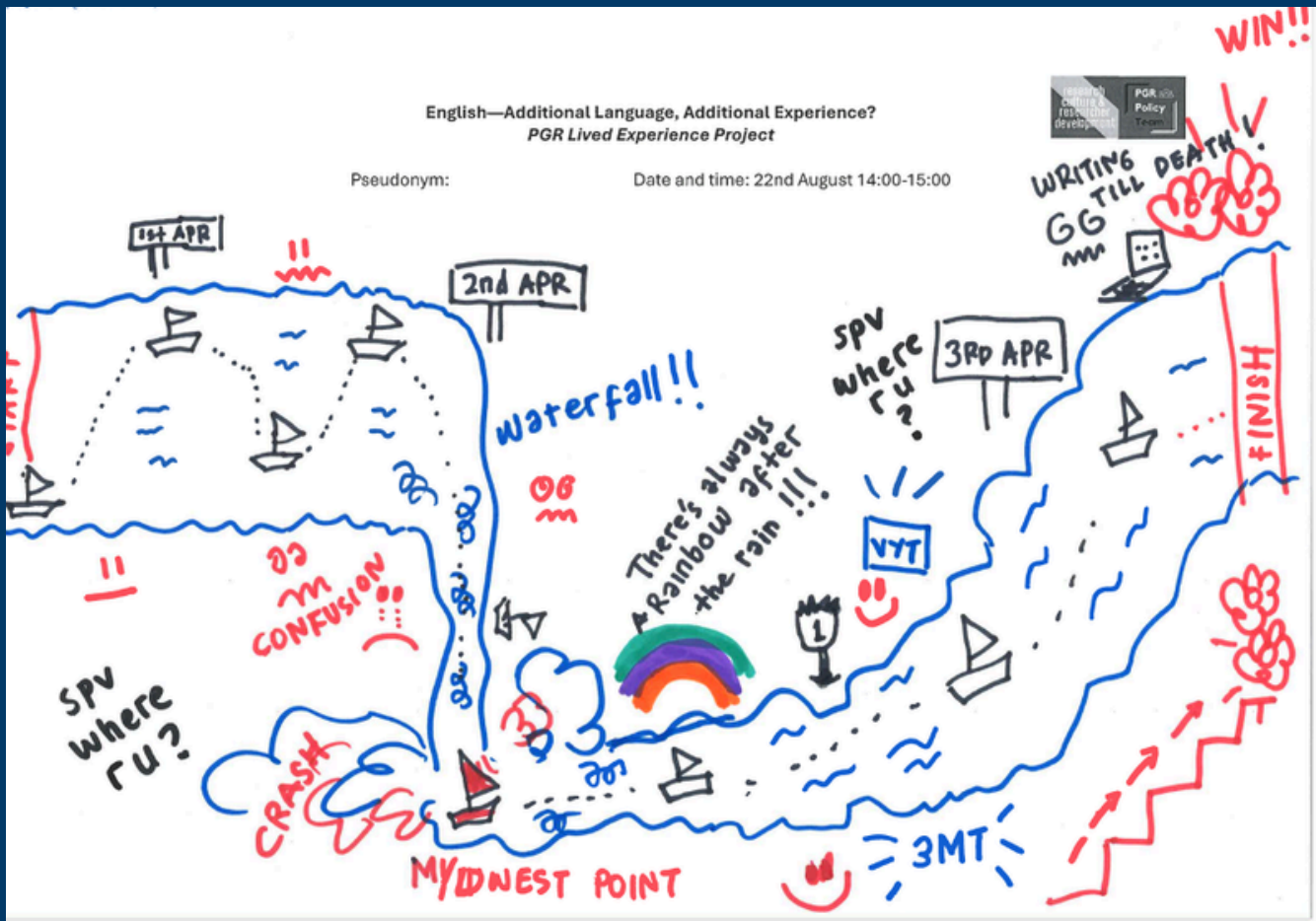




Summary Report

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

This summary version of the EAL-PGR Lived Experience Project report focuses on key findings and recommendations. These are presented alongside some of the visual data we collected, and some of the valuable insights shared by our participants. For a more detailed investigation of the project's goals, methodology, and strategic underpinning, as well as a fuller exploration of the project's visual and discursive data, please see the longer version of the report.

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

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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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Mikaila is a PGR Policy Adviser at the University of Glasgow, where she leads on projects supporting PGR service enhancements. She was the co-lead for the PGR Lived Experience Project, holding responsibility for the PT-PGR branch of the project.

