OPEN ACCESS

University of Dundee

University of Dundee

Embracing the complexity

White, Wendee; Ingram, Richard

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Embracing the complexity: a multifaceted and inter-sectional model of Taught Postgraduate student experience

Wendee White & Richard Ingram

Published online: 19 Oct 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⏍

View related articles ⏍

View Crossmark data ⏍

ARTICLE

Embracing the complexity: a multifaceted and inter-sectional model of Taught Postgraduate student experience

Wendee White and Richard Ingram

School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

Postgraduate taught student experience (PGT) is the product of a complex journey. During study, PGT students face an array of emotions and stressors associated with biopsychosocial-cultural processes interacting in, across, and in response to various dynamic systems that serve to threaten or challenge their study journey, making wellbeing an important factor in their experience. This paper unfolds and examines the utility of an integrated model for exploring, understanding, and responding to student experience according to these interacting processes and dynamic systems. Using an integrated framework, we conceptualise student experience as a transactional process arrived at through person–environment interactions informed by the synergistic effect of biopsychosocial-cultural processes, emotion responses, and wellbeing. We use a meta-appraisal approach to explore the intra and interpersonal processes that inform PGT student interactions in and across the complex systems of higher education and the role of the student as an active participant within their own eco-system. This approach is appealing as it engages multiple perspectives, exploring the individual according to four intersecting, ontological dimensions: mind, body, culture, society and overcoming any ontological or epistemological priorities assigned through a reductionist lens. Through this multifaceted conception we propose new potential for enacting practices and contexts to actualise the transformative potentials of higher education to support sustainable development.

Introduction

Taught Postgraduate (PGT) student experience has largely been studied through the lens of student satisfaction, befitting what might be viewed as the traditional business-oriented approach of Higher Education (HE) and including knowledge transfer for the interest of economic growth and institutional development (Steuer, Marks, and Murphy 2008; Morgan and Rigby 2014; Coneyworth et al. 2019). However, current writers on sustainability (Grau et al. 2017; Abdul Razak, Wan, and Sirat 2017; Cai, Ma, and Chen 2020; Ronen and Kerret, 2020) highlight a new imperative that supports individual growth and transformation through a focus on wellbeing, proposing HE has a central role that requires a wider responsibility beyond economic interests. Proponents argue sustainability relies on the interconnectedness of personal, social, environmental, and economic wellbeing; at the heart of this is a focus on the individual, prophesising that building individual capacities will create a cascading effect, benefitting societal, environmental, and economic wellbeing with positive implications for global sustainability (Cai, Ma, and Chen 2020; Ronen and Kerret, 2020).

CONTACT Wendee White w.white@dundee.ac.uk School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, Dundee, DD1 4HN, UK

Within this emerging movement, it is argued that Higher Education's role is to support the development of the whole person, fostering knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes to transform learners through improved capacities of critical, creative, and innovative thinking, and social connectedness, with the potential to influence respective communities and entire societies (Grau et al. 2017). Achieving such goals, Steuer, Marks, and Murphy (2008) argue requires new research approaches that position wellbeing as central in student experience, contending this broader perspective will support the sustainable development goals of higher education to transform the individual and society (Gillard 1997; Abdul Razak, Wan, and Sirat 2017).

This emergent recognition informs the writing in this paper, which unfolds a conceptualisation of PGT student experience through the lens of wellbeing. We begin by exploring the relevance of wellbeing in PGT student experience before examining the praxis of our conceptualisation through an examination of the theoretical underpinnings and practical application.

A focus on the experiences of taught postgraduate populations (PGT) through the lens of wellbeing has relevance. This population by definition will contain many future professionals and leaders. Their success at Masters level infers the development of capacities necessary to influence and inform the wellbeing and behaviours of others through their connectedness within family, community, and in employment sectors. In addition to this, the PGT student population is increasingly diverse, and the trajectory of their journey is complex. This is an increasingly heterogeneous student group, representing 25% of the total student population in the United Kingdom, with approximately one third being from overseas (Higher Education Student Data (HESA) 2019). During study, PGT students face an array of emotions, and stressors associated with social, cultural, psychological, institutional, and discipline-specific factors that serve to threaten or challenge their study journey, making wellbeing an important factor in their experience (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013; Coneyworth et al. 2019; Ingram and White 2020).

Further, the pluralistic nature of this population as connected, contributing members of family, community, society, and workforce alerts us to the multiple identities that PGT students may hold in terms of culture, familial networks, professional roles among many others. It is important to recognise that 'students' as a category of identity is not static and/or mono-dimensional rather it is fluid and interfaces with other identities. This paper will acknowledge this fluidity and the implications this has for considering how to understand well-being within the student experience. Identity, whether linked to group membership or more individually held, can be seen to be important in terms of well-being (Stets and Serpe 2016).

The PGT student experience and the importance of considering this through the lens of well-being encourages us to engage in a meta-appraisal of the multiple layers of interactions, supports, challenges and intra-personal emotional responses. We can view the students as actors within the complex system of the higher education sector and consider the structural and environmental factors which can facilitate or compromise the experience and performance of students. Or as we will in this paper, locate the individual student within this labyrinthine system and explore the interaction of individual identity, capability, emotions and efficacy within this. These two strands are best not viewed in a binary manner where solutions and developments are sought in isolation but rather that they be understood as an inextricably linked dynamic system. Guided by an integral-holism paradigm we adopt a meta-theoretical framework (Wilber 1997; Lazarus 2000, 2006b; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Bronfenbrenner 2005; Crenshaw 1991) exploring student experience as an ensemble of 4 intersecting ontological dimensions of the person including, the mind, body, culture, and society. Such an integrated approach acknowledges the interplay and intersectionality of biopsychosocial-cultural processes operating during person–environment interactions in and across a web of systems to inform student experience. This paper seeks to illuminate and conceptualise the PGT student experience within an integrative framework which is intended to contribute to the insights and practices within the sector and in turn improve the student experience and the likelihood of meeting the broader ambitions of higher education.
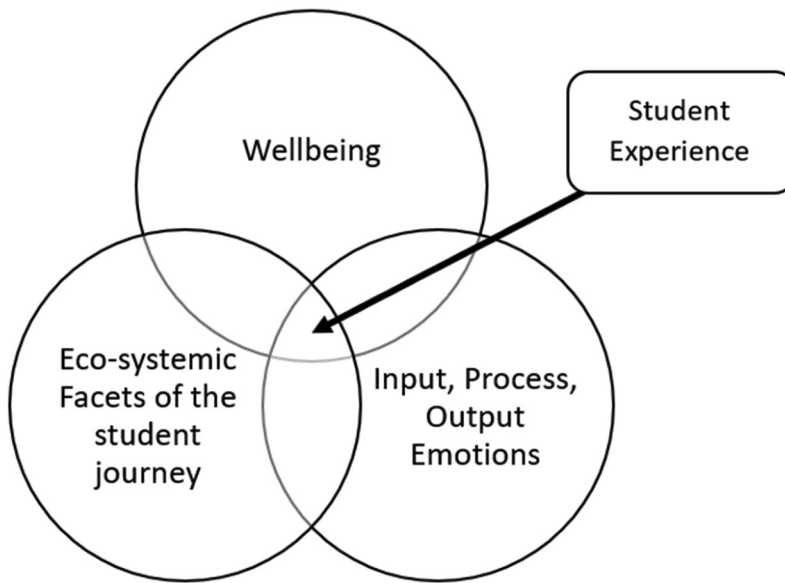
Figure 1. Student experience: the relationship between facets of the student journey, emotions, and wellbeing.

