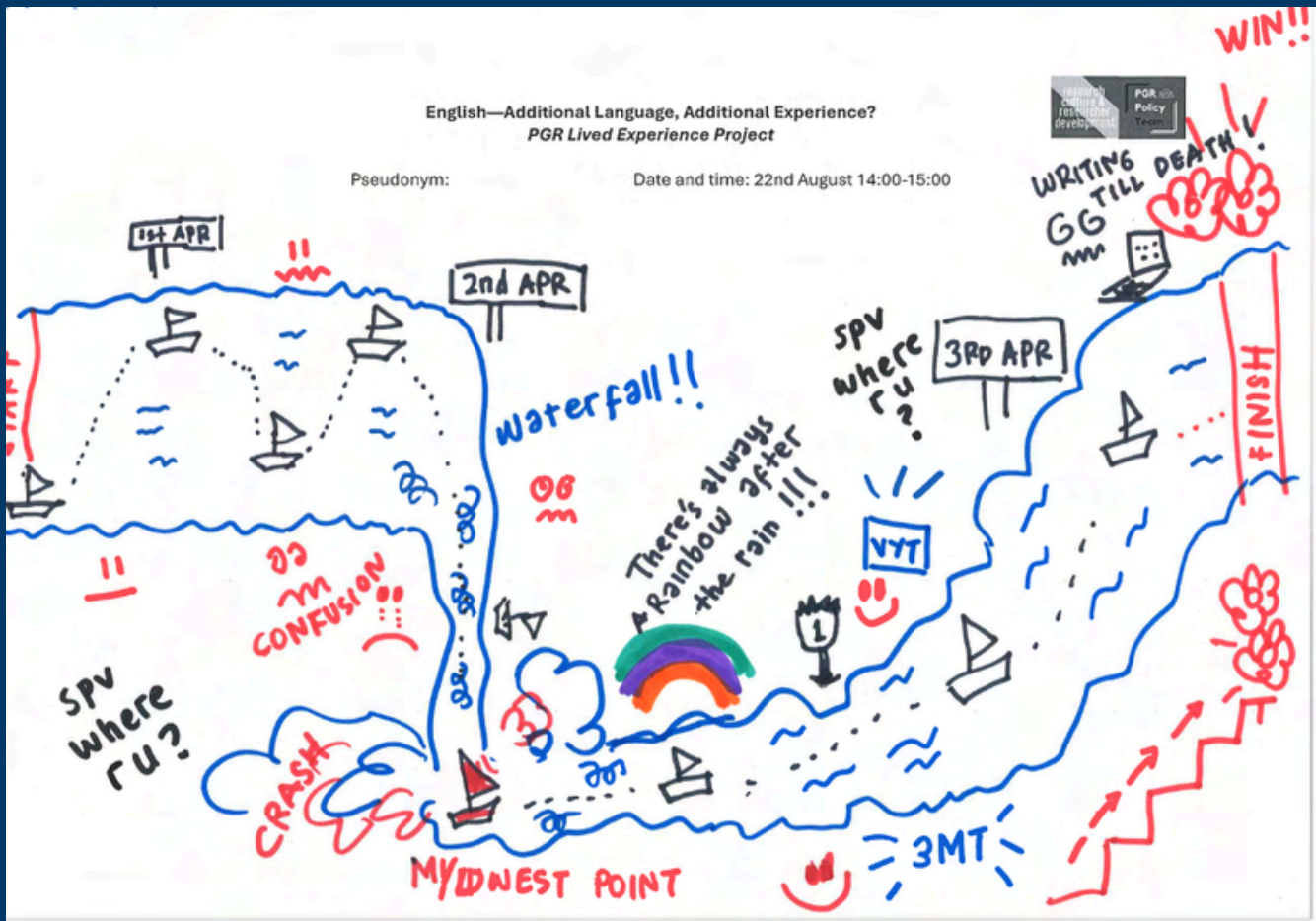




Additional Language, Additional Experience?

Insights from the EAL-PGR
Lived Experience Project

Dr Rachel Lyon & Dr Qian Jiang,
University of Glasgow

2026

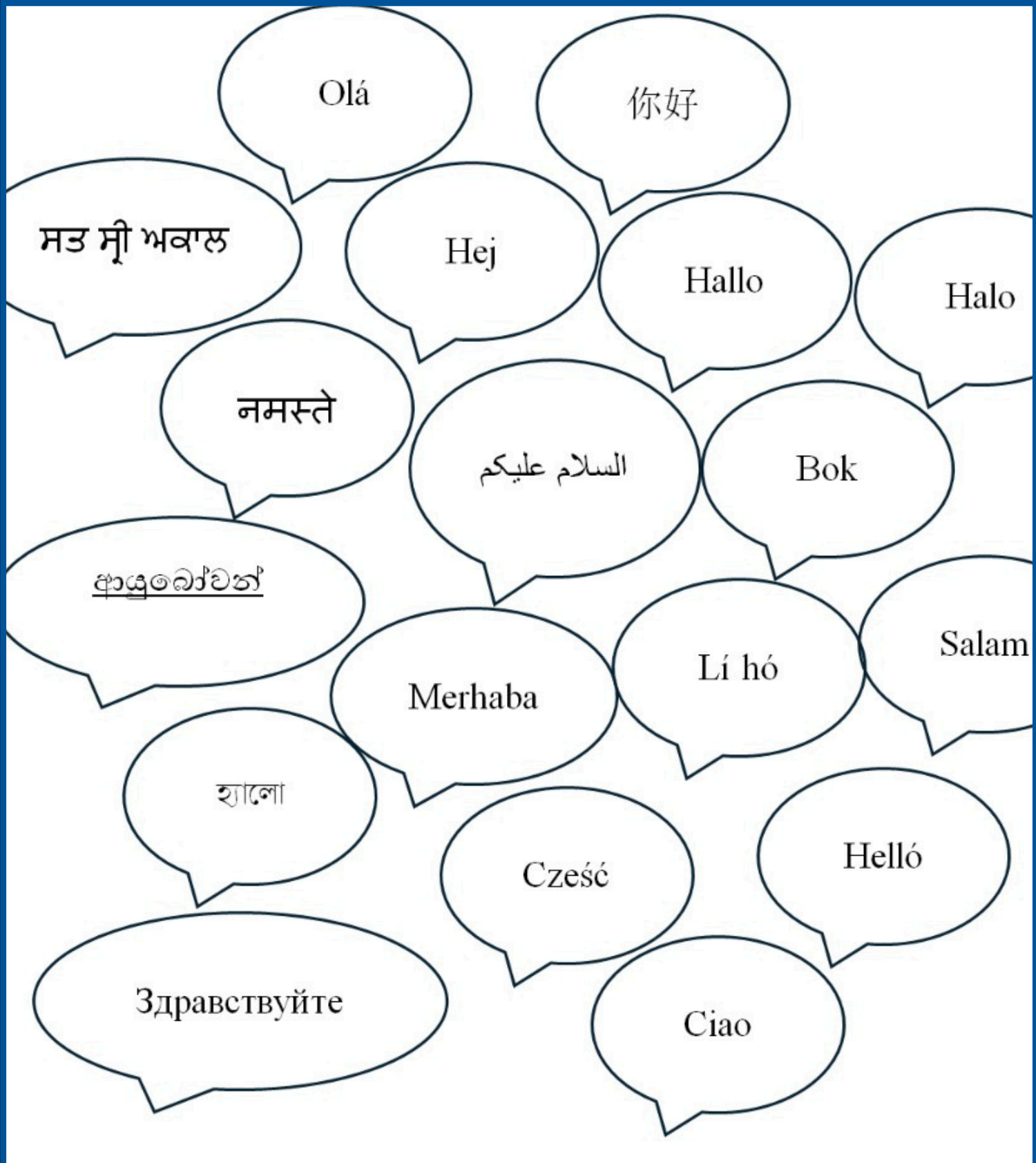


Figure 1: Multilingual greetings shared by our project participants

About the Authors



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Rachel is a Researcher Development Specialist at the University of Glasgow, where she leads on support for PGRs who use English as an Additional Language [EAL-PGRs]. She was the co-lead for the PGR Lived Experience Project, holding responsibility for the EAL-PGR branch of the project, which this report describes.

Dr Qian Jiang

Qian was a PGR Intern on the PGR Lived Experience Project at the University of Glasgow. She has since graduated with a PhD in Education (December 2025), and is currently a Research Associate on the Wellcome InFrame funded project, Inspiring Leaders from Underrepresented Doctoral Communities.



We are grateful to have been able to collaborate closely with colleagues on our sister project, the Part-Time PGR Lived Experience Project:

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Executive Summary: Project Overview, Key Findings and Key Recommendations

How do multilingual researchers experience the relationship between their languages and their research journey? If Universities took steps towards understanding this relationship more fully, could we support this group of PGRs more effectively?

'Additional Language, Additional Experience?: Understanding the EAL-PGR [English as an Additional Language Postgraduate Researcher] Experience at UofG' was developed answer these questions by exploring, understanding, valuing, and responding thoughtfully to the lived experiences of postgraduate researchers who use English as an Additional Language [EAL-PGRs] at the University of Glasgow. Funded by the University's Student Experience Strategy via the UofG Together Internship Fund, the EAL-PGR Lived Experience Project was realised as a collaboration between Research Culture and Researcher Development and the PGR Policy Team, and was delivered across June - October 2025.

Recognising the absence of multilingual researchers from existing institutional data on PGR experience, we held a series of six focus groups with EAL-PGRs, hearing from 26 participants who shared valuable insights drawn from their lived experience. Findings from this project disclose several key challenges encountered by EAL-PGRs, and offer incisive reflections which address lived experience of policy, practice and educational structures. These findings suggest both the far-reaching impacts of working multilingually for EAL-PGRs themselves, and the potential benefits for Universities who embrace the collective multilinguality they hold institutionally.

Our Eight Key Findings

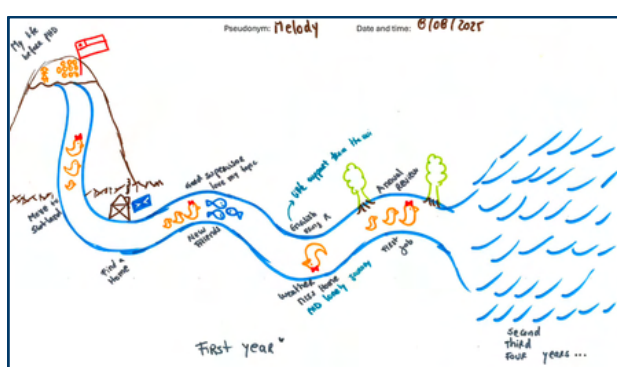
1. EAL-PGRs value dedicated support with academic writing that is specifically tailored to their needs.
2. The invisible challenge: multilingual researchers encounter hidden complexities in listening and speaking in EAL.
3. The dual challenge: EAL-PGRs are deepening language skills and developing new knowledge simultaneously
4. Transformational self-awareness: EAL-PGRs' reflections on the value of their multilinguality often changes over time
5. EAL-PGRs' self-perception: the 'native/non-native' comparison and dichotomy negatively impacts EAL-PGRs' appraisal of their abilities
6. Language plays a complex role in community building.
7. "A forbidden apple": EAL-PGRs' have a nuanced awareness of the pros and cons of using GenAI for language support.
8. The structural challenge: Navigating doctoral milestones within a UK context for academic practice also plays a key role in EAL-PGRs research journeys

We used the insights EAL-PGRs shared with us to make strategic recommendations to support cultural and structural improvements within the University's research ecosystem, allowing the institution to address key drivers such as enhancing the doctoral experience, increasing the likelihood of timely submissions, deepening our commitment to service excellence, foregrounding best practice across the research ecosystem, and taking an aligned approach to antiracist and decolonial practice across the University of Glasgow.

Our Five Key Recommendations

1. **Make it visible** – Enhance visibility of the complex challenges that EAL-PGRs face around speaking and understanding, and equip colleagues across the institution to offer effective support to address this
2. **Make it sustained and specific** – Develop further tailored writing support for EAL-PGRs
3. **Make it smoother** – Facilitate EAL-PGRs' self-realisation as empowered partners in research, and agentic knowledge creators for whom multilinguality is a distinct and definable asset, rather than a deficit
4. **Make it clear** – Clarify the institutional position and broader ethical landscape around the use of AI in language assistance
5. **Make it integrated** – Build a more inclusive institutional community through championing linguistic diversity

As this report details, we structured our approach to gathering data in our focus groups through the **River of Experience** methodology. We asked our participants to draw their research degree as a river, visualising the shape of their academic journey, and adding details to describe their lived experience of that journey. These rivers became the basis for critical conversations around the role that language played in their research careers, and are shown throughout this report as powerful illustrations of EAL-PGR experiences in UK Higher Education.

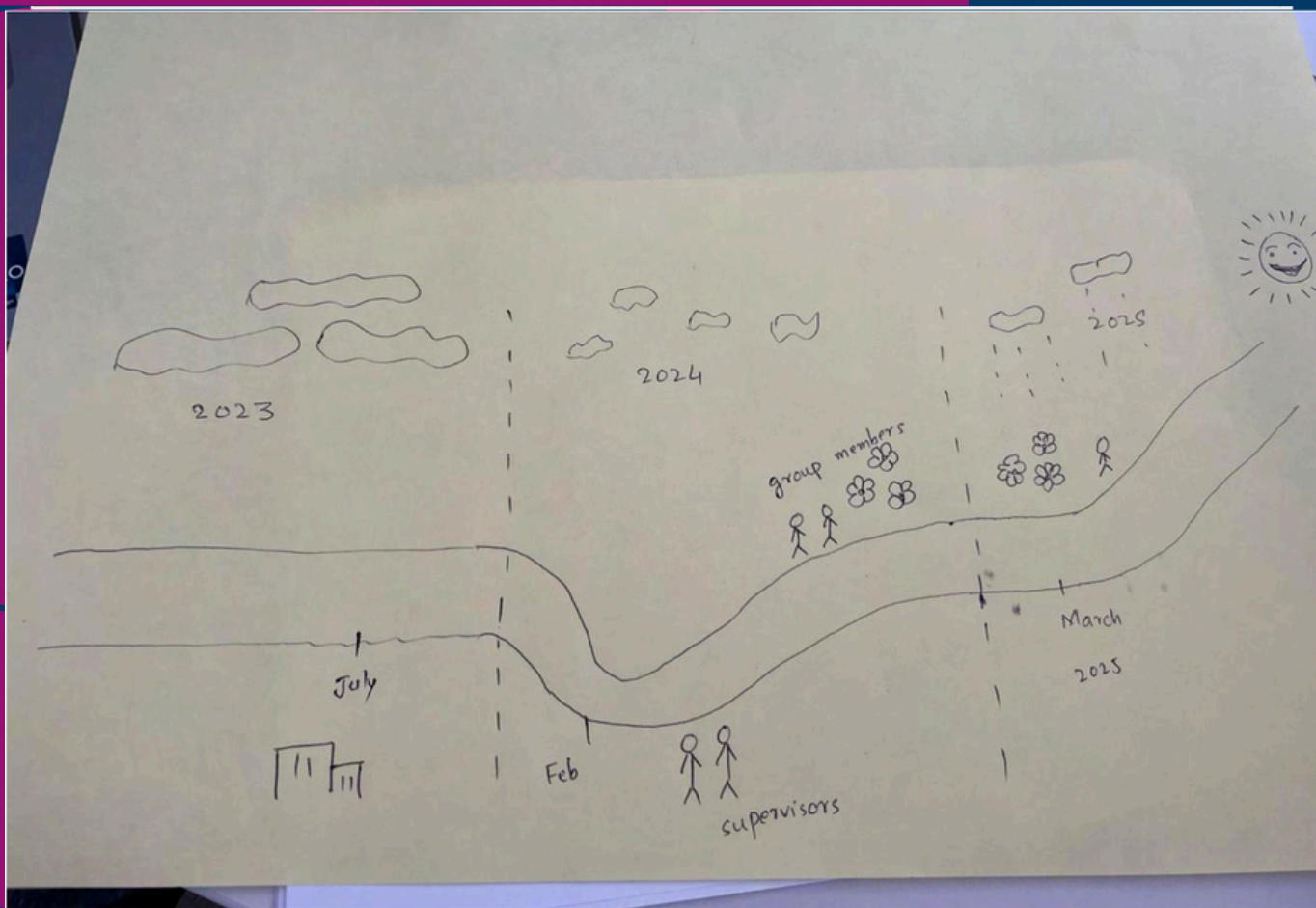


An example of a River of Experience drawn by a participant in one of our focus groups

We are delighted to now be able to offer the valuable insights our EAL-PGRs shared with us to the wider sector in the form of this report, enabling colleagues to use the evidence gathered at the University of Glasgow to expand their own programmes of support for multilingual researchers.

"native speakers[...]are free,
you know, so we are slaves
to languages"

Zainab, a PGR using EAL



2 Designing the Project

In the section, you can read more about how we designed our project, what our key priorities were, and the work we did to ensure that those critical priorities were foregrounded in our methodological approach to the project.

Strategic Aims

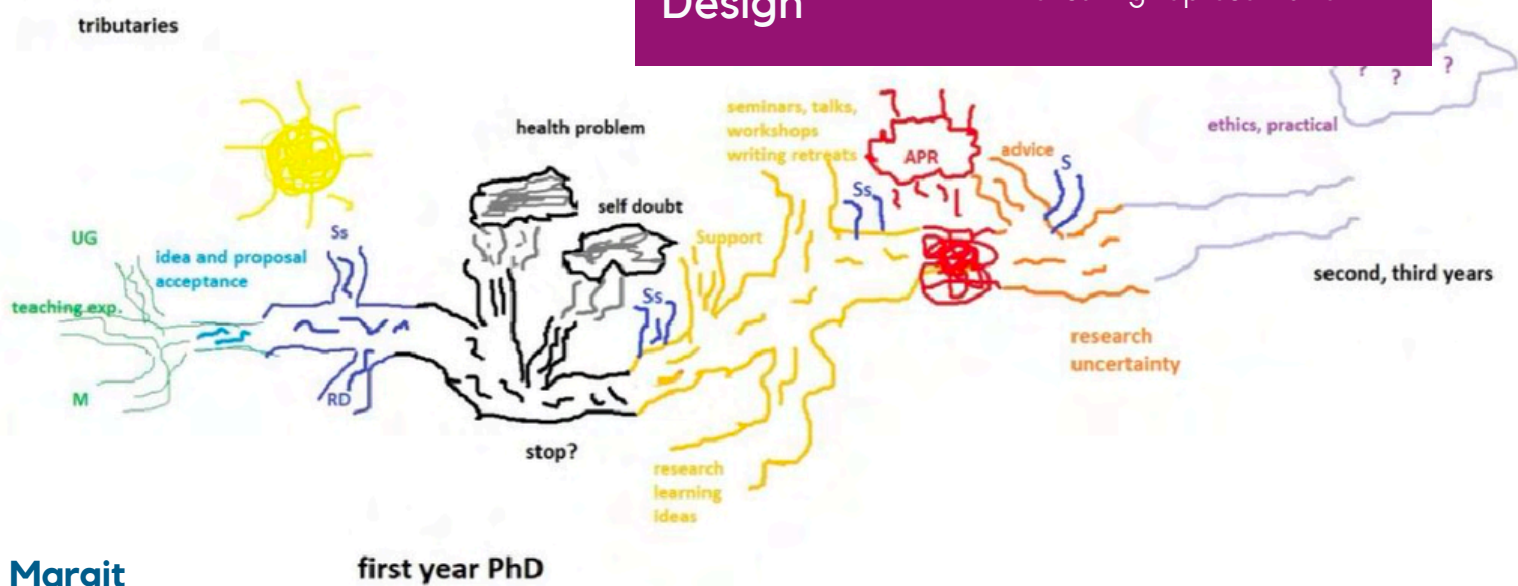
- Advancing antiracist, decolonial principles
- celebrating linguistic diversity
- developing our collective listening practice as an institutions

Methodology

- River of Experience
- translanguaging practices
- prioritising an ethics of care

Focus Group Design, Ethics & Analysis Design

- creating a supportive, equitable environment
- structuring the session
- ensuring representation



Strategic Aims and Objectives

We designed the EAL-PGR Lived Experience Project to create a meaningful and necessary discursive space through which we could listen deeply to our University's multilingual PGRs, and understand more about how they conceptualised and articulated the relationship between their languages and their research experience.

We found that while our existing data suggested the University of Glasgow to be a very international institution, the diversity of our community's languages and their impact on researchers' experience of their research degrees was not well-understood. We saw a missed opportunity in this, and felt that multilinguality among PGRs at the University of Glasgow both merited further investigation, and deserved sustained consideration. Understanding the linguistic diversity which thrives within our University community is a critical step towards understanding, including, and valuing the exciting diversity of epistemologies, cultures, and languages that our institution holds. Further, it enables us to explore the many approaches to connection, community and collaboration that we share collectively, and to become more aware of and open to the rich and varied skillsets that multilingual researchers bring to our communal research environment. In creating this project, we wish to centre listening to multilingual researchers as the critical first step in a longer journey towards institutional self-reflection and growth.

Our project set out from this space of listening, hearing and amplifying PGR voices, in alignment with several key aspects of University Strategy which speak to community, inclusion, equity and belonging. The University of Glasgow's Research Strategy 2020-2025 calls for the nurturing of inclusive research cultures, prioritising researcher wellbeing, and equity of opportunity for all research students and staff. Building on this, the Research Strategy 2036 advances a vision for a dynamic, sustainable and intellectually vibrant research environment, which will continue to attract and develop global talent, and a research culture which draws strength from diversity.

Despite these strategic drivers, and the work of many colleagues across the institution, EAL-PGRs are rendered largely invisible in institutional data and often under-considered in policy discourse, and in service provision. This project adopted an evidence-based approach to understanding the lived realities of EAL-PGRs at the University of Glasgow. Co-creating the project as a staff-student partnership team, the PGR Lived Experience Project brought together a Policy Professional, a Researcher Development Specialist, and two Postgraduate Researchers with expertise in the field of Student Voice to create a team with valuable strengths across research and practice. Our PGR Interns were a key part of the team, and took a leading role in data collection. Using this peer-to-peer data collection methodology, the project has generated insights that will support institutional change, inclusive practice, and stronger peer communities.

The EAL-PGR Lived Experience Project contributes directly to a number of these institutional strategic goals through:

- Supporting the PGR Ecosystem Project in generating insight into the lived realities of structurally marginalised doctoral researchers
- Informing UofG's emerging vision for our institutional support mechanisms, ensuring it reflects the perspectives and needs of diverse groups of PGRs
- Embedding researcher voice into policy formation
- Enhancing the design and targeting of support services across the Graduate Schools and professional support directorates

We hope colleagues across the sector will find this report useful for considering the efficacy of similar areas of practice at their own institutions, enabling us to collectively centre the experiences of multilingual researchers, as we plan and deliver our programmes of support.

Our Timeline: An operational overview of the project

After being granted the funding from Student Experience Strategy, this project was launched in June 2025. In June and July, work centred on the aim, scope, and operation of the project. In August 2025, participants were successfully recruited, and data was collected through focus group sessions. Data analysis began in September to develop evidence-informed insights into PGRs' experiences, with written and oral reports to be delivered to the relevant audiences thereafter.

Figure 2: Project Timeline



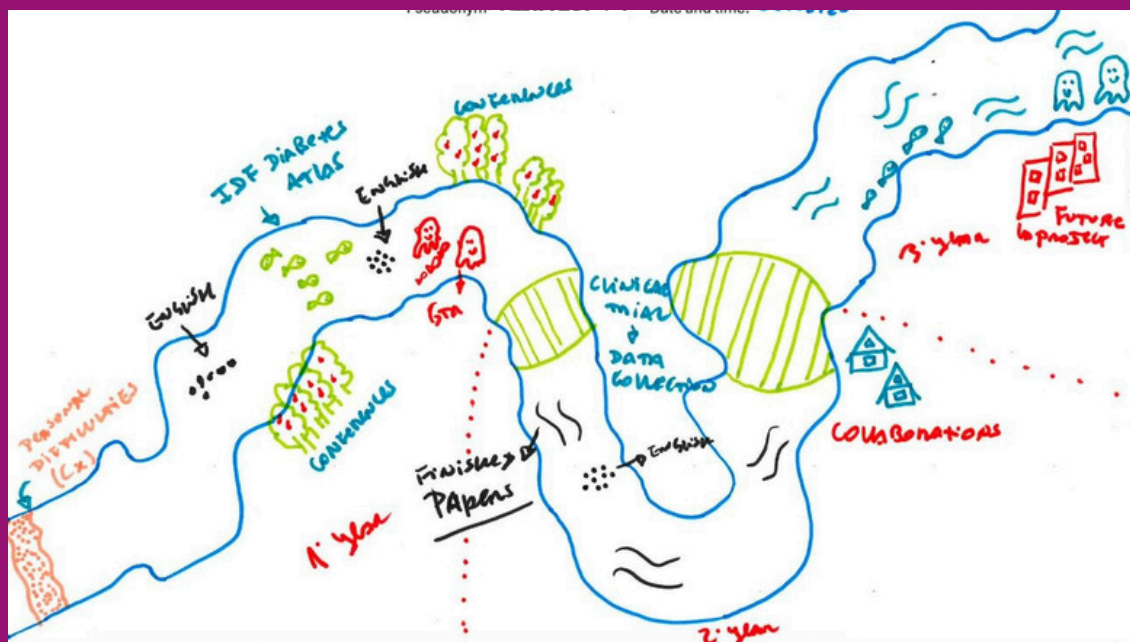
Having established the strategic goals of the project shared above, we moved to consider methodology, focus group design and operational planning. We made the decision to adopt a two-part structure to our focus groups. Part 1 centred on the River of Experience methodology, and Part 2 on a series of carefully chosen discussion prompts.

Focus Group Design, Part 1: Adopting the River of Experience as a Methodology

When we began to consider the methodological design for this project, we were keen to adopt an approach that would encourage creative, thoughtful and engaged reflection, give space to our participants to shape their stories in a way that felt meaningful to them, and allow them to reflect on their experiences as they perceived them. We found the River of Experience methodology, which uses drawing as the mode through which participants visualise and describe their personal journey, to be an excellent fit, and were further encouraged by studies which suggested that the method had been previously successfully employed in HE settings (Elliot et al., 2024).

At its heart, the methodology has a simple premise. It invites participants to draw their research journey as a river, flowing from the beginning of their degree to the present. Participants are also able to annotate their river with text, and to add different elements such as trees, fish, or buildings to illustrate the shape of their personal journey, or to highlight key moments. In our project, we allowed 10 mins for participants to draw their rivers, and then allocated a further 2-5 mins each for participants to describe their rivers to each other as the first part of our focus group design.

River of Experiences Gallery: Michelle



The picture above shows an example of a 'River of Experience' drawn by one participant. Michelle's river contains various details that depicting her experiences. For example, trees refer to pleasant experiences of attending conferences. On the other hand, rocks in the river are used to describe her relationship with English language use.

Focus Group Design Part 2: Designing the Discussion Prompts

To further explore EAL-PGRs' experiences and to complement the data acquired from their Rivers of Experiences, we used several key prompts in the second half of each focus group session to open critical discussions with our participants. To ensure that our research engaged with experiences that were important to our PGR community, we developed these prompts from re-analysis of the annual University of Glasgow PGR Experience Surveys 2021-2025, in conjunction with considering our key project objectives.

We examined our existing datasets using a range of 'key words' & 'filtering' methods:

- Selected data: PGRs' languages are not held as part of this dataset. Recognising this limitation, the data selected to give an analogous perspective from which to begin was "international students".
- To pursue a more complete view of "EAL-PGRs" from the existing dataset, we then searched "language", "English", "culture", "cultural", and "inclusion" in the whole dataset.

- As the 2022 iteration of the Survey did not include a question specifying whether respondents are home or international students, data from this survey was only analysed by searching the key words listed above.

Following this, a total of six themes were identified from the data. Four of these correlate closely with the themes which emerged from the wider Survey data across 2021–25, and relate to:

- connection and community building
- communication channels and efficiency
- infrastructural improvements
- structured and transparent guidelines

However, two additional themes emerged from the data subset which were distinct:

- culture and inclusion
- training and development

The first four themes highlighted above align with the key analyses in the institution-wide PGR Survey Reports published across the same time period indicated that these four drivers spoke to concerns shared across the PGR community, regardless of PGR Domicile category. However, the remaining two themes—culture and inclusion, and training and development—demonstrate distinctive characteristics that reflect some specific experiences of EAL-PGRs.

Revisiting the results of these surveys made us aware of the importance of investigating themes around community building, cultural awareness, and training opportunities. We were then able to integrate these questions into our research design, and they became the basis for the discussion prompts which structured the second part of each focus group session.

Focus Group Planning: Recruitment

Our key objectives in recruiting to this project were to ensure that a range of disciplinary areas across the institution were represented in our focus groups, and that we were able to hear from researchers who used a range of different languages. To meet these goals, we advertised this project widely via a Microsoft Form link to all PGRs through multiple channels, including email, an internal message board known as Viva Engage, UofG PGR WhatsApp groups, digital signage in the University's Advanced Research Centre, and posters on campus. As a small token of our appreciation to PGRs who gave their time to this project, we offered a £10 gift voucher to all those who took part.

