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Pre-Arrival Motivation Among Postgraduate Taught Students Entering a United Kingdom University: An Exploration Through Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

This study provides rare insight into postgraduate taught (PGT) students' motivations for entering university by capturing views before arrival rather than after enrolment. Drawing on responses collected in the weeks prior to course commencement, it presents a large-scale pre-arrival qualitative analysis across disciplines. More than 1,300 incoming PGT students from 12 schools at a United Kingdom (UK) university completed a survey that intentionally incorporated a self-reflective qualitative component including an open-ended motivation question. Data were analysed inductively and interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, examining autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. Four themes emerged: Career and Employability Aspirations, Passion and Interest for Subject, Personal Growth and Independence, and Social Engagement and Connection. Although career motives predominated, they commonly coexisted with intrinsic interests and developmental aspirations. Findings show students begin PGT study with overlapping motivations combining career ambition, economic security, academic curiosity, and intellectual growth. Highlighting motivations pre-arrival, the study informs institutional strategies to support autonomy, confidence, and meaningful connection from the outset.

***Keywords**:* Achievement; higher education; motivation; pre-arrival; success; transition; postgraduate.

Introduction

The motivational factors influencing undergraduate (UG) students' decisions to pursue higher education (HE[1]) are comprehensively documented in the academic literature (Hudig et al., 2020; Hyytinen et al., 2022; Janke, 2020). These motivations encompass a broad spectrum of personal, social, and contextual elements (Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). Research across various settings consistently demonstrates that UG students perceive HE not only as a means to improve employment prospects, career advancement, and earning potential (Kennett et al., 2011), but also as an avenue for intellectual development, personal growth, and the enhancement of social networks (Ma et al., 2021). Although these UG experiences may suggest that students enter postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes with assurance, existing evidence reveals that individuals frequently

[1] HE in the UK system refers to post-secondary education provided by universities, colleges, or HE institutions.

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possess complex and diverse motivations and encounter significant transitional challenges and motivational changes when beginning PGT study (Bingen et al., 2025; Kotera et al., 2023).

The transition to, and determinants of, PGT study remain relatively under-researched (English & Umbach, 2016; Thomsen, 2022). The literature indicates that PGT students are primarily motivated by objectives such as career progression, improved employability, higher long-term earnings, and advancement into senior or specialist positions (Aitken et al., 2019; Hovdhaugen & Ulriksen, 2023; Sethi et al., 2018). Moreover, studies have found that individuals reporting greater satisfaction with their UG experiences and attaining stronger academic results are more likely to pursue PGT programmes (Cseh-Papp et al., 2023; Liu & Lin, 2021; Zamfir et al., 2021). Many candidates also seek PGT study to acquire specialised expertise, develop advanced professional competencies, obtain professional accreditation, or prepare for doctoral-level research (Liu, 2010). In addition to these pragmatic considerations, intrinsic factors such as personal growth, intellectual curiosity, confidence enhancement, and academic fulfilment also influence students' decisions to embark on PGT study (Amani et al., 2022; Bergann et al., 2025).