We propose PGT student experience is the subjective representation of the phenomenological nature of the lived reality; having valence, amplitude, and salience, it is shaped by the interplay of biopsychosocial-cultural forces, wellbeing, and a student's interactions across eco-systemic facets of the student journey (Jarvis 2007; Schiffer 2019). The defining themes of our paper are presented below in our initial graphic of the PGT student experience (Figure 1). It illustrates the intersectionality of the aforementioned themes and the location of the student experience within it.

In the next section we explore and expand on our core themes beginning with wellbeing as a factor in student experience, informed by the interactions of emotion processes and eco-systemic facets of the student journey. We interrogate these ideas further using Bronfenbrenner and Morris' process-person-context-time model (PPCT) (1998, 2005) as a principal focus for broadening our understanding of the person–environment interactions and ecologies that define the PGT student journey, shaping wellbeing and informing student experience. Following this and using our own previous research exploring PGT student experience (Ingram and White 2020) we drew from a composite of our findings to construct a hypothetical case study illustrating a student's experiences during PGT study. Through this approach the reader can examine and assess our conceptualisation of student experience as a transactional process arrived at through the influence of inter and intrapersonal processes operating across interconnected ecologies and giving rise to emotion responses that inform wellbeing and ultimately shape the student experience. This paper should be of interest to educators, researchers, institutional leaders and policy makers invested in supporting PGT curriculum delivery, attainment and retention, and achieving the transformative potential of higher education.

Wellbeing and emotion in the PGT student experience

Wellbeing is an overarching state of being that reflects the emotional, psychological, and social health of an individual; influenced by the capacity to cope with daily life stresses, it informs human functioning (Keyes 2005; World Health Organisation 2014). Arguably, wellbeing is a significant factor in PGT student experience, interacting reciprocally with learning to support developing higher order

capacities and competencies including autonomy, research competence, critical discourse, social exchange, and professionalism that are essential to successful engagement with the increasing complexity and unpredictability that defines PGT study (QAA 2013, 12).

Integral to the relationship between well-being and learning is emotion (Boekhaerts, 1993). The hedonic and eudaimonic measures that define wellbeing, reflect the integration of social, emotional, and psychological processes operating in response to person–environment interactions and informing an individual's cognitive engagement, social connectedness, productive working, and life satisfaction (Lazarus, 1991; Keyes 2005; Dodge et al. 2012; World Health Organisation 2014; Disabato et al. 2016). Within the mutual entanglement of these processes, emotion acts as a central organising construct. It is a defining factor in how an individual engages with and responds to the world; influencing stress-related cognitive appraisals of challenge, threat, or benefit, and arising in response to perceptions for coping that influence social functioning and wellbeing; it is a conduit between mind and body and a primary source for accessing an individual's experience (Wilber 1997; Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus 2000, 2006a; Maiese 2017).

Dodge et al. (2012) contend there is a set point of optimal well-being and a delicate balance exists between this point and an individual's perceptions of coping with daily life stressors that influences learning potential. Through this lens, emotions act like the fulcrum, central to the balance of wellbeing, and acting in partnership with stress and coping to create a conceptual whole that informs cognition, motivation, and enacted behaviour (Lazarus, 2006b; Lambert et al. 2020). Lazarus and Smith (1990) define this emotion-learning relationship in terms of situational appraisals of challenge and threat and the relational meaning derived during person–environment interactions that inform coping. The appraisal of stress and subsequent perceptions of coping are subjective in nature, varying as a product of interconnected cultural, social, and psychological experiences informed over time. They are further influenced by the situational demands and psychological attributes of the stressor as controllable, unpredictable, ambiguous, or uncertain with the potential to heighten or mitigate emotional responses and impact sustained wellbeing (Lazarus, 2006b; Anisman, 2014, p.41; Jamieson et al. 2018).

This has relevance within the PGT student population, whose wellbeing is challenged during transition to and through study as a result of varying student backgrounds, cultures, prior learning, anxieties about Masters level study, and performance-oriented goals and aspirations (Morgan 2014; Coneyworth et al. 2019). The diverse nature of this population, who increasingly are comprised of non-traditional, ethno-culturally diverse, and multilingual learners (Bird 2017; Morgan and Direito 2016) highlights the complexity of the emotion-learning relationship across the student journey and its implications to sustained wellbeing. Throughout their journey PGT students encounter an array of stresses, anxieties and concerns unique to their study and in addition to normal life circumstances (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013; Morgan and Rigby, 2014; Coneyworth et al. 2019). How these are overcome, minimised, or eliminated to sustain wellbeing and learning, depends on the stress-emotion-coping relationship, and an individual's embodied awareness of the cultural, social, individual, and behavioural dimensions of the world around them, the situational demands and psychological attributes assigned to each experience (Lazarus, 2006b; Esbjörn-Hargens and Foucaultii 2007).