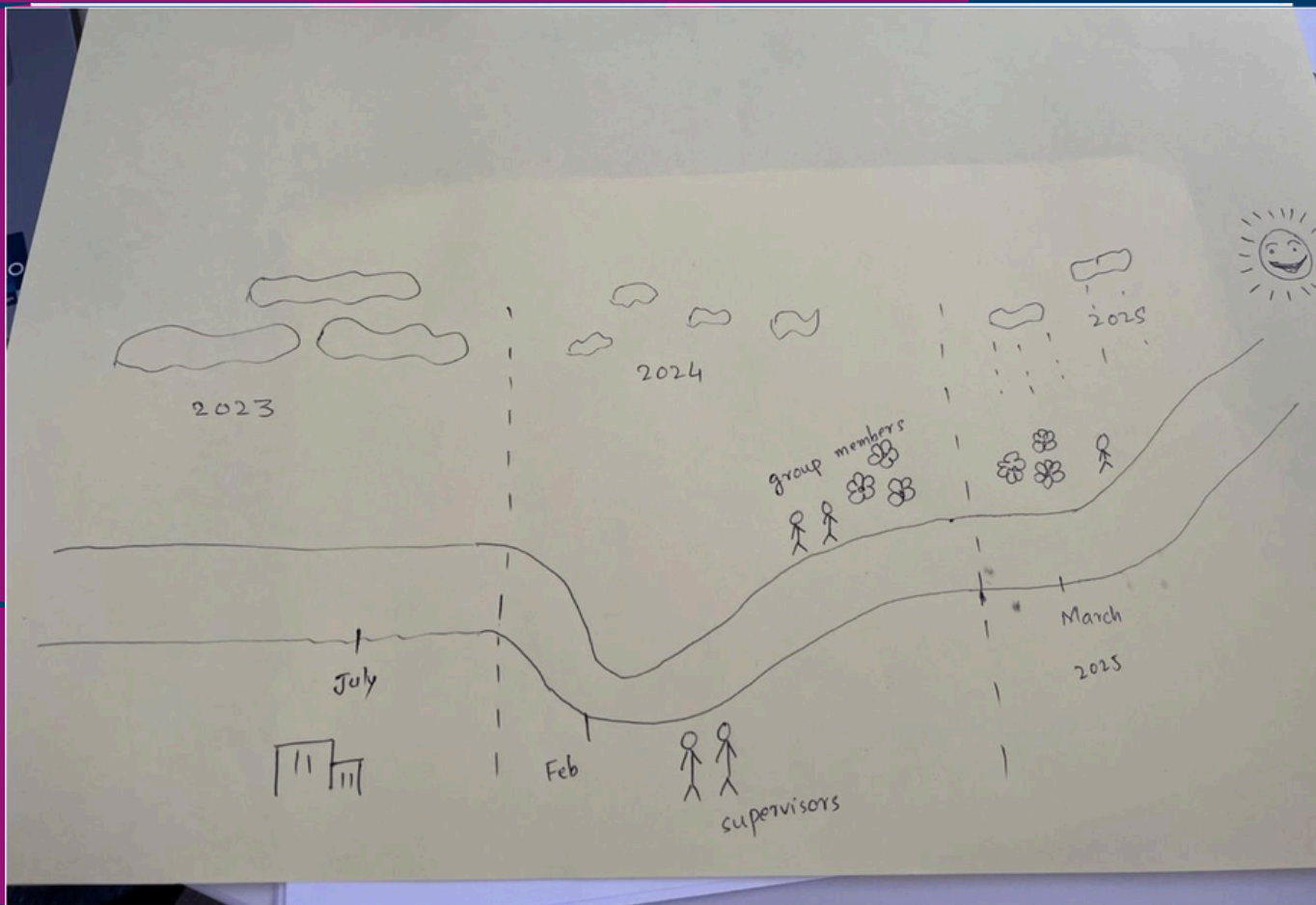


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Arianna is a PT-PGR at the University of Glasgow, where she is currently completing her doctorate in Archaeology. She was a PGR Intern for this project, and worked with Mikaila on understanding the lived experiences of PT-PGRs.