We received an enthusiastic response from the PGR community. A total of 46 EAL-PGRs expressed their interest in participating in this project, representing a wide range of Schools and Colleges (see Table 1 below). The College of Social Science was the most represented College (n=21), with the College of Arts & Humanities as the least (n=6). Among all schools, Adam Smith Business School (n=8) and School of Education (n=7) were the two most represented schools. Five schools had no registered participants: School of Critical Studies, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, School of Cancer Sciences, School of Psychology & Neuroscience, and School of Chemistry.

Table 1: Registered EAL-PGR Participants: College and School Breakdown

College	Number of participants	School break-down	Number of participants
College of Arts & Humanities (CoAH)	6	School of Critical Studies	0
		School of Culture and Creative Arts	2
		School of Humanities Sgoil nan Daonnachdan	4
		School of Modern Languages and Cultures	0
College of Medical, Veterinary & Life Sciences (MVLS)	9	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine	1
		School of Cancer Sciences	0
		School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health	2
		School of Health & Wellbeing	1
		School of Infection & Immunity	3
		School of Medicine, Dentistry & Nursing	1
		School of Molecular Biosciences	1
		School of Psychology & Neuroscience	0
College of Science & Engineering (CoSE)	10	School of Chemistry	0
		School of Computing Science	2
		James Watt School of Engineering	3
		School of Geographical and Earth Sciences	1
		School of Mathematics and Statistics	1
		School of Physics and Astronomy	2
		Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre	1
College of Social Sciences (CoSS)	21	Adam Smith Business School	8
		School of Education	7
		School of Law	1
		School of Social & Environmental Sustainability	1
		School of Social & Political Sciences	4

According to the dates and times they selected at registration, these 46 potential participants were assigned to six focus group sessions. Eventually, 26 of these respondents were involved as participants in the EAL-PGR Lived Experience Project. Data was collected through six focus groups in August 2025, including four in-person and two online focus group sessions. Table 2 presents the profile of all participants. As shown in the table, the 26 participants have a good coverage of Schools and Colleges. In addition, the participants of this project also represent various years of studies, including ten 1st-year, ten 2nd-year, six 3rd-year, one 4th-year PGRs, and two PGRs who are in the thesis pending and post-viva stages of their PhD journeys, respectively. As well as ensuring representation across various years of study and discipline, focus groups were designed with language in mind. Where it was possible to do so, PGRs were assigned to focus groups that included another speaker of one of their languages, recognising the importance of language to our sense of community and belonging.

Table 2: Actual Participant Profile: EAL-PGRs

Focus Group	Pseudonym	Year of Study	College	School	Languages
FG1(in-person)	Hua	Year 1	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Mandarin, English
	Nor	Year 3	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Javanese, Indonesian, English
	Sarah	Post-viva	CoSS	School of Law	Turkish, English
	Lin	Year 1	CoSE	School of Geographical & Earth Sciences	Mandarin, Taiwanese, English
	Sena	Year 1	CoSS	School of Education	Bahasa Minang, Bahasa Indonesia, English
FG2 (in-person)	Ann	Thesis Pending	CoSS	School of Social & Environmental Sustainability	German, English
	Hearty	Year 3	MVLS	School of Infection & Immunity	Bangla, Hindi, Urdu, English
	Melody	Year 2	MVLS	School of Health & Wellbeing	Spanish, English
	Michelle	Year 2	MVLS	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health	Spanish, German, English
FG3 (in-person)	Laiba	Year 1	CoSS	School of Social & Political Sciences	Urdu, Swedish, Punjabi, Hindi, Arabic, English
	Apple	Year 3	MVLS	School of Infection & Immunity	Polish, English
	Putri	Year 1	CoSS	School of Education	Malay (Bengkulunese), Bahasa Indonesia, English

FG4 (in-person)	Cave-lad	Year 4	CoSE	Universities Environmental	Croatian, English
	Saparyati	Year 1	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Indonesian, English
	Mike	Year 1	CoSE	School of Physics & Astronomy	Spanish, Portuguese
	Mulyani	Year 3	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Bahasa Indonesia, English
	Ratri	Year 3	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Javanese, Bahasa Indonesia, English
FG5 (Zoom)	Maya	Year 2	CoSS	Adam Smith Business School	Sinhala, English
	Agnes	Year 2	COAH	School of Humanities Sgoil nan Daonnachdan	Italian
	Zainab	Year 2	CoSE	James Watt School of Engineering	Urdu, English, Punjabi
FG6 (Zoom)	Zun	Year 1	MVLS	School of Molecular Biosciences	Chinese, English.
	Parvati	Year 2	CoSS	School of Social & Political Sciences	Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian), English, Javanese
	Myra	Year 3	CoSE	School of Humanities Sgoil nan Daonnachdan	Chinese, English.
	Margit	Year 1	CoSS	School of Education	Hungarian, English
	Sophia	Year 2	CoSS	School of Education	Azerbaijani, Russian, Turkish, English
	Adem	Year 1	CoSE	James Watt School of Engineering	Farsi, English

As one critical early output of the project, we collected and presented data on linguistic diversity amongst our project participants. EAL-PGRs who applied to take part in this project were asked to list their languages as part of their registration of interest. As shown in Table 2 above, among the 26 researchers who took part in our focus groups, PGRs listed 24 distinct languages on application. As a small-scale pilot for collecting data on languages, we were encouraged by what we found, and what we were able to share with others across our institution. It enabled us to demonstrate the viability of linguistic data collection at our institution, and to suggest the underexplored diversity that our institution holds, and to open a discussion institutionally on the potential benefits of valuing, welcoming and celebrating our PGR community languages.

Excitingly, this small-scale pilot suggests that there is rich linguistic diversity amongst our EAL-PGRs. We believe there would be wide-ranging benefits to collecting linguistic diversity data from our researcher community: each of the languages our researchers bring to our research environment opens the institution onto diverse epistemologies, cultures and communicative modalities.

As part of our project's commitment to valuing EAL-PGRs as whole people including the linguistic diversity they bring to the institution, during our focus groups, PGRs were invited to share a greeting in their 1st language(s). Participants taught their words of greeting to one another, and these words of connection are shared on the opening page of the present report, centring EAL-PGRs' voices in how readers encounter this work. Each focus group was opened as a multilingual space, 'relocating the linguistic repertoire from between us to among us' (Abraham, 2024), and created a space in which participants' authentic multilingual selves were welcomed. Participants were also welcome to use translanguageing in creating their rivers of experiences.

Figure 3: Word Cluster of Participants' Languages

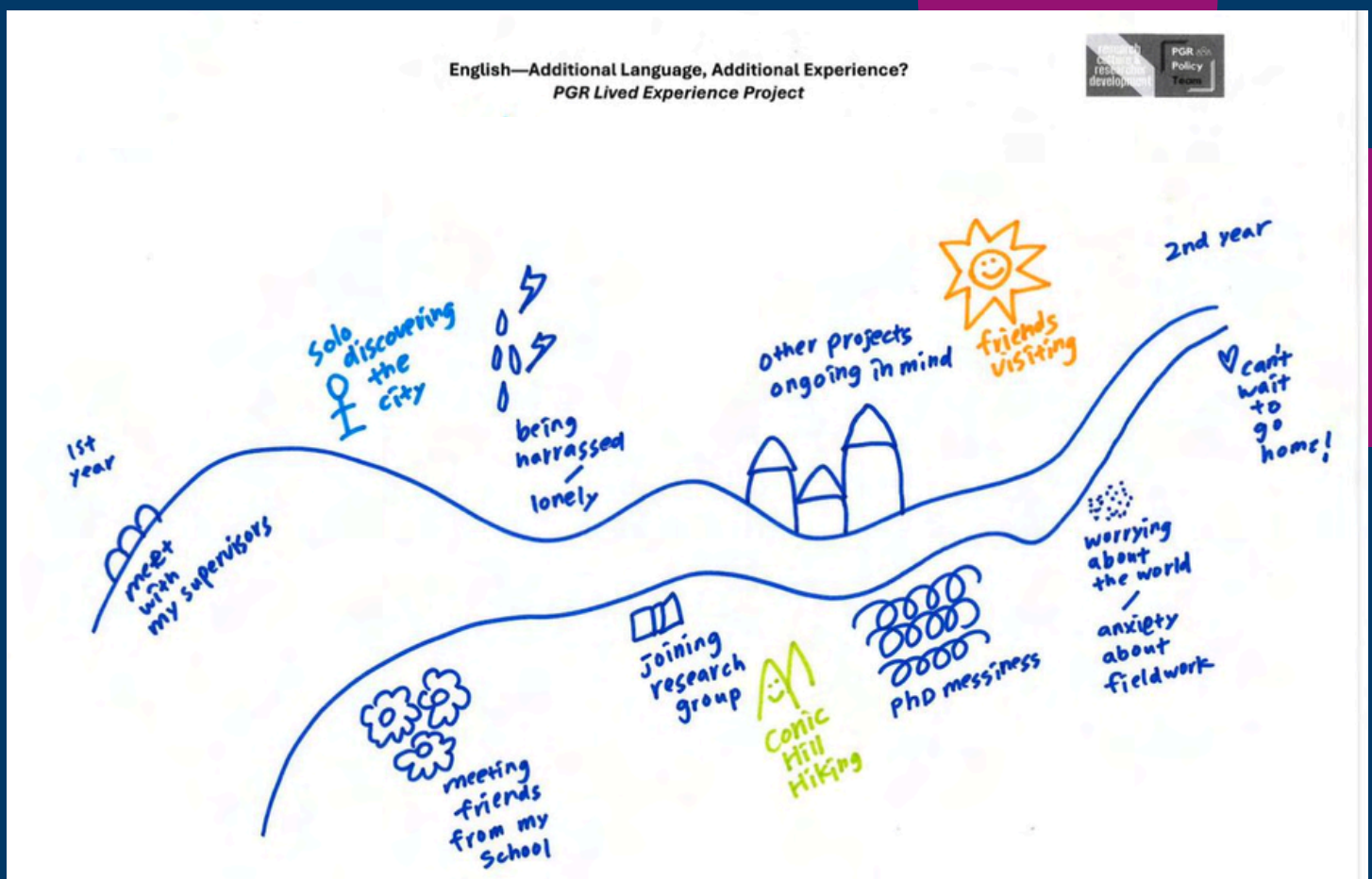


Evaluating our Methodology: Reflecting on the River of Experience

We found employing the River of Experience method to be beneficial in providing the ground for participants to have valuable conversations with each other and creating a space in which everyone could express themselves through drawing, rather than only in language. After completing their drawings, each PGR was then given 2-5 minutes to talk through their river, highlighting key moments in their journeys, and explaining the meaning of the visual elements they had chosen to include in their drawings- the rocks, sunshine, waterfalls, fish, trees and so on.

"One of my friends is from Palestine. We were all worried about the situation, um happening around the world. [...]"

we cannot escape from [it] and just constantly worry about what happens next, what would happen to ourselves as the international students and how would that affect our research?"



This gave us data which told ‘the whole story’ of each participant’s PGR journey to date, allowing us to understand where their relationship with language fit into their wider life as a PGR, how their EAL identity affected their broader emotional life while studying for their research degree at UofG, and what role language played, in relation to other aspects of their journey, in their self-understanding.

During the focus groups, each of these short narratives was met with an enthusiastic round of applause, and sparked moments of joy, understanding, solidarity and empathy among participants. The methodology therefore enabled us to effectively facilitate the core project values around listening and valuing the lived experiences of our EAL-PGRs.

Further, we found the methodology to be an effective scaffolding technique, allowing us to support participants to contribute fully in the focus group through providing a ‘bridge’, in the form of an individual activity to the wider group discussion. Scaffolding is a pedagogical technique that can be particularly relevant to learners who find plenary discussions difficult when encountered ‘cold’. This can include learners who are working in an additional language, those who experience language anxiety, or those who need time to formulate their thoughts in English, and/or build confidence towards in plenary sharing ([Wilson, 2016](#)).

Additionally, the methodology functioned as a translanguaging technique. Drawings allowed participants to describe their experience visually, calling on their entire linguistic repertoire to help them do so, rather than using just English. The benefits of translanguaging practice are wide ranging in terms of communicative potential, from allowing speakers to bridge the gaps between fluencies in their languages, to opening up different connective pathways between languages and parts of the authentic self, and allowing access to the speaker’s range of linguistic epistemologies. Using the River of Experience methodology allowed us to make a small but meaningful adjustment to our participants’ lived realities, responding pre-emptively to potential issues around language use, comfort, and confidence. It also enabled us to foreground our belief in decolonising and antiracist practice, allowing us to communicate our interest in diverse epistemologies and languages, and our interest in valuing our participants as whole people, rather than just in who they were in their additional language.

Employing this method has resulted in the creation of a novel dataset which differs from surveys or interviews by providing an exciting variety of vivid illustrations for understanding PGR experiences. For readers of this report and future researchers and/or practitioners who are interested in this methodological approach to the collection of qualitative data, the River of Experience method is strong in illustrating PGRs’ experiences in a pictorial approach, which is expressive, straightforward, and innovative. Inviting EAL-PGRs to use drawing as a way to give shape and voice to their experiences not only enriches our existing knowledge base but also foregrounds a promising future of how this and similar methodologies could be used in future, to allow lived experiences to be better understood across our institution, and beyond.

Data Analysis & Ethical Considerations

Thematic analysis was employed to identify the key themes from the data following the step-by-step guidance proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). In addition, Rivers of Experiences were analysed as critical visual data through which EAL-PGRs were able to investigate and present their thoughts and experiences. They appear throughout the present report to illustrate EAL-PGRs' views and insights.

The ethics application was made in June 2025 and approved by the University's Scholarship of Learning & Teaching Ethics Committee in July 2025. All actions were taken in line with what is included and approved. All participants signed consent form and participated in focus groups voluntarily. Before all focus group sessions started, ethical guidance and focus group rules were shared with participants again, including data deidentification, their withdrawal rights, enabling collegial conversations, and respecting each other's privacy. After focus group sessions, a debrief form was sent to all participants, which provided necessary details of the project and a list of internal and external student support services. During the data analysis period, all participants were pseudonymised, and their data was stored safely according to relevant data management protocols.

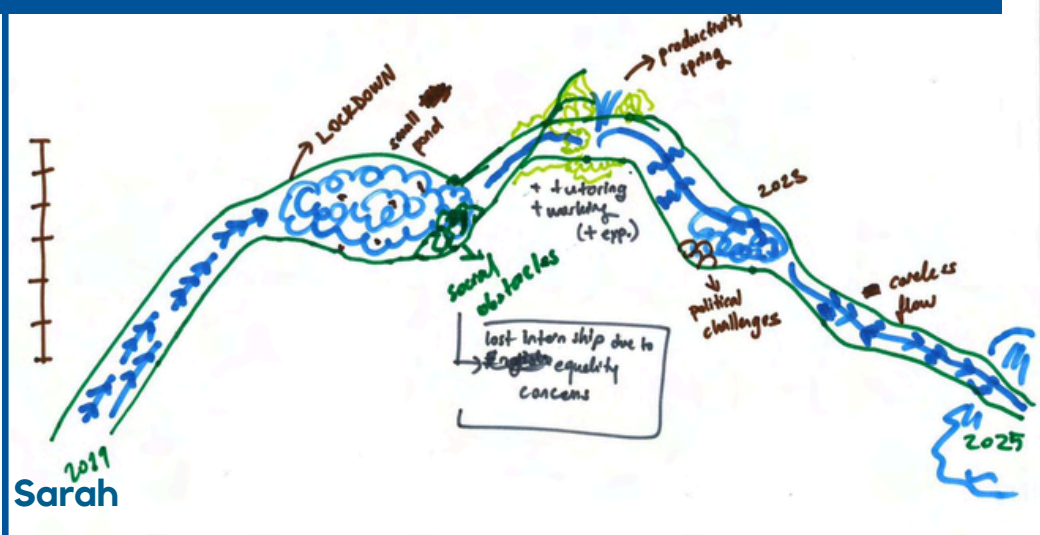
Regarding data pseudonymisation, participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonym, allowing them to have agency over how they were represented in the project data. Where participants did not specify a pseudonym of their choice, the project team selected one for them. We chose to prioritise participants' languages when assigning pseudonyms, both to reflect the importance of language as an aspect of an individual's selfhood, and to allow readers to engage with the breadth of linguistic diversity of the group of 26 EAL-PGRs, and to appreciate the associated impact on EAL-PGRs' experiences. Names were chosen from the participants' linguistic backgrounds in consideration of decoloniality, inclusion, and diversity. In addition, considering the broad audience this report will reach which may include colleagues who have previously interacted with our participants in their capacity as PGRs, and cognisant of the inclusive learning environment the institution aims to sustain, some sensitive information mentioned by the project participants was adjusted and converted to depersonalised expressions to ensure that participants were not able to be identified by their contributions.

Listening to EAL-PGRs

our key findings

During this project, we held a series of six focus groups, in which we heard from 26 EAL-PGRs about their experience of the relationship between their languages and their research. In this section, we take a closer look at the eight key findings that emerged from these insights.

1. EAL-PGRs value dedicated support with academic writing that is specifically tailored to their needs
2. The invisible challenge: multilingual researchers encounter hidden complexities in listening and speaking in EAL
3. The dual challenge: EAL-PGRs are deepening language skills and developing new knowledge simultaneously
4. EAL-PGRs' self-perception: 'Native speakerism', comparison and internalised deficit narratives often negatively impact EAL-PGRs
5. Transformational self-awareness: EAL-PGRs' reflections on the value of their multilinguality often change over time
6. Language plays a complex role in community building
7. "A forbidden apple": EAL-PGRs' have a nuanced awareness of the pros and cons of using GenAI for language support
8. The structural challenge: Navigating doctoral milestones within a UK context for academic practice also plays a key role in EAL-PGRs research journeys



Listening to our EAL-PGRs: our key findings

What emerged from the focus groups we held was a richly valuable, detailed and multifaceted dataset. The wide-ranging, thought-provoking and authentically voiced insights that EAL-PGRs shared open onto a variety of potential analytical directions. In this report, we present key findings which respond effectively to the project's initial strategic design and scope around enhancing the PGR experience at UofG through delivering recommendations for policy and practice across the institution. However, we intend to return to make further analyses of additional dimensions of the data, which remain available for further research. We are excited by the huge potential and strategic value of this dataset in enabling us to centre the experiences of EAL-PGRs as we not only plan provision and enact policies, but also as we work to lessen the impact of global structural inequities ([Shahjahan, 2025](#)) and linguistic injustices ([Meighan, 2023](#); [Mu, 2025](#)) on the EAL-PGR experience, not just at UofG but across the UKHE sector.

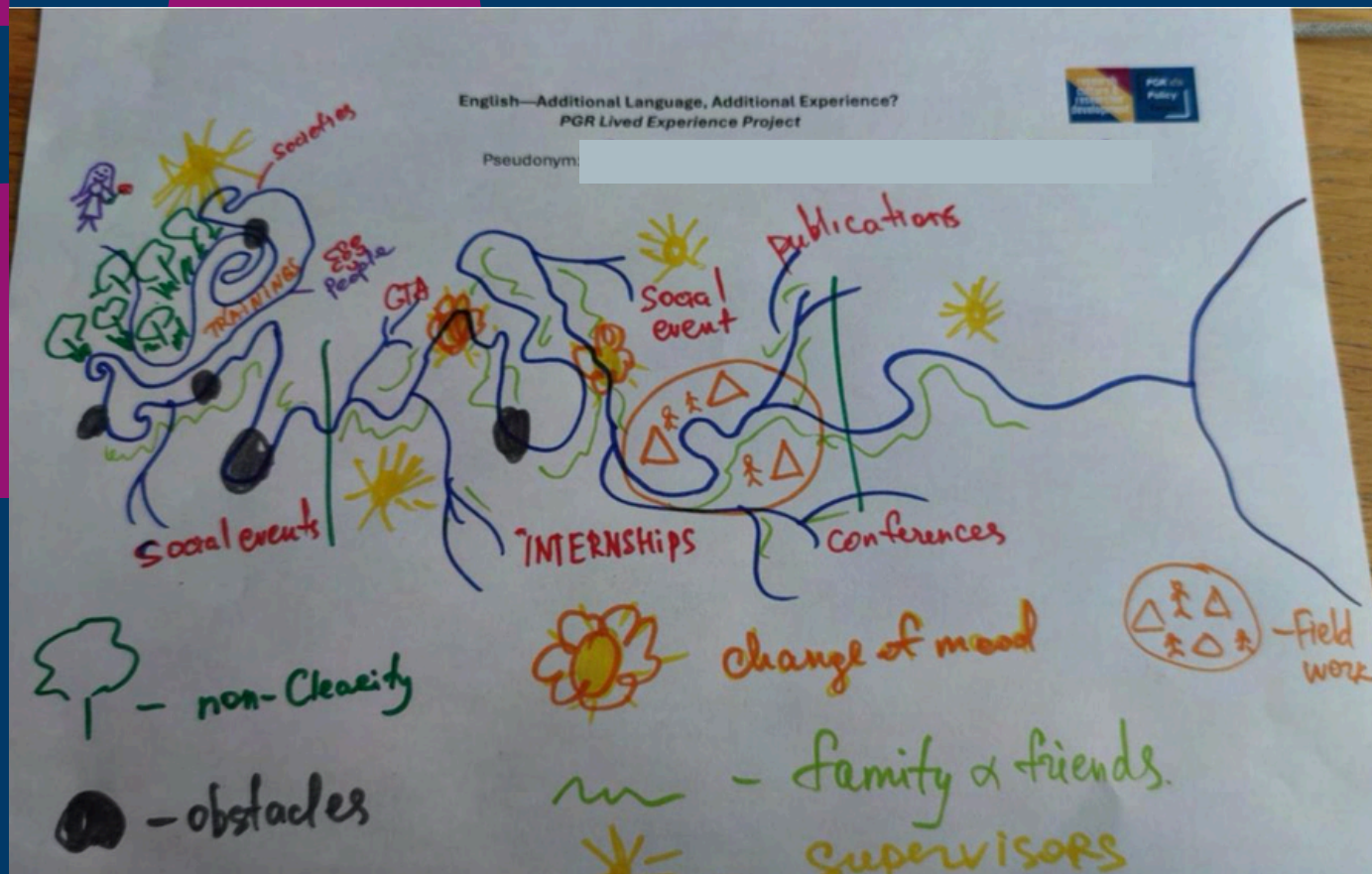
This section of this report presents findings of this project. There are eight themes identified from the focus group data, including:

1. **EAL-PGRs value dedicated support with academic writing that is specifically tailored to their needs.**

EAL-PGRs deeply valued dedicated writing support that was specifically tailored to their needs, and credited it with helping them understand both themselves and the UK context for academic practice better, and saving them time, among other things. EAL-PGRs described the challenges of academic writing and spoke about the impact of support for academic writing provided within the institution, specifically naming the [EAL-PGR Writing Community](#), including EAL-PGR specific workshops and writing retreats, the [Thesis Mentoring Programme](#), and 1-2-1 writing appointments as those aspects of writing support which have most enhanced their learning. EAL-PGRs told us that current writing support provides both useful guidance around improving academic writing, and also creates an inclusive and welcoming space for well-being support and peer support.

2. **The invisible challenge: multilingual researchers encounter hidden complexities in listening and speaking in EAL.**

Our data exposed a prevalent yet under-investigated issue which affects the academic environment: struggles in communicating in English experienced by users of EAL are often invisible in Higher Education, internalised by EAL-PGRs, and experienced as a personal failure rather than an effect of wider structural or systemic issues. EAL-PGRs described communicative challenges around understanding and speaking English as something they struggled with, often in isolation. They described a multi-layered issue associated with facets of communication such as accents, slang, speaking speed, equity, and inclusion, and explained the impact this complex issue and the mental and emotional labour of feeling isolated and undersupported in this space had on their wellbeing.



"my river went in a very strange direction [...] I had a lot of obstacles, and I had to go in different directions like dealing with accommodation issues, with my scholarship issues, so financial issues, you know everything at the same time, and at the same moment, [...]"

Sophia, a PGR using EAL

3. **The dual challenge: EAL-PGRs are deepening language skills and developing new knowledge simultaneously**

Third, EAL-PGRs pointed out that challenges related to language are often doubled with knowledge acquirement, which denotes a dual challenge: combining gaining PhD-level knowledge with a need to work across multiple languages and ways of creating knowledge at the same time. EAL-PGRs therefore face a doubled challenge in entering advanced research degrees, encountering both the challenge of conducting advanced research for the first time, and the linguistic challenge of working in an Additional Language simultaneously. Many struggle with negative self-image, self-doubt and feelings of shame, blame and failure as a result.

4. **EAL-PGRs's self-perception: 'Native speakerism', comparison, and internalised deficit narratives often negatively impact EAL-PGRs**

EAL-PGRs perceive a dichotomy between themselves and non-EAL-PGRs, which they characterise as differences in writing speed, efficiency in expressing ideas, and critical thinking capacity in argument development. EAL-PGRs often compare themselves with non-EAL-PGRs, and perceive themselves as less capable, as being hindered by their facility with English, and for some respondents, even as less intelligent, or as stupid. For many EAL-PGRs, this leads them to experience frustration with themselves, to view themselves negatively, and to anticipate others will find them to be at a deficit. For researchers who unfortunately did encounter racist or colonising harms, this compounded feelings of inadequacy, exacerbated feelings of isolation, and contributed to difficulties in feeling at home in Glasgow.

5. **Transformational self-awareness: EAL-PGRs' reflections on the value of their multilinguality often change over time**

EAL-PGRs described curves of self-realisation and awareness around language, and spoke about the impact this had on their self-perception. They gradually reach the point of tolerating their mistakes in speaking and writing, being confident in delivering their thoughts in English, and viewing EAL as more of an advantage than a disadvantage. Several EAL-PGRs spoke of a transformational self-awareness experienced during their research journey: a growing understanding of their multilinguality and associated epistemological and communicative richness. Realising that it took talent, skill and determination to undertake advanced research in an additional language reminded them of their abilities, and the value of their voices to the wider research culture.

6. **Language plays a complex role in community building.**

Our data discloses how EAL-PGRs perceive the relationship between language and community, and confirmed that for multilingual researchers, language has an important but underexplored role to play in community building. For some EAL-PGRs, language had the potential to bring them together with their UofG communities, while for others, it created barriers to connection, belonging

and feeling valued. Many PGRs named the EAL-PGR Community, a community which gathers researchers with diverse linguistic backgrounds as their point of connection, as where they discover community at UofG, and as a core part of their support system. This suggests the EAL-PGR Community has an important role to play in helping PGRs detangle the complex nexus of experience, identity and culture around how we use our languages.

7. **“A forbidden apple”: EAL-PGRs’ have a nuanced awareness of the pros and cons of using GenAI for language support.**

AI emerged as a topic that participants were keen to discuss. Many EAL-PGRs felt anxious or unsure about how they used AI technologies to support their language development and research practice. Others described making routine use of AI for various writing tasks, including formal submissions and casual communications. Our findings demonstrate that the scope of AI use in supporting language remains unclear to EAL-PGRs, leaving them in need of further guidance around ethical AI practices, and with Policy translation and application. One researcher described AI as a “forbidden apple”, concluding “how can you not just take a bite?”.

8. **The structural challenge: Navigating doctoral milestones within a UK context for academic practice also plays a key role in EAL-PGRs’ research journeys**

We found that EAL-PGRs encountered a range of challenges around key doctoral milestones that they felt played a critical role in their experience of their journey, such as initial instability, intense APR experiences, and uncertainty regarding their futures trajectories.

Below, we elaborate on each theme, supported by evidence from the data.

Theme 1: EAL-PGRs value dedicated support with academic writing that is specifically tailored to their needs



(Margit: “seminars, talks, workshops, writing retreats” are “tributaries feeding into my river”)

Participants were clear about how critical institutional support for writing was to their development as researchers. While they named a variety of support mechanisms available at UofG, including writing retreats, workshops, Thesis Mentoring and 1-2-1

writing appointments, they perceived support for writing and research practice that was specifically tailored to their needs as EAL-PGRs to be most effective in supporting their writing and research practice. Participants explained that EAL-PGR Community workshops had led to crucial skill development, increased confidence and self-assuredness in their abilities, and had saved them valuable time, all of which speaks to the importance of this support package in delivering service excellence, and in meeting strategic drivers around inclusion and equity.

