

# SEDA Spring Conference 2024



**Session Title:** Reimagining Academic Engagement to Meet the Diverse Needs of International Postgraduate Students

**Session Type:** Research paper (20 mins plus questions)

**Main presenter(s):** Fatema Khatun, Aston University

**Co presenter(s):** Olaide Ashley Dejo, Paul Clayton, Josh Evans, Steven Jones, Anisha Mansha, Vy-Liam Ng and Joanna Owczarzak. (Aston University)

**Session Summary:** This research paper examines the impact of positioning postgraduate students as undifferentiated consumers in UK higher education and how it influences student motivation and engagement. It explores this through ethnographic accounts and the concept of hallway learning, emphasising the importance of a nuanced approach to engagement and pastoral care, particularly for international students. The paper contributes to discussions on academic identities and relationship management, shaping educational development in UK universities.

**Session Outline:** The UK parliament released data in November 2023 which suggested that in 2021-2022, 679,970 international students were studying at UK universities (Bolton et al., 2023). At postgraduate level, recruitment has steadily increased from 220,780 in 2018-2019 to 265,725 in 2019-2020, and current numbers are at an all-time high with 290,295 students (HESA, 2023). Department for Education and Department for International Trade launched the international education strategy in 2019 with five strategic actions. The most important for this paper is number three: continue to provide a welcoming environment for international students and develop an increasingly competitive offer (Department for Business and Trade et al., 2022). This paper seeks to explore how the positioning of postgraduate students in the current Higher Education market as a set of undifferentiated consumers impacts students' sense of belonging by problematising notions of engagement. Solomonides, Reid, and Petocz (2012) suggested that engagement is widely used to 'describe various relationships between the student, study and the institution, including the campus'. The main critique surrounding student engagement research is the use of survey data such as PTES which often paints a reductive picture of academic engagement, heightened further by marketised performance metrics, ignoring the changing needs of international students in UK HEIs.

The authors of this paper, working in an inner-city research-based university are part of a dedicated team working, as a growing community of practice, to redefine student support engagement at the postgraduate level. Through ethnographic accounts, we explore how learning adjacent activities such as personal tutorials, and soft skills programmes impact motivation and student engagement. Using the concept of hallway learning (Khatun et al., 2023), we aim to illuminate discussions surrounding academic identities, for the students and staff involved. Exploring the gap in the literature around international postgraduate, we present

a nuanced approach to engagement and pastoral care using personal experiences of language, subject knowledge and the lasting impact of meaningful relationship management with students.

**References:** Bolton, P., Lewis, J. and Melanie Gower (2023) International students in UK higher education.

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HESA (2023) Higher Education Student Statistics: UK 2021/22 released | HESA. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/higher-education-student-statistics-uk-202122-released> (Accessed: 28 January 2024).

Khatun, F., Poynton, G. and Evans, J. (2023) Hallways to learning: creating brave spaces inside contemporary Higher Education. *Soundings*, 2023 (84): 103–116. doi:10.3898/SOUN.84-85.06.2023.

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