Most research into PGT student motivations has focused on their engagement with research or learning behaviours, rather than the reasons behind their decision to enrol in these courses. Notably, much of this literature investigates motivation retrospectively, usually after students have started their studies, so the findings are often influenced by institutional experiences rather than students' initial expectations. For instance, Helal and Hassan (2025) examined 600 PGT students in Egypt and demonstrated that research motivation mediates the relationship between system intelligence, academic grit, and achievement. Similarly, Pereles et al. (2024) explored the motivational profiles, self-regulation strategies, learning approaches, and competence development among online PGT students. However, only a limited number of studies have directly addressed students' entry motivations for PGT programmes. A survey of 390 Australian nurses enrolling in a critical care PGT programme identified knowledge growth, skill acquisition, confidence building, and career advancement as key motivators (Oldland et al., 2023). Similarly, care-experienced graduates have been found to be driven by the need for career opportunities and stability, facing challenges such as limited family support and the abrupt loss of support following UG study, commonly described as the "undergraduate cliff edge" (Baker, 2024). Liu (2010) investigated motives, expectations, and preparedness among PGT marketing students at four United Kingdom (UK) universities, discovering that while career progression and skill development were foremost motivators, most students felt unprepared for postgraduate study despite having high expectations for academic and practical support. Healthcare PGT students have been found to seek career advancement, empowerment, and relevant programme content, with logistical factors like proximity and course format also influencing their decisions (De la Rosa et al., 2025). Finally, İlter (2020) reported that teachers pursuing PGT qualifications aimed to develop their careers and enhance confidence, critical thinking, and professional expertise.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) offers a strong foundation for understanding what motivates students to enter PGT study. SDT highlights three core psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation: *autonomy* (feeling in control of one's actions), *relatedness* (experiencing connection and support from others), and *competence* (seeing oneself as capable and growing). When these needs are met, students tend to internalise their motivation for pursuing HE, considering it not just a pathway to a job, but a meaningful personal and intellectual journey. SDT is particularly valuable for analysing why students choose PGT programmes, as it moves beyond the simple distinction between external and internal motives, allowing for a deeper look at student motivation. The theory recognises that even career-focused goals can become personally meaningful through social and institutional influences. Research in HE has used SDT extensively to examine how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape student motivation, adjustment, and academic success (Marchuk & Gordeeva, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024), demonstrating the theory's effectiveness in explaining the motivations of incoming PGT students before they arrive at university and prior to direct engagement with institutional environments.

Rationale and Aim

Although substantial research exists regarding UG motivations for university entry, there has been limited investigation into the factors driving students to pursue PGT study, particularly during the crucial pre-arrival period immediately preceding enrolment. This phase represents a distinct and underexplored point in the transition to PGT during which motivations, expectations, and intentions are formed but have not yet been shaped by programme structure, teaching practices, or peer interactions. This paucity of research is noteworthy given that PGT students constitute a diverse, expanding, and strategically significant cohort whose pre-entry motivations influence their expectations, engagement, and academic outcomes. Over the past five academic years for example, the proportion of UK HE registered students enrolled on PGT courses has consistently been approximately 25%. Of the 2,742,005 students enrolled on taught credit within UK HE in 2024–2025, 675,375 (24.6%)

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were enrolled on PGT courses (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2026). In contrast to UG students, individuals pursuing PGT qualifications frequently bring complex professional, personal, and financial considerations to their decision-making process. Nevertheless, the underlying reasons for their pursuit of further study remain insufficiently explored, inadequately theorised, and rarely captured at a point when motivations are still anticipatory. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these motivations is essential for universities aiming to develop effective recruitment strategies and tailored support frameworks for this distinct group of learners.

This study makes a novel contribution by examining PGT students' motivations in the immediate pre-arrival phase, before they physically enter university or engage with institutional practices. By focusing explicitly on this anticipatory stage, the study captures motivations as part of the transition process itself, rather than as reflections shaped by lived PGT experience. It is one of the few comprehensive pre-arrival studies examining why students choose PGT programmes, drawing perspectives from individuals of various backgrounds and academic fields at a single UK university. By collecting qualitative feedback just before enrolment, it sheds light on how incoming PGT students conceptualise the purpose, value, and anticipated benefits of PGT education, as well as the personal, professional, and contextual factors influencing their decisions at this critical period. Importantly, the study was designed to include a self-reflective qualitative component within the pre-arrival survey, providing students with the opportunity to articulate their motivations for undertaking PGT study in their own words. Such pre-arrival insights, which are rarely discussed in existing literature, provide a valuable evidence base for improving programme design, managing expectations, enhancing early engagement, and supporting retention at the PGT level. The findings therefore make a meaningful and timely contribution to the limited body of research on PGT entry motivations and student transition.