Houghton and Anderson (2017) cite the value of higher education to well-being, acknowledging sustained positive emotion-learning relationships support personal development, resilience, and gains in social and economic environments that directly impact family and community. In contrast, they highlight the negative potential that arises when the relationship between learning and well-being is threatened through negative affect and heightened stress (Stecker 2004; Anisman 2014). Through this lens, they propose wellbeing has a central focus within higher education.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Process-Person-Context-Time model (PPCT) is a useful framework for exploring these ideas as they relate to PGT student experience. It is an integrated framework that presents an individual's development as a the product of a reciprocal transaction between the person and environment, and involving proximal processes synergistically influenced over time as a joint function of sociological, cultural, biological, and psychological phenomenon, and according to specific

developmental goals (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Prati et al. 2019). The PPCT model has utility for exploring PGT student experience as both a phenomenological and distributed phenomenon shaped through the interplay of biopsychosocial-cultural interactions across multiple eco-systemic facets of the student journey. For example, while the subjective nature of PGT student experience is a result of the individual's phenomenological reality, the contextual truth that defines that reality influences the interpersonal interactions which in turn create a distributed phenomenon, or ripple effect, through the influence of these interactions on the inter and intrapersonal processes that define another individual's subject experiences. Using the PPCT model it is possible to explore person-environment variables as interactive determinants and antecedents of stress and coping that inform emotion responses and wellbeing.

Process-person-context-time model and student experience

Within the PPCT model Bronfenbrenner acknowledges the active role of the individual interacting across multiple contexts over time and involving people, objects, activities, and semiotics (Smith and Lazarus 1990). The proximal processes that define the quality of these interactions are influenced by an individual's intra-personal characteristics that shape personality, disposition and temperament (Jaeger 2016). Such characteristics include the biological resources: genes that inform an individual's knowledge, skills development, and ability; innate trait-based dispositions that inform an individual's affiliation towards age, race, and ethnicity; and the psychosocial forces: cognitive, emotional, and motivational resources that develop over time and through experience (Bronfenbrenner 2005). These forces shape the temperament, persistence, engagement, and resilience of an individual and ultimately inform the direction and power of proximal processes and subjective experience (Jaeger 2016). Directly connected with physiological responses, these forces act as the ultimate determinant in the stress-coping relationship, emotion responses and enacted behaviour when all other person characteristics and contexts are equal, making them a focal point in the person–environment relationship (Lazarus and Smith 1990; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998).

Within our conception, we position emotions as a central organising construct in PGT student experience, underpinning the form, direction, content and power of the proximal and distal processes through their relationship to appraisals of stress and coping, with direct implications to wellbeing (Dodge et al. 2012). Through this focus, the cognitive-evaluative nature of emotions becomes apparent through the appraisals of stress, the subsequent perceptions of coping, and the resulting emotion responses. Using the PPCT model the stress-emotion-coping relationship can be explored according to the antecedent motivational and belief variables that are influenced by previous experiences, biological factors, and socialisation processes that exist across eco-systemic facets of the student journey (Lazarus and Smith, 1990; Anisman 2014; Jamieson et al. 2018).

This is a significant idea, given current research that indicates PGT students enter study with diverse expectations; varied knowledge, skills, and understanding influenced by wide-ranging learning experiences, cultural norms, and reasons for pursuing a PGT degree (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013; Morgan and Direito 2016; McPherson et al., 2017; Coneyworth et al. 2019; Ingram and White 2020). The myriad of PGT student characteristics becomes a genesis for varied stresses, and heightened emotions during the study journey with implications to the student experience.

Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT in the next section we advance our discussion exploring the distributed phenomenon of the student journey arriving at five eco-systemic facets within which the student is entangled and that serve to facilitate or compromise the person–environment interactions and proximal processes that define the PGT student experience.

Networked and nested ecologies

Drawing from earlier iterations of his work, Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model identifies contexts as a series of hierarchically ordered systems, nested as concentric circles that extend outwardly from the individual, to depict the influence of proximal to distal ecologies on development (Darling 2007). However, various authors identify limitations to this depiction and propose a need for revisions (Neal and Neal 2013; Jaeger 2016). Neal and Neal (2013) propose a networked arrangement for the three inner-most rings while maintaining a hierarchical configuration extending outwardly from the individual. Within our conceptualisation this revision more accurately reflects the complexity of the person–environment interactions, activities, events, and semiotics enmeshed in a web of interacting ecologies that define the PGT student journey. Figure 2 is illustrative of the combined networked and nested ecological system depicting the PGT student as the focal individual.

At the inner most circle, the *microsystem* includes a network of environments most immediate to the individual and involving face to face interactions (Downes 2014). For the PGT student this includes family, friendship groups, academic staff, work, and study-related activities. These microsystems are not mutually exclusive; they are networked and interconnected through the movement of the individual within and between settings. The quality of person–environment interactions involving the focal individual in one setting are informed by causal antecedents, situational demands, personality variables and the relational meaning ascribed by the individual to the interaction which have been shaped through time and experience within and across each microsystem. The imputed meaning gives rise to emotions that are indicative of an individual's perceptions for coping with implications on wellbeing and subsequent behaviours in and across each microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Lazarus, 2006b).

As an example, Ingram and White (2020) found quality of feedback acted as either a threat or benefit to students' goal-oriented behaviours triggering heightened emotions with direct implications to sense of self-efficacy. Feedback that was timely and direct, providing clear areas for development gave rise to positive emotion responses. However, feedback that was lengthy and
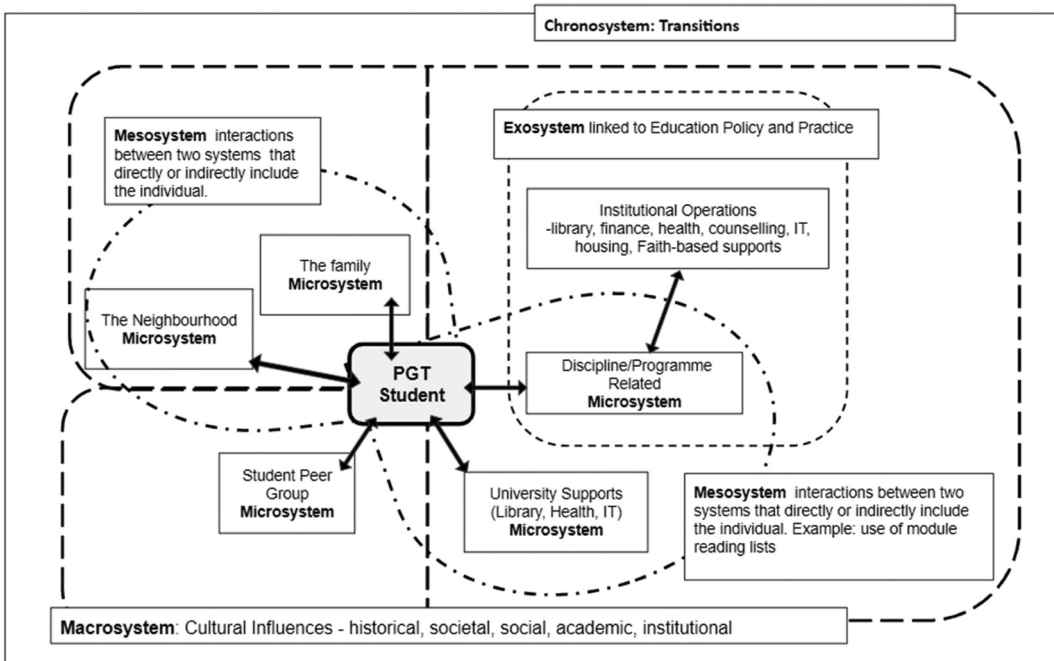