Describing the impact of the “seminars, talks, workshops and writing retreats” she attended as “tributaries feeding into her river”, supporting her to move forward through her PGR journey, Margit shared:

“I attended [the EAL community], also from Rachel, I can't be...I can't praise her enough. I mean, her presence is just so positive, and she just gave me so much. And I also discovered the writing retreats, hers as well [...] they are big for me, and they helped me kind of pick [my writing] up where I was.” (Margit)

Myra agreed, and described what a meaningful impact attending these workshops and retreats had on her experience of research at UofG, contributing to her feeling of belonging, and to a general feeling of being supported, and encouraged to succeed by the ‘whole university’:

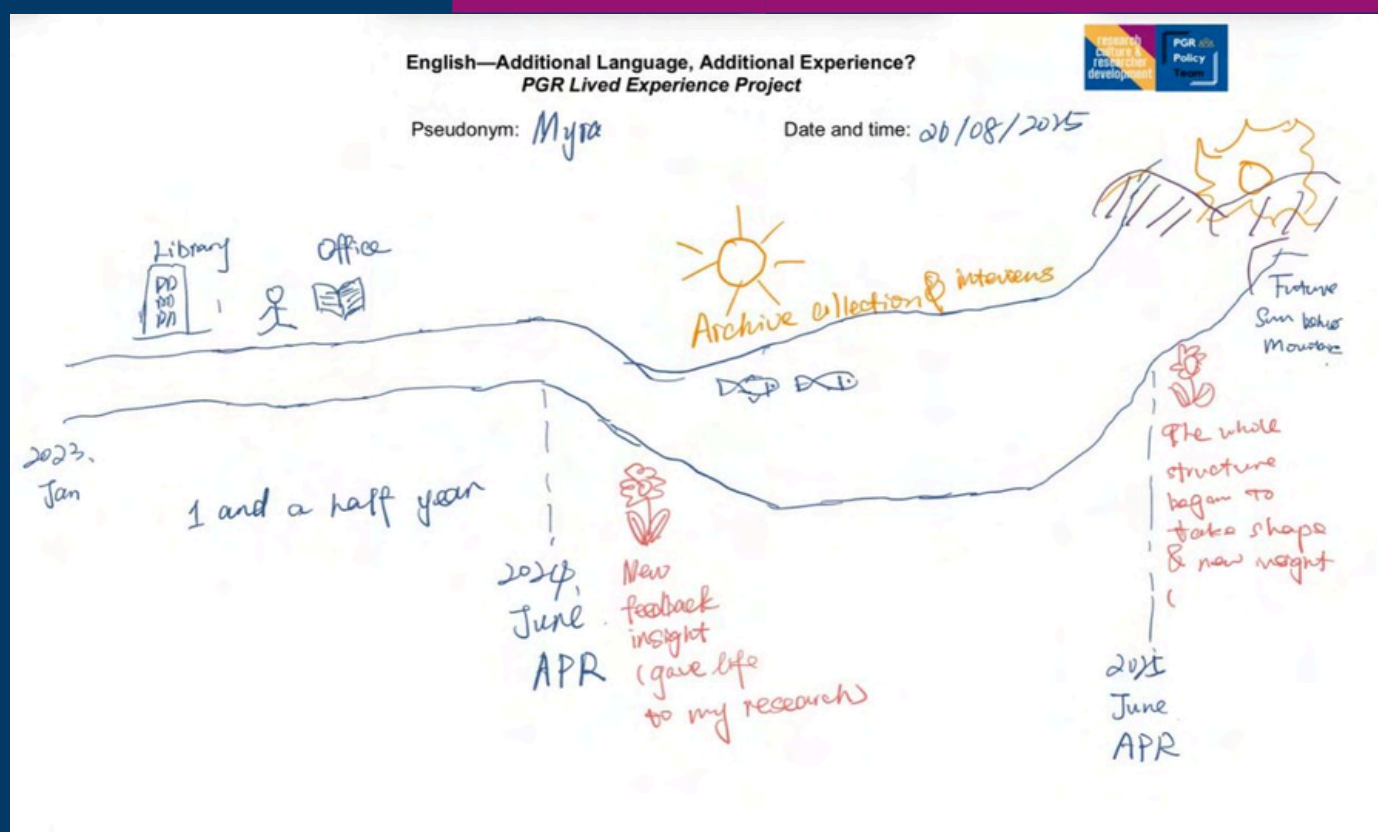
“the RD department provide lots of workshops, both online and in person, and I find it's quite helpful for me, especially during the first year. Like, they [...] teach us how to communicate with the supervisors and how to do the literature review [...] These workshops really give me a sense that I belong to this university, and [that] the whole university are trying to help and to equip the PhD students with the necessary skills” (Myra)

Some PGRs particularly highlighted how they had been positively impacted by workshops that had helped them develop their understanding of the complex intercultural and linguistic demands of working in a UK context for academic practice. For example, Mulyani, who had previously experienced a South-East Asian educational culture, shared what she had learned about criticality at EAL-PGR Community workshops, and how this had informed her critical approach to the literature review.

Mulyani: “I have attended several classes and I think it's really useful. You know, it has some tips and tricks [about] how to write like methodology, or [...] for the literature review, how can you like translate not only what you have read, but something that you can reflect on. Yeah, that is really good. So, I mean, it is like not uh just like describing, it just like have a critical point of view of something that you read and then try to put your own view about that, so that is really good. [...] That is from the university, from [...] Rachel”

Expanding on the effectiveness of the EAL-PGR Community's support for intercultural transition, Margit, who grew up in an Eastern European educational culture before

"I think for the first year, I feel, like, quite isolated, so it's a very narrow river as you can see in the first part [...]"



in the second year [...] you can see the river getting wider and wider, and I feel like there's data coming into my research, and I can see the fish"

Myra, a PGR using EAL

coming to UofG begin her research, reflected on the transformational effect discovering educational cultures had had on her research practice.

"those workshops, by the year, by Rachel, one of the... I think the most important for me, going to the language – obviously, I teach English, I never had a problem with that, but what I didn't realize, because it's not...in the literature, that you have these different educational cultures. [...] that opened my eyes. I said, that is why I'm... well, I'm struggling [...] since that, I say this to everybody, you know, maybe that's the problem, that maybe you suppose that you know where you're coming from, they know much more. But you can't take that, you know, as granted." (Margit)

Looking to the time saving benefits participants found in institutional support for EAL writing, Adem pointed to several EAL-PGR specific workshops he attended as key moments in his research journey that delivered both skill development and time saving benefits to his practice, enabling him to stay on track as he progresses through his research degree:

"...it was so hard for me to find that structure. And I think, the, like, a couple of workshops that actually Rachel, and, the EAL community has, like, provided us, like, how to write your abstract, how to write the methodology, has massively helped like, it finally made it click that, oh, now I understand how to look at this, or how to approach this in a better way. It has saved me so much time." (Adem)

Our findings also highlight that the current writing support provided by the institution is not only used by PGRs as a space for seeking skill development, but also as a space for connecting with others, seeking solidarity in shared challenges, and giving and receiving peer-to-peer support. PGRs spoke about the feeling of shared experience they encountered during EAL-PGR writing retreat sessions, and about how this improved their wellbeing, lessened feelings of isolation, and contributed to helping them feel like they belonged at UofG. Sena and Sarah's conversations provide strong evidence, demonstrating the importance of EAL workshops in promoting PGR well-being:

"for me. it is helpful. I mean, like, I have attended several EAL workshop, writing workshop and I also find writing retreats helpful. I have some space when everyone is also stressful with me. and just writing that pieces and then we got also free lunch and coffee, so it is really nice. Sarah: Everyone is equally crazy. Sena: It was equally crazy, and like when I when I listened to everyone experience, oh, they're also confused. They are also depressed, and I am feeling good." (Sena)

Parvati expressed a similar feeling of relief, and additionally spoke about the benefits of accessing community as a writer, and connecting as a way to support her writing practice:

"And then the second thing that I really love about the, English, EAL community is that, I actually, had a chance to attend at one of the writing retreats. That was my first chance, and I think I'm going to do that again and again, because what I feel is that I feel that I'm not alone. There are a lot of, non-English writers there who

actually struggle with the same thing, and that's... that's kind of, you know, gives the sense of, I'm not alone in doing this. And that's really important for me" (Parvati)

Adem discussed the importance of the EAL-PGR Community and in particular the community's writing retreat programme as a space of community building and connection for him, emphasising how important it was to his feeling of wellbeing to be able to talk about his experiences with others who really understood.

Adem: "one of the communities that I really found helpful was the English as an Additional Language community. The writing retreats have been, like, a staple in my calendar. I try to, like, not miss any of them. And finding people who are, like, share the same kind of experience and the same challenges, it's a bit...encouraging, you don't feel like you're alone, [...] At times, you really feel like, oh, like, I'm in, isolated, everyone is, like, progressing so fast, but I don't know, I'm not making the same progress and everything, but having a community to just talk about these things has been really, really helpful."

Margit expressed a similar perspective regarding the community generated by the EAL-PGR writing retreats and workshops, and expanded on how the community co-learning she encountered in those spaces led to moments of self-understanding that generated benefits for her research practice.

Margit: "it is so, so good to have these, virtual events as well, because at...those events, I could feel the community. And I actually really, really enjoy listening to everybody. [...] And what I also noticed is that it gives us the chance to talk about our work, and it helps us to see better. I had many realizations during those talks, and it helped me to see more clearly"

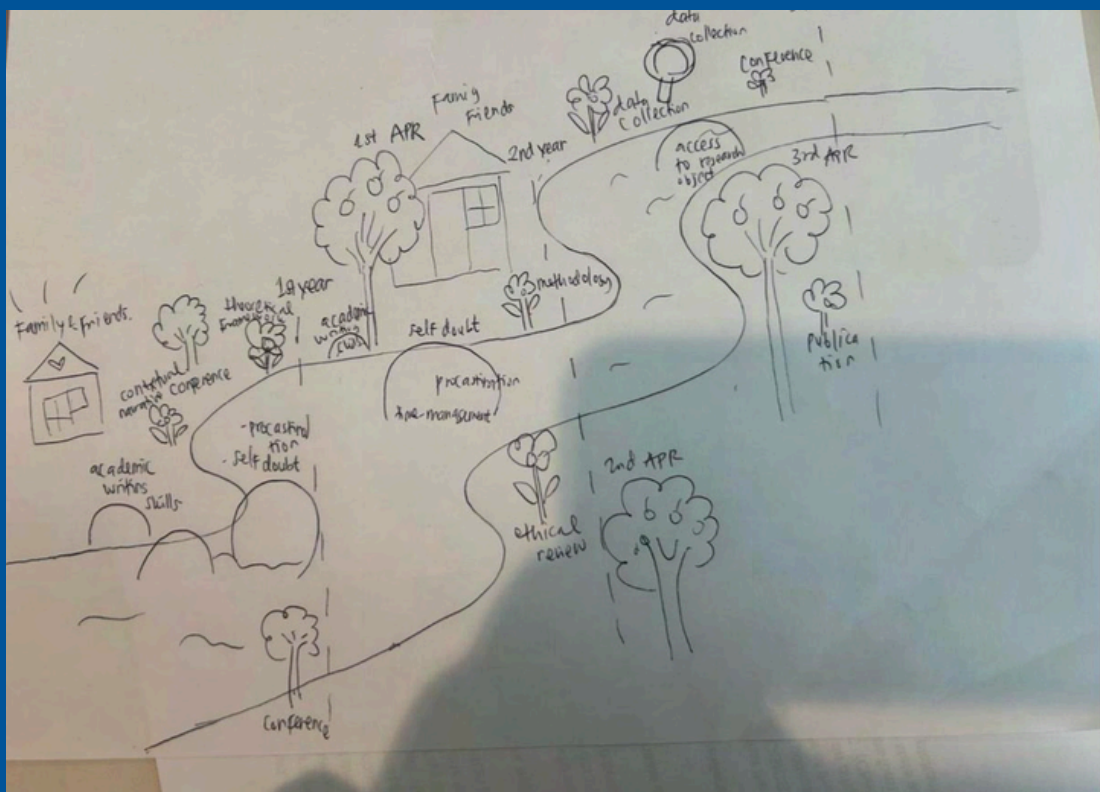
Looking more widely across the institutional ecosystem for spaces where community-focused interaction had delivered a positive impact on practice: in addition to the dedicated programme of tailored EAL-PGR writing support, Lin shared how having a mentor via the Thesis Mentoring Programme supported her reading and writing practice, and helped her feel less lonely:

so that part is really helpful for me because it's sort of like writing counselling. So I always come with my concern...to the mentor and because my mentor is also...who is somewhat English as additional language, so I think we have some common things and also share about how to write, how to read, um in more full way, and I think in that kind of program, it really helps me to know that I'm not alone and that there are someone who is willing to give me some advice and tell me that things will be better in the future. Even knowing that I don't feel that right now. It's just really helpful. (Lin)

When considering how the current institutional support for tailored, dedicated support for EAL-PGR writing might be further enhanced, one participant suggested that in addition to continuing to offer the support listed above, the institution might look to increase access to 1-2-1 writing consultations, and that Graduate Schools might consider the viability of offering a wider range of subject-specific writing workshops:

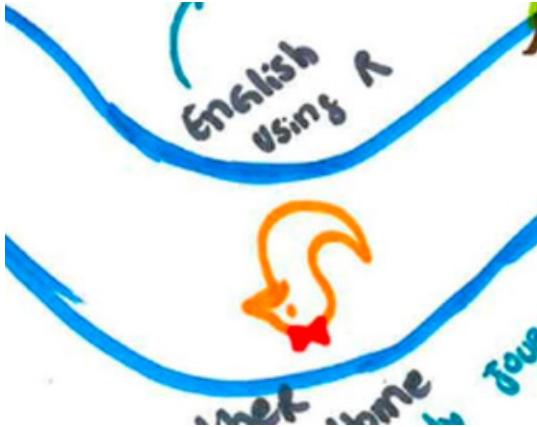
Parvati: "what I want to say is that maybe if you can actually, have more slots to the one-on-one consultation session, that would be great. And then the second one is maybe [...] we can also do, like, writing workshops, which cater to a particular field of study. Let's say, like, media studies, sociology studies, which maybe have a different style of writing with other field of study".

River of Experiences Gallery: Parvati



"along the way, I find my family and friends, as a home with love. Where, actually, I find comfort, I find the supports that I need to do all the things and all the challenges that I face within my study."

Theme 2: The invisible challenge: multilingual researchers encounter hidden complexities in listening and speaking in EAL



Melody: I am an “upside-down duck” in the river, because “I have troubles [in] like expressing myself as I want to in English”

As one of the core findings from the focus group data, speaking and understanding English emerged as key challenges for EAL-PGRs, which can often remain invisible to support services across the institutional ecosystem. In terms of speaking English, EAL-PGRs expressed difficulties they had encountered when articulating their arguments, presenting at conferences, and communicating effectively. Our participants shared that they found understanding English to be a multi-layered issue combining accents, speaking speed, settings, and the extent of mutual understanding in conversations.

To give an example of these challenges in speaking, Mulyani mentioned that she felt she could not convey her ideas smoothly through English. It has been difficult for her to find the right words to describe her thoughts, especially when the conversation takes place in an academic setting. Mulyani’s full account of this perspective is as below:

I'm not actually good in, like, explaining something, so, because I have to do it in English, and it's sometimes like, kind of blur what I want to say, so they [supervisors] don't understand what I want to say, but that is what I actually mean. I can write it down, but it's hard for me to explain it. So, something like that, because I keep thinking in my own language and then try to translate it. I know that is wrong, but especially for academics, it's like quite different with, like, talking informally, just like now, so, you know, I'm trying to find words, academic words to it, but then I can't. So it just like, um, it's quite a struggle to convey my ideas to my supervisors. (Mulyani)

Our participants shared a number of other examples related to challenges in speaking English: Ann mentioned that she had to take notes in advance, preparing herself to give self-introduction to others at the beginning of her PhD; Hearty found himself slow in expressing ideas in English to his supervisors; Putri shared that she found distinguishing the past, present, and future tenses hard when speaking English, which caused confusion between her and her supervisors; Apple found herself trapped in speaking ‘correct’ English, but not having enough brain space to focus on conveying her ideas and arguments.

In addition, adding to the schema that EAL-PGRs outlined around the challenges of understanding English, the majority of the focus group participants mentioned the difficulty in understanding Glaswegian accents, especially at the beginning of their PhD lives. Michelle and Putri's accounts demonstrate how anxiety, stress and disappointment connecting with misunderstanding Scottish accents affected their mental health and wellbeing during their research journeys at the University of Glasgow.

...but here, when, for example, I need to attend meeting, we just...Scottish people, you know, it's quite difficult, because they talk super fast and with strong accent and it's quite difficult to follow. So, yeah, this is disappoint[ing]. (Michelle)

When I got here like January, I realised that I really struggled a lot in understanding like how local people like speak English here like despite I have been like studying English like my whole life I think. Knowing that I have no idea sometimes what they're talking about is really, like stressful... Also, English in the beginning, I mean, I'm sure you all know, the accent, like, the first two months, it was hard, it was hard. I remember we do every Wednesday a seminar at the pub, and the pub is very loud, and people were chatting, and I couldn't understand the accent, and I was like, I want to cry, like, I will never be able to make friends, because this is just too difficult. (Putri)

The lack of mutual understanding around accent diversity can sometimes cause conflicts in EAL- PGRs' lives, as shown in Cave-lad's example.

Cave-Lad: Yeah, I can connect to the whole Scottish thing, I also experienced it. Quite recently, actually, I work with technicians from teachers, basically, and trainers in the lab. So my PhD is [...] very lab based, and one of the technicians is Scottish, and with a very thick accent. So I find it like I have to spend entire day with this person and because there's a lot of machinery, there is a lot of white noise in the background. I'm fine actually with understanding uh, if there is a, you know, like, good... , like if there is specifically there is a no noise in the background, and uh we have had unfortunately, uh how would I explain this? Misunderstandings but also uh there was a bit of um a quarrel at the end of it because this person thought I wasn't paying attention when in fact, I was just trying to understand.

(laughter from all others)

Mike: I am listening but I don't understand. (laughter from all others)

Cave-Lad: yeah yeah it was difficult so um yeah, I obviously...this you know, not going to detail but it's just...it wasn't a nice experience I would say, uh and I think that's something uh, obviously we had a talk, uh with my supervisors and all and I tried to explain, you know, there is a language barrier and obviously it's...I would never show up somewhere where I'm not listening to whoever is training me, but, um it's definitely I...specifically with like accents here. I struggle as well, sometimes even though I think my English is in general good, at least my communication skills.

Some EAL-PGRs had been able to access support with speaking and listening skills, and this helped them develop their communication skills as well as helping them develop their confidence in using English conversationally, and in understanding Scottish accents. Mike participated in a series of workshops in his College designed to support EAL-PGRs' verbal communication skills, including understanding local accents. The workshops included lots of practical exercises and real-time examples of communication in action, which Mike found very useful, and which he enjoyed. However, not all PGRs were able to access these sessions, and class sizes were very small, which meant that only a small number of PGRs were able to benefit from this opportunity.

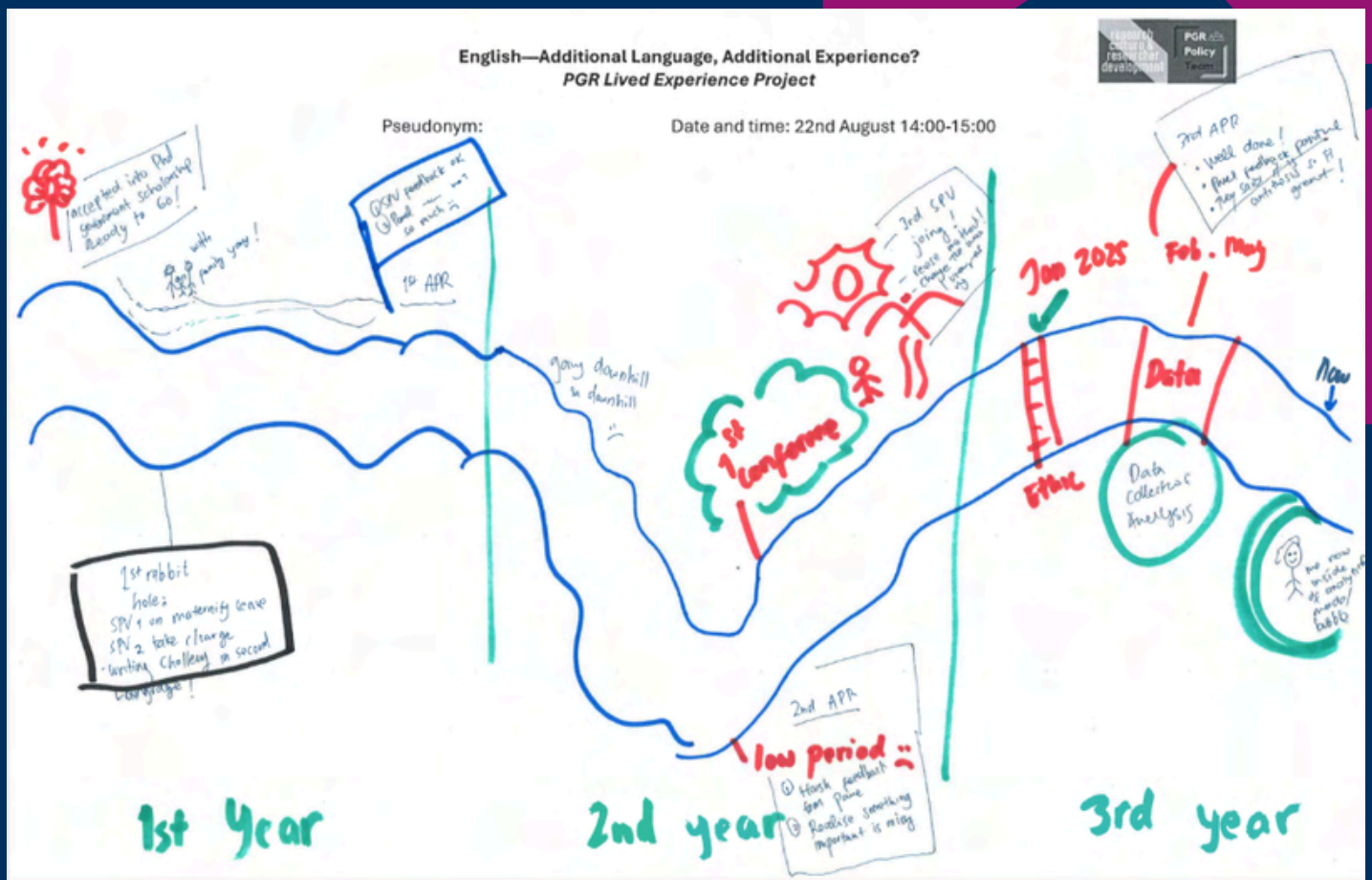
Melody shared that she attended language-focused sessions, where they practised speaking and paraphrasing. However, she was unsure how successful these sessions had been in helping her make improvements in her language skills, expressing her personal concerns over the usefulness of these sessions in helping her use 'correct' English constructions, as an institutional support mechanism which relies on discussion with other users of EAL (notwithstanding the other benefits that such a format might entail). She questioned whether there was a risk that speakers using EAL might repeat each other's mistakes:

But because it's all people that use English as an additional language, it's like you say, you cannot get used to like the native English speakers because you're always listening or other people that I try to speak in English...so they make mistakes and maybe you embrace that mistakes and repeat them. because it's not our first language. (Melody)

Looking outward to the wider research environment, and how issues around linguistic diversity and EAL usage are seen, understood and valued across the institution, a number of participants spoke about a desire for greater understanding of their lived experience. Lin voiced this powerfully, advocating for a more equitable research environment in which supervisors and others could be upskilled around language challenges, and in how best to support EAL-PGRs like her:

Lin "I want to add another point that I feel like the University has done many workshops or programmes, which is nice, but I feel like the support from our Graduate School is...They can be more supportive in that term, so and I don't know if the supervisors, the Professors, have been trained to cope with international students or not..." I'm not suggesting that they should treat me differently, but they should be aware that we are international students. We have different needs. and it's, we are not only...we are not only having needs, in terms of our writing or speaking, but also in terms of our life in here in a foreign country. and without any support from here, from Professor, from the School, it's not acceptable. It's definitely unacceptable. So I feel like there should be courses that should take in order to know our needs. So that's my opinion."

"One of my supervisor told me that, "Your writing is really bad. This is not the expected writing of a PhD student. [...] What happened with you, you are the strongest PhD candidate I have, and now you submitting something like this?"



So, the things like that keep — you know, it's difficult because we're not first, we're not native, so it's going to take time for us to achieve the writing in another language in English I think."

Ratri, a PGR using EAL

Theme 3: The dual challenge: EAL-PGRs are deepening language skills and developing new knowledge simultaneously



(Nor, Putri, and Apple: stream and rocks blocking the three rivers, representing challenges in researching, adapting, and learning.)

The third theme identified from the focus group data is about a dual challenge faced by EAL-PGRs: disciplinary knowledge and language. The accelerated pace of learning within an advanced research environment in an Additional Language can leave EAL-PGRs struggling to manage the overlapping demands of language acquisition and knowledge building. EAL-PGRs need to expend additional effort to overcome the language barrier first alongside addressing knowledge development. Additionally, as Mike describes below, this doubled challenge also involves a higher level of mental and emotional labour, which can leave him feeling exhausted and overwhelmed:

[My supervisor] is really nice. I mean, it's really nice and really supportive, but what she is Scottish and she has a strong accent. So definitely is like three layers, so I have to learn something English. I have to learn something physics, and I have to learn understand Scottish accent. So at the end of the meeting, I feel exhausted. I mean, it's just one hour and I feel like I've been doing like working the full day. So it's the day I have a meeting is like, okay, I only I can only focus on the meeting. That's it. I mean after that I'm going home, because it's like, um too much. (Mike)

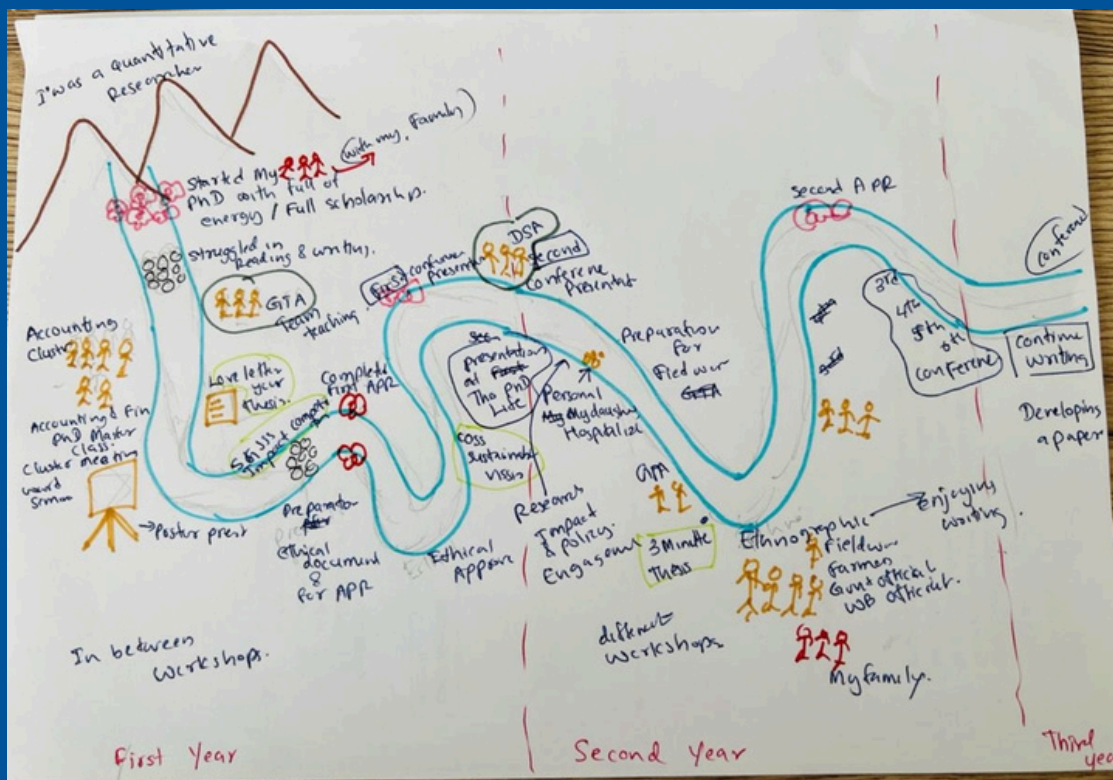
it can also lead to confusion for learners. Expansion of knowledge and language development can become entangled and intertwined for EAL-PGRs, and it can be hard to separate out the root cause of an issue from the effects. Laiba describes this intertwining and how it affects her practice, articulating subject-specific language, and learning how to use it effectively can presents a dual knowledge and language challenge.

[not]politics at all, so it was not even a language. It was also a knowledge which was lacking. So knowledge plus a language is a task on its own, because political language is different and, you know? (Laiba)

EAL-PGRs often found it difficult to distinguish whether their challenges in understanding stemmed from language or knowledge, which led to a lack of confidence, additional stress, and self-doubt. For example, Maya explained the “two differences” she found in her own practice, which she articulated as language on the one hand and knowledge on the other. The resulting blankness Maya experienced led her to a largely negative self-view, “I’m not reading well”, indicating how readily the blurred lines between these overlapping competencies can exert additional pressure on EAL-PGRs.

I have no... because I'm... sometimes I'm blank... I'm blank in English and blank in my mother language as well. It means... it means it's not due to English, so it's due to my... I'm not reading well, so... oh, I'm not...exploring in much on that. So it... then, ... so I think there are two differences here. (Maya)

River of Experiences Gallery: Maya



“[...for] ethnographic fieldwork, [...] mostly I use my mother language. But then I have to, write the reflections and subs in English. At that time, it was somewhat tough, because I got all the interviews done, all the observation or something in my mother language, so then I have to translate into English.”

Theme 4: EAL-PGRs' self-perception: 'Native speakerism', comparison and internalised deficit narratives often negatively impact EAL-PGRs

As indicated in the data, EAL-PGRs tended to perceive a dichotomy between EAL and non-EAL English speakers, which they characterised around perceived differences in writing speed, efficiency in expressing ideas, and critical thinking capacity in argument development. 'Native speakers' of English were often invoked by EAL-PGRs as a benchmark for measuring their own abilities, and they consistently found themselves lacking, in comparison to peers who used English as a first language.

Cave-lad describes critically comparing himself with other non-EAL-PGRs in this way, discussing how he navigates the emotional complexity that results from unfavourable comparison with others. He describes that while he works more slowly than first language English speakers, his awareness of his slower pace is compounded by others' expectation that he should work more quickly. He articulates the unfairness of the situation and the advantage that first-language English speakers seem to hold in communicative settings, as an structural component of additional challenges EAL-PGRs face. Cave-Lad also describes the invisibility of the additional mental and emotional load he carries when communicating in Anglocentric settings, and how easy it is for first language speakers to forget this, particularly in an environment where everyone is learning new things.

I think it is definitely people don't always understand that it's more difficult for us. uh and they tend to, for example, in my cohort, there is three of us and both of them are [L1 speakers], so they forget that for example, it takes me a bit extra time to cover a topic or something and they expect me to work at the same pace as them, which uh which, you know, I feel like sometimes it's not always fair, but then again, it does push me to work harder and I think I am, you know, I can keep up with them...because it is in a sense, a bit of advantage on their side, but, uh I see that like all of us regarding all language we speak is always a struggle to go through, because we have to learn so many new things. (Cave-lad)

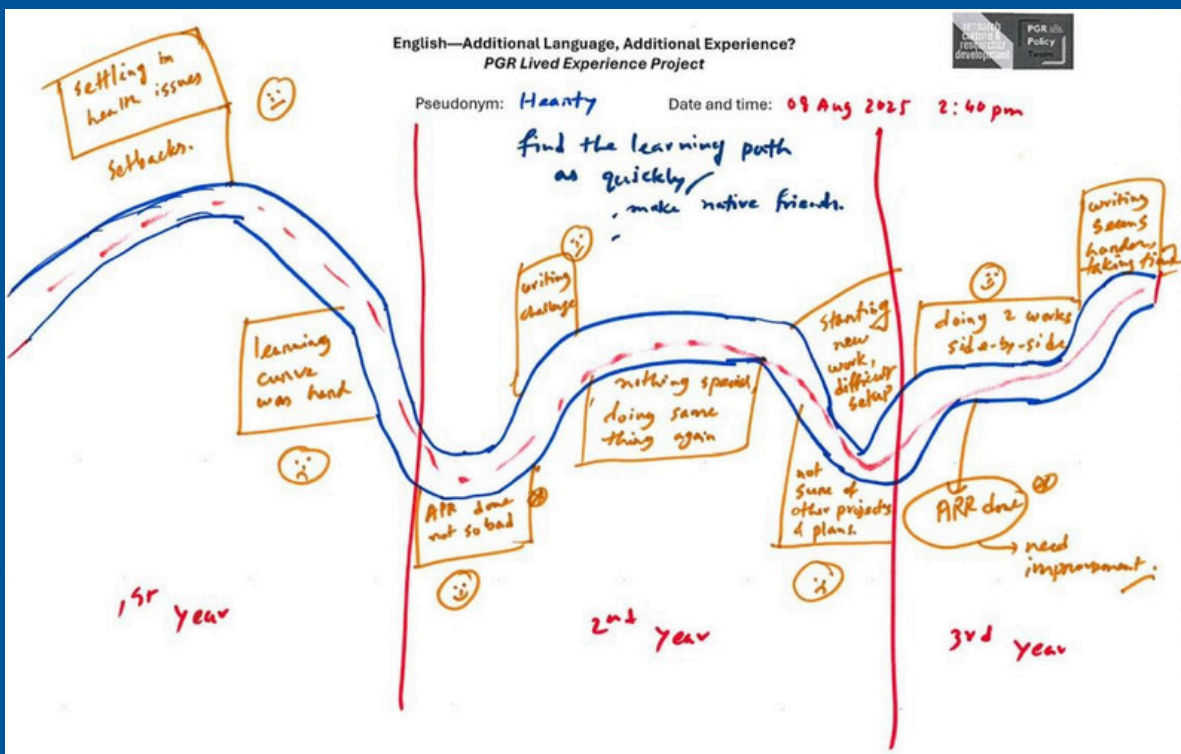
In addition, we also found that some EAL-PGRs' made similarly negative comparisons between themselves and others when thinking about speaking English. For example, Melody reflected that she did not feel at ease when presenting, as she perceived language as a barrier that prevented her from articulating her research more effectively, compared with "another (L1) English speaker".

I presented and another English speaker presented. I see that I was a speaker at a slower pace, more mark with more doubts than him, and he was like, speaking super easy, and I was... if I was presented in Spanish, I would be even better than you in your presentation, but I'm struggling with this and it's inevitable to compare myself with other person in that part. Our works were completely different, but I say, oh, he has so much [more] communication abilities than me, and it was like a bad feeling. It doesn't feel comfortable. (Melody)

To take another example in a different area of practice, Hearty shared his experiences of presenting his lab work to his supervisors in a more informal setting. Where his colleague who used English as a first language was able to communicate with their supervisors easily, Hearty felt that his own communication was notably less efficient.

...and also like how the [L1 English] speakers like express something uh in a particular way. So we not we, like I can't make in in that way. So I think it's there's a gap of communication sometimes. So, in my meeting, for example, the current project I'm working on, one of the postdocs uh, he's from here...so since he knows what I am doing...and he is in the same lab, so I can talk to him for a long time. So whenever he is in the meeting, the supervisors can understand the things easily because, like, he's kind of like translating my things like, I'm also speaking in English, but uh well whenever he is speaking to them. They're getting that like in one minute and when I'm trying to say that I same thing in three minutes, probably it's still difficult for them to catch. (Hearty)

River of Experiences Gallery: Hearty



"in my second year, the main challenge I was finding is like writing because the things getting like longer and like more complex uh, so, uh writing challenge was one of the, like, important thing I thought I should mention

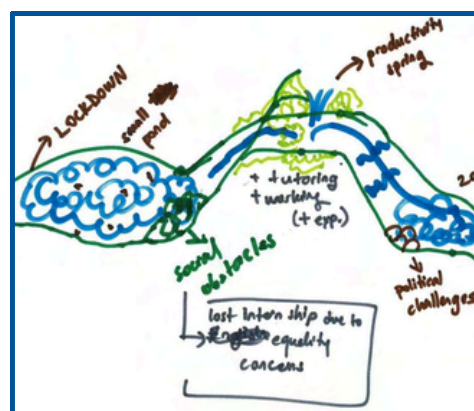
{...}

the last curve here shows that writing seems very, like it seems easy, but like when I try to write long thing, it's very difficult"

Unfortunately, as our data shows, some EAL-PGRs still encounter language-based discrimination and continue to be negatively affected by structural inequities in how language usage is understood and conceptualised within UKHE. Two EAL-PGRs in our study reported an experience in which they felt they had been viewed negatively by some members of staff due to how their English proficiency had been perceived by the university. It was unclear to them how their language skills had been evaluated and compared with others, which caused increased anxiety, and feelings of self-doubt.

Additionally, Sarah found that it was a challenge to get others to understand that this was an equity issue, while Lin initially internalised the wider discourse as evidence of “my language problems”, rather than a structural issue.

I tried to email [one department of the university]. It took us a couple, like forth and back for them to understand why this is an equity issue, which is... this is like a very basic level of equality being violated. So I think this is one thing, like people assume that you don't have the merits, like, right away because your speaking level of English is not always perfect. (Sarah)



Eventually I didn't get the job, but then I was so cautious that I...it isn't...so it's sort of a self-doubt as someone who is using English as an additional language, I'm also concerned, always concerned about my language skills, so I always worried that if it's because of my language problems, I didn't get the job. (Lin)

Neither Sarah nor Lin were able to access any institutional support mechanisms to help them manage these challenging situations. This lack of literacy around language-related inequities and colonialinguistics across the institutional spaces they inhabited meant that Sarah and Lin had to manage these difficulties alone, using only their personal resources as individuals to reframe and externalise these experiences. In our view, this is an unsustainable situation which serves to compound the structural inequities embedded within the HE sector. We believe the sector must respond by making literacy around multilinguality and its associated benefits and challenges a key priority. Raising literacy around multilinguality across the sector would create a wide range of benefits, enabling institutions across the sector to not only deliver meaningful improvements in PGR wellbeing, degree outcomes, and progression and completion rates, but also in enabling institutions to honour their commitments to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and to uphold critically important antiracist principles.

For Sarah and Lin, who were not able to benefit from a cross-institutional pedagogical literacy of the kind described above, they were left to reflect privately on what they had experienced, and to work through the complex emotional resonance their experiences left behind alone.

As both of them indicated, these challenging encounters with the entanglement between colonialinguistics and UKHE spaces affected how they understood themselves, and engendered some critical reflection. Their self-reflection prompted a transformational change in their understanding of how they should view English language use in their lives. Sarah underlined the parameters of the issue: it is not that staff are unsupportive or have ill intentions, but rather that there is a knowledge gap which affects the way colleagues are able to give support, even when they wish to do so – what Sarah described as a lack of understanding about the association between language and discrimination in the institution.

However, reflecting on the lack of awareness she encountered with her (supportive) supervisors crystallised a new sense of self-understanding for Sarah: she ended up being more accepting of her accent and how she speaks English, valuing her multilinguality and expressing pride in the way she had been able to adapt to working across multiple contexts for academic practice.

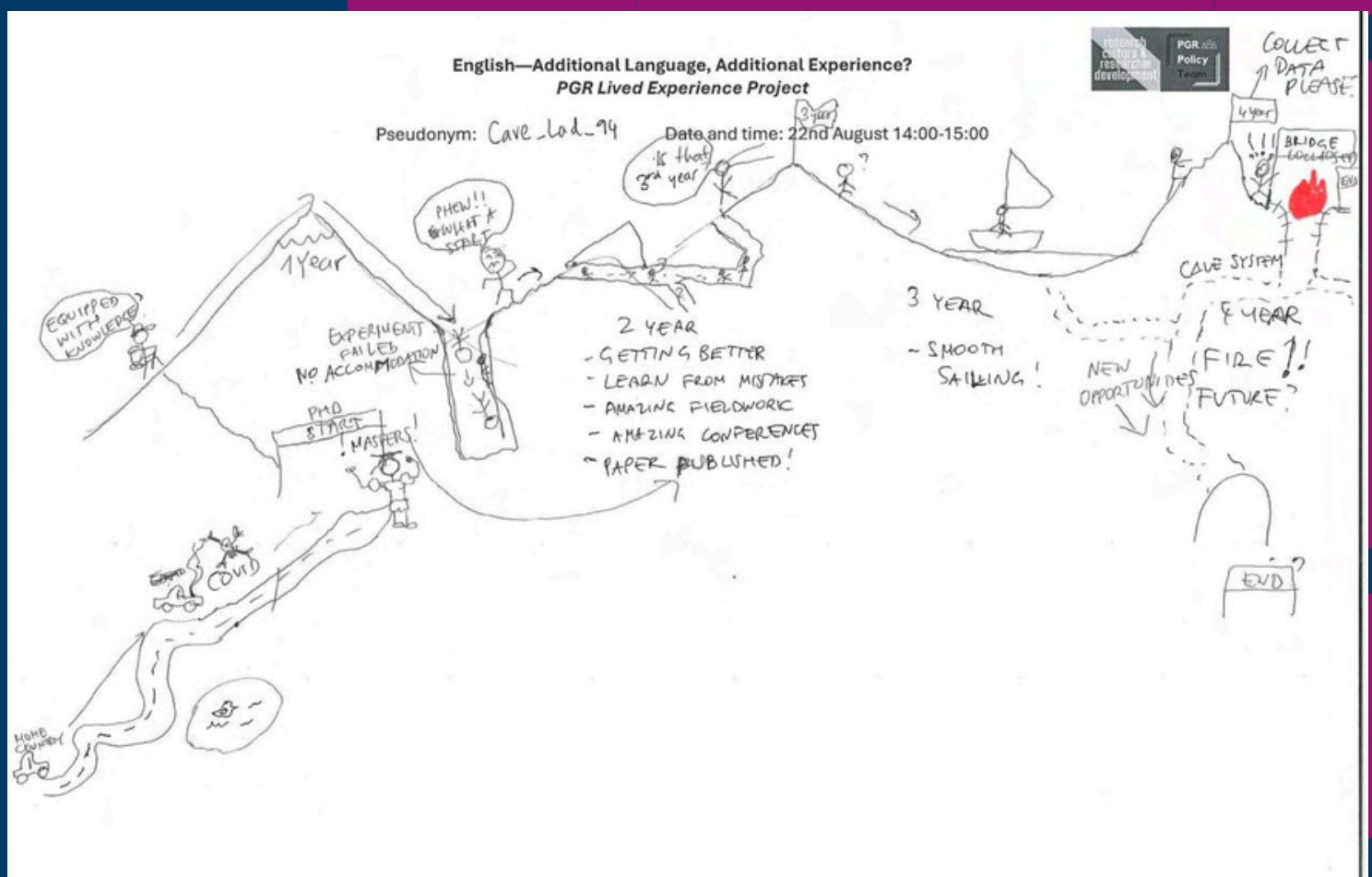
The problem is like, the people I talked to wasn't in my actual social circle, like I talked to my I mean my supervisor and then that everyone in academia is very supportive, but they didn't comprehend this issue..... I don't believe that we should be like fluent as nature in in English. I like having an accent, I'm proud of it because it shows that I am actually like a brain immigration (Sarah)

Lin, on the other hand, remained conflicted. Though she believed that she shouldn't "be ashamed of" her English, and believed that it formed an important part of her identity, she also acknowledged that she continued to "worry about" it nonetheless, exemplifying the complexity of the issue, and the ways it continues to affect her.

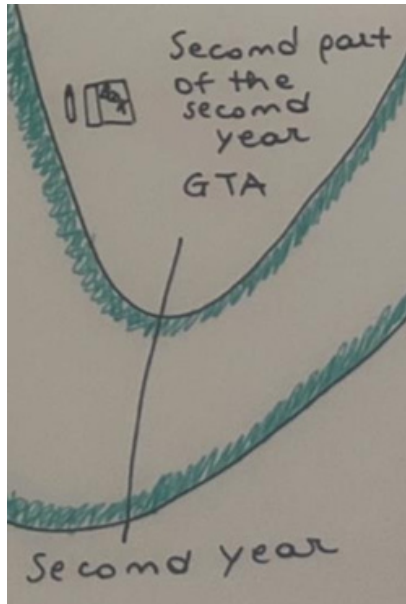
but at some point, I feel like I shouldn't be shy or be ashamed of how my English sound like, because it's part of who I am, but I just can't help, but sometimes worry about that (Lin)

“It's a mountain because I feel like mountain also depicts it really nicely, you know, up and downs over the PhD”

Cave-Lad, a PGR using EAL



Theme 5: Transformational self-awareness: EAL-PGRs' reflections on the value of their multilinguality often change over time



Agnes: When doing graduate teaching work, "I knew not everyone was going to be native speaker, but still, I was very worried, like, not understanding a question that a student asks you"... "It just clicked, because I also, I think, maybe...trying to be over-perfectionist, I was very worried about, like, making mistakes when writing, or not understanding, and being worried of asking again, so I also felt, like, a bit of...maybe that it was my fault, and I should have been more confident, more professional in my English. And then, after this conversation, I realized that actually we forget how good it is to do a PhD in another language, and it's such a big effort, and especially in academic English."

As Agnes describes above, many EAL-PGRs in our study described experiencing a transformational curve of self-realisation and awareness regarding language. Where perceived errors in speech and writing had initially felt overwhelming for many, and had negatively affected their self-perception as competent and talented advanced-level researchers, they were gradually able to gain greater ease with these perceived 'mistakes' and to separate those from their broader intrinsic value as researchers. They came to understand using EAL as more of an advantage than a disadvantage, and came to a deeper appreciation of their skill and achievement.

Like Agnes, Sarah shared that after initially judging herself harshly for perceived mistakes, she eventually came to the realisation that this was a common experience for many users of EAL, including senior lecturers, and that she could be kinder with herself in the way she framed her language use. She was able then to separate the challenges she encountered with language from her intrinsic worth and ability as a researcher:

...and also one of the things that help me most about, like my speaking skills, because sometimes you read a word like a thousand times, you know what it means, you like, write about it, but when you need to pronounce the word, it is whole different thing, like okay, how do we say tea right now? Like so seeing the lecturers and professors and other research people, like more like in the higher position, the researchers in

the higher positions being like using English as a spoken language like a second language, and still having challenges and sometimes don't even understand each other. It is kind of helpful. I was like, okay, this is not about my sufficiency as a researcher. This is just using English as a second language, and it happens... (Sarah)

In a similar vein, Melody also experienced a learning curve where she realised that using EAL is not a weakness but something “cool”. Starting from this change in their minds, both Sarah and Melody became more confident in using English in their PhD journey.

I have learned to accept that and not trying to punish myself because I made some mistakes. It just like, this is not...it's okay. I even make mistakes in a Spanish, so it's okay if I do it in it, but yeah, we need more spaces for people like us.(Melody)

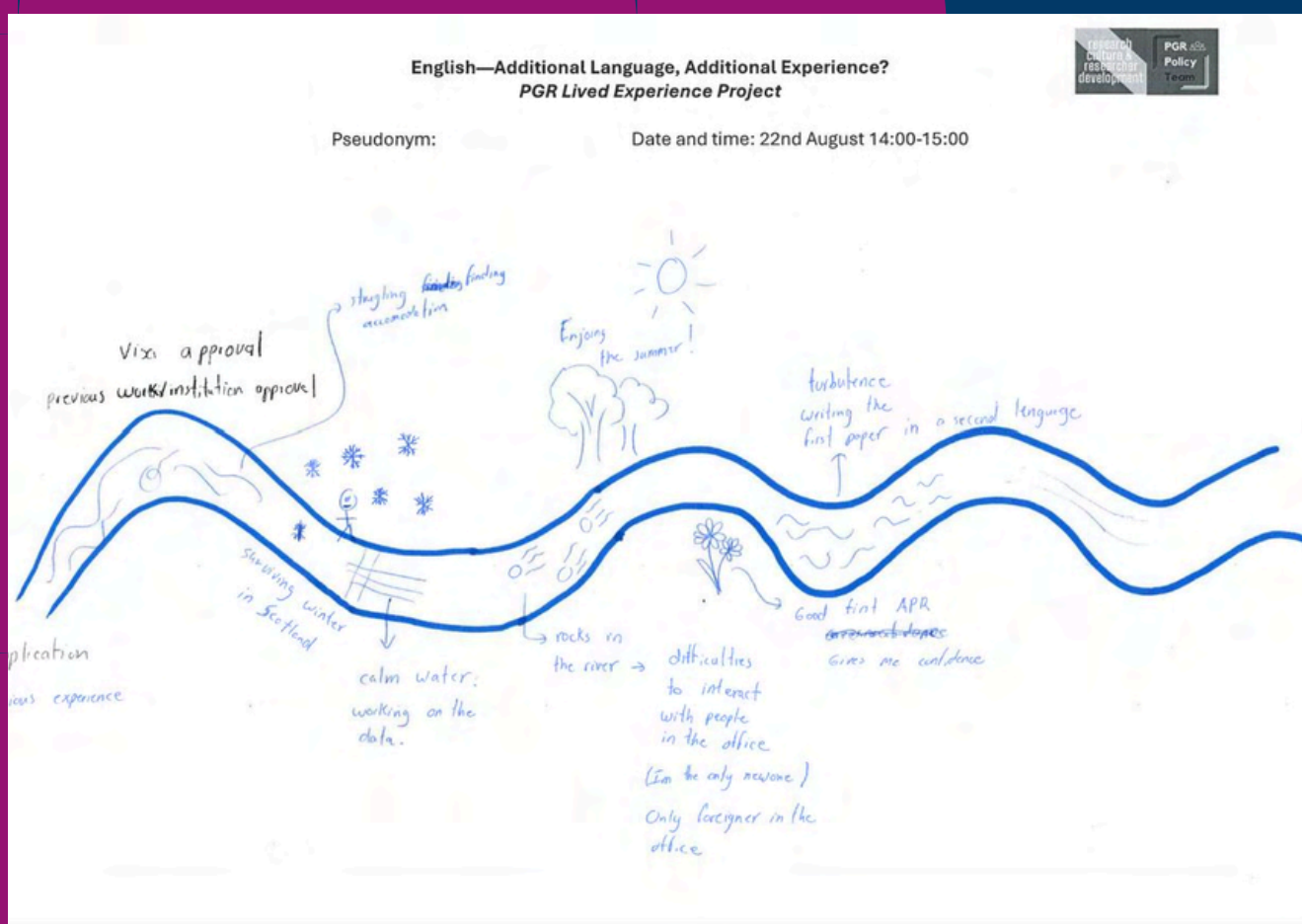
In addition to these valuable perspectives on reframing how they understood their multilinguality that Agnes, Sarah and Melody discussed, Ratri shared her reflections on intercultural transition had played an important role in her PhD journey, and in shaping how she understood herself as a researcher. For Ratri, the transformation self-awareness she grew into during her time in Glasgow was not only about learning to value her multilinguality, but also involved acknowledging and reflecting on epistemological and ontological diversity. As she developed her understanding of the demands of a UK context for academic practice, she reflected on how she had practiced in her previous context, and found that there were differences in each context's approach to how to teach, how to learn and how to think.

I think in the University in reading and writing, I find it in terms of language, it's really hard to, to build an argument and to think in English, because I think like throughout my um, formal education, like argument, is something... it is something that's been taught by the teacher, but it's, it's just not how we – like, in my native language, it's just it's just not like something that will happen, like in the classroom. [...] But here the way you process your information it's not, maybe it's not enough just to present the information, but put your voice in it. That's something that I didn't think I need until now, practising in a more deep and philosophical way. Sophisticated. (Ratri)

As Ratri discovered, multilingual researchers, and those with experience of diverse educational cultures hold valuable epistemological richness. However, Ratri's account also demonstrates how frequently EAL-PGRs experience this richness as a deficit. For Ratri, and others like her, this experience of epistemological difference as a personal failure is compounded by a pervasive Anglocentrism that devalues approaches to meaning-making which don't align with that world view. It is the shared responsibility of all those who work within UKHE to be clear and explicit in how we value epistemological diversity, linguistic richness and ontological multiplicity, to espouse those values in how we communicate our practice, and to back up our words with action.

"I know how the things work back in my country, but I don't know how things work here"

Mike, a PGR using EAL

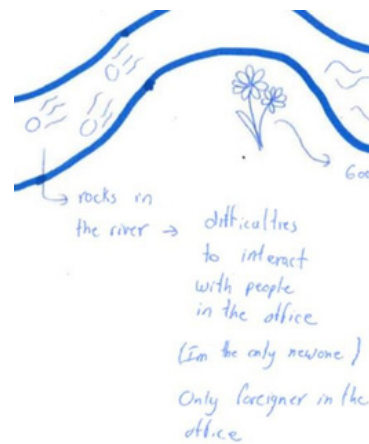


Theme 6: Language plays a complex role in community building



(Putri, three types of communities in her river: flatmates, family, and cheer leader groups)

(Mike: "rocks in the river: difficulties to interact with people in the office - I am the only new one, only foreigner in the office")



EAL-PGRs described the complex and multifaceted role that languages played in their access to community. Some EAL-PGRs perceived language as a barrier to community building. For example, Myra shared how language negatively affected some international students' sense of community:

Yeah, I think, I cannot speak for all [my country's] students, but, I got the impression that [these] students...We are good at, like, writing and listening, but when it comes to speaking, it's another...But it's another level, so I think... and it can be a barrier for some international students to feel the sense of community here on the campus.
(Myra)

Laiba and Apple described the complex intersection of language and nationality, and the effect this has had on their access to community. Apple, who is from a country in Europe, described University events designed to create community that have left her feeling "lost" and less included because of how other EU students responded to the events themselves.

I feel that some of the... events that are created for international students, there is a very low turn up from EU students and sometimes you just kind of feel very lost and don't feel like there is any group that you can particularly join because a

lot of people finally find people from their country and they're happy to chat up, whereas people from Europe don't really... come to these things. So I don't feel like... they're that great. That well, they're not get that great for me. (Apple)

Laiba, who is originally from a country in South Asia, but spent much of her life in the EU, and is fluent in an EU language, described seeking an inclusive environment in events with other EU students, but instead finding the opposite, and therefore excluding herself from seeking out those opportunities to connect with others in the future.

When I went to any EU event, everybody was surprised like, why?

[Laughter]

So I stopped going afterward, not to make them more uncomfortable. (Laiba)

However, our data also shows that many EAL-PGRs perceive language as vital in expanding their network and getting peer support. In some project participants' conversations, language played a key role in shaping the type of community they encountered, and how they approaching building new relationships with colleagues and othr students during their research journey. For example, in Melody's narrative, when interacting with people who spoke the same language as her, she felt less stressed and more comfortable.

For community, I try to meet with the Spanishes. My stress levels go down. I feel less stressful when I was talking with people in Spanish than in English, so I am not like trying to build a network with English speakers and also I have experienced what other the people saying that I don't know, maybe it's ...just adjustment for this stuff... But they say, like, people here are very close and just like politically correct and they don't...probably, will you...and they sell a lot of discrimination...They are not mean in the means that they are going to say, like, here is stupid or something like that, no, but they're not going to let you in in their circle or brands. Something like that... (Melody)

As pointed out by project participants such as Ratri, community built with PGRs who speak the same language can be particularly helpful in navigating challenges in their first year. Peer support, including giving feedback on each other's work, was one of the key benefits Ratri experienced through connecting with other PGRs via their shared languages.

I think um, in terms of inclusion, I think it works well, but because we are um may specifically in [my] school, we have a lot of people from all the world, and we have a lot of [students from my country] coming, so it's kind of help in settling like the first year because we talked with each other, we give feedback. But then again, when we go to international events, we met a lot of people too, so it's kind of good...(Ratri)

At the same time, not all PGRs felt the same sense of comfort in connecting with communities of others from the same country. Putri described feeling a sense of pressure connected to gathering with people who shared her nationality, and a sense of liberation around being able to choose how to engage with others.

I'm lucky like I have like a solid community [of students from my own country]. But sometimes, like, you know, having a very strong sense of community overwhelm because, you know, sometimes you don't want to really, like, take part [...] I learned that having [...] liberation on yourself is like the thing, like being able to say something that you feel uncomfortable to [...] in home country. Because, like, at the end of the day, like you, you're the one like, who doing this journey [...] being able to make a decision for myself and like, do things in moderation, I think it's... it's... good, you know? (Putri)

Putri's contribution underscores the point that EAL-PGRs are not a homogenous group, but are instead, of course, individuals with individual preferences for engaging with others, finding community, and accessing spaces of safety.

Our data shows that many PGRs look to linguistic diversity itself as a way to find community and to make meaningful connections with others who understood their lived experience as a speaker of EAL. Many participants found community in celebrating their differences and connections within the EAL-PGR Writing Community, and experienced benefits in their wellbeing, and an enhanced doctoral experience through participating in that space.

For example, Adem reflected on an early challenge in his PGR journey:

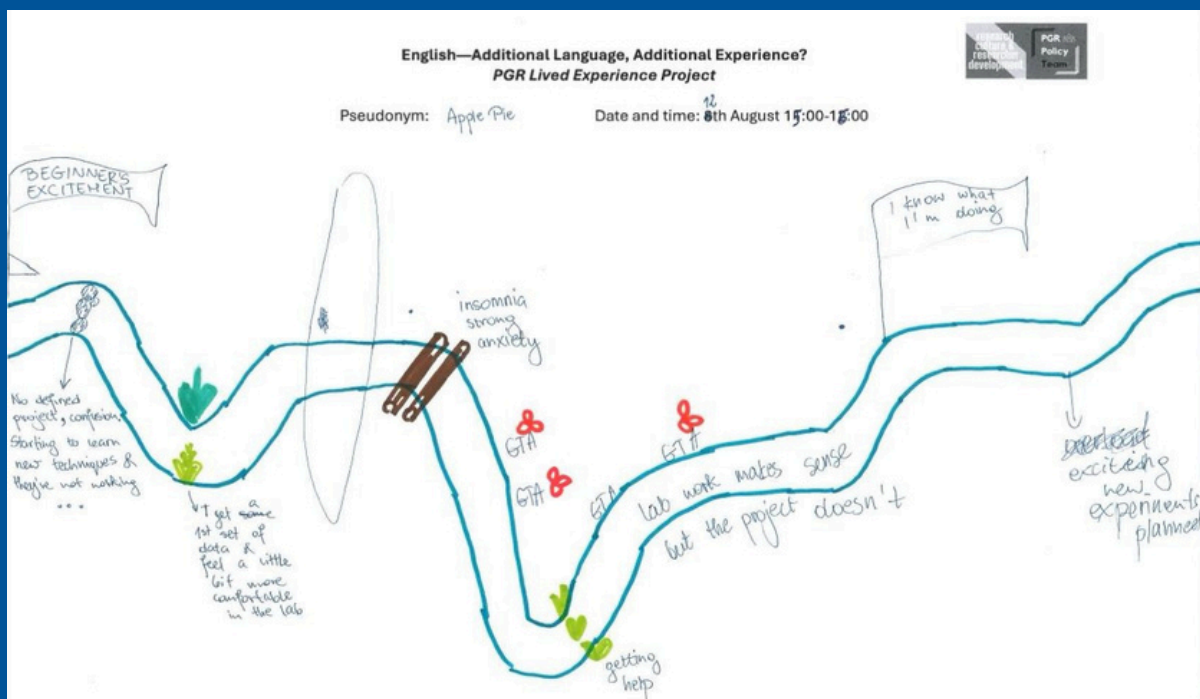
more important than the work was finding friends and communities to, like, relate to, to resonate with, which was a bit weird. I'm [in my late 20s] now, and when I started from scratch again, it feels weird. You feel like a kid that has gone to the school again. You want to find new friends, you want to find, like, communities. And all the challenges that come from it, like [...] accommodation, basically setting up a new life.

