It's a big leap of faith...”

‘Exploration’ more evident in ‘Home’ students

- Gaining confidence
- Masters as a transition or reflection year (**Home only**)
- Keeping options open
- Exploring options before committing to a career pathway, e.g. seeing what a research career might offer (**Home only**)

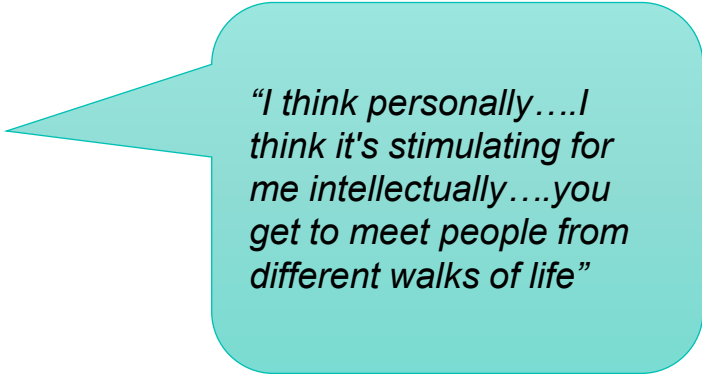


“this master’s feels quite neutral to me in career route and that I could still go in lots of different directions”

Intellectual development

= *Intrinsic and utility value motivations*

- Interest in the subject
- Intellectual challenge
- Deepening knowledge
- Personal growth



"I think personally....I think it's stimulating for me intellectually....you get to meet people from different walks of life"

More evident in '**Home**' students, **international** students linked personal interest more directly to professional development or professional contribution.

Professional identity

= *Professional/community motivations and networking*

- Contribute to patient care/research
- Build professional networks
- Learn from experts

“a placement that we can do... I am hoping to use that as a way of networking and getting into the field that I want to get into”.

“one of my motivations was to learn about it abroad and then bring that knowledge back home”.

External influences and social expectations

Most visible among **international** students

- Family expectations, role models, alumni advice, and wider social norms

“I do know a lot of people...who are course alumni. So yeah, they were kind of an influencing factor and they did talk really well about the course”

“back in India....people expect you to have that level of degree as like a bare minimum”

Expectations discussed in depth

Academic challenge and independence

- Higher academic standards
- More independent learning
- Increased personal responsibility for learning

Career investment and preparation

- Career-relevant skills
- Research experience
- Networking opportunities

Supportive academic relationships

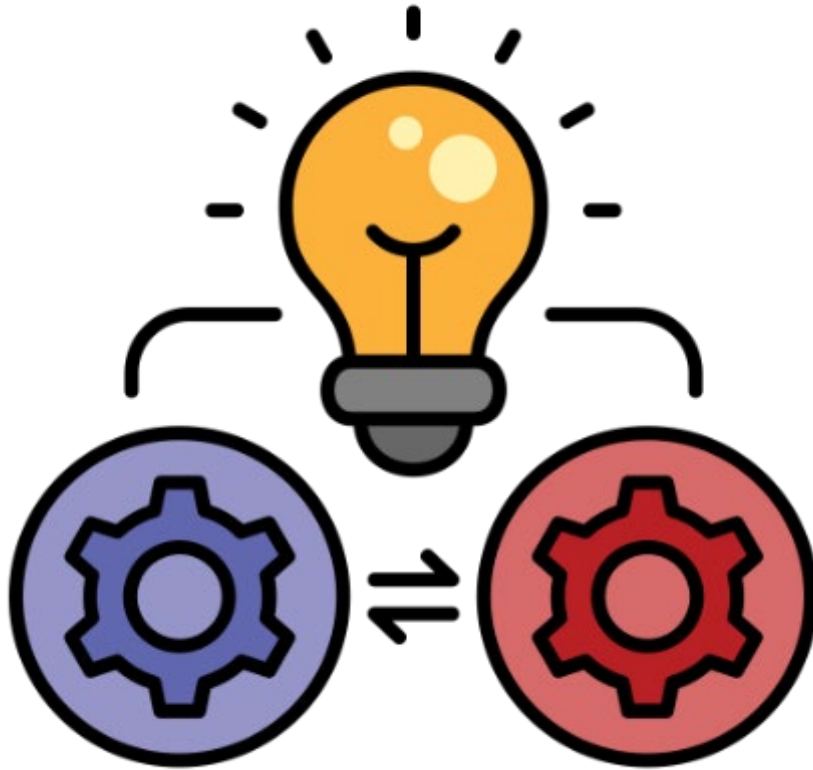
- Access to academic staff
- Support with assessments
- Opportunities to discuss ideas with experts