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

Zainab, a PGR using EAL

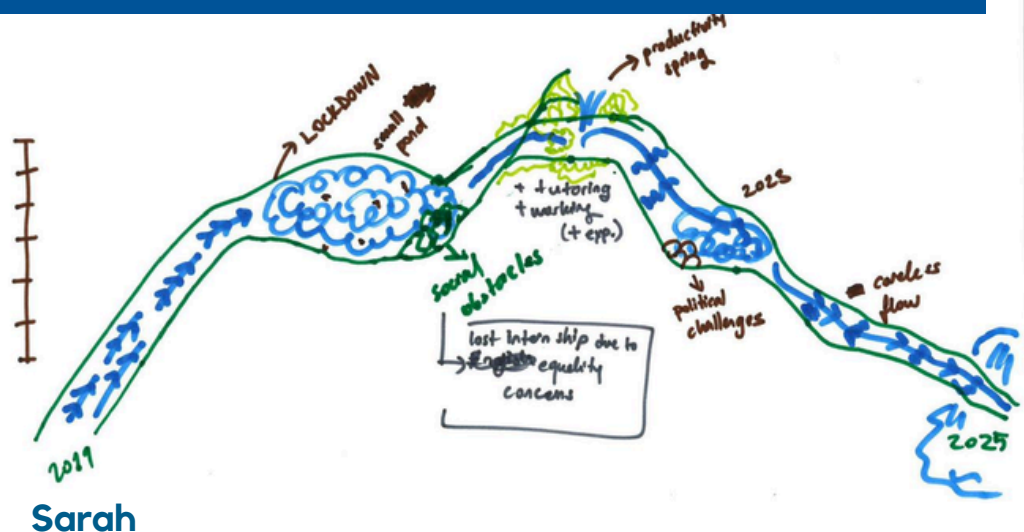


Listening to EAL-PGRs

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 six focus groups we held was a richly valuable, detailed and multifaceted dataset. We adopted the River of Experience methodology, meaning that our 26 participants drew their research journey as a river as part of our focus groups. They then described their rivers to one another, sharing insights on the overall shape of their journey, reflecting on key moments or aspects of their journey that were meaningful to each of them. They then participated in small group discussions in which they considered the relationship between their languages and their lived experience of their degrees.

The wide-ranging, thought-provoking and authentically voiced insights that EAL-PGRs shared through this project were rich, compelling and nuanced, and engaged a wide variety of critical issues which form part of multilingual researchers' experiences in UK Higher Education. In this report, we present these key findings as eight key themes which emerged from the project data:

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

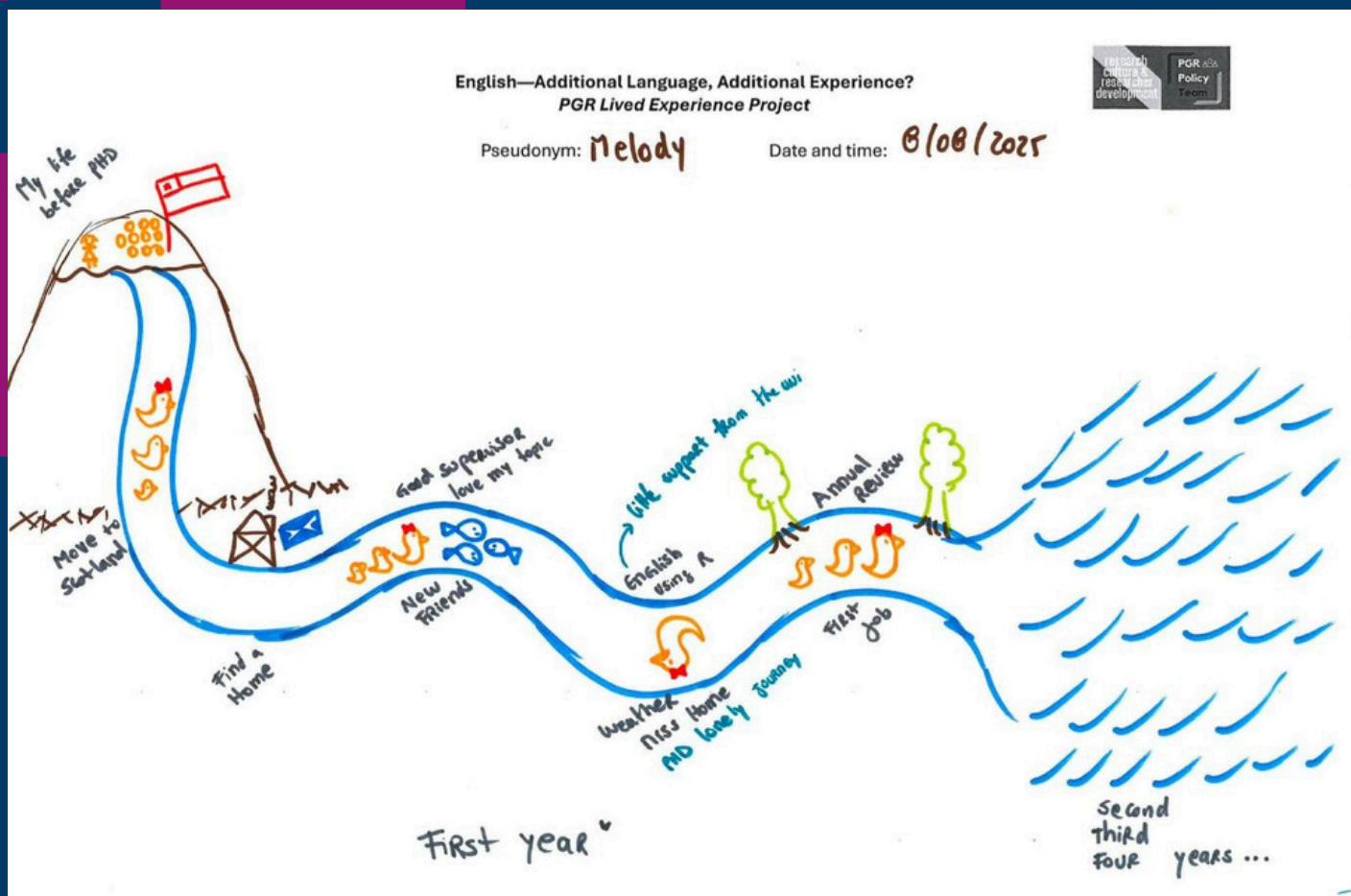
EAL-PGRs deeply valued dedicated writing support that was specifically tailored to their needs, and credited it with helping them understand both themselves and the UK context for academic practice better, and saving them time, among other things. EAL-PGRs described the challenges of academic writing 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.