[...] finding people who are, like, share the same kind of experience and the same challenges, it's a bit...encouraging, you don't feel like you're alone, [...] At times, you really feel like, oh, like, I'm isolated [...] but having a community to just talk about these things has been really, really helpful. (Adem)

Myra also found important community within the EAL-PGR Writing Community, and found her confidence in her communication skills had increased as a result, explaining:

"the [EAL-PGR] writing retreat. also, I think, give me a sense of community that, especially with others from, like, maybe we do not speak English as a first language, and I think it's kind of built my confidence to... to communicate with others, especially in English, yeah." (Myra)

River of Experiences Gallery: Apple



"Sometimes I think that people, if I would be doing my degrees in [my mother language], I would actually be considered smarter than I actually am considered now because I would have the full volume of the language but after seven years, I'm at the point where when I speak English, the English word is not coming, but [my mother language] is. When [that language] went s-so bad as well. Like...

[...]My family is making fun of me and I don't feel smart in [my mother language] anymore as well. So I feel kind of dumb in both languages."

Theme 7: "A forbidden apple": EAL-PGRs' have a nuanced awareness of the pros and cons of using GenAI for language support

It is perhaps unsurprising, as AI technologies continue to gain traction in academic spaces, that many of our project participants were interested in reflecting on their relationship with AI as researchers working in EAL. Many EAL-PGRs felt anxious or unsure about the way they used AI technologies to support their writing and research practice. EAL-PGRs described using AI for support with language and with correcting, suggesting or translating writing practice, and found value in the time saving benefits of this method of working. However, many also felt deeply conflicted about the place LLMs held in their writing lives, wondering whether they had become overly reliant on AI, whether it really enabled them to develop their writing skills, and how to interpret the parameters of ethical use. One PGR described AI as a "forbidden apple" which carried with it certain risks, and yet, as she reasoned, "How can we not just take a bite?"

When discussing the benefits of using AI for language development, a number of participants mentioned saving time, support with proofreading, and help with grammar corrections, and some explicitly described seeking support from LLMs rather than another person, which some suggested felt less vulnerable, and therefore more comfortable; "just AI" rather than sharing early drafts with a supervisor.

For example, Melody shared:

"So, yeah. I use it for proofreading. because I don't need another person to read my work, it's just like the AI, so I write my stuff and then put it there and see he said, oh. It started like saying, you can improve this this and that. Some things like I take them, some things I don't take them. And for saving time, writing an email, usually I write...hello, improve them. And then it sends me dear XXX and yours sincerely. I don't like wasting time in things that [are] not worth my time, like writing my email in English, in Spanish, I don't do it." (Melody)



(Mulyani: "writing till death".)

For another example, both Ann and Michelle acknowledged the benefits of using AI in reaching the complexity of academic writing and shaping the style of their writing:

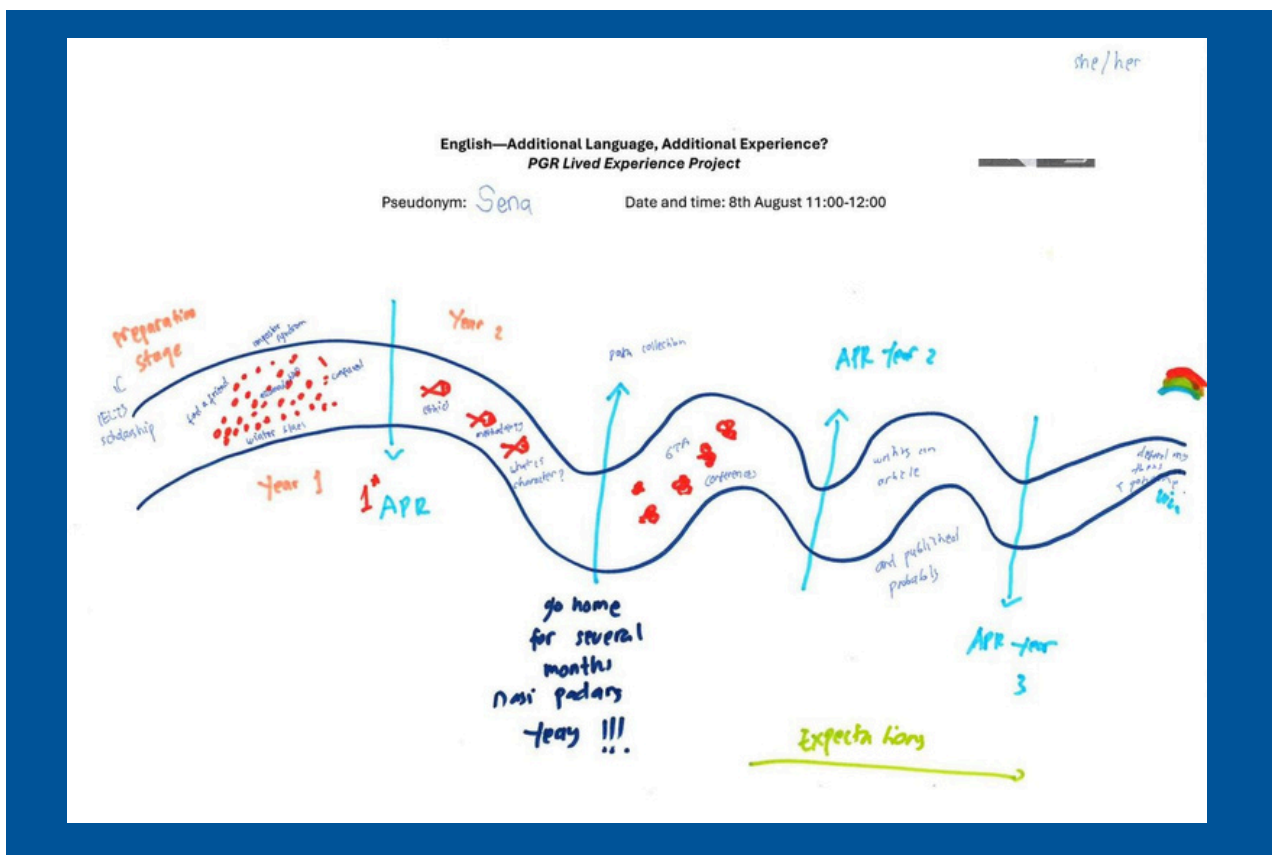
It's definitely helpful. I mean I sometimes write long sentences and a lot of commas. You don't really do that in English, so it's kind of like that for, you know, if it breaks it down more and you're like, oh, okay. I am not gonna do a sentence in four or six lines and, okay, um, but yeah, so it's been helpful and definitely. (Ann)

For me, it has been useful to when I try to write, for example, papers or articles, I can, but I can't [do] X level, you know, in terms of complex [complexity] to explain my ideas. So I can't, but when I put this one in ChatGPT and asked, for example, to do more complex for a specific [degree] now, it has been really good. (Michelle)

In some participants' responses, the boundaries around AI ethics were uncertain and unclear. The parameters of ethical use of LLMs were not always clearly defined for EAL-PGRs, leading to uncertainty and anxiety for some. Sena was conflicted about her AI use, and how to understand the short and long term benefits and drawbacks of choosing to use AI. She evoked AI as "a forbidden apple", "one click away". She shared her belief that the strong pull of instant language improvement might lead to immediate gains which could cause issues in the longer term: interfering with her development as a writer in her own right, and potentially around detection. Her position exemplifies the challenge of LLMs for many EAL-PGRs: they provide a short cut to quick success on the one hand, but cannot fully support the growth of academic agency nor the development of a fully realised academic skillset.

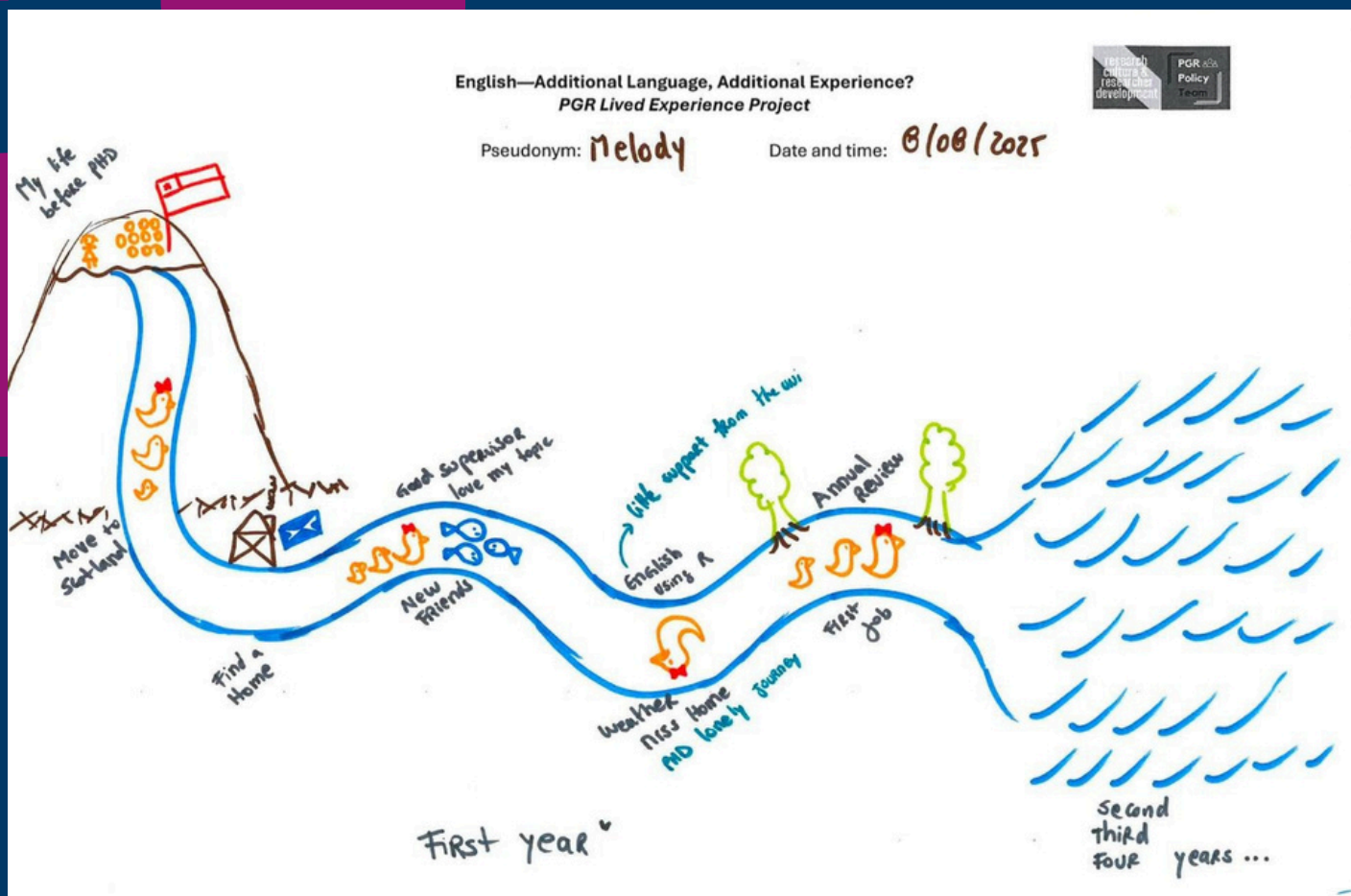
But now we have Chat GPT. I mean, like they compiled it together in one app and it is really helpful. It is like a forbidden apple, but you cannot just get the store cut, but it is there, you know? I mean, like how can you not just take a bite? This is going to be a problem, right? Because it was as an additional language, if we bite that forbidden apple and then I'm not going to improve. but it is just one click away, so it is really, really hard because it makes it easier... but then it will be to get detected...(Sena)

River of Experiences Gallery: Sena



"The duck is upside down because of the English, I have troubles like expressing myself as I want to in English. Also, the weather here in Scotland makes me very depressed and also very sick. [...] I miss home sometimes."

Melody, a PGR using EAL



Theme 8: The structural challenge: Navigating doctoral milestones within a UK context for academic practice also plays a key role in EAL-PGRs research journeys

Alongside the language-related challenges described in the seven themes above, the data also revealed a range of other important challenges EAL-PGRs encountered throughout their journeys, many of which also deeply impact their lived experience of their research degrees. We found that many EAL-PGRs experienced confusion at the beginning of their programmes, indicating that more could be done to facilitate the dual transition into advanced research and the UK-centred context for academic practice that many EAL-PGRs encounter simultaneously.

For example, Cave-lad described his situation in his first year as falling into a ravine because of his experimental failure and having no stable accommodation.

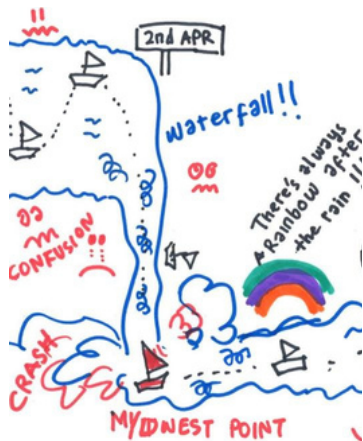
But as I started my journey, you know, to start here, I felt really in the beginning confidence, but obviously pretty soon I realized that I'm not that competent and I don't know that much. Uh, so, as I was climbing, I basically slipped into this ravine, which kind of represents my lowest of a first year at the end of the first year. I still didn't have an accommodation, so basically I was living out of my suitcase and also every experiment that I did, basically failed. and I couldn't figure out what was going on. (Cave-lad)



Other EAL-PGRs referred to a “honeymoon” (Saparyati) period at the beginning of their studies, which was rapidly followed by a debilitating loss of confidence, as the “beginner’s excitement” (Apple) of the initial months wore off, and the challenges of advanced research in an additional language became more apparent. This indicated to us that institutions could meaningfully support EAL-PGRs by thinking carefully about how programmes of support are unfolded across the research lifecycle, and by offering timely support at crucial moments, such as induction, or the 3–6 month dip that many EAL-PGRs in our focus groups described.

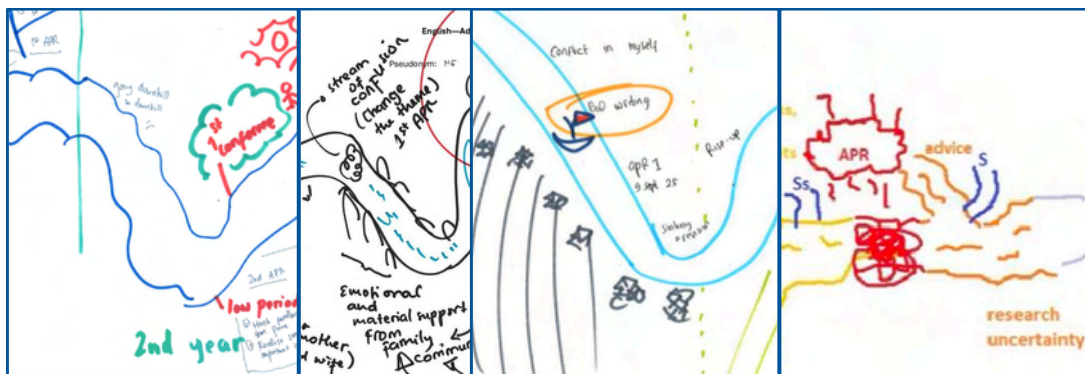
Our data revealed another key moment in the PGR lifecycle when EAL-PGRs might particularly benefit from additional support: post-Annual Progress Review. Many EAL-PGRs highlighted how APRs played a vital role in their lives and their experiences of this are often intense, leading to a range of complex emotional resonances in the period immediately following the APR, from a post-APR slump or malaise, to a failure in the second-year APR was described as a “waterfall” and “the lowest point” of this EAL-PGR’s PhD life.

For example, Mulyani described the after effects of failing her 2nd APR. Visualising this moment as a “waterfall”, and naming it “the lowest point” of her PhD life, Mulyani spoke about how isolating this experience of “failure” had been to her, when those around her were successful, and also touched on how unfamiliar failure was to her, having been a successful scholar across her professional career until this moment. Failing this APR created not only a practical but an identity crisis for Mulyani, as she was forced to re-evaluate how she understood herself as a researcher to enable her to move forward through this moment of extreme challenge.



But that is my lowest point because, you know, everybody succeeded at that time. All my colleagues uh, like A, getting an A, like everybody is but me. Because I'm not really familiar with failure, so that is really my lowest point. (Mulyani)

While Mulyani's was a particularly challenging APR experience, she was far from the only EAL-PGR to use a waterfall, or downward curve to connote the post-APR experience. For example, Ratri, Nor, Saparyati and Margit all used a similar visual motif to indicate the nature of the post-APR challenge and how it affected their research journey.



We suggest these findings indicate that institutions could do more to anticipate these moments of significant challenge: raising awareness with EAL-PGRs of these potential pain points; and offering increased well-tailored support to enable researchers to successfully navigate these challenging moments.

A number of researchers also acknowledged the impact of uncertainty about the future, as they attempted to visualise the shape of their research journey. EAL-PGRs had different perspectives on this lack of certainty. For example, while Nor drew her river, showing “the forest of the unknown”, she also drew a smiley face, and indicated her perspective: “just keep swimming”. Melody expressed positivity about the potential directions of her future: “It is just exciting for me. and then it's open. This represent like the sea, because I have still second year and fourth year and I want to a post-doc. Hopefully, a lot of things to do...”

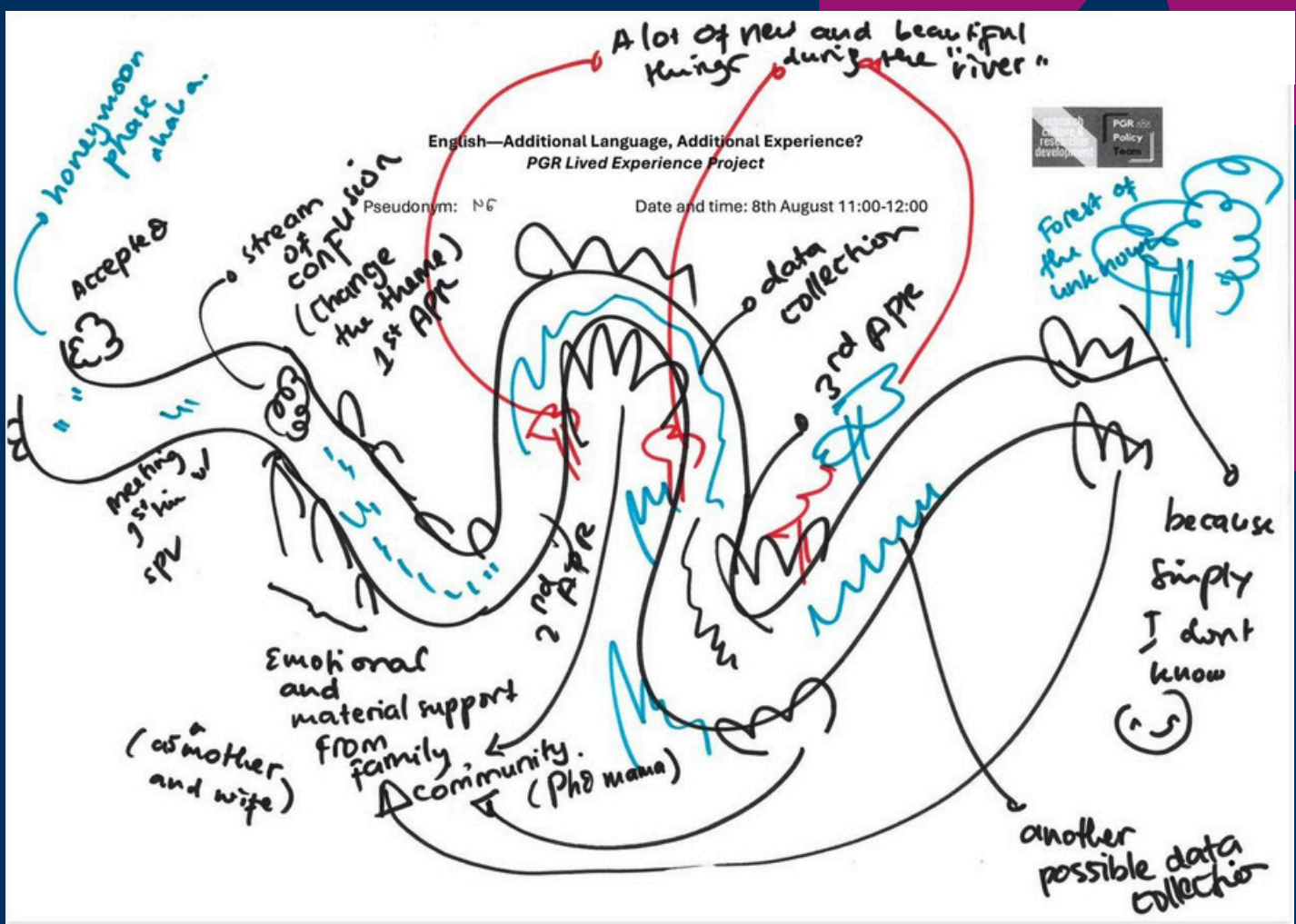
However, others expressed greater anxiety about the uncertainty on their horizons. Putri shared a feeling of “plateau”, “a different kind of tired” where “what’s next” is entangled with “missing her old life”. Lin shared her anxieties about how volatile geopolitics might affect her research experience: “we cannot escape from [it] and just constantly worry about what happens next, what would happen to ourselves as the international students and how would that affect our research?”



Details from Melody, Putri and Lin’s rivers, showing how the diverse approaches they each take to the uncertainty they see in their futures.

These findings from our data suggest that when planning initiatives to support EAL-PGRs, institutions should remain mindful of how research fits into EAL-PGRs wider social, emotional, and political lives. Working in alignment with life outside of the ‘research bubble’ means that addressing uncertainty might take different forms. For example, responding to concerns such as Nor’s “the forest of the unknown”, or even Melody’s “open sea”, addressing uncertainty might look like career planning, or raising awareness of non-academic career paths. At other times, responding to geopolitical crises such as recent events in Palestine, or the rise of rightwing extremism across the UK, including in cities with large International Student populations, it might look like creating space for complexity and holding thinking environments to allow EAL-PGRs the time and space to work through the emotional impact caused by issues outside of their research that have a deep impact on their lived experience.

"...just keeps swimming, just keeps waving. And there is still a forest of unknown because I simply I don't know what this the connection will lead me to..."



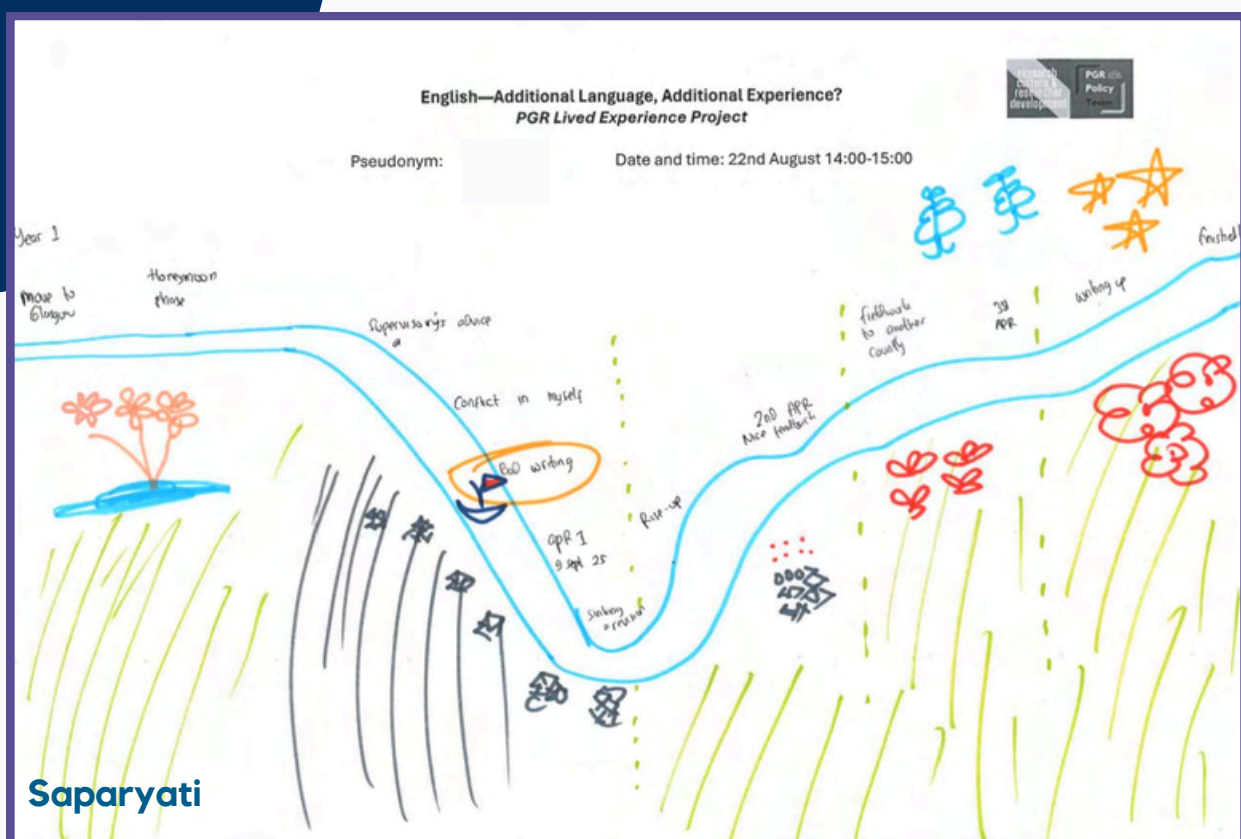
Nor, a PGR using EAL

4 Valuing and responding

Our recommendations

Our evidence suggests institutions across the sector could enable EAL-PGRs to thrive by adopting these five recommendations. In this section, we discuss each recommendation, and suggest a range of service enhancements Universities could implement to deliver meaningful community benefits and strategic value.

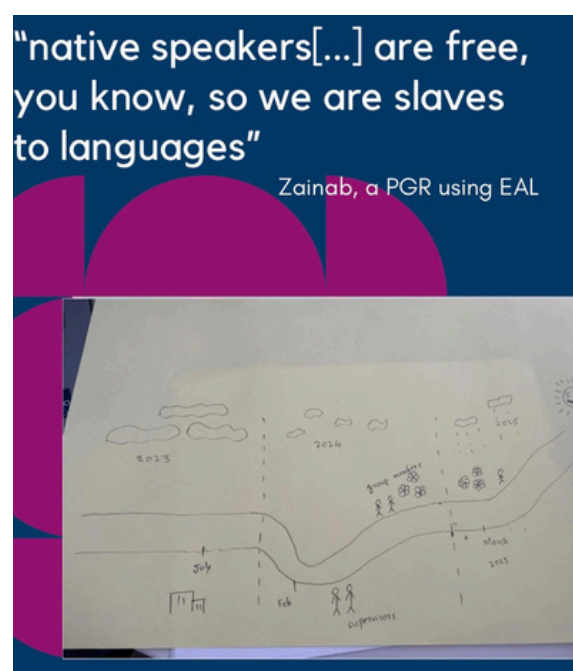
1. Make it visible — understanding linguistic diversity and its multifold benefits and associated challenges
2. Make it sustained and specific — EAL-PGR writing support
3. Make it smoother — facilitating EAL-PGRs' self-realisation
4. Make it clear — the use of AI in supporting language development
5. Make it integrated — linguistic diversity as a connection point



Valuing and responding to EAL-PGRs' insights: our recommendations

Responding to and reflecting on the valuable insights which EAL-PGRs shared with us, we developed a series of critical evidence-informed recommendations designed to enable institutions to deliver an enhanced programme of support for EAL-PGRs. The picture that emerged from the data is rich and exciting and will be hugely valuable in enabling colleagues across the sector to centre the experiences of EAL-PGRs as we design provision, plan policy enhancements, and work to lessen the impact of global structural inequities ([Shahjahan 2025](#); [Mu, 2026](#)) and linguistic injustices ([Meighan 2022](#)) on the EAL-PGR experience in UKHEIs.

Our view is that decolonising approaches to the creation and communication of knowledges have deep value across Higher Education, and particular resonance in the critical area of support for multilingual researchers. Our research demonstrates the ways in which structural inequities, linguistic injustices and systemic barriers can enter into the doctoral experience for many PGRs who use EAL. Further, it suggests that institutions could deepen support for multilingual researchers by committing to meaningful and lasting perspectival shifts through decolonising how languages, cultures and diverse educational experiences are understood, valued and welcomed within doctoral education.



Zainab, a PGR using EAL

As Zainab so powerfully articulates in the small fragment of text above, the harms English enacts as a colonising language are deep-seated, complex and ongoing. In order to move forward as a sector, we must acknowledge uncomfortable truths, redress inequitable power balances, and centre the lived experiences of those who have been harmed. This is difficult work, which needs commitment, rigour and investment ([Lyon, 2026](#)).

Below, we outline five key areas of practice which our findings suggest will have a deep impact on EAL-PGRs experience, allowing colleagues at institutions across the UK and beyond to deepen their commitment to developing a more inclusive, equitable research environment for their researchers. These key recommendations both effectively respond to EAL-PGRs' self-identified needs, while at the same time suggesting a number of ways in which institutions might further develop conditions for a meaningful mindset shift in the service of wider decolonising and antiracist work around language support.

Recommendation 1: Make it visible — understanding linguistic diversity and its multifold benefits and associated challenges

Challenges in communicating in English are often invisible and internalised by EAL-PGRs, and experienced as a personal failure rather than an effect of wider structural or systemic issues. Many EAL-PGRs struggle with negative self-image, self-doubt and feelings of shame, blame and failure as a result. Institutions could usefully increase visibility of challenges by offering specific materials, training and support to those who support EAL-PGRs, allowing teams across the support ecosystem to build capacity for supporting linguistic diversity in an evidence-informed way, that enables constructive reframing around strengths, abilities and aptitudes.

Damaging and false deficit narratives around linguistic diversity persist. Universities could do much to alleviate the challenge of working in an additional language by reframing the discourse around EAL away from colonial linguistics, Anglocentrism and 'native speakerism' and towards valuing multilinguality, appreciating epistemological richness and welcoming linguistic diversities. Universities should look to bolster this crucial institutional mindset shift with practical, actionable strategies that enable EAL-PGRs to take back agency in spaces they have been disempowered to inhabit, such as support with understanding local dialects, and support with managing the additional emotional and mental labour of using EAL in both advanced research and community settings.

Steps you can take to develop your institutional approach to linguistic diversity:

- Collect linguistic diversity data from all entrants to your University, with a view to better understanding, responding to and valuing the epistemological and communicative richness that is embedded in your community languages
- Develop, implement and socialise an institution-wide Linguistic Diversity or Linguistic Justice Policy that champions multilinguality, centres linguistic diversity and welcomes epistemological richness into the research environment
- Collaborate across all areas of your institution, including central Research Services, Colleges, Schools and disciplines, to raise the visibility of the challenges associated with using EAL and to offer a connected, aligned institutional response. This may involve upskilling staff across your institution in intercultural competences, and in decolonising and antiracist practice to ensure equity in how linguistic diversity is received across the institutional environment
- Reconsider the wordings and priorities of PGR internship application criteria through the lens of equity, inclusion and linguistic justice – this may involve, for example, revisiting criteria around language skills to understand which communicative facilities of language are crucial to a role, and to provide greater clarity and accuracy for applicants around what aspects of language competency will and will not be assessed

- With a view to practical support, facilitate the design of a wide range of support mechanisms for EAL-PGRs that are geared towards supporting with the invisible challenges of speaking and understanding, including initiatives such as:
 - Support with navigating local linguistic and cultural context, including accents
 - Support with the navigating the additional mental load and emotional labour of communicating in an additional language
 - Support supervisors and staff to identify and adopt intentional and evidence-informed practices around inclusive, supportive and equitable communication with EAL-PGRs. This may involve upskilling colleagues in decolonising and antiracist practice.
 - Destigmatising the use of real-time transcription in online meetings.
 - Prioritising equitable practice in considering in-person meeting environments including issues of access for EAL-PGRs such as choosing venues with less background noise for meetings, providing written information as well as verbal where appropriate, or providing information in advance
 - Upskilling around inclusive practices such as creating safe spaces, and supporting EAL-PGRs encountering challenges such as language anxiety and intercultural transition.
 - Reconsider the possibilities of promoting inclusion in designing supervision meeting, including for example setting expectations, agreeing wordcounts or deadlines, discussing institutional processes, and giving feedback.

River of Experiences Gallery: Ann



Recommendation 2: Make it sustained and specific — EAL-PGR writing support

Dedicated and tailored writing support has a powerful impact on skill development, self-understanding, self-belief, self-compassion, and personal growth. EAL-PGRs deeply value dedicated writing support that is specifically tailored to their needs. Participants in our project credited that support with helping them understand both themselves and the UK context for academic practice better, and saving them time, among other things.

However, it is critically important that EAL-focused support for writing and academic practice adopts an antiracist and decolonial ethos. Offering nominal support that replicates existing deficit narratives, compounds racist harms, or replicates the epistemic violence of colonialism, whether unintentionally or otherwise, is not an effective or ethically viable approach. Support for EAL-PGRs must actively resist these discourses, and that may mean that researcher developers and HE practitioners need to learn new languages of support, challenge their own perspectives or positionalities, or become adept in new pedagogical approaches that centre decoloniality, and antiracism.

We recommend extending EAL-specific academic writing offers to include decolonially-informed speaking and listening support ([Gimenez 2020](#); [Hutchison & Morris, 2025](#)), acknowledging that other aspects of communication can also be culturally informed, and may also require space and time to consider, in a supportive, inclusive and caring environment, which centres equity, and reciprocal understanding.

Steps you can take to deepen your institutional approach to EAL-PGR writing support:

- Provide effective, high-quality support for writing that is expertly tailored to EAL-PGR's needs
- Acknowledge the symbolic harms inherent within Anglocentric environments, and create pedagogical spaces of resistance to damaging discourses within your teaching practice
- Develop existing programmes of writing support to include a broad range of EAL-specific writing sessions, perhaps including things like: discipline specific writing support led by expert voices from across the institutional landscape; sessions which address the emotional labour of working in an additional language, or the additional cognitive load involved
- Provide guidance for PGRs on how to initiate and lead peer-to-peer writing support groups
- Deepen institutional intercultural awarenesses, to create supportive learning and feedback spaces
- Develop institution-wide approaches to feedback delivery that support both writing development and PGR wellbeing

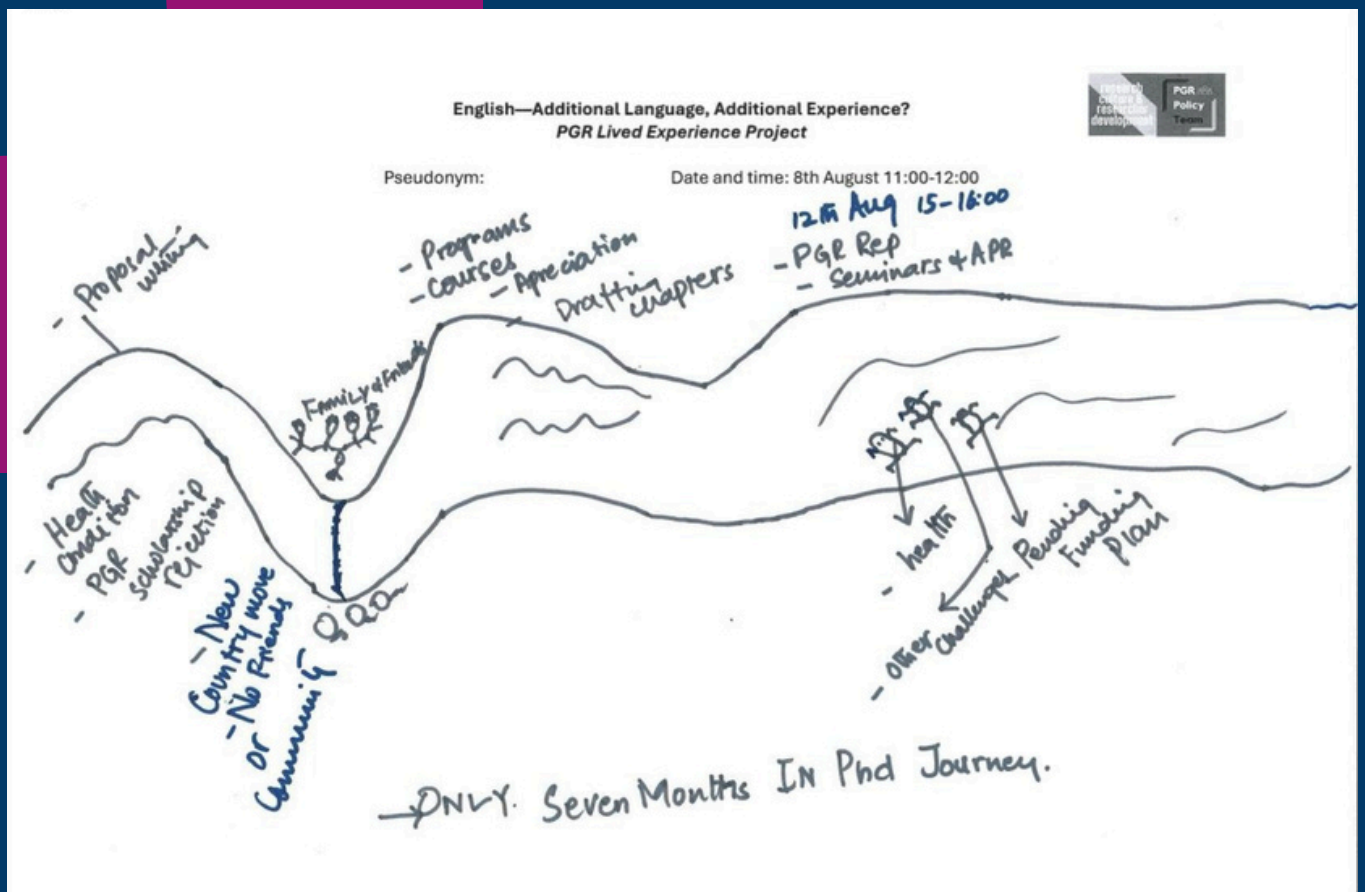
Recommendation 3: Make it smoother — facilitating EAL-PGRs' self-realisation

The double challenge of entering a new space of learning through beginning an advanced research degree, while also working in a new language in a new cultural context for practice can make the journey towards self-understanding, self-compassion and agentic self-actualisation for EAL-PGRs complex, time-consuming and emotionally fraught. Misunderstandings, misattributions and hidden curriculum guesswork ([Guccione et al., 2020](#)) can slow the path to effective research and writing, disrupting research timelines, affecting the likelihood of timely completions and potentially interfering with the high quality doctoral experience that institutions, and those working within them, wish to create.

However, several EAL-PGRs also spoke of a transformational self-awareness experienced during their research journey: a growing understanding of their multilinguality and associated epistemological and communicative richness. Realising that it took talent, skill and determination to undertake advanced research in an additional language reminded them of their abilities, and the value of their voices to the wider research culture. Institutions should look to facilitate spaces where this transformational self-understanding can be realised, such as writing retreats, trainings, community events, or mentoring relationships.

Steps you can take to deepen your institutional approach to facilitating self-understanding:

- Integrate insights on self-realisation in language use into tailored and dedicated EAL-PGR writing programmes and initiatives. This could include drawing on research projects like this one to illustrate how PGRs have described their journeys through cultural transition towards a greater appreciation of their multilinguality.
- *"that's just PhD though, isn't it?" (Apple)*: Support EAL-PGRs at every stage of their research journey to understand how to decode the demands of advanced research from the complexities of English language usage, to allow EAL-PGRs to reach this moment of transformational self-understanding sooner
- Create additional spaces of critical reflection for PGRs to develop their understanding the role of English and the role of their mother language(s) and other additional languages in their research and lives
- Utilise Annual Progress Reviews (APRs) as opportunities to promote EAL-PGRs' self-awareness in terms of language use. This may involve upskilling those who hold APRs in how to lead conversations around language usage and language support, and in enhancing visibility of existing support at UofG, such as the University of Glasgow's [EAL-PGR Writing Community](#).
- Operate more statistical analysis of existing and emerging data sources to foreground the relations between EAL-PGRs' self-realisation and their PhD completion, paper publication, APR outcomes, etc.



"Then come the three frogs who gonna stay with me for the rest of my river. One is my health, second is other challenges which are coming and going, of course. And the third is the pending... funding application. [...] So, I made them my friend, so we are moving along with the journey now."

Laiba, a PGR using EAL

Recommendation 4: Make it clear — the use of AI in supporting EAL

Participants indicated that they would benefit from increased support around understanding the ethical use of AI. We recommend that colleagues should look to collaborate across their institutional environments to develop targeted and practical guidance for using AI in supporting language.

We recommend integrating guidance on using AI into existing programmes of writing support. Introducing critical awareness and discussion on the ethical use of AI into existing learning spaces could promote EAL-PGRs' understanding of the wider AI landscape, helping to address the feeling of uncertainty around policy and practice that many EAL-PGRs experienced. Our project findings also highlighted that EAL-PGRs are concerned about engaging with varied subgenres of academic practice, and are just as likely to seek AI support with conference papers, emails or networking introductions as with formal academic submissions. Providing holistic guidance on communicative strategies and self-articulation could allow EAL-PGRs to both develop their skills and increase their confidence, and ensure that using AI is a well-considered and intentional choice, rather than a result of a perceived communicative deficiency. Additionally, we recommend increased guidance on alternative non-AI-based writing and editing strategies, to deliver additional support in this area to those who need it, and allow EAL-PGRs to approach their professional practice with confidence.

Steps you can take to deepen your institutional approach to clarifying the use of AI to support writing and language development in research:

- Increase the reach of existing AI in Research Policies, through integrating guidance for using AI into writing and/or other training sessions, and embedding Policies into institutional support mechanisms more broadly.
- Offer enhanced training in policy translation, enabling EAL-PGRs to feel confident in their interpretation of existing Policy documents.
- Offer guidance and/or training in ethical prompt formulation to enable EAL-PGRs to make evidence-informed decisions about how best to use AI tools to enhance their practice, and deepen their research skills and language facility.
- Offer enhanced guidance on citational practice, to ensure that institutions are able to uphold high standards of integrity and transparency in research outputs.
- Offer enhanced training in the area of alternative writing and editing strategies, giving EAL-PGRs a wider range of options for developing their successful research and writing practice, and to facilitate the development of 'analogue' writing skills. These skills are increasingly valuable in our contemporary research environment, and will allow us to graduate PhDs with the requisite professional skills to ensure positive graduate outcomes for EAL-PGRs, beyond the completion of the degree itself

Recommendation 5: Make it integrated — linguistic diversity as a connection point

Our data suggests that while for some EAL-PGRs, language had the potential to create barriers to peer-to-peer engagement, for many others, it functioned effectively as a tool to enable meaningful connections. Spaces where we can facilitate connections between EAL-PGRs that are welcoming, inclusive and celebrate diversities are deeply valuable and, when grounded in an ethos of empathy and care, can create feelings of belonging, community and understanding. Positive feedback that our participants have shared around the University of Glasgow's EAL-PGR Writing Community indicated that they experienced significant benefits through connecting with others within that community, and felt able to release the tension or pressure they felt around their English language use through speaking with others who understood. They also shared that the Community enabled them to both give and receive valuable peer support, which reminded them of their value, both as talented researchers in their own right, and as members of our research culture, who could deliver meaningful support to one another. These perspectives evidence that our institutional approach to valuing, celebrating and interrogating the relationship between linguistic diversity and community building, achieved through utilising language as a connection point and linking EAL-PGRs through the use of diverse languages is very effective, and had a positive effect on participants' experiences of their research at the University of Glasgow.

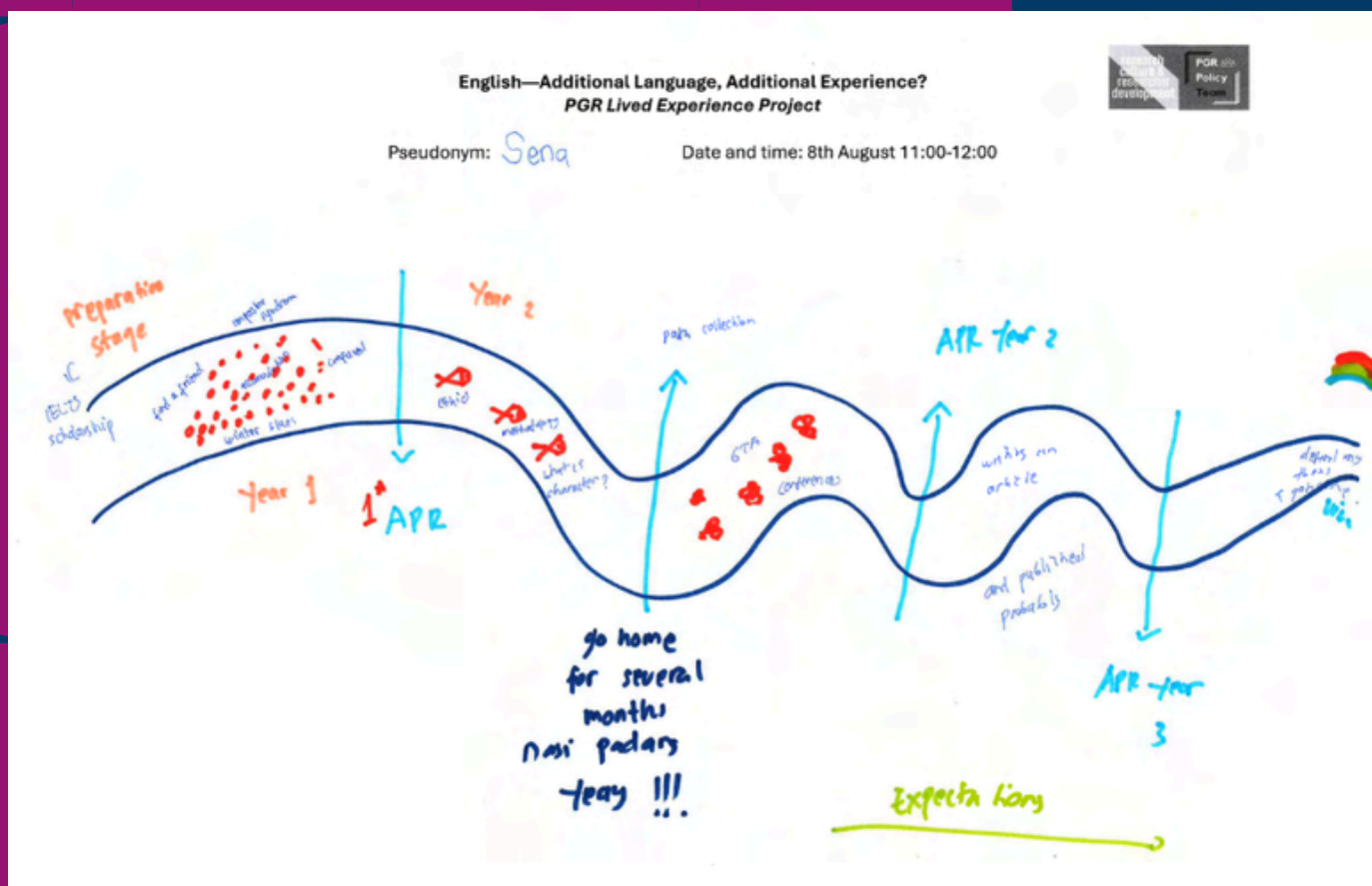
Steps you can take to deepen your institutional approach to language and community:

- Support the growth and development of spaces such as the University of Glasgow's EAL-PGR Writing Community, where PGRs can connect with others who share aspects of their lived experience, as a key part of the research journey
- Facilitate language-focused activities to celebrate the linguistic diversity and enhance the sense of community for EAL-PGRs, such as language exchange workshops
- Provide opportunities for micro-intercultural encounters as peer-to-peer spaces of learning and connection, such as the University of Glasgow's successful Coffee Connect initiative
- Initiate a new institutional response to welcoming epistemological richness of researchers' linguistic diversity, as suggested above in the shape of a Linguistic Diversity Policy, which would validate researchers' holistic selfhood, and expand the range of contributions researchers are welcomed to make to our research culture, enriching the space for all in the research ecosystem.
- Scope viability of adjusting language around the questions on community and belonging in feedback and annual evaluations to collect regular qualitative data on how EAL-PGRs understand, articulate and position the relationship between languages and community-building

"even though this piranha keeps eating my expectation, I have to fight for it [...]"

By the end of the day, I am gonna go to my Viva, defending my thesis and go back home. That is why I drew a little bit of rainbow. Finally, Yay!"

Sena, a PGR using EAL



5 Rivers of Experience

Gallery

This section gathers all 26 Rivers of Experience made during our focus groups into a gallery. Through this, we can encounter EAL-PGRs' visualisations of their lived experiences in conversation and in juxtaposition with one another, and discover the points of similarity and divergence in their journeys.

Translanguaging

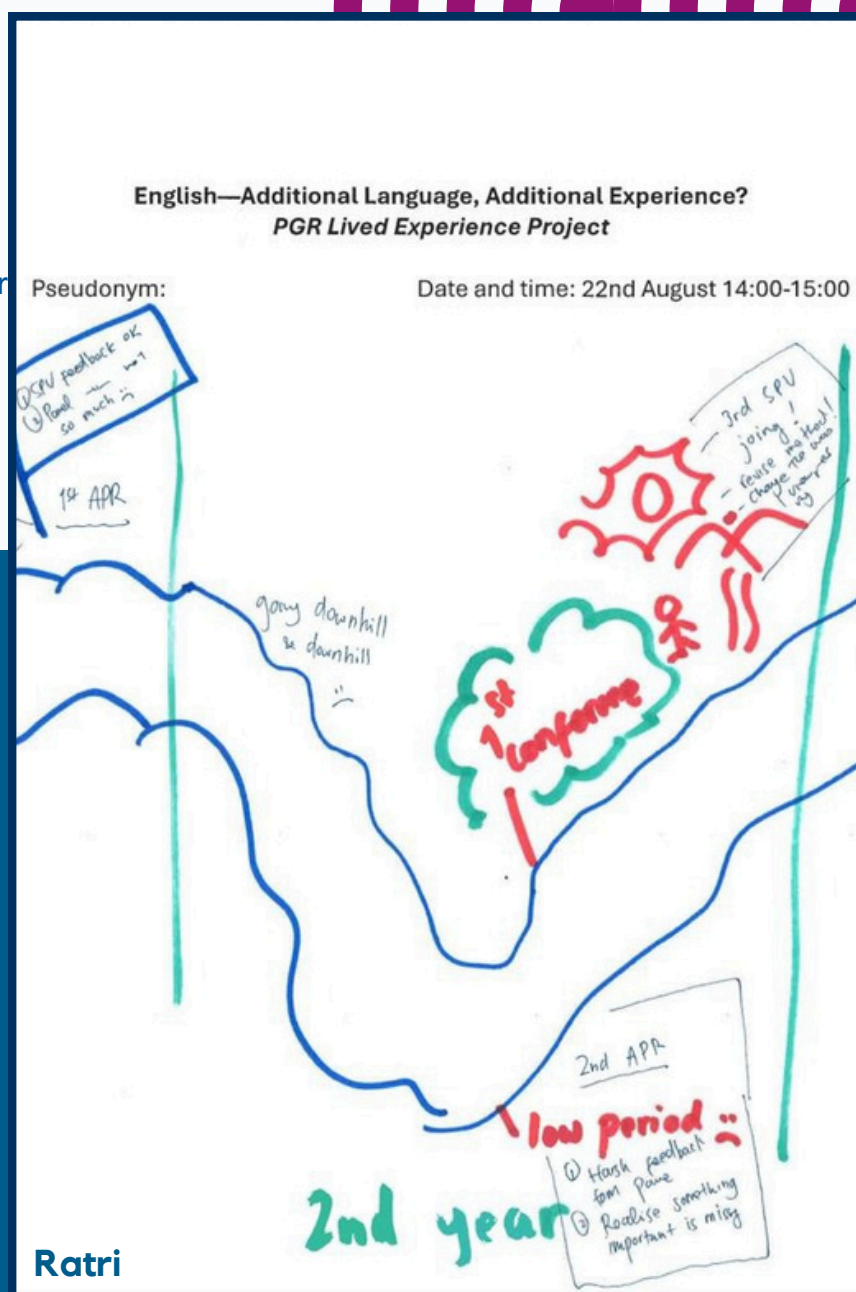
The methodology allowed EAL-PGRs to engage all of their linguistic repertoire when reflecting on their journey.

Scaffolding

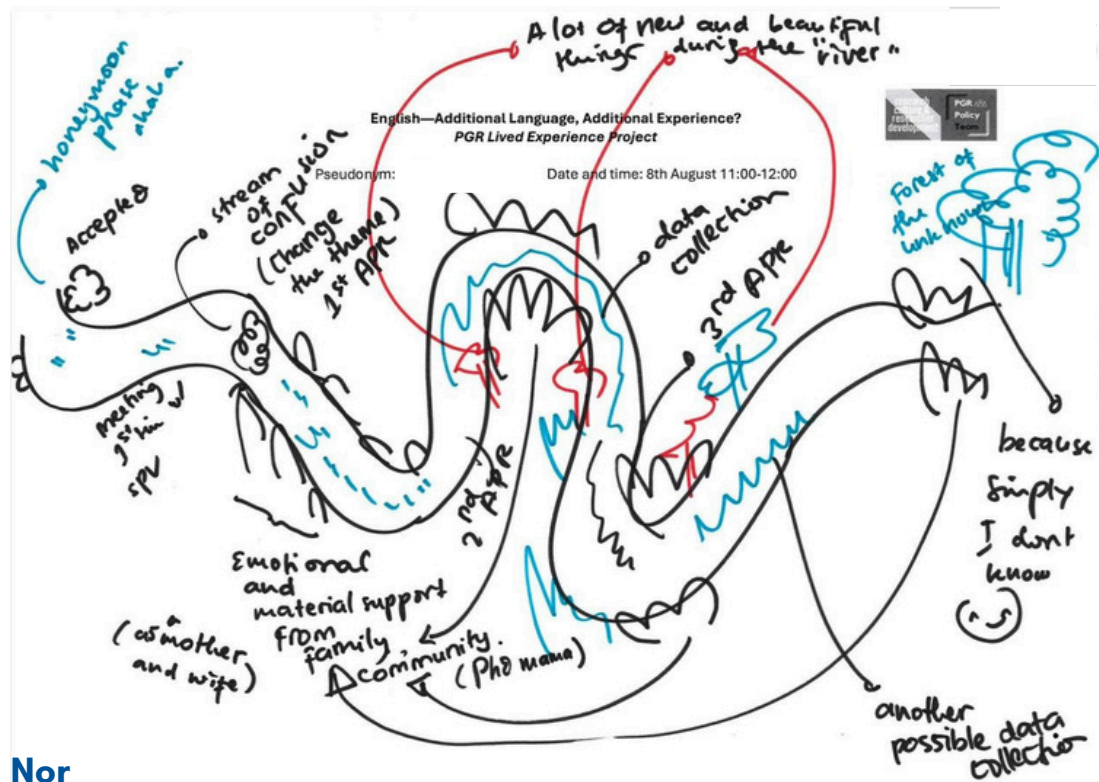
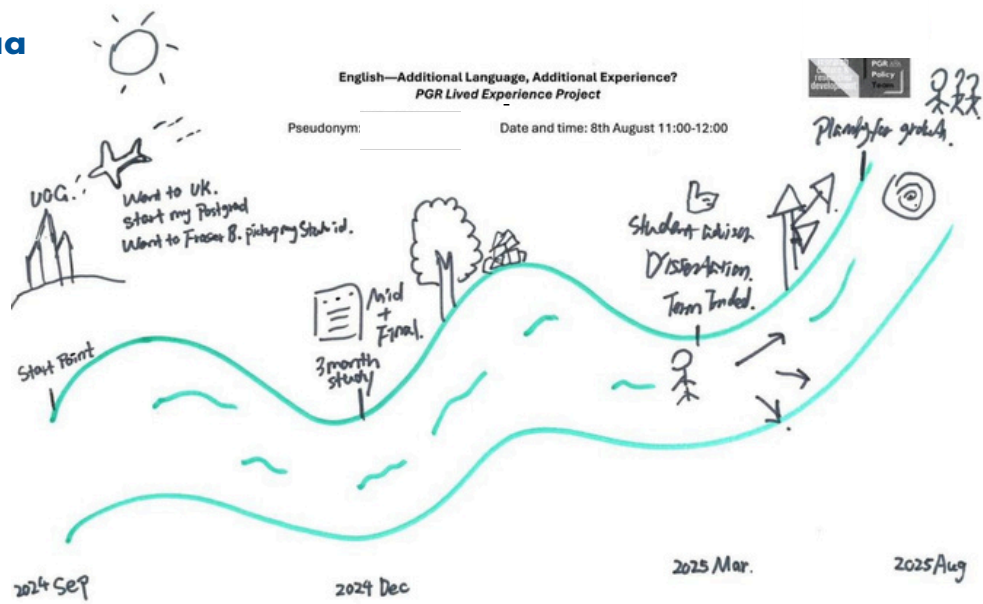
Using it meant we could scaffold in group discussion, allowing personal reflection time for EAL-PGRs to gather their thoughts, and structure their ideas before speaking about them.

Unprompted responses

EAL-PGRs drew their rivers and described them to each other prior to encountering our questions, allowing us an unfiltered view of how they understood their own research journey.



Hua



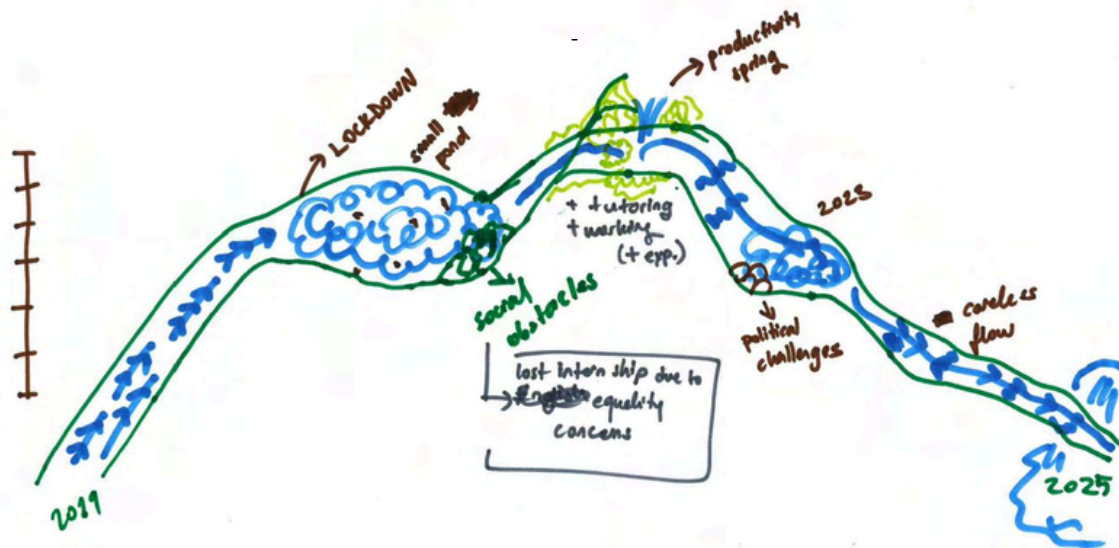
Nor

Sarah

English—Additional Language, Additional Experience?
Experience Project

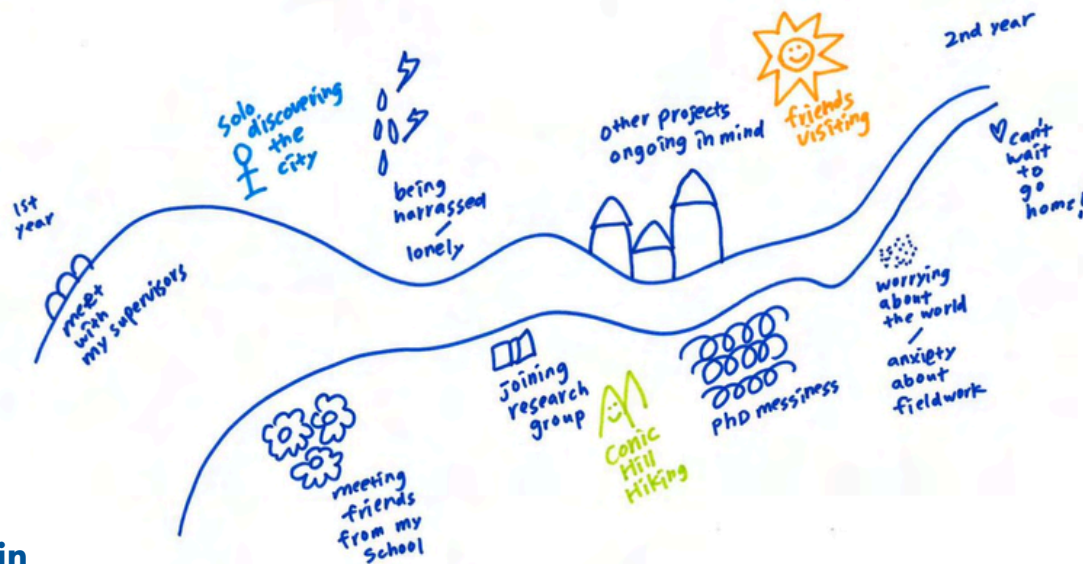
Pseudonym: S

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English—Additional Language, Additional Experience?
Experience Project

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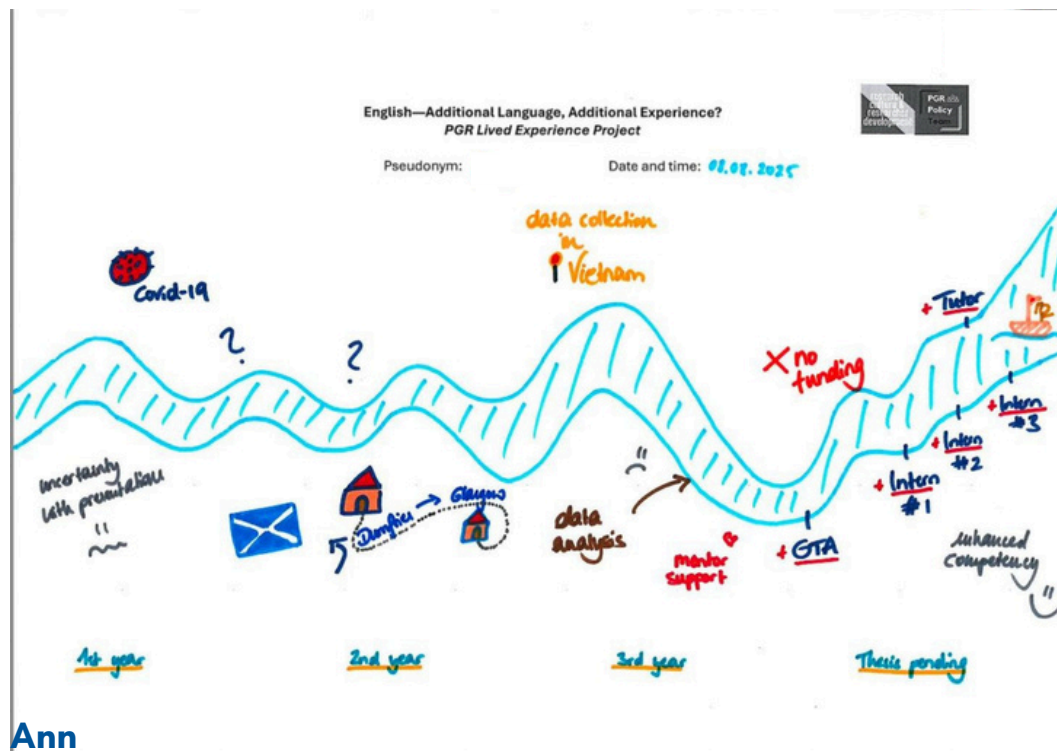
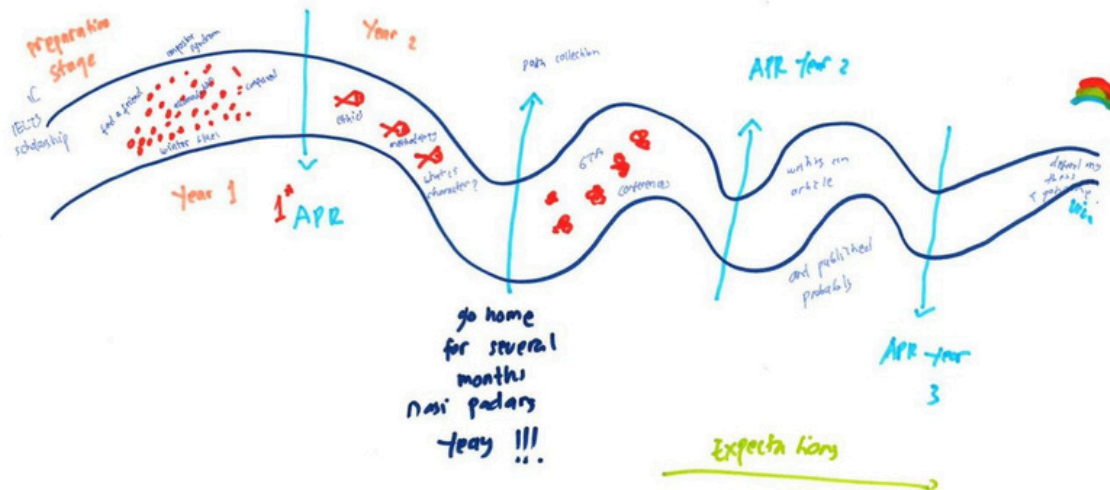
Lin

Sena

English—Additional Language, Additional Experience?
PGR Lived Experience Project

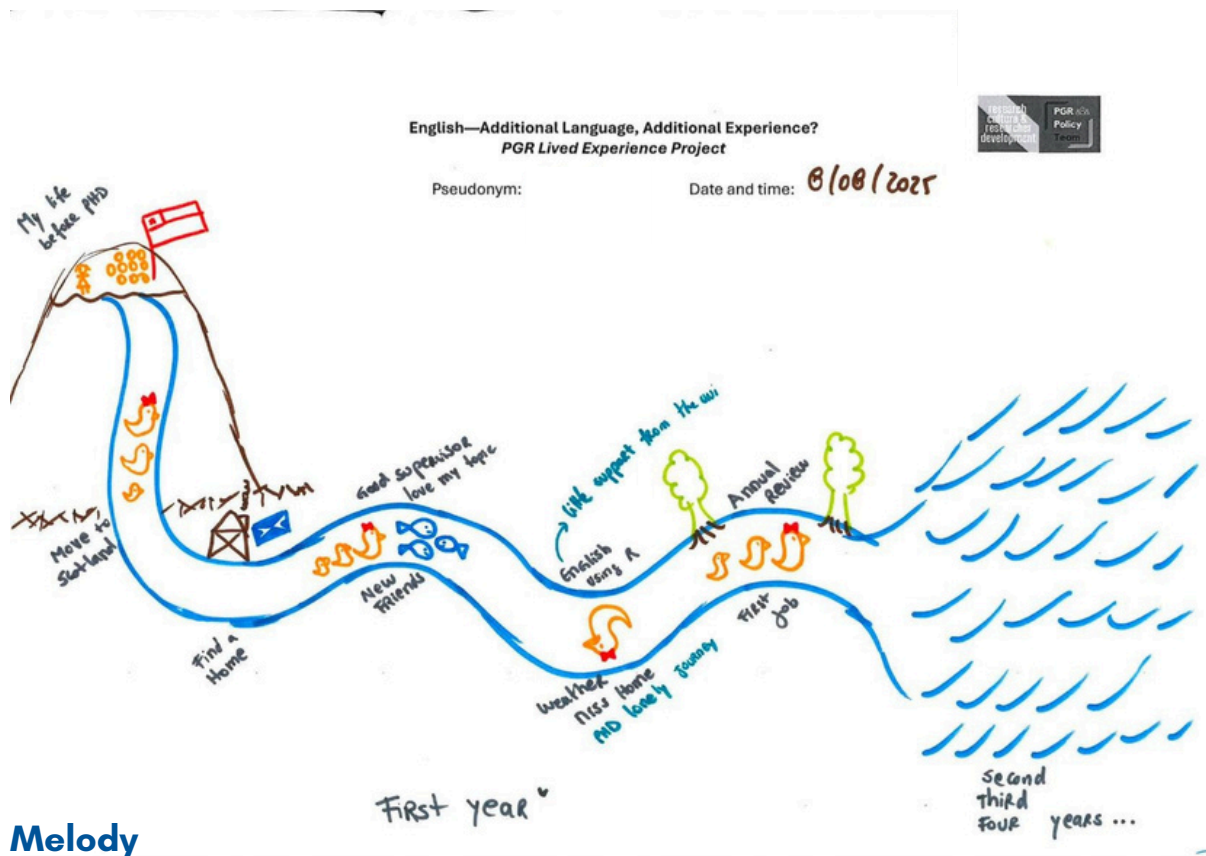
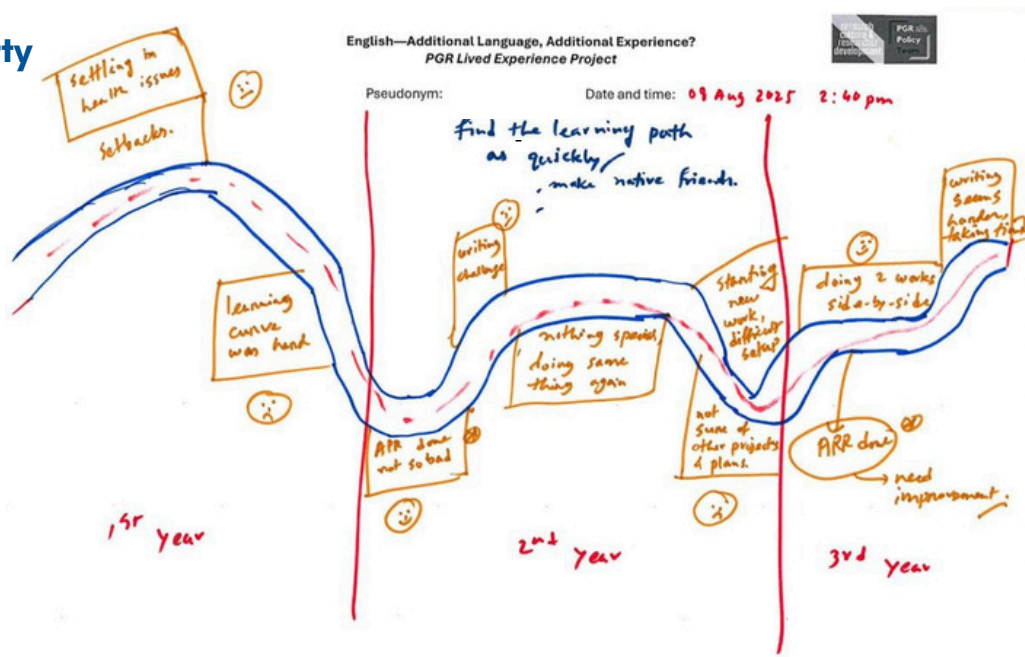
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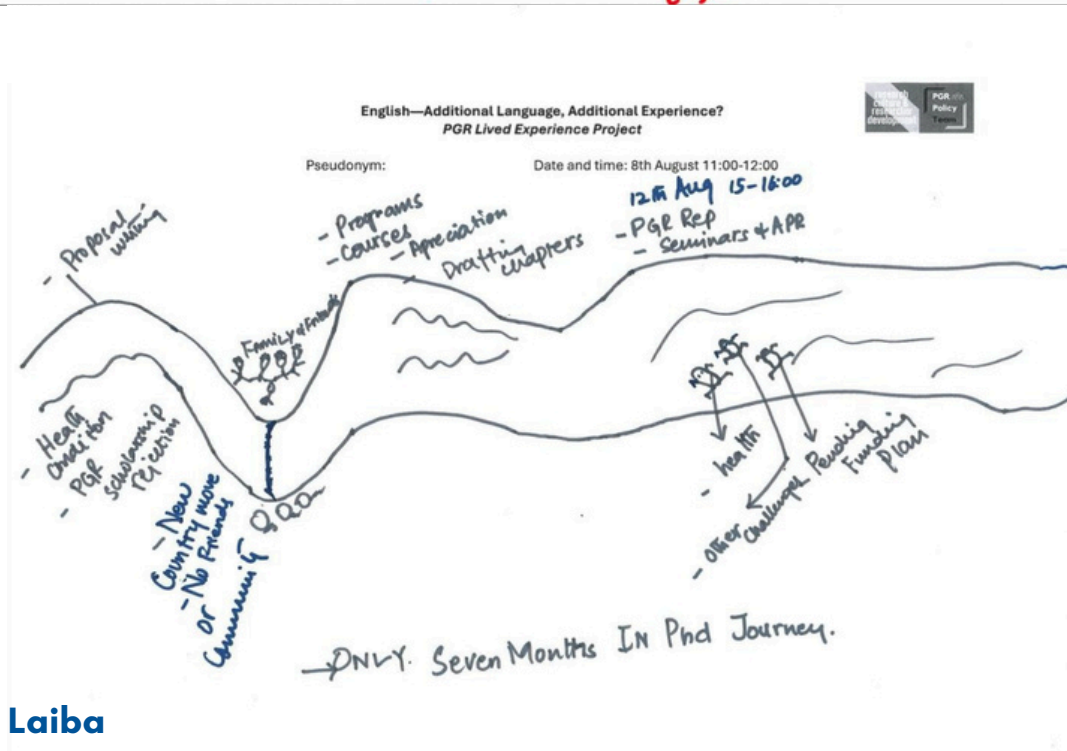
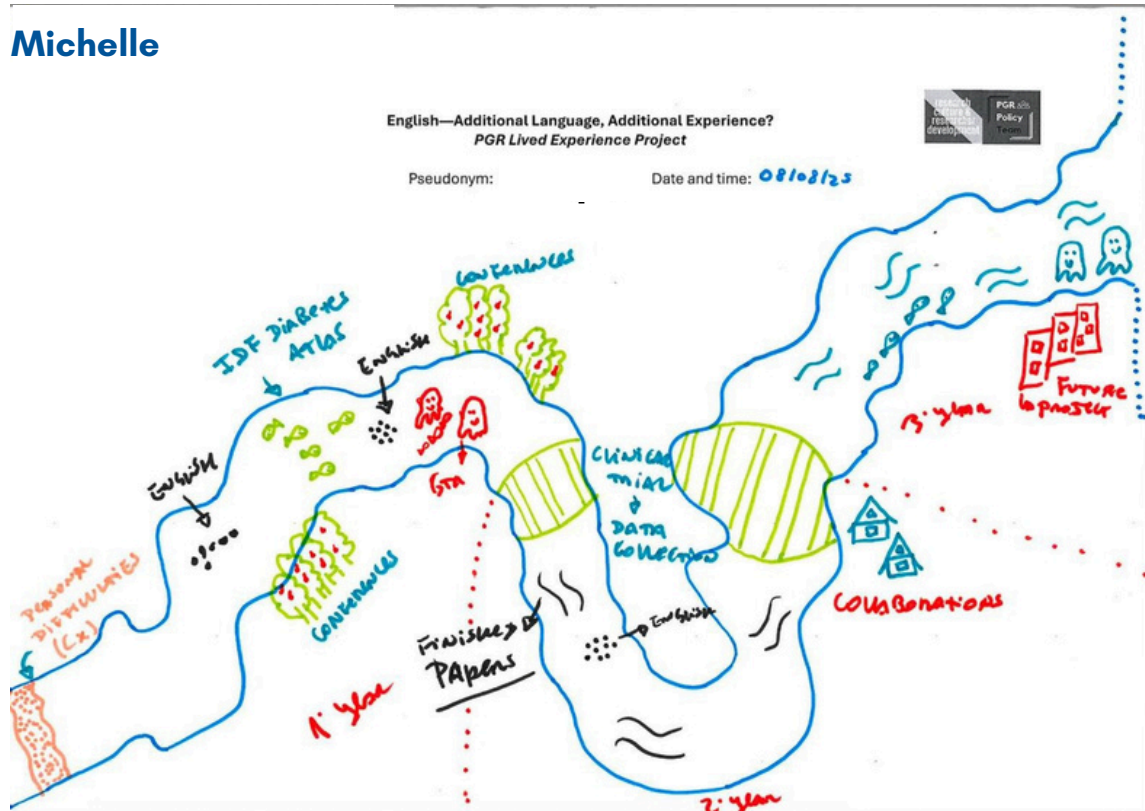
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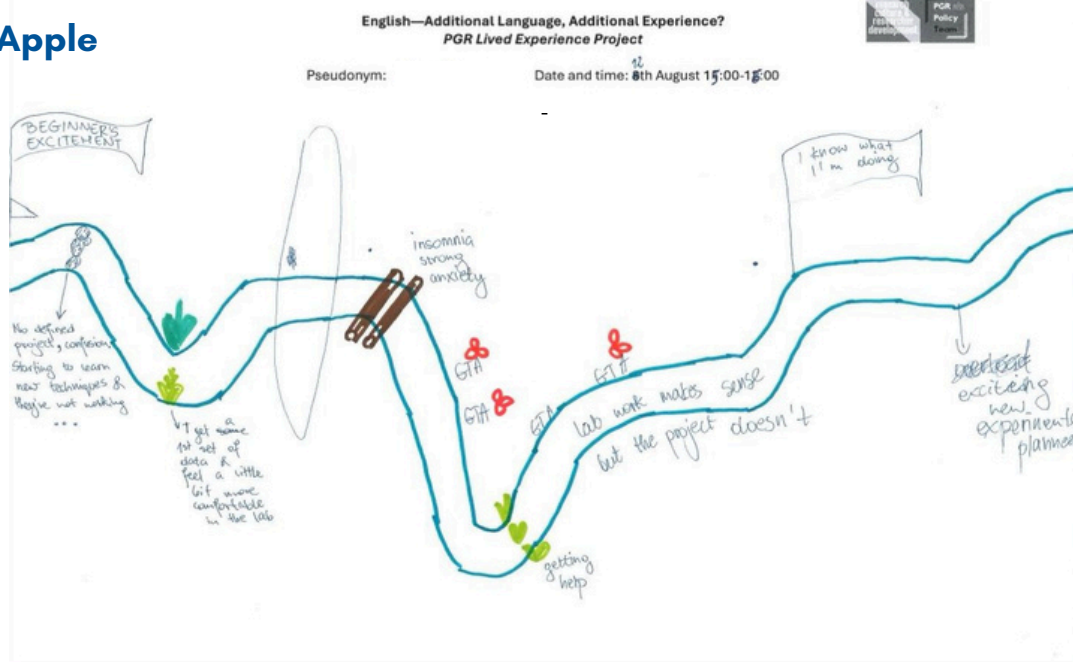
Ann