Community and belonging

- Interaction and collaboration with peers
- A sense of belonging within a postgraduate community

International students emphasised:

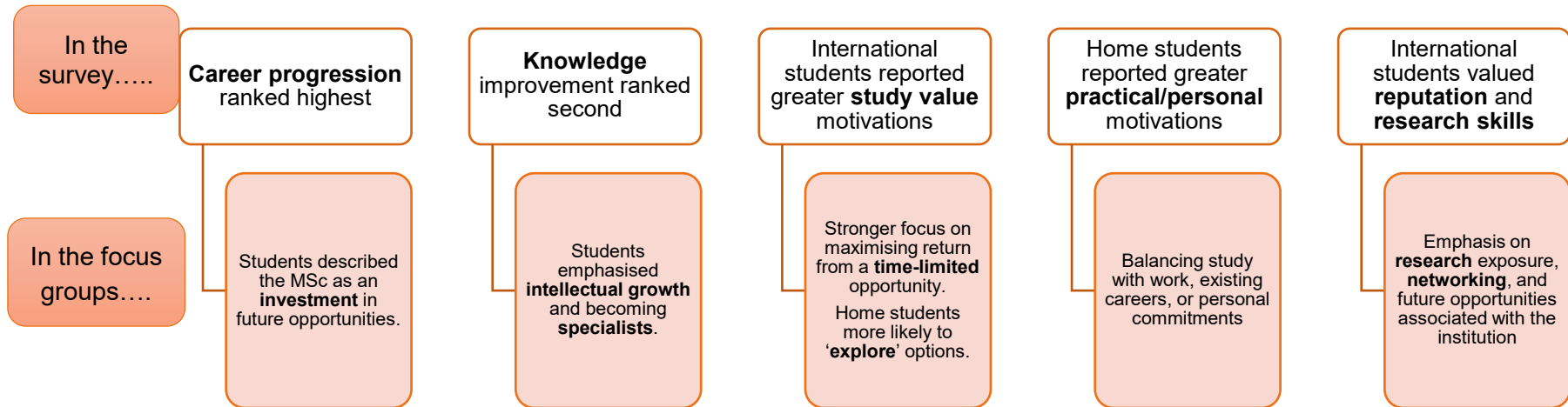
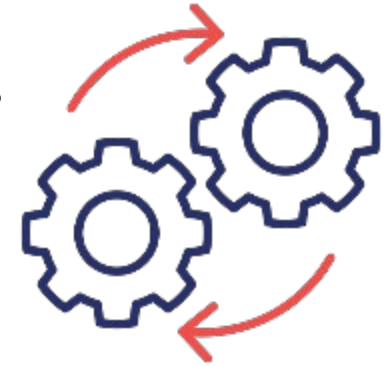
Structured support to understand UK academic conventions,
Networking and UK career routes



Discussions

Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Focus group data help **explain** the survey data:



What can we do?

Before enrolment

Understand and communicate **diverse** motivations

Use **targeted** and **specific** messaging during recruitment

Question: Are we communicating what students actually value, or what we assume they value?

Induction

Align expectations with postgraduate reality

Recognise **different starting points** and expectations

Questions for students:
Why are you here?
What do you hope to achieve?

During study

Build **explicit** career, research and community opportunities **throughout**

Help **international** students understand UK academic culture, networking and careers

Question: What do we promise international students during recruitment and do we support them to achieve this?

Programme review

Evaluate whether students achieved their **intended goals**, not just generic satisfaction

Revised satisfaction questions: “Did the programme deliver what students came here to achieve?”

Sneak peak at experiences.....

- Some 'realities' were discussed.
- Programme-driven differences in:
 - Networking opportunities and experiences
 - Community feel



Emerging initiatives

- *Community and research exposure:*
PGR: PGT mentoring scheme
- *Community and careers:*
Whole-school careers sessions
- *Community:*
Faculty-wide writing retreats for
PGT students



Limitations

- Timing of focus groups wasn't optimal and the questions could be refined to discuss programme features in more depth
- Second part of research still to come - expectation fulfilment
- Selection bias and small numbers
- No insights into why students are NOT coming!



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