Figure 2. An illustrative example of a networked and nested ecological system for a PGT student.

hypercritical was deleterious to students' sense of self efficacy. While the relational meaning ascribed to this feedback gave rise to emotions that threatened students' goal-oriented behaviours including motivation, sense of belonging, and academic identity within this microsystem, there are implications to diminished self-efficacy across microsystems through the negative impact to sense of self.

Next in the hierarchy is the *mesosystem*. It includes relationships or connections between two or more microsystems. Interactions at this level are unique for each student depending upon the features (part-time, full-time, in-work, research-based, on-campus, online, international) that define the study journey (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013). Broadly, Frielick (2004) highlights the importance of university microsystems to the student journey. He defines teaching and learning as an 'ecosystemic process' (p. 1) dependent upon both quality teacher-subject-student interactions and wider university services all supporting entry to study processes, in-study processes, and output processes (QAA 2018; Gunn, 2018). Through mesosystem interactions involving, for example, library services, disability services, IT services, and academic staff it is possible to develop what Henard and Roseveare (2012) define as quality teaching and learning experiences through the design and development of learning materials, resource and access support, learning contexts, and approaches to assessment.

Distal to the mesosystem is the *exosystem*, where linkages and processes between two or more settings not including the developing person occur. Interactions between settings in this system lead to events that affect the setting containing the individual (Bronfenbrenner 2005, 148). Current COVID-19 events provide a prime example for defining exosystemic interactions that influence the PGT student population. Interactions between government, healthcare and institutional leaders, have influenced new policy and practice changes across UK universities, with implications to the PGT student experience through with programme changes related to graduation, remote study, and access to student services; such changes have implications for (Universities UK 2020).

Next, the *Macrosystem*, plays an important role interacting with all other ecological levels, defining social roles and relationships (Bronfenbrenner 2005, p. xv). It is defined by cultural influences that shape an individual's attitudes and values. Daniels, Lauder, and Porter (2012) remind us of the multiplicity of culture; each affiliation influencing an individual's cognitive and emotion resources and shaping attitudes, values, beliefs, identities, and behaviours. Through their intersectionality, they inform an individual's perceptions of the world and the world's perceptions of the individual (Crenshaw 1991). *Time* is a constituent part of these cultural complexities, shaping interpersonal interactions through within society generational differences and capacities to navigate cross-cultural differences (Lewis 2010).

Culture is a defining aspect of PGT student experience, directly related to student identity and sense of belonging, and an important motivating force for student success, promoting engagement within the environment (Gale and Parker 2014; Bin Ai 2017). However, for PGT students who are increasingly comprised of non-traditional, ethno-culturally diverse, and multi-lingual learners (Bird 2017; Morgan and Direito 2016), inculcation to the academic culture can present challenges (Maassen 1996). PGT students enter study with varying knowledge, understanding, practices, and expectations informed through diverse cultural histories, combined with in-society differences including age, gender, and social class. Intercultural understanding or lack thereof influences quality of teaching, capacity for international students to build relationships, and to develop interpersonal openness (Menzies and Baron 2014; Bird 2017; Gbadamosi 2018) all contributing factors in learning with implications to student success (Jarvis 2007). The kaleidoscope of cultural variability that defines the PGT study population puts them at risk of culture shock (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2015); a resistance and inability of different cultures to be able to interact positively within a microsystem. Over time culture shock contributes to a lack of belonging, which is essential to student success, supporting student resilience in overcoming the complex demands of higher education (Rienties et al., 2013; Bessant 2018); through this lens, culture shock is a direct threat to wellbeing and student experience.

Nested as the outer ring of Bronfenbrenner's model, is the chronosystem, representing 'change or continuity across time' as a result of interactions across systems and involving the individual and their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner 2005, 119). Chronosystem-level events can be conceptualised as transitions. Defined as ongoing, perpetual, fragmented and interpersonal events, transitions involve whole-of-life fluctuations or changes within and across interacting ecologies with implications to development (Gale and Parker 2014; Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016). Transitions are influenced by inter and intrapersonal processes operating across the hierarchy of ecological systems that actively involve the individual, family, professional, institution, and policy (Darling 2007; Gale and Parker 2014; Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016).

For the PGT student, the movement into, through and beyond the student journey is rippled with whole of life transitions. Unfamiliar learning environments paired with diverse expectations of Masters-level study requirements; challenges associated with forming new relationships; cultural adjustments, cognitive demands, and language barriers give rise to heightened emotions, which for some are emancipatory, and for others overwhelming.

Transitions are influenced by inter and intrapersonal processes operating across the hierarchy of ecological systems that actively involve the individual, family, professional, institution, and policy (Darling 2007; Gale and Parker 2014; Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016). The interconnectedness of this system across all other ecologies makes it is possible to identify how interactions in one microsystem can support mediating influences of stress appraisals in another system. At a micro-level, student transitions can be supported through family connections paired with developing peer and tutor relationships that provide essential psycho-social support leading to feelings of belonging (Rienties et al. 2013). At the meso-level, O'Neill et al. (2007) suggest PGT student transitions should be supported by a university community approach. Through system-level cooperation that unites academic, administrative, and support staff, challenges of PGT student transition can be overcome by establishing positive peer interactions, building a student's academic identity, and promoting their sense of belonging (O'Neill et al. 2007), leading to positive student experience.