Method

Procedure

The study was conducted at a UK HE institution which attained university status in 1992. It is hereafter referred to by the pseudonym KLM to preserve institutional anonymity in accordance with the study's ethical commitments. Building on a longstanding tradition of vocational and professionally oriented education, this heritage continues to shape its current academic offerings. KLM is recognised for its active research profile, strong commitment to social inclusion, and high standards of teaching quality. Its Education Strategy and Access and Participation Plan are dedicated to advancing equitable access and addressing educational disparities. Organisationally, KLM comprises three faculties encompassing 12 academic schools, covering disciplines such as health; humanities; social sciences; business; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This organisational framework supports a broad spectrum of programmes and underpins the university's reputation for delivering industry-relevant courses in fields including nursing, law, and sport.

The survey received institutional ethical approval prior to its launch. In late August 2025, newly enrolled and pre-enrolled PGT students at KLM were invited to join the study. Student data (name, gender, programme, and email) were obtained from the academic registry at KLM. The Explorance Blue platform (https://www.explorance.com/solutions/institutional-surveys/) managed survey distribution in which participants received personalised links via institutional email, along with study information and an assurance of confidentiality. Consent was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. Four survey rounds were distributed: an initial invitation to all enrolled students, followed by three weekly reminders to newly enrolled students. The survey remained open until the Friday before the start of Welcome Week in mid-September 2025. Participants completed the 45-item Pre-Arrival Survey (PAS). In addition to its structured quantitative items, the PAS was deliberately designed to incorporate a qualitative component, enabling students to provide a self-reflective written account of their motivations for pursuing PGT study. This element was included to complement the survey's quantitative measures and to capture the personal reasoning and expectations underlying students' decisions. For the purposes of this study, an open-ended question "What made you decide to study a postgraduate taught degree?" was included to elicit students' qualitative reflections on their return to HE. This question invited participants to articulate their motivations in their own words, thereby generating richer, more nuanced insights into their decision-making processes than could be achieved through Likert-scale responses alone.

Participants

Of 1,964 eligible PGT participants, 1,326 (68%) completed the PAS, representing 744 males (56%) and 588 females (44%). All level 7 PGT programmes at KLM were represented in the sample and grouped into 12 schools (see Table 1). The sample included a high proportion of international students (65%), which broadly reflects the institutional composition of PGT enrolments at the time of data collection (53% international, 47% UK home). This alignment indicates that the sample is

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ecologically representative of the wider PGT population at KLM rather than disproportionately weighted toward international students.

Table 1

PGT Programmes of Study per School

School	PGT Programmes of Study
Business	76
Law	47
Architecture & Built Environment	21
Communities & Education	55
Computer Science	61
Design, Arts & Creative Industries	25
Engineering, Physics & Maths	3
Geography & Natural Sciences	6
Healthcare & Nursing Sciences	58
Humanities & Social Sciences	8
Psychology	3
Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation	5

Out of 1,326 survey participants, 1,314 (99%) responded to the question regarding their motivation for attending university. After removing 24 participants who either answered incorrectly, left the question blank, or provided generic one-word replies, the final sample included 1,290 motivation responses for analysis. Responses were generally detailed yet succinct, typically ranging from 10–50 words. On occasion, some participants offered extended reflections on their motivations for undertaking PGT study, with some exceeding 150 words. This high response rate suggests that participants engaged meaningfully with the self-reflective qualitative component of the survey, reinforcing its value as a deliberate mechanism for capturing their personal motivations for PGT study.

Analysis Strategy

Qualitative responses were analysed using an integrated inductive–deductive content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The initial phase was predominantly inductive, with the first author conducting multiple comprehensive readings of each response to thoroughly engage with the data, followed by open coding to identify recurrent ideas and concepts. This data-driven process facilitated the emergence of themes directly from participants' accounts, preserving both nuance and contextual detail. Concurrently, a deductive (theory-driven) perspective informed by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) supported alignment between the evolving codes and the study's theoretical framework, enabling interpretation of the data in relation to key constructs whilst accommodating insights not fully encapsulated by the theory. Codes were subsequently organised into broader categories and iteratively refined into overarching themes through continuous comparison of inductive findings and deductive theoretical considerations. After the initial coding, the second author independently reviewed the analysis, offering feedback and alternative interpretations. Discrepancies were addressed through discussion, resulting in minor adjustments to the categorisation and the final set of primary themes. Representative quotations were selected for each theme, and findings underwent multiple rounds of refinement to ensure clarity, coherence, and theoretical rigor.