Hearty

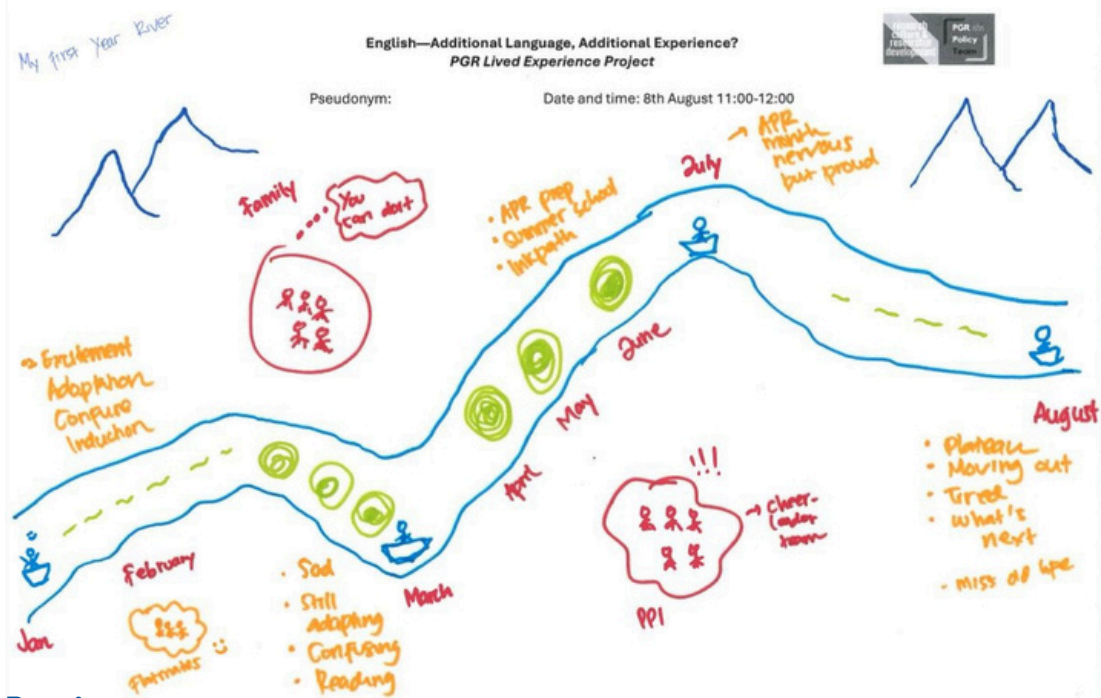




Apple

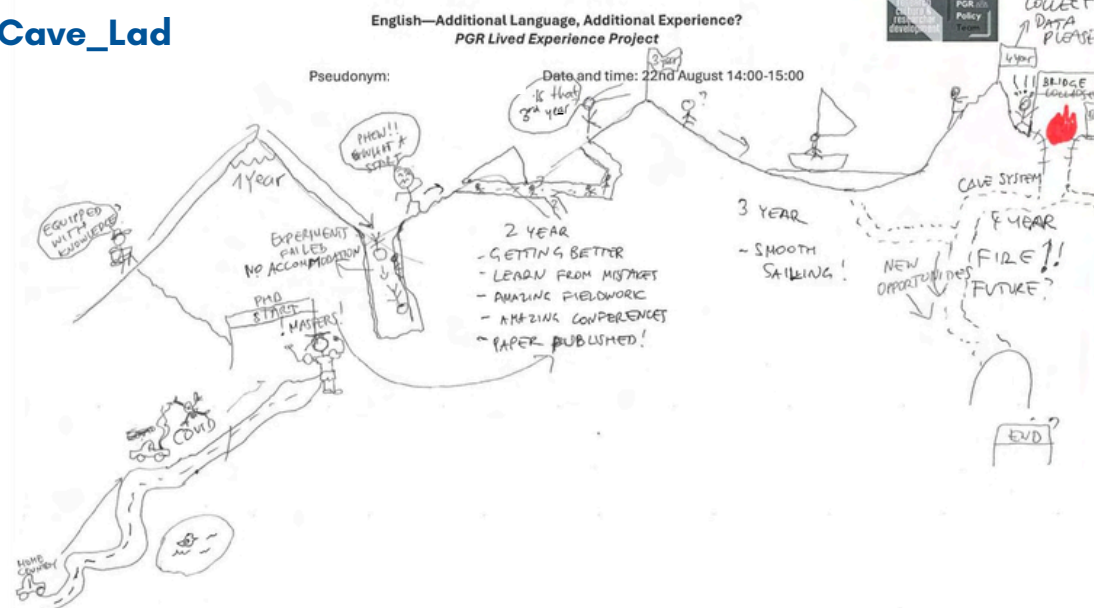


My first Year River

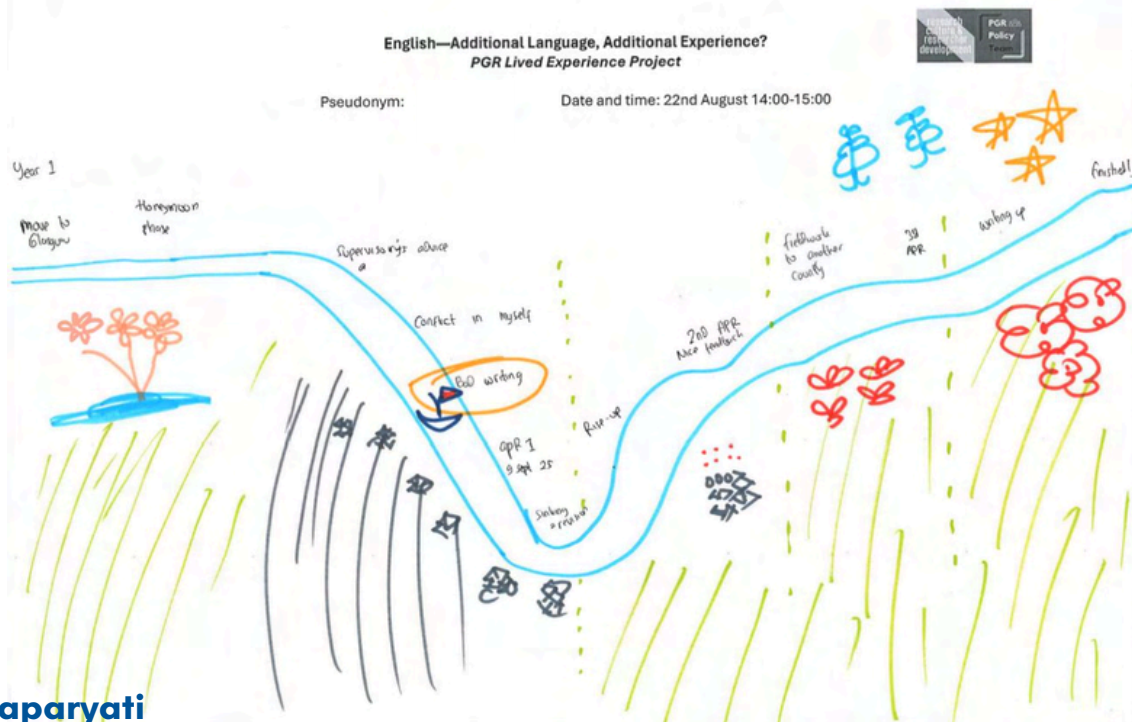


Putri

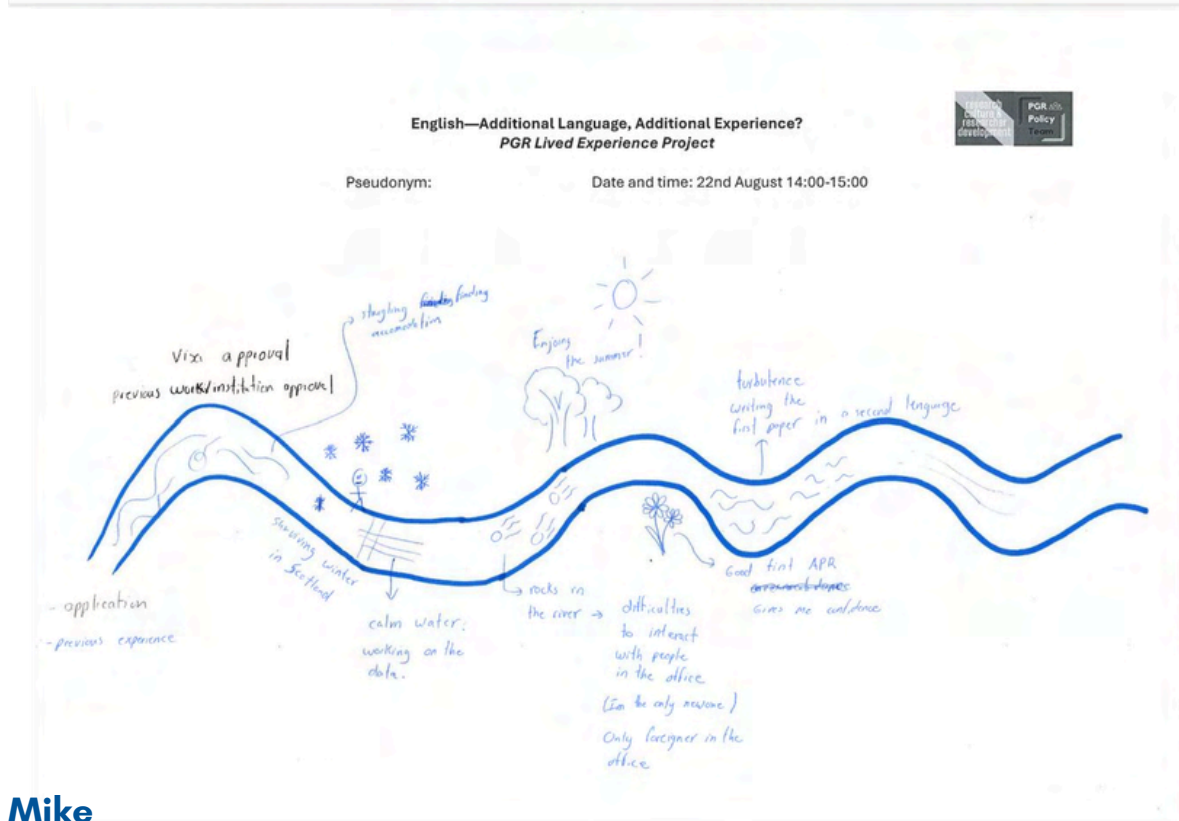
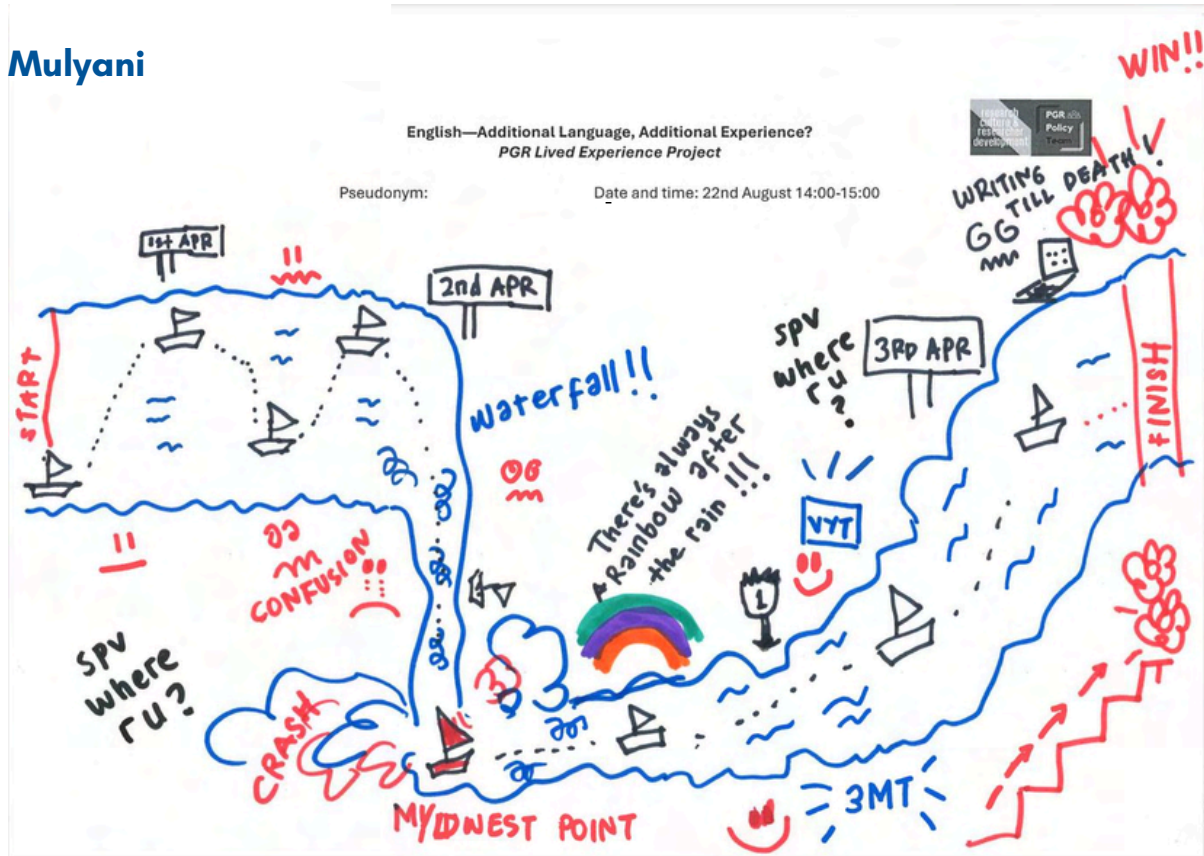
Cave_Lad



Saparyati

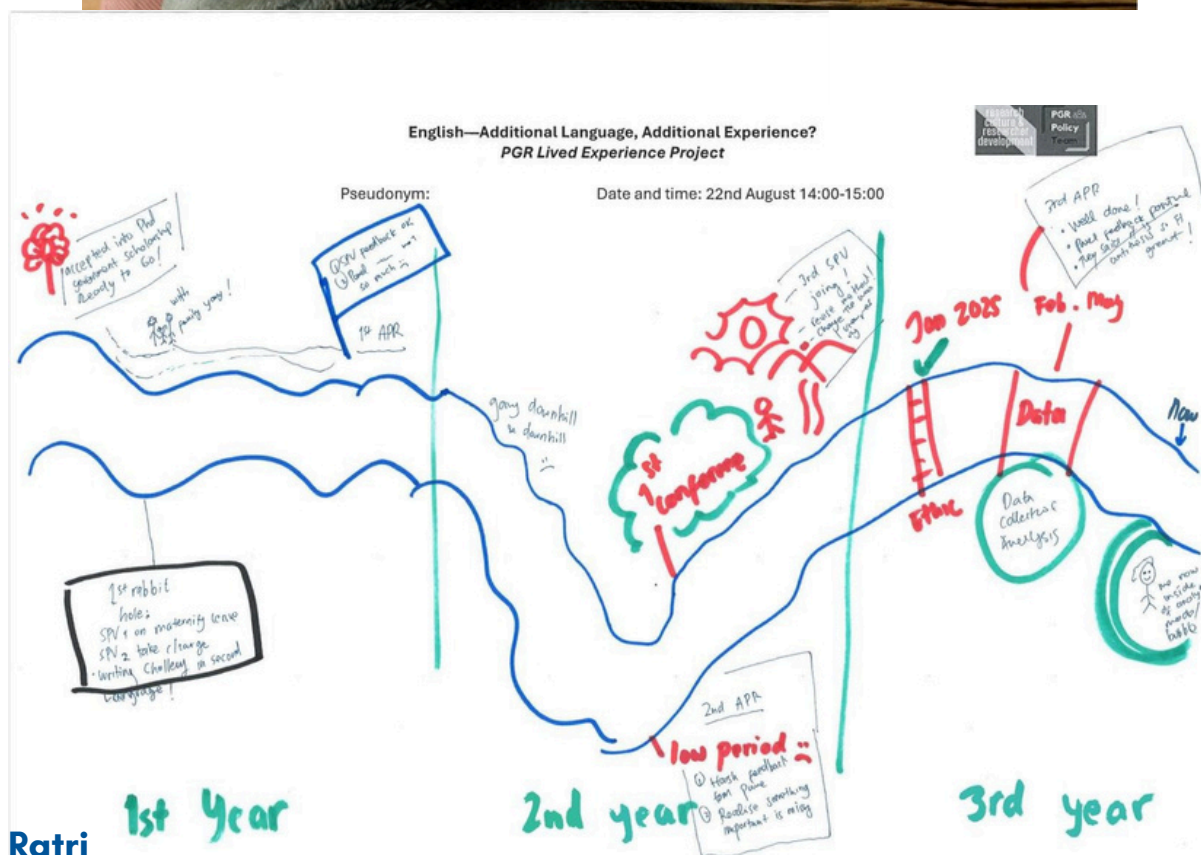
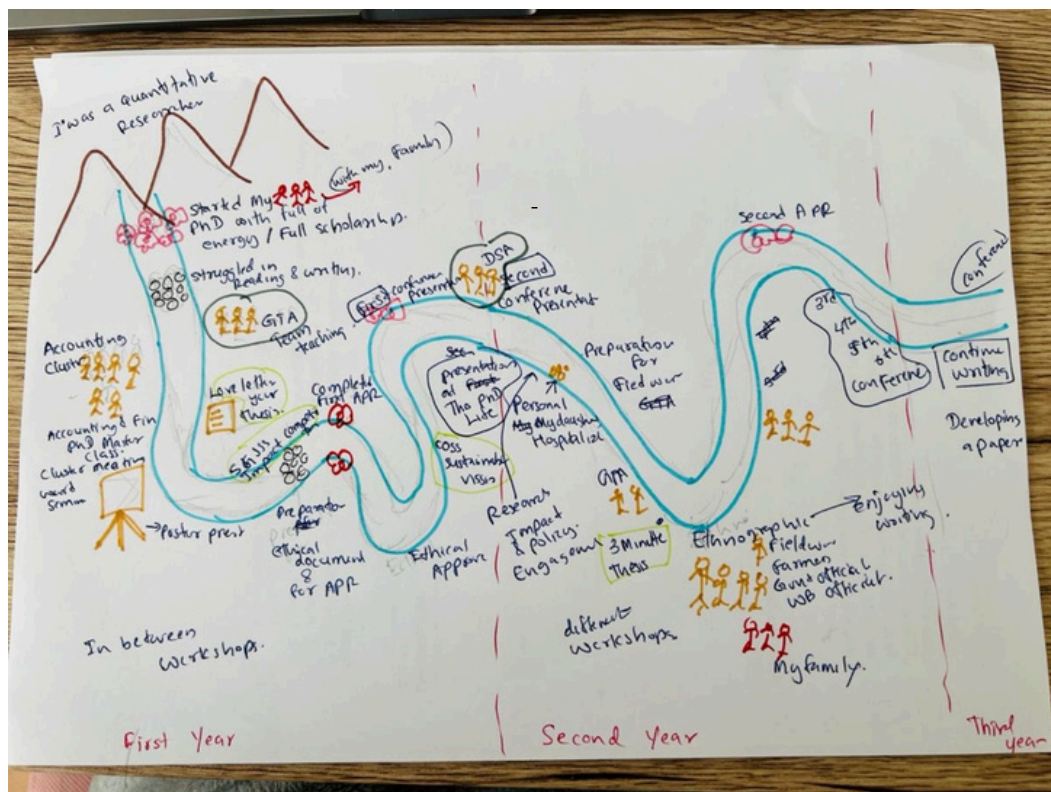


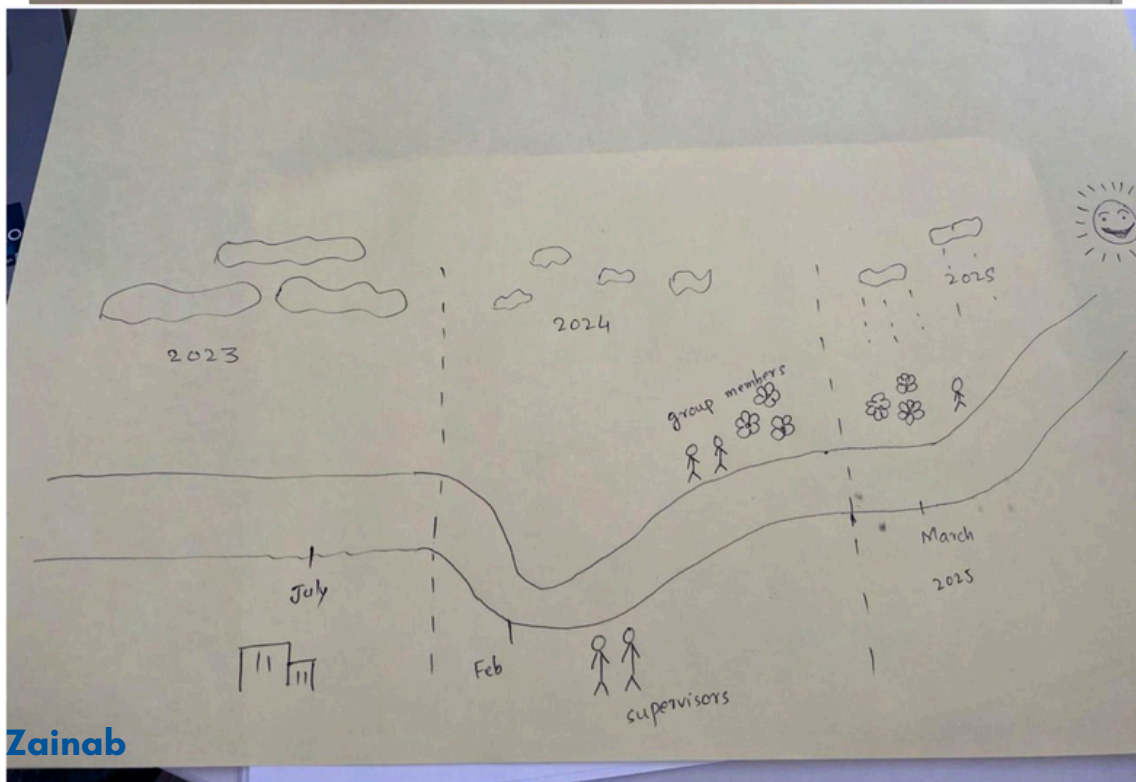
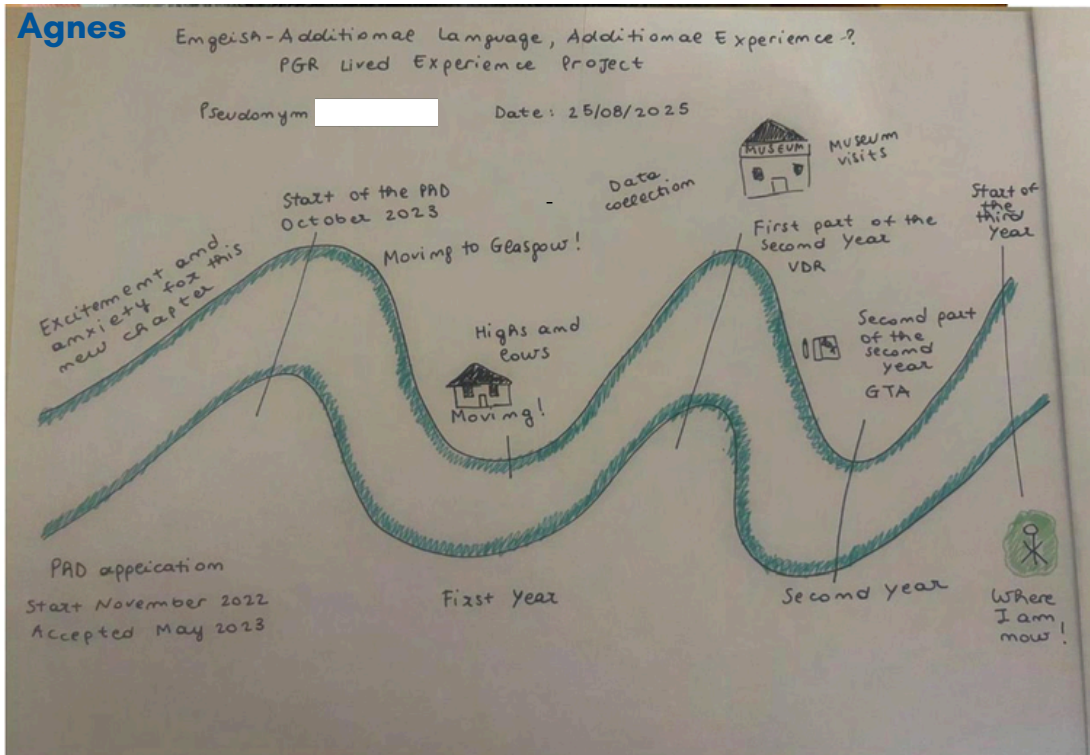
Mulyani

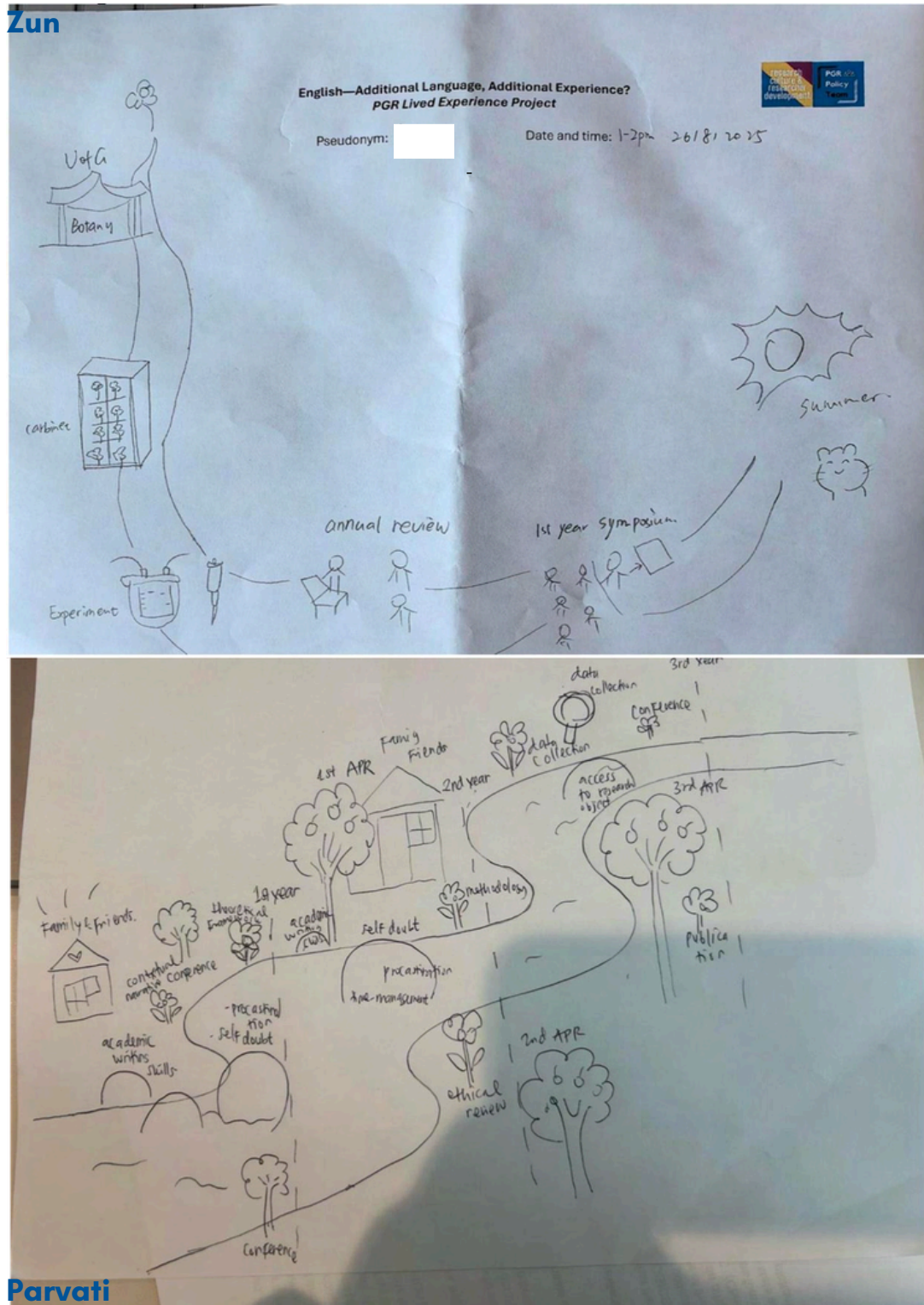


Mike

Maya







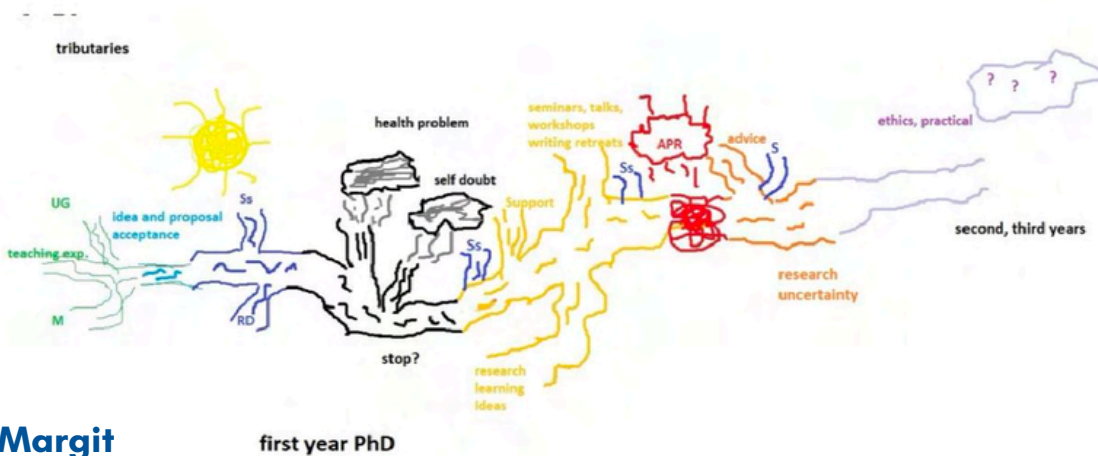
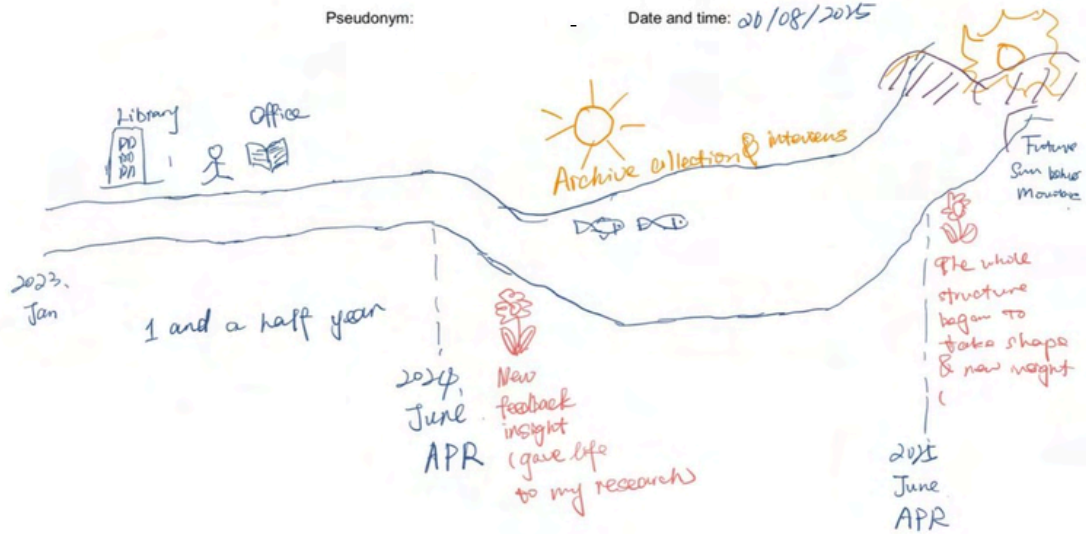
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Myra

English—Additional Language, Additional Experience?
PGR Lived Experience Project

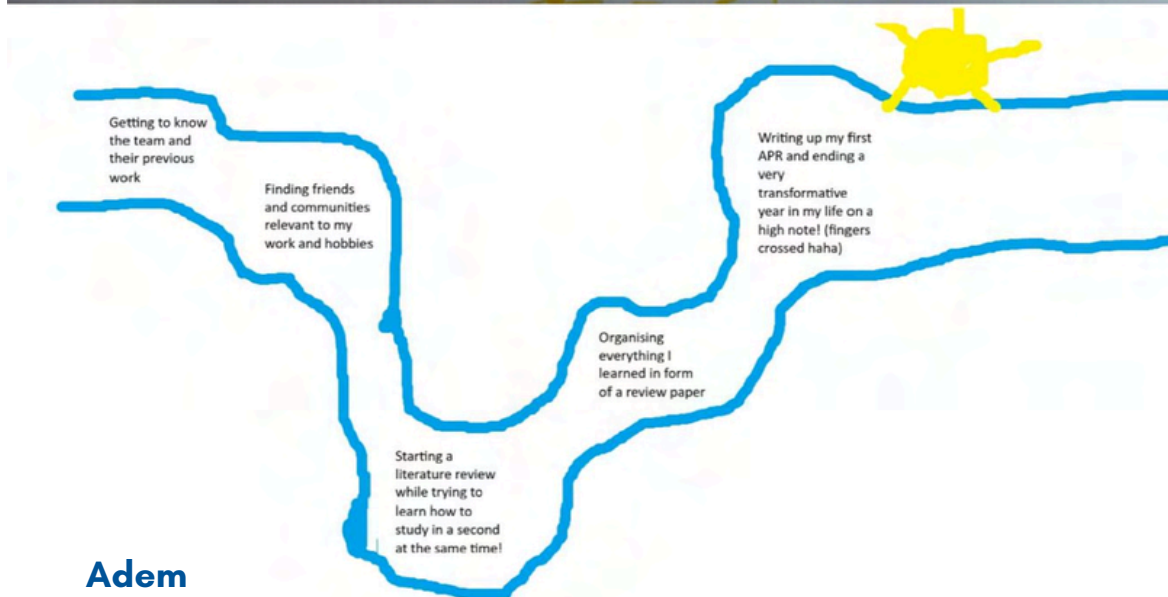
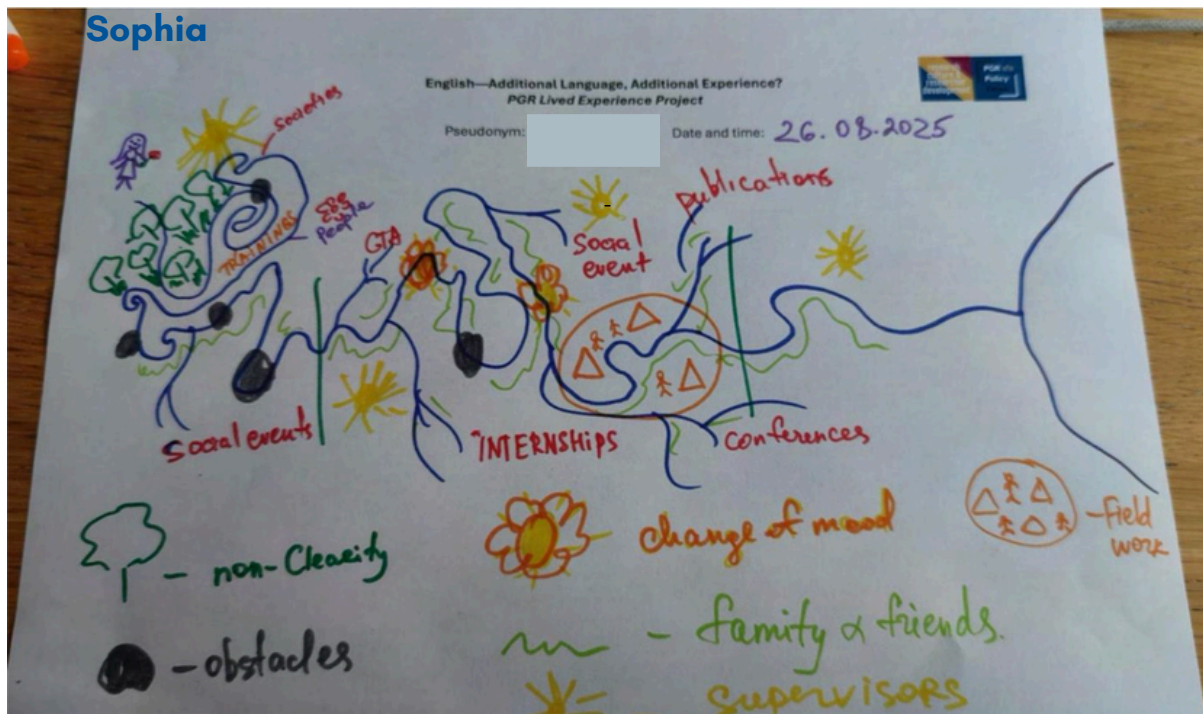
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Date and time: 26/08/2025



Margit

first year PhD



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[EAL-PGR Writing Community Sway](#)