Eco-systemic facets of the student journey

Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (2005) we have examined various ecologies of the student journey, affirming its complex and multifaceted nature, influenced by institution-related, discipline specific, and socio-culturally informed interactions (Temple et al. 2014; Ingram and White 2020). To this point, five important understandings have emerged that are relevant within our conceptualisation of the PGT student experience:

(1) PGT student interactions are influenced through a hierarchical arrangement of networked and nested systems.
(2) Proximal to the PGT student there are three levels of networked systems, contextualised as settings. These include, but are not limited to, family, neighbourhood, university services, programme of study, and peer groups. Within these settings the PGT student is a either a direct or indirect participant.
(3) The PGT student's interactions in or between these contexts influences interpersonal processes creating a 'ripple effect' according to the implications of one student's experiences on another.
(4) Indirect or direct interactions between participants from settings that do not directly contain the PGT student, have implications for the student experience.
(5) Whole of life influences, including culture and transitions, are nested in the ecological framework because they interact across all ecological levels and have long ranging influence on the PGT student with implications to student experience.

As a way of illustrating the array of contexts, networked and nested within and across each ecological level, that influence student experience, we introduce five facets of the student journey: academic, university services, daily life, culture, and transitions. Within each facet we acknowledge the possibility exists for identifying previously unknown or overlooked contexts informing student experience. Whilst these nested contexts may vary in nature across institutions, we believe they are generic enough to ensure applicability across the Higher Education sector.

Academic

This includes all programme-related contexts, learning environments, tutor–student interactions, learning materials, advisor of study interactions, programme-related policy, assessment and feedback activities, and administrative practices.

University services

This includes interactions involving IT services, Library services, Health and Counselling, Student Services, Finance and Housing Services

Daily life

Relates to contexts that are external to study; possible contexts include work, family, and needs-based contexts, food, banking, health and hygiene, social events.

Culture

Reflects the multiple cultural affiliations over time that influence an individual including, as a possibility, family and regional cultures, social cultures, peer cultures, and academic culture.

Transition

These contexts are embedded across the ecological levels and define experiences on entry to, throughout, and exiting study. Admissions, induction, programme orientation, annual progression through study, and graduation are possible contexts where PGT students experience transitions.

Through this section of writing we have unfolded an examination of student experience as a product of person–environment interactions defined by and giving rise to cognitive appraisals of stress, perceptions of coping, and emotion responses that inform social functioning and wellbeing. Through an amalgamation of stress-emotion-coping theory and the PPCT model the synergistic effects of force characteristics and socio-cultural factors interacting within and across various eco-systemic facets of the student journey to influence wellbeing become an integrated framework for exploring the subjective and objective nature of student experience. We represent this conceptualisation in our culminating model of the PGT student experience as seen below (Figure 3). In the next section, we introduce a narrative case study (Ingram and White 2020) providing the reader opportunity to examine the utility of our model as we analyse the inter and intrapersonal interactions and emotion processes of one PGT student in and across various systems and how these define her student experience.

Gelman and Basbøll (2014) recognise narrative writing within social science research as a useful tool for illustrating a model and for supporting readers to engage with the development and evaluation of theory (p. 548). We acknowledge student experience is fundamentally subjective in nature and therefore unique to each person according to the interactions of biopsychosocial-cultural forces acting over time. We propose a narrative case effectively supports a reflective examination of our conceptualisation highlighting for the reader the dynamic, multi-layered interactions, supports, challenges, and
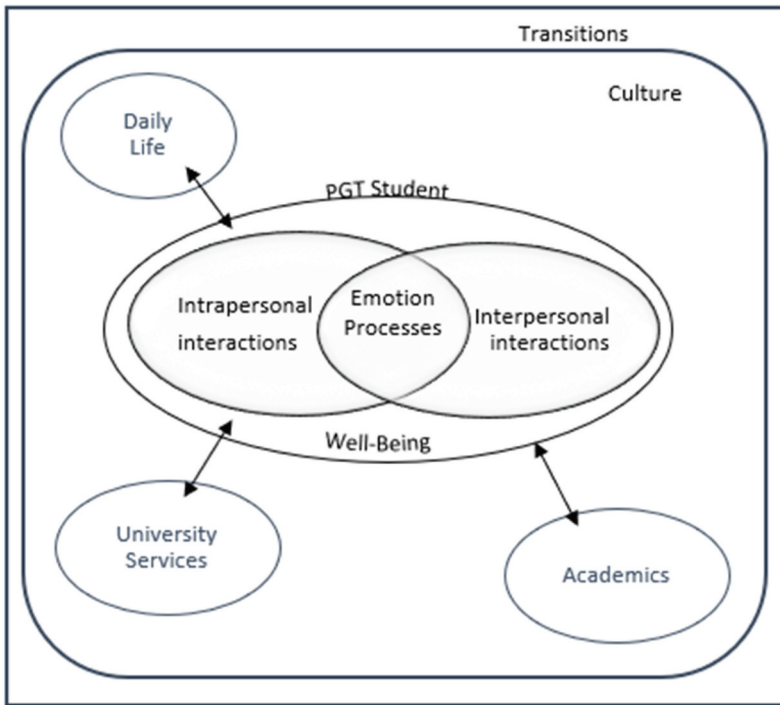
Figure 3. PGT student experience: the product of intra and interpersonal processes occurring across eco-systemic facets of the student journey, giving rise to emotion responses that inform wellbeing.

intra-personal emotional responses that inform PGT student experience and through that rests the potential for identifying the flexible nature of our model as an effective conceptualisation for exploring student experience. The ideas presented in this narrative case are drawn from our own previous research exploring PGT student experience (Ingram and White 2020). We use a composite of our findings to construct a hypothetical case study illustrating a student's experiences during PGT study.

A narrative case study exploring an integrated framework approach for understanding and responding to PGT student experience

Martha's story

Martha is a second-year part-time distance learning, online Master of Education student. She balances study with full time work as a primary classroom teacher and her family responsibilities which include caring for her two children, ages 5 and 7. Martha describes herself as a confident, ambitious professional, who is motivated to complete her studies for the purpose of promotion.

As a mature student, Martha feels determined about her studies. This has been a long-time dream for Martha. Now, she is excited to study and steadfast in her drive to pursue her professional goals. From her initial contact with the university, Martha felt a sense of relief. She had found staff helpful and supportive, which was an asset in overcoming the rising anxiety she felt in response to unfamiliar jargon and protocols that needed to be followed in order to submit her application.

Martha describes her peer group as a mutual source of resilience during stressful times on her study journey. She recalls a time in her second year of study when her family and work-related responsibilities became overwhelming, interfering with her capacity to engage with study. When this happened, Martha

found herself feeling vulnerable, doubting her potential for success in the program, wondering about her professional ambitions, and resenting the financial implications of study paired with sacrifices to family time. In these moments, her peers provided the emotional support she needed to persevere.

Martha has one more year left in her 3-year programme of study and although she admits there will be challenges to come, she feels she is gaining the knowledge and skills needed to be successful at this level of study. Martha feels grateful for the support she has had from her peers and tutors. Martha dreams of the day she has her degree, and she can hold it up proudly with her family, celebrating together all their sacrifices and hard work.

PGT student experience as an integrated framework

Martha's narrative is illustrative of the complexity of PGT student experience; it highlights the labyrinthine of systems and the synergistic effects of intra and interpersonal processes giving rise to emotions with implications on wellbeing that define PGT student experience.

As a full time, teacher, mother, and part time student the multiplicity of systems within which Martha is enmeshed shape her student journey, interfacing in ways that are both supportive and threatening to her experience. As a supportive measure, Martha's strong peer relationships provide her the psychological and emotional coping resources to overcome periods of high stress during study. The psychosocial benefits of strong peer relationships promote a positive sense of belonging for Martha, which has far reaching effects on student identify and academic performance (Matheson and Sutcliffe 2018). For Martha, the emotions arising in response to her positive peer relationships mitigate against her negative emotions of self-doubt, which arise in response to her stress-related appraisals associated with work-life-study balance. These act as a threat to her wellbeing through a declining sense of self-efficacy, which is reflected through feelings of self-doubt in her ability to achieve her PGT goals. If left intact, these feelings threaten engagement, persistence, and academic success (Freire et al. 2020).

Through this example, we highlight coping as a central part of emotion processes, mitigating against heightened emotion responses that threaten wellbeing and learning, and pre-empt subsequent negative biopsychosocial responses that threaten student experience, including decreased cognitive engagement, social connectedness, productive working, and self-efficacy (Lazarus, 2006b; Freire et al. 2020; Lambert et al. 2020). Lazarus (2006b) reminds us the process of ascribing relational meaning to any experience is ongoing; it changes according to the person–environment interactions, situational demands, and psychological attributes of the stressor assigned by the individual and giving rise to varying emotion responses. In Martha's story, stress-related appraisals arising through her experiences in family and work-related microsystems threaten her potential engagement with study through declining sense of self-efficacy. These emotions are supplanted through the relational meaning she ascribes to her peer-related experiences giving rise to psychosocial coping resources and positive emotions that supported her overcome the negative threat. This highlights the inter-connectedness of the emotional worlds of PGT students and suggests that protective factors may reside in unpredictable spaces and as such underlines the need for HEis to be cognisant of this holistic picture.

Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2018) highlight the importance of flexible access to and use of a variety of coping resources to mitigate against stress-related threats. In Martha's story, her motivation to study is a significant personality variable that provides an additional coping resource. It shapes her sense of controllability, which is a significant mitigating factor during heightened emotion (Smith et al. 1993) and promotes access to problem-focused coping strategies that allow her to maintain her goal-oriented behaviours (Jamieson et al. 2018). High internal motivation informs emotional commitment, which is essential for establishing an academic identity and shaping Martha's approach to relationship building, critical thinking and sense of self (Whannell and Whannell, 2015; Robinson and Glanzer 2016). Drawing from multiple coping resources Martha has overcome varying threats to successfully inculcate to the academic culture; adapting to demands she has maintained a positive goal-oriented direction in her study journey.

Conclusion: embracing the complexity

Within this writing we have sought to unfold our conceptualisation of student experience. Unlike previous approaches that measure student experience in terms of satisfaction, we have presented emotion as a central organising construct of student experience, underpinning the person–environment interactions that occur in and across five eco-systemic facets and directly impacting wellbeing. Through this conceptualisation, we locate the student as an active participant enmeshed within and across a labyrinthine of systems evolving over time and engaged in intra and interpersonal processes that include the dynamic interactions of stress-related appraisals, coping, and emotion responses that influence wellbeing. These interactions are shaped by past and present experiences according to biopsychosocial-cultural forces acting over time and function to shape future experiences.

   Through this approach, we adopt a meta-appraisal of the multiple layers of interactions, supports, challenges and intra-personal emotional responses to study student experience in a holistic way; using the phenomenological nature of the lived reality according to the interactions between the focal individual and the interconnected ecologies to inform our understanding. In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's ultimate goal aimed at understanding person–context interactions to inform adaptive ecologies that support development (2005, p. xiv), we argue this revised representation provides direction for exploring, understanding, and responding to student experience in a way that supports enacting practices and contexts to promote preparedness for professional life and actualise the potentials of higher education to support transformative sustainable development. We hope that this model will provide a lens and resource for researchers and those involved in student support and teaching to interpret, understand and respond to the experiences of their students. Furthermore, the risk of not embracing this multifaceted conception of the student experience will limit the efficacy and attunement of higher education strategies and services and in turn inadvertently constrain attainment, retention, and sustainability. Future research could explore how this newly developed conceptualisation of student experience could inform proactive approaches that support positive wellbeing for PGT students.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Wendee White is a lecture in Education at the University of Dundee and fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her professional experiences span early years education through higher education and her research focuses on the role of emotions in teaching and learning, professional practice, and student experience.

Richard Ingram is a Reader in Social Work at the University of Dundee. His research interests include emotions, professional practice, internationalisation, and the student experience. He holds the role of Associate Dean of Internationalisation in the School of Education and Social Work.

ORCID

Wendee White ![iD] http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8511-7915
Richard Ingram ![iD] http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6367-4024

References

Abdul Razak, D., C.D. Wan, and M. Sirat. 2017. "Juxtaposing Economic Progress with Sustainability in Mind: Issues and Way Forward for Universities." *Higher Education in the World 6: Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local*, Global University Network for Innovation. Accessed 15 November, 2020. http://www.guninet work.org/report/higher-education-world-6

Ai, B. 2017. "Constructing an Academic Identity in Australia: An Auto-ethnographic Narrative." *Higher Education Research & Development* 36 (6): 1095–1107. doi:10.1080/07294360.2017.1303459.

Anisman, H. 2014. *An Introduction to Stress and Health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bessant, K.C. 2018. "Relational Sociology and Emergent Community." In *The Relational Fabric of Community*, edited by K. C. Bessant, 185–209. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bird, E.L. 2017. "Student and Staff Perceptions of the International Postgraduate Student Experience: A Qualitative Study of A UK University." *Journal of International Students* 7 (2): 329–346. doi:10.32674/jis.v7i2.384.