Results

This study explored participant motivations for entering PGT study, revealing a complex interplay of career, academic, personal, social, and contextual drivers. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) *Career and Employability Aspirations*, (2) *Passion and Interest for Subject*, (3) *Personal Growth and Independence*, and (4) *Social Engagement and Connection.* Responses were often interrelated, with participants regularly expressing overlapping motivations for entering PGT study.

Theme 1: Career and Employability Aspirations

Career and employability motives were the most prominent drivers for enrolment (Hovdhaugen & Ulriksen, 2023). Numerous participants reported how obtaining a PGT degree was essential for either entering their desired profession or improving their

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long-term job prospects. One home participant simply stated, “To help get a good job after”, while another added, “higher earning potential and better job prospects”. Other domestic participants echoed this sentiment, noting, “For better career opportunities and overall career growth and success”, “My decision to come to university for PGT study is driven by the need to advance my career and broaden my knowledge beyond accounting”, and “Ultimately, my decision to pursue higher education is an investment in my future. University is not just about earning a PGT degree but about taking the next intentional step toward building the career and life I envision for myself”.

For many, a PGT degree was a necessary requirement for the careers they aspired to: “To complete my bar studies and become a barrister”, “I want to get my masters to continue my journey to become a sport and exercise psychologist”, and “My brother did the PGCE primary course in KLM and is now a very successful primary teacher. I aspire to be a primary school teacher, so I decided to follow in his footsteps at this university”. As one participant put it, “It has been a dream of mine to pursue Cyber security and this university and program provides me with that opportunity”. These statements indicate that for many, PGT study served as a strategic pathway to achieve career goals.

In other responses, participants highlighted the link between academic study and employability, viewing university as a pathway to gain both knowledge and experience to position them for higher-level or specialist roles (Aitken et al., 2019). As one home student explained:

> My decision to come to university was basically for career growth. The industry in which I am fortunate to work in, is very challenging and dynamic and one has to be constantly in tune with the dynamics and technical know-how, the company’s products, the markets and what is expected, the value to be added, the target audience and all, thus the need to come to university.

Another said, “Well, because I want to get a master’s degree in computing and push my tech career to the highest point”, and a third noted, “To develop new knowledge and skills in computer software and hardware and also gain global recognition in computer technology”. Several international participants also discussed developing skills for employment: “A pathway to a larger pool of employment opportunities globally” and “To further my studies, also to improve on my career so as to get a good job or open a business to better my life and that of my family”.

These reflections suggest participants did not view learning and employability as separate aims but as interconnected pursuits (Donald et al., 2025). For them, PGT study represents an opportunity to develop competence while progressing toward professional goals. From the perspective of SDT, career-focused motivations align with identified regulation, a form of internalised extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Although the end goal of securing a career is externally focused, participants integrated it as personally meaningful, driving engagement in their PGT studies. This process also reflects the need for competence, as students seek to develop the qualifications, skills, and confidence required to succeed in their chosen disciplines (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Theme 2: Passion and Interest for Subject

Alongside career-oriented motivations, genuine passion, and interest for a particular subject or discipline, further pursuit of knowledge and the development of practical skills emerged as strong drivers for participants entering PGT education (Bergann et al., 2025; Sethi et al., 2018). Many described a deep interest or personal connection with their chosen area of PGT study. One participant from outside of the UK remarked, “I love learning about data, and this is a great opportunity to learn new things”, while another shared, “I have a passion for language teaching and learning. Language has always fascinated me”. A mix of home and international participants expressed similar enthusiasm, such as “I decided to come to university because I am passionate about deepening my knowledge in the field of computer science and exploring its various branches, such as artificial intelligence and software engineering”, “My thirst for knowledge”, and “I would love to keep learning, learning new skills and improve my current ones in business”.

Participants also mentioned the broader opportunity to further their learning in their specific areas of interest as a key aspect of what drew them in to PGT study (Liu & Morgan, 2016), describing a desire to deepen their understanding of their chosen subject while also acquiring competencies that could be applied in professional or real-world contexts. One participant wrote, “To further enhance my career in accounting and finance so I can update my knowledge in my choosing field”. Another noted:

> I have always been really passionate about learning and pushing myself to new heights. After my degree, I realised that going back for my masters would be the perfect platform for me to dive deeper into my interests, explore new subjects, and gain the skills and knowledge needed to pursue my career goals.

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Further examples include "I love to learn and I found university of KLM very suitable for the course I want to study" and "I wanted to deepen my knowledge in a subject I am passionate about and open up more career opportunities". Another participant explained:

> I decided to come to university because I wanted to challenge myself, explore my subject in more depth, and open up more opportunities for the future. I see it as a chance not only to gain knowledge, but also to develop skills and experiences that will help me grow personally and profession.

These reflections show that passion and interest for learning play an important role in the motivations that participants have behind pursuing PGT education. This suggests that learners engage with their chosen subjects not solely for tangible extrinsic benefits, but also for the satisfaction, curiosity, and enjoyment they provide. In terms of SDT, such motivations are primarily intrinsic, reflecting engagement in learning for its inherent interest. SDT posits that intrinsically motivated behaviour enhances persistence, deep learning, and overall engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The participants' reflections of fascination and personal fulfilment exemplify this, as the pursuit of knowledge or skill is valued for its own sake rather than purely for extrinsic outcomes.

Many participants also demonstrated a blending of intrinsic passion with career goals. One home participant explained:

> I have always been curious and eager to learn more, and university provides the environment where I can study subjects I am passionate about in depth, while also being exposed to new perspectives that will broaden my understanding of the world.

Another stated:

> Coming to university to do PGT education was about pursuing my passion for learning and personal growth. I have always been driven to explore my interests in business management, and I believe that PGT study will equip me with the knowledge, skills and network to achieve my career goals.

An international participant articulately described this balance:

> I have always been motivated by learning and pursuing myself to achieve more. This university offers both the academic challenge and the wider opportunities for growth that I am looking for. It will allow me not only to gain the qualifications I need, but also to develop my subject knowledge and as a person.

These accounts illustrate how intrinsic and identified regulation can coexist, with participants seeking not only personal satisfaction but also professional growth. Such a combination can strengthen engagement, as learners feel both personally fulfilled and competent in their chosen field. Prior research highlights the central role of subject interest in students' decisions to enter university and succeed once enrolled.

Theme 3: Personal Growth and Independence

The pursuit of personal growth and independence was a strong motivation for entering PGT education (Jung & Li, 2021; Ma et al., 2021). Participants frequently described it as an opportunity to challenge themselves academically, emotionally, and socially. To illustrate, UK home and international participants said:

> I decided to come to KLM University because I believed that was the only available option for me to upgrade myself. After successful completion, I will become a complete person, enriched with knowledge and technical know-how which will place me at an advantage in solving most of the engineering problems in my country.

> I decided to come to university because I have a plan to upgrade my life and career. To get ahead in my job and secure a better position and grow my business to become a global brand.

> I decided to come to university because I see it as an essential step for both my personal growth and my career aspirations. For me, higher education is not only about gaining a qualification but also about challenging myself to think critically, explore new ideas, and push beyond my comfort zone.

Participants frequently described PGT study as a means of fostering personal development, independence, and broader self-growth. One participant explained, "I have sought to challenge myself intellectually, broaden my global perspective, and gain independence. With a desire to make a meaningful impact, I aim to build a strong foundation for my future career". Others similarly emphasised the developmental opportunities afforded by university study, with one noting that "university offers opportunities to develop independence, leadership skills, and resilience, all of which are vital for success in any career" and

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another writing, "KLM provides access to a vibrant community with diverse opportunities for work placements, volunteering, and professional networking". Personal growth was further highlighted as a core motivation, with one participant stating:

> I decided to come to university because I believe PGT study is an important step in shaping both my career and personal growth. University provides not only advanced knowledge in my chosen field but also the opportunity to learn from experienced faculty, engage with diverse perspectives, and develop practical skills that are essential for my future career. I see this as a chance to explore my subject in depth and gain hands-on experience.

Another international participant echoed these sentiments, underscoring both academic and personal aspirations:

> I wanted to deepen my knowledge in a subject I am passionate about and open up more career opportunities. I see university as more than just a qualification but as a chance to grow personally, develop critical thinking skills, and connect with people who share similar interests.

The desire to develop autonomy and self-reliance was a recurring theme, highlighting how university is viewed by PGT learners as a transformative stage in personal development (Kotera et al., 2023). International students echoed similar motivations, noting, "Driven by curiosity and ambition, I pursued this PGT study for its academic excellence, cultural diversity, and personal growth. I sought to challenge myself intellectually, broaden my global perspective, and gain independence" and "To boost my career prospects and gain in depth knowledge in the real world and also build independence and meet diverse individuals, potentially leading to a more enriched and successful life".

Some also framed university as a space to develop resilience and overcome previous challenges. One noted, "To develop transferable skills and in turn develop my person goals in terms of interest values, self-confidence, resilience and my long-term goals", while others shared, "I have a desire for intellectual growth and career advancement" and "I decided to come to university for academic and professional reasons. I intend to acquire new skills and gain life experience". Others viewed PGT study as part of a longer-term and strategic plan for personal development, noting:

> Coming to university is not just about academics for me. It is also about personal growth. Moving from KLM is a big change, but I see it as a chance to become independent, meet people from different backgrounds and build resilience.

Personal growth motivations were often intertwined with academic and career aspirations. For instance, one participant stated:

> I chose to come to study PGT at university because I want to learn more about electrical engineering, especially in power and energy systems. It will help me gain both knowledge and practical skills that are important for my career. I also see it as a chance to grow as a person, become more independent, and prepare myself to contribute to the energy industry worldwide.

Others commented, "I came to university to explore my interests, grow as a person and prepare for my future career" and "I decided to come to university because I wanted to build on my undergraduate degree in Business Administration and gain more specialised knowledge in global management". These accounts illustrate how personal development, learning, and employability reinforce one another, as participants pursue multiple goals that support both personal satisfaction and professional preparedness, aligning with previous literature which highlights personal growth as being a key motivator for entering PGT education (Donald et al., 2025; Sethi et al., 2018).

Theme 4: Social Engagement and Connection

For some participants, social engagement opportunities were central to their motivation for entering university, with the desire to meet new people, participate in a wider social community, and build meaningful connections often highlighted. However, these aspirations were directed far more towards forming professional relationships with peers and academic staff than toward the social-leisure activities typically associated with UG life. Rather than seeking a broad social scene, participants viewed PGT study as an opportunity to develop intellectually focused networks, collaborate with like-minded colleagues, and engage with academic communities that could support both their learning and professional development. One international student wrote, "Meet new people and be an active member in various academic societies", while others expressed similar sentiments, such as "Make useful connections with likeminded scholars and business inclined students" and "I intend to improve on myself both professionally and personally during my school year in the UK, by meeting new people and learning from them while also collaborating on projects". These statements highlight the importance of relatedness, a core need in SDT, as participants seek connections that foster a sense of belonging and support. Beyond forming professional relationships, participants were motivated by the broader university experience. One remarked, "The campus offers a great environment to study while being connected to professional opportunities and a diverse community". Others described similar aspirations: "vibrant campus community offers a diverse and inclusive atmosphere. I have taken time to go through the website and discovered that it stands

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out among many universities" and "Being part of a university community that allows me to meet people from different backgrounds, share experiences and build lifelong connections that can support me both socially and professionally".