"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



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.

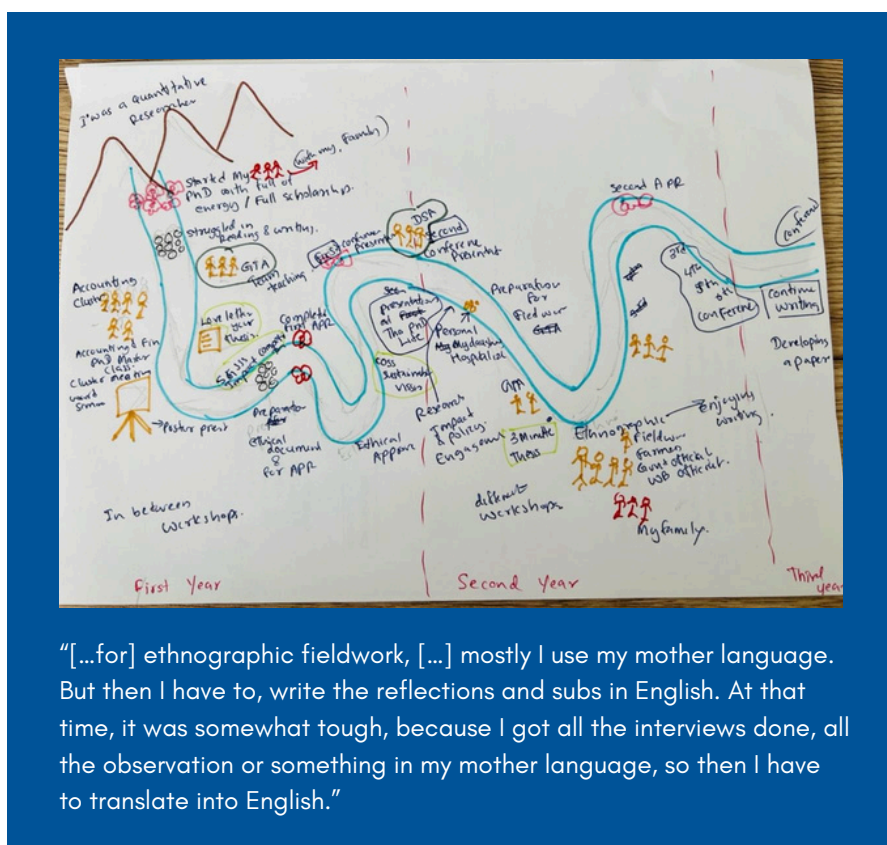
7. **"A forbidden apple": EAL-PGRs' have a nuanced awareness of the pros and cons of using GenAI for language support.**

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.