Boekaerts, M. 1993. "Being Concerned with Well-being and with Learning." *Educational Psychologist* 28 (2): 149–167. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep2802_4.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 2005. *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bronfenbrenner, U., and P.A. Morris. 1998. "The Ecology of Developmental Processes." *Handbook of Child Psychology* 1 (5): 993–1028.

Cai, Y., J. Ma, and Q. Chen. 2020. "Higher Education in Innovation Ecosystems." *Sustainability* 12 (11): 4376. doi:10.3390/su12114376.

Coneyworth, L., R. Jessop, P. Maden, and G. White. 2019. "The Overlooked Cohort? – Improving the Taught Postgraduate Student Experience in Higher Education." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 262–273. doi:10.1080/14703297.2019.1617184.

Crenshaw, K. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–1299. doi:10.2307/1229039.

Daniels, H., H. Lauder, and J. Porter, Eds. 2012. *Educational Theories, Cultures and Learning: A Critical Perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Darling, N. 2007. "Ecological Systems Theory: The Person in the Center of the Circles." *Research in Human Development* 4 (3): 203–217. doi:10.1080/15427600701663023.

Disabato, D.J., F.R. Goodman, T.B. Kashdan, J.L. Short, and A. Jarden. 2016. "Different Types of Well-being? A Cross-cultural Examination of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-being." *Psychological Assessment* 28 (5): 471–482. doi:10.1037/pas0000209.

Dodge, R., A.P. Daly, J. Huyton, and L.D. Sanders. 2012. "The Challenge of Defining Wellbeing." *International Journal of Wellbeing* 2 (3): 222–235. doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4.

Downes, P. 2014. "Access to Higher Education for Socio-economically Marginalised Groups: Indicators at Micro-meso Levels." In *Access to Education in Europe. A Framework and Agenda for System Change*, edited by P. Downes, 111–142. Dordrecht, London: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-017-8795-6.

Esbjörn-Hargens, S., and M. Foucaultii. 2007. "Integral Teacher, Integral Students, Integral Classroom: Applying Integral Theory to Education." *AQAL: Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* 2 (2): 72–103. http://www.bis.qld.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/wpforo/default_attachments/1528011393-Copy-of-Integral-Education-Esbjorn-Hargens.pdf

Freire, C., M. Del Mar Ferradás, B. Regueiro, S. Rodríguez, A. Valle, and J.C. Núñez. 2020. "Coping Strategies and Self-efficacy in University Students: A Person-centered Approach." *Frontiers in Psychology* 19 (11): 841. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00841.

Frielick, S. 2004. "Beyond Constructivism: An Ecological Approach to E-learning." In Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference (328–332), (PDF) Beyond constructivism: An ecological approach to e-learning | Perth, Western Australia: Stanley Frielick - Academia.edu, 19 October 2020

Gale, T., and S. Parker. 2014. "Navigating Change: A Typology of Student Transition in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5): 734–753. doi:10.1080/03075079.2012.721351.

Gbadamosi, A. 2018. "The Anatomy of International Students' Acculturation in UK Universities." *Industry and Higher Education* 32 (2): 129–138. doi:10.1177/0950422218760335.

Gelman, A., and T. Basbøll. 2014. "When Do Stories Work? Evidence and Illustration in the Social Sciences." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43 (4): 547–570. doi:10.1177/0049124114526377.

Gillard, D. Dearing report. 1997. *Higher Education in the learning society*. Accessed 10 September 2019. http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html

Grau, F.X., J. Goddard, B.L. Hall, E. Hazelkorn, and R. Tandon. 2017. "Higher Education in the World 6. Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local." *Girona: Global University Network for Innovation*. (PDF) Higher Education in the World 6: Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local | Francesc Xavier Grau Vidal and Ellen Hazelkorn - Academia.edu, 5 August 2020

Gunn, A. 2018. Metrics and Methodologies for Measuring Teaching Quality in Higher Education: Developing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). *Educational Review* 70 (2): 129–148. doi:10.1080/00131911.2017.1410106

Henard, F., and D. Roseveare. 2012. "Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education: Policies and Practices." *An IMHE Guide for Higher Education Institutions*, 7–11. Accessed 5 July 2020. http://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/QT%20policies%20and%20practices.pdf

Higher Education Student Data (HESA). 2019. *Higher Education Student Data*. Accessed 20 September 2020. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students

Houghton, A.M., and J. Anderson. 2017. "Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum: Maximising Success in Higher Education." *Higher Education Academy*, 68. Accessed 2 July 2020. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/embedding-mental-wellbeing-curriculum-maximising-success-higher-education

Ingram, R., and W. White. 2020. "Student Emotion Matters: Understanding and Responding to Taught Postgraduate Student Experience through the Lens of Wellbeing." *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 8 (1): 3–14. doi:10.14297/jpaap.v8i1.426.

Jaeger, E.L. 2016. "Negotiating Complexity: A Bioecological Systems Perspective on Literacy Development." *Human Development* 59 (4): 163–187. doi:10.1159/000448743.

Jamieson, J.P., E.J. Hangen, H.Y. Lee, and D.S. Yeager. 2018. "Capitalizing on Appraisal Processes to Improve Affective Responses to Social Stress." *Emotion Review* 10 (1): 30–39. doi:10.1177/1754073917693085.

Jarvis, P. 2007. *Globalization, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society. Sociological Perspectives*. Vol. 2. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jindal-Snape, D., and B. Rienties. 2016. "Understanding Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions of International Higher Education Students." In *Multi-dimensional Transitions of International Students to Higher Education: New Perspectives on Learning and Instruction*, edited by D. Jindal-Snape and B. Rienties, 259–283. London: Routledge.

Keyes, C.L. 2005. "Mental Illness And/or Mental Health? Investigating Axioms of the Complete State Model of Health." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73 (3): 539–548. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.73.3.539.

Lambert, L., T. Lomas, M P. van de Weijer, H.A. Passmore, M. Joshanloo, J. Harter, and T. Kawakami. 2020. "Towards A Greater Global Understanding of Wellbeing: A Proposal for A More Inclusive Measure." *International Journal of Wellbeing* 10 (2): 1–18. doi:10.5502/ijw.v10i2.1037.