Participants frequently linked the social and experiential aspects of university life with personal growth, noting that engagement in new social contexts could challenge comfort zones and develop confidence. For example, a participant explained, "The campus offers a multicultural and vibrant environment. The Students' Union organizes societies, events and social activities, while the Ask4Help and Academic Community of Excellence (ACE) teams provide ongoing academic and personal support" and another wrote, "The university offers a diverse and inclusive environment of which I believe it will help me as a student in my academic and social life while studying". Such reflections illustrate the interconnected role of social engagement, personal growth, and academic ambition in shaping PGT students' university experiences (Kotera et al., 2023). These current findings illustrate how newly arriving PGT cohorts were motivated to actively seek experiential opportunities to meet peers, integrate socially, and develop confidence while simultaneously pursuing academic and career goals. Such social and experiential motivations underscore the importance of relatedness and supportive environments in PGT education with structured social engagement, peer networks, and extracurricular opportunities helping students meet these needs.

Discussion

This study found that motivations for undertaking PGT study are multidimensional, overlapping, and interconnected across career aspirations, subject interest, personal growth, and social engagement. This highlights how PGT study is perceived by learners not as a single-purpose endeavour but as a holistic developmental pathway through which they seek to build their professional futures, pursue intellectual passions, and develop broader life skills. Career and employability motives were the most consistently emphasised, reflecting evidence that PGT qualifications are increasingly positioned as key for labour market competitiveness, professional identity formation, and upward mobility (Donald et al., 2025). Yet career motivations in this study were not narrowly instrumental (e.g., only to secure a job or salary increase). Instead, participants frequently linked employability with the ambition to build competence, expand knowledge, and grow both personally and academically, echoing the SDT framework in which identified regulation supports purposeful and engaged learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Equally notable was the strong and often intrinsic desire to pursue subject-specific passion. Participants described learning as inherently enjoyable and intellectually meaningful, aligning with prior research that identifies subject interest as a powerful predictor of engagement, persistence, and academic success (Bingen et al., 2025; Wild, 2023).

Personal growth and independence also emerged as central motivations, highlighting the role of PGT study in supporting identity development, autonomy, and confidence-building. Unlike the findings of previous studies (Hanson et al., 2016; Jung et al., 2024; Liu & Morgan, 2016), parents and UG academic staff did not appear to influence participants' PGT decisions, suggesting that institutional factors outweighed mentor- and family-related influences in this particular cohort. Finally, social engagement motivations further emphasised the importance of relatedness and belonging. Participants sought opportunities to form meaningful connections, join diverse communities, and integrate socially into university life, needs that SDT identifies as foundational for wellbeing and academic persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Overall, PGT motivations extended far beyond basic career advancement. Instead, learners pursued PGT study as a means of integrating professional aspirations with intellectual fulfilment, personal transformation, and further pursuit of social belonging.

Practical Implications

The study findings have clear implications for universities seeking to enhance PGT student engagement, retention, and success, particularly in contexts characterised by high levels of international recruitment. Universities must treat PGT students not as 'advanced undergraduates' but as a distinct, highly intentional, professionally oriented cohort whose motivations are already formed before arrival. This positions the pre-arrival period as a critical but under-utilised site for strategic institutional interventions.

Designing Pre-Arrival Communication for Psychological Need Support

Universities should move beyond purely administrative information-heavy pre-arrival communication focused on compliance, logistics, and regulation. Instead, communications should be intentionally designed to support students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To improve autonomy, universities could provide structured opportunities for choice with clear rationale and expectations (e.g., optional skill refreshers, reading lists, pre-arrival micro-modules). For competence, they could offer early access to academic skill resources and for relatedness, they could introduce cohorts to personal tutors or program teams or create a pre-arrival online community or discussion space.

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Aligning Academic Expectations Before Arrival

Study participants frequently expressed uncertainty about academic expectations and learning practices in UK HE. Institutions should therefore consider offering discipline-specific pre-arrival academic orientation prior to welcome week, including exemplars of assessment, marking rubrics, and opportunities to engage with authentic learning tasks. For example, universities could run pre-arrival webinars with program leaders or develop short videos explaining academic culture to demystify expectation thereby reducing early anxiety, support competence development, and mitigate the "shock" often reported during the transition into PGT.