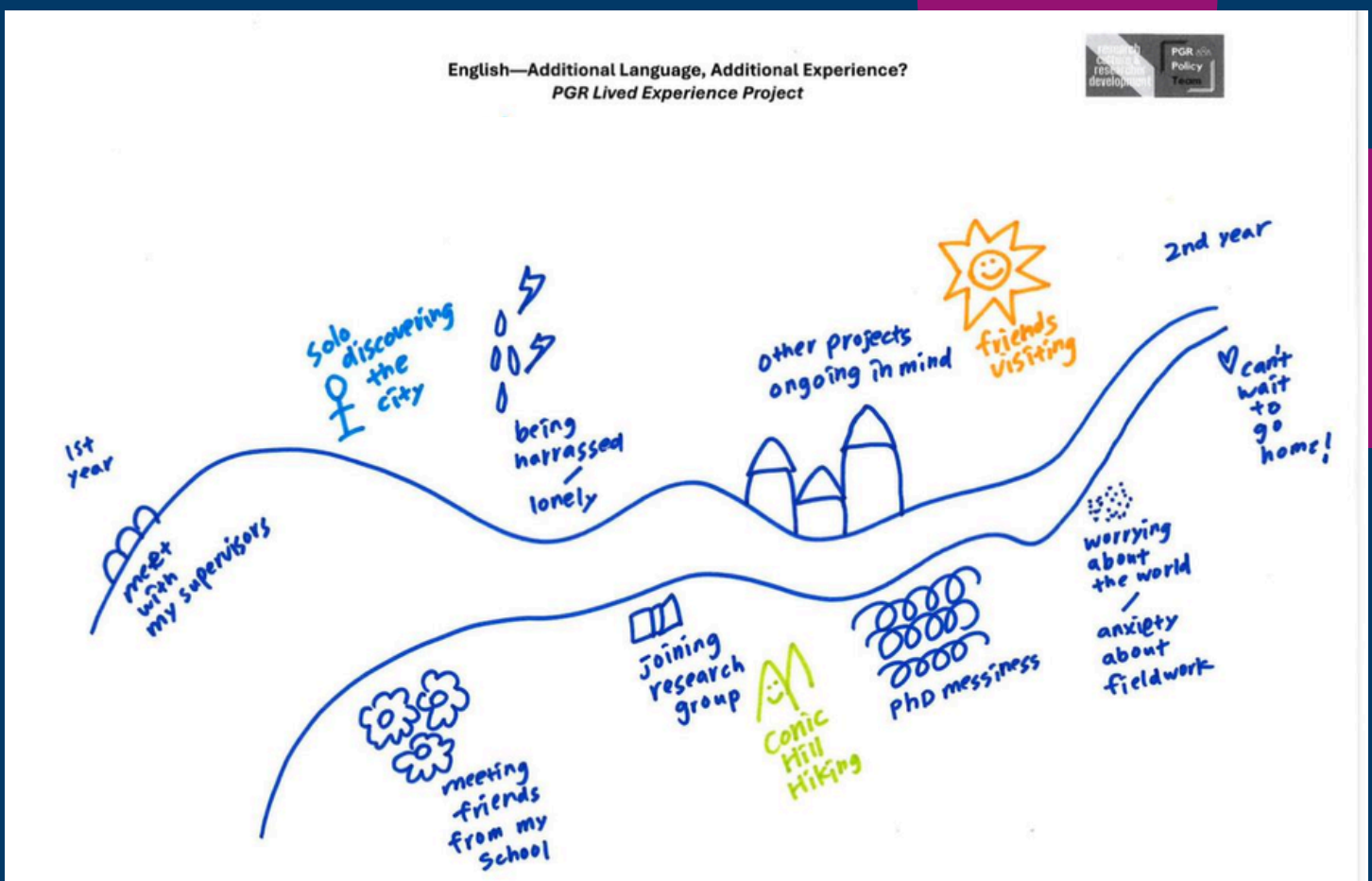
River of Experiences Gallery: Maya



"[...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."

"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?"

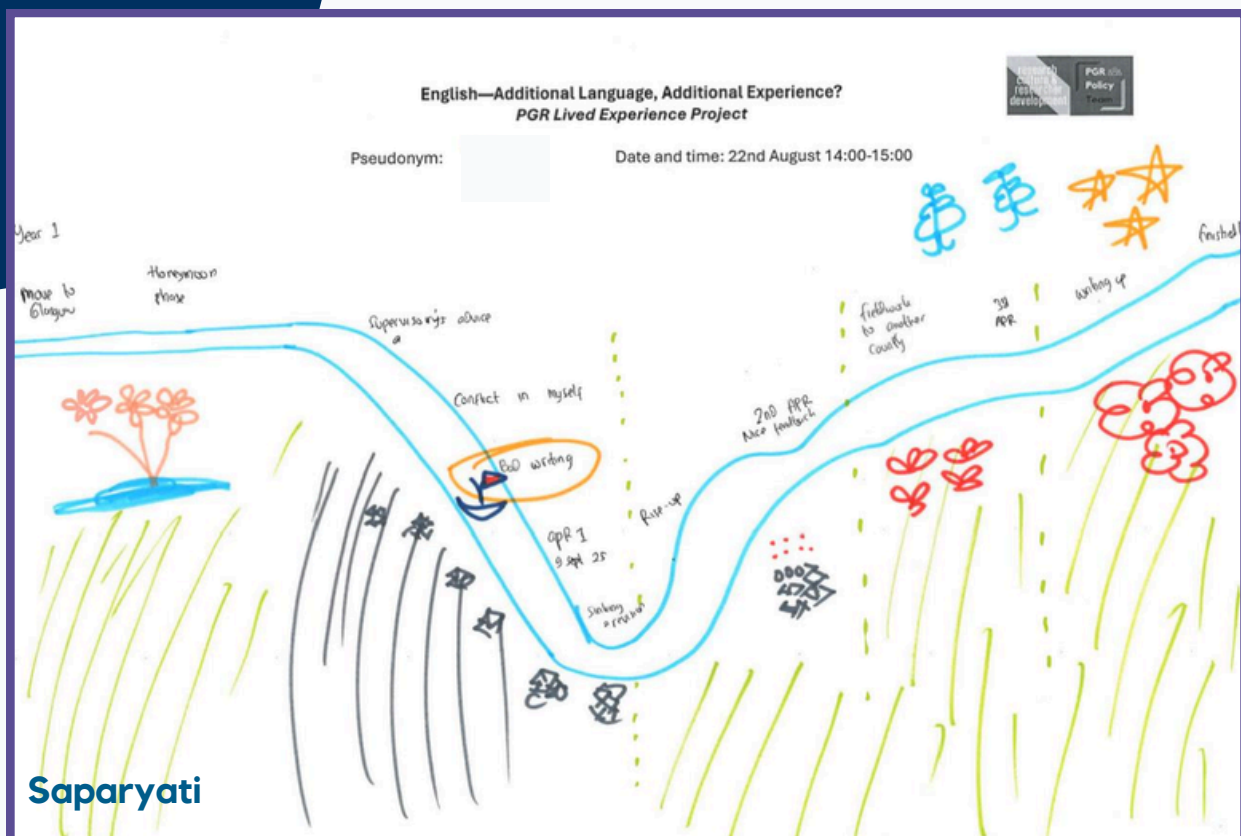


Valuing and responding

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.

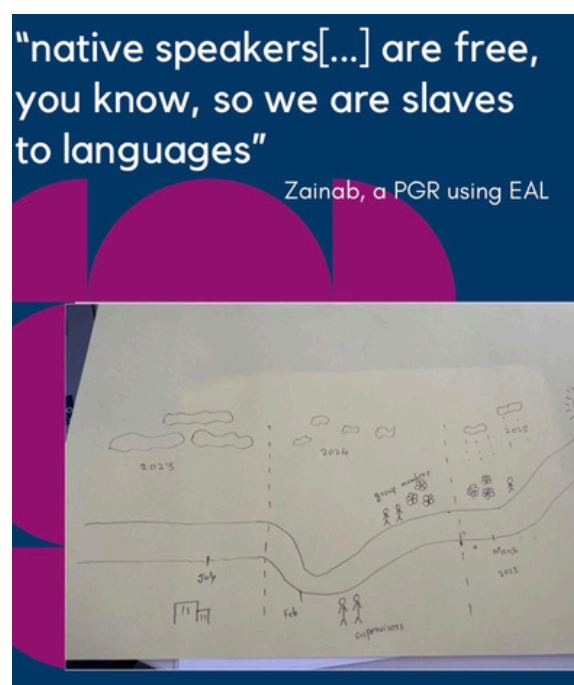
1. Make it visible — understanding linguistic diversity and its multifold benefits and associated challenges
2. Make it sustained and specific — EAL-PGR writing support
3. Make it smoother — facilitating EAL-PGRs' self-realisation
4. Make it clear — the use of AI in supporting language development
5.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



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

Considering 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 rich and exciting data that emerged from this project will be hugely valuable in enabling colleagues across the sector to centre the experiences of EAL-PGRs as we collectively 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.

Responding to the project data as a whole, 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.



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

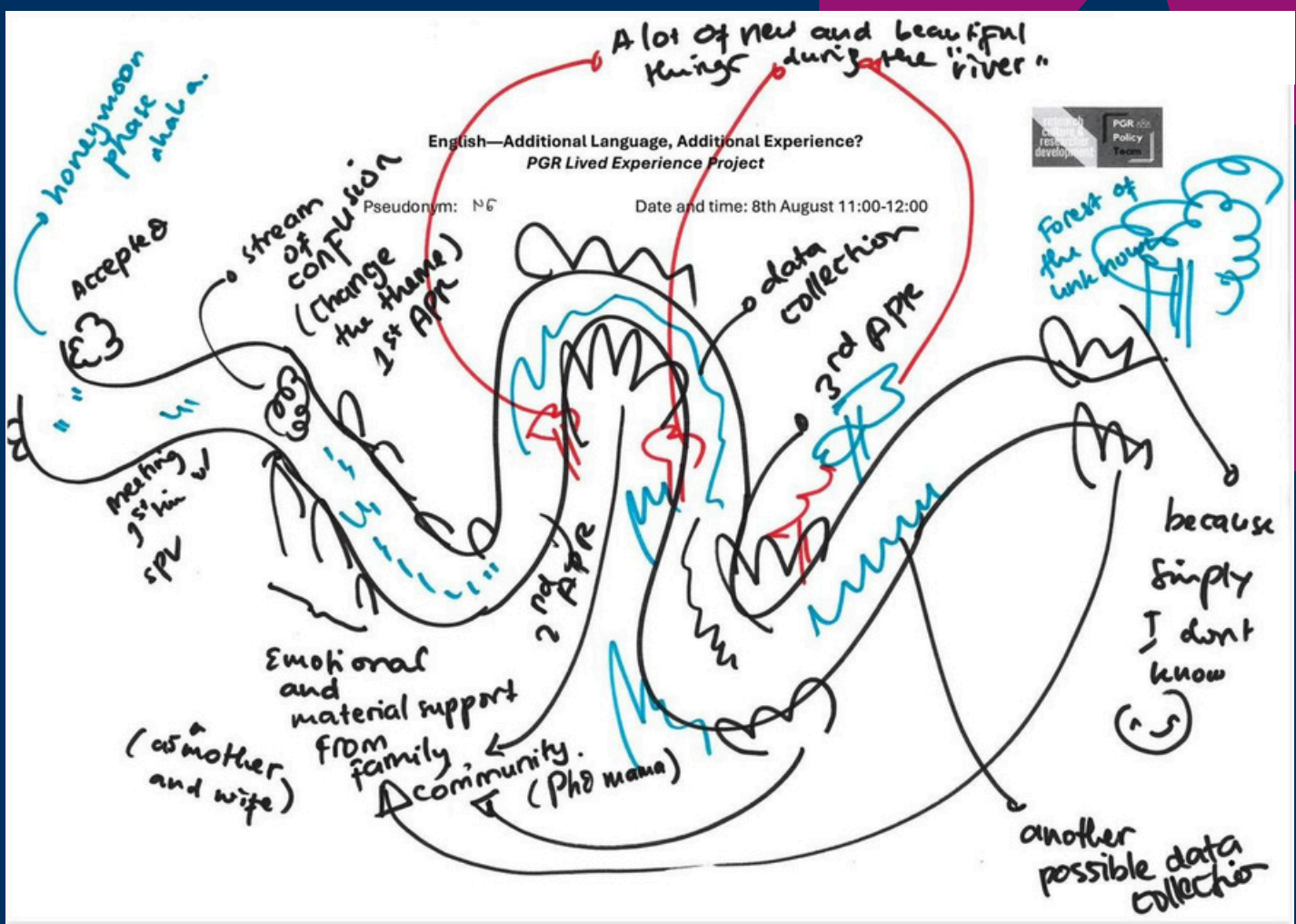
The double challenge of entering a new space of learning through beginning an advanced research degree, while also working in a new language in a new cultural context for practice can make the journey towards self-understanding, self-compassion and agentic self-actualisation for EAL-PGRs complex, time-consuming 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' s 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.