Lazarus, R. S., and S. Folkman. 1984. *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Lazarus, R. S. 1991. *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R.S. 2000. "Evolution of a Model of Stress, Coping, and Discrete Emotions." In *Handbook of Stress, Coping, and Health: Implications for Nursing Research, Theory, and Practice*, edited by V. Rice, 195–222. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lazarus, R.S. 2006a. "Emotions and Interpersonal Relationships: Toward a Person-centered Conceptualization of Emotions and Coping." *Journal of Personality* 74 (1): 9–46. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00368.x.

Lazarus, R.S. 2006b. *Stress and Emotion: A New Synthesis*. NewYork, NY: Springer.

Lewis, R. 2010. *When Cultures Collide*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Maassen, P.A. 1996. "The Concept of Culture and Higher Education." *Tertiary Education & Management* 2 (2): 153–159. doi:10.1007/BF02354009.

Maiese, M. 2017. "Transformative Learning, Enactivism, and Affectivity." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36 (2): 197–216. doi:10.1007/s11217-015-9506-z.

Matheson, R., and M. Sutcliffe. 2018. "Belonging and Transition: An Exploration of International Business Students' Postgraduate Experience." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 55 (5): 576–584. doi:10.1080/14703297.

McPherson, C., S. Punch, and E.A. Graham. 2017. Transitions from Undergraduate to Taught Postgraduate Study: Emotion, Integration and Ambiguity. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 5 (2): 42–50. doi:10.14297/jpaap.v5i2.265

Menzies, J.L., and R. Baron. 2014. "International Postgraduate Student Transition Experiences: The Importance of Student Societies and Friends." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 51 (1): 84–94. doi:10.1080/14703297.2013.771972.

Morgan, M., and I. Direito. 2016. "Entry to Study Expectations of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Postgraduate Taught Students." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 228: 561–566. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.07.086.

Morgan, M., and S. Rigby. 2014. "The Importance of Understanding the Expectations and Attitudes of the Student Body, University Staff and Business and Industry in Improving the STEM Postgraduate Taught Student Experience." *The Higher Education Academy STEM*. Accessed 12 September 2020. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/GEN-236-P.pdf

Neal, J.W., and Z.P. Neal. 2013. "Nested or Networked? Future Directions for Ecological Systems Theory." *Social Development* 22 (4): 722–737. doi:10.1111/sode.12018.

O'Neill, M., J. Tobbell, V. O'Donnell, and R. Lawthom. 2007. "Transition to Postgraduate Study: Does Practice Reflect Policy," In Sociocultural Theory in Education Conference. Manchester, UK.

Prati, L.E., M.C.P. de Paula Couto, M. Poletto, N.A. de Morais, S. dos Santos Paludo, and S.H. Koller. 2019. "Revisiting the Ecological Engagement: New Aspects and New Research Examples." In *Ecological Engagement*, edited by S.H. Koller, S. dos Paludo, and N. Auraugo de Morais, 29–48. Switzerland: Springer, Cham.

QAA. 2013. "What Is Mastersness? Discussion Paper." *Report of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee Learning from International Practice*, 19 June 2020. http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/report/what-ismastersness.pdf

QAA. 2018. *UK Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: Learning and Teaching*, 10 June 2020. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/learning-and-teaching#

Rienties, B., N.H. Nanclares, D. Jindal-Snape, and P. Alcott. 2013. "The Role of Cultural Background and Team Divisions in Developing Social Learning Relations in the Classroom." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 17 (4): 332–353. doi:10.1177/1028315312463826.

Robinson, J.A., and P.L. Glanzer. 2016. "How Students' Expectations Shape Their Quest for Purpose during College." *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 53 (1): 1–12. doi:10.1080/19496591.2016.1110034.

Ronen, T., and D. Kerret. 2020. Promoting Sustainable Wellbeing: Integrating Positive Psychology and Environmental Sustainability in Education. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (19): 6968

Schiffer, F. 2019. "The Physical Nature of Subjective Experience and Its Interaction with the Brain." *Medical Hypotheses* 125: 57–69. doi:10.1016/j.mehy.2019.02.011.

Smith, C.A., and R.S. Lazarus. 1990. "Emotion and Adaptation." *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, edited by L. A. Pervin and O.P. John, 609–637. 3rd ed. Guildford, NY: Elsevier. Accessed 9 September 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Craig_Smith11/publication/232438867_Emotion_and_Adaptation/links/00463536ae7d206717000000.pdf

Smith, C.A., K.N. Haynes, R.S. Lazarus, and L.K. Pope. 1993. "In Search of the "Hot" Cognitions: Attributions, Appraisals, and Their Relation to Emotion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (5): 916–929. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.65.5.916.

Stecker, T. 2004. "Well-being in an Academic Environment." *Medical Education* 38 (5): 465–478. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2929.2004.01812.x.

Stets, J.E., and R.T. Serpe. 2016. *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190457532.001.0001.

Steuer, N., N. Marks, and M.M. Murphy. 2008. *University Challenge: Towards a wellbeing approach to quality in higher education. New Economics Foundation*. Accessed 21 May 2020. https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/176e59e9cc07f9e21c_qkm6iby2y.pdf

Temple, P., C. Callender, L. Grove, and N. Kersh. 2014. "Managing the Student Experience in a Shifting Higher Education Landscape." *The Higher Education Academy* 1 (1): 1–25. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/managing_the_student_experience.pdf

Tobbell, J., and V.L. O'Donnell. 2013. "Transition to Postgraduate Study: Postgraduate Ecological Systems and Identity." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 43 (1): 123–138. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2012.749215.

Universities UK. 2020. *COVID-19 and UK Universities*. Accessed 17 January 2021. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Pages/Covid-19-intl.aspx#return

Ward, C., S. Bochner, and A. Furnham. 2015. *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Whannell, R., and P. Whannell. 2015. Identity Theory as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Attrition for University Students in Transition. *Student Success* 6 (2): 43–53.

Wilber, K. 1997. "An Integral Theory of Consciousness." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4 (1): 71–92. https://www.cutsinger.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/minds_eye_reader.pdf#page=238

World Health Organisation. 2014. "Promoting mental health: Concepts, emerging evidence, practice (Summary Report)." *Geneva*. Accessed 28 May 2020. https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/en/promoting_mhh.pdf

Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J., E.A. Skinner, K.L. Modecki, H.J. Webb, A.A. Gardner, T. Hawes, R.M. Rapee, and S. Costa. 2018. "The Self-perception of Flexible Coping with Stress: A New Measure and Relations with Emotional Adjustment." *Cogent Psychology* 5 (1): 1537908. doi:10.1080/23311908.2018.1537908.