Early Belonging and Relational Pedagogies

The findings highlight the importance of belonging and professional relational connection in shaping motivation. Universities should view belonging not as an outcome of induction week, but as a process that begins before enrolment. Structured opportunities for early interaction with peers, programme teams, and academic staff, including facilitated online discussions or cohort-based pre-arrival activities, may promote relatedness and reduce isolation, particularly for students relocating internationally. Employability was also important to students. As such, integrating employability messaging could be included into pre-arrival and induction materials and personalised career planning sessions could be offered for international students in particular.

Implications for Student Support and Retention Strategies

The pre-arrival period represents an opportunity to identify students who may be vulnerable to motivational or transitional challenges. Integrating diagnostic tools that explore confidence, expectations, and perceived readiness could allow institutions to tailor early support and signposting more effectively. Importantly, such approaches should be framed as developmental rather than deficit-based, reinforcing students' existing strengths and experiences.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insight into PGT students' pre-arrival motivations, some limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the project was conducted at a single UK university, which may limit the generalisability of findings to institutions with different student demographics, resources, and academic cultures. Secondly, self-reported data were collected three weeks before enrolment, meaning participants' motivations may shift as they receive new information, make practical arrangements, or refine their expectations. Additionally, although the study identifies key motivational themes for undertaking PGT study, it does not quantify how common specific motivations are among student subgroups, such as part-time, mature, or career-changing learners. Finally, although the sample included both UK home and international students, the analysis did not directly compare these groups, limiting the extent to which potential differences in motivations and experiences could be meaningfully explored.

Future Research

Forthcoming projects could explore whether pre-entry PGT motivations differ across student groups, including variations by gender, discipline, and institutional type (e.g., Russell Group[2] vs. post-92 universities[3]) or even time since previous HE studies. Longitudinal designs following PGT students from pre-arrival through to graduation would offer valuable insights into how initial motivations, such as career advancement, academic interest, or personal development, shape later outcomes including retention and academic achievement. The differing motivations and experiences of UK and international postgraduate students could also be examined in greater depth. A comparative institutional study in the UK is planned for the 2026–2027 academic year to examine how these contextual factors shape PGT study choices and experiences.

Conclusion

This study provides new insight into why students choose to enter PGT study by examining motivations in the immediate pre-arrival period, before institutional experiences shape expectations or engagement. Findings demonstrate that PGT motivations are multidimensional and overlapping, encompassing career and employability aspirations, subject interest, personal growth,

[2] Russell Group refers to a group of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK. Its member institutions are recognised for their strong research activity, high levels of research funding, and commitment to excellence in teaching and learning.

[3] Post-92 refers to higher education institutions in the UK that were granted university status through the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*. The term includes both former polytechnic colleges and institutions established since 1992.

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and social connection. While career progression was the most frequently cited driver, it rarely appeared in isolation and was commonly integrated with intrinsic interests and aspirations for competence development, autonomy and personal fulfilment. By capturing motivations as anticipatory rather than retrospective, this study positions motivation as an integral component of the transition into PGT study itself. These pre-arrival insights offer universities a valuable opportunity to design early interventions that align with students' initial goals; manage expectations; and support engagement, confidence, and retention from the very outset of the PGT journey. Importantly, the findings also have implications for institutional strategy. UG students are often prioritised in institutional research and enhancement activity, in part because their experiences feed directly into national benchmarking and ranking systems (e.g., through the National Student Survey [NSS]), whereas equivalent mechanisms for PGT students (such as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey [PTSE]) carry less strategic weight. As a result, institutions are typically better positioned to understand and respond to UG motivations than those of PGT students. This study helps to address that imbalance by offering insight into what motivates PGT students to return to study. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature that can support more intentional, evidence-informed approaches to PGT student engagement, ensuring that this population is not overlooked in institutional planning and enhancement agendas.

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