"... 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

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.

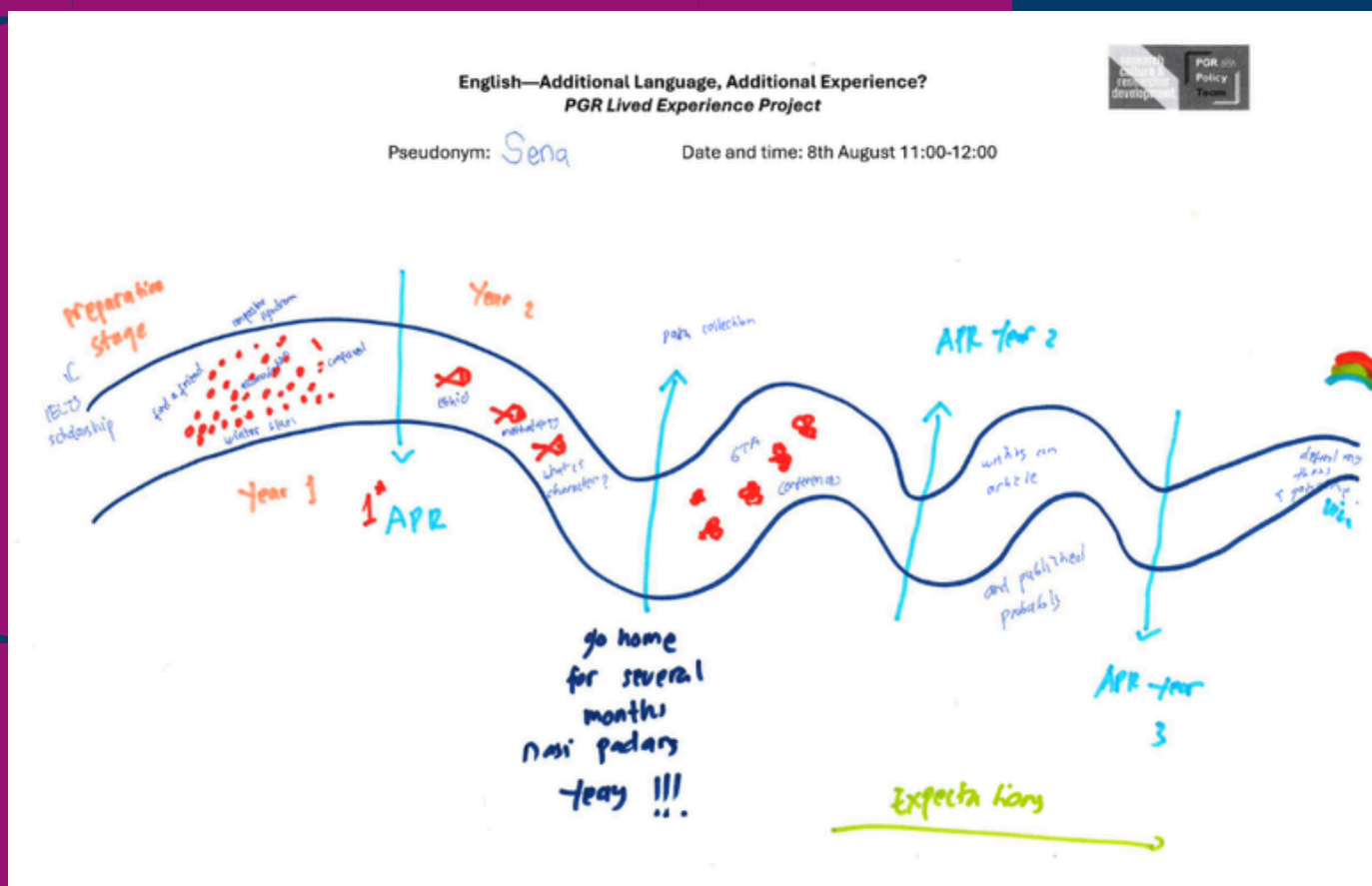
Steps you can take to deepen your institutional approach to language and community:

- 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



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