Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Journal of International Students
Volume 14, Issue 1 (2024), pp. 289-308
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org

Connecting with family, friends and others: informal caregiving among international postgraduate researchers in a British University

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ABSTRACT

This article casts light on informal caregiving, an essential aspect of the international postgraduate researcher (PGR) experience, but which is often invisible in literature and discourses on international education. Drawing from qualitative semi-structured interviews with international PGRs in a British university, it highlights their dual role as care recipients and lesser known caregivers across transnational and local spaces. It gives insights into the forms and dynamics of care that they give to and receive from family, friends and others, uncovering the emotional and affective aspects of undertaking a postgraduate research degree overseas which impact on their mental wellbeing. The findings have implications for the improvement of university support for international PGRs which has relevance for the wider international student community.

Keywords: care, mental health, pandemic, postgraduate research, United Kingdom, social networks, wellbeing

International postgraduate researchers (students undertaking research degrees overseas at PhD and MPhil levels) face unique issues and challenges which have been the subject of many studies (see Gao, 2021, for a recent review). The literature to date have largely focused on their academic and socio-cultural adjustment (e.g. Chen & Le, 2021; Elliot et al., 2016; Young & Schartner, 2014), the supervisory relationship (e.g. Due et al., 2015; Marijanović et al., 2021),

identity and belonging (e.g. Edwards & Ye, 2018; Phelps, 2016; Tsouroufli, 2015), and post-study trajectories (e.g. Roy, 2021; Shen & Jiang, 2023). While these studies have contributed to theory on international PGR experiences with implications for policy and practice in formal (university) support provision, they have less to say about the care (practices reflecting concern and effort to help someone cope, develop and thrive) they give to and receive from informal networks (family, friends and others). In the effort to address the aforementioned gap, this article looks into international PGRs' caregiving (the receipt and giving of care) with family, friends and others. It draws upon semi-structured interview findings from three projects exploring the lived experiences of students (including international) in a British university.

International PGRs represented 6.8% (46,350) of international students studying for a degree in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2021/22 and a substantial 41% of the total number of students pursuing a postgraduate research degree in the UK (HESA, 2023). They are an important group of students whose specific issues and challenges in caregiving need to be looked into in detail in light of the prevalence of mental health and wellbeing (hereafter, mental wellbeing) issues affecting PGRs especially international students (Metcalfe et al., 2020). Within the UK, this need is exacerbated by the pandemic (Frampton et al., 2022; Schartner & Wang, 2022), the cost of living crisis (Office of Students, 2023) and the newly announced massive hikes in student and graduate visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge to access public health services (Glen, 2023). In response to calls in the UK (UUK, 2022) to take a whole university approach (considering all aspects of university life) to mental wellbeing, this article highlights how informal caregiving within wider social contexts (involving family, friends and others in local and transnational spaces) is an important aspect of university life for international PGRs which impacts on their mental wellbeing.

Adapting a transnational care framework (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014) used in migration research to explore how care is exchanged within the transnational family, this article investigates the varied forms and dynamics of caregiving that occur between international PGRs and their family, friends and others. It looks into the dual role of international PGRs as care recipients and caregivers. Of particular focus is the interdependent relations, emotions and obligations that form the basis of international PGRs' experiences of international education and shape their mental wellbeing. The implications of the findings for the improvement of university support for international PGRs are considered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The transnational care framework is often used in migration literature (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014) to describe how care is exchanged within reciprocal (two-sided), asymmetrical (one-sided) and multi-directional (across countries) relationships between the migrant and

geographically separated family members. Caregiving is defined as a set of practices of giving and receiving care, involving concern and effort to meet the needs of one another across national borders (Baldassar, 2008). Care comes in many forms such as financial, emotional and practical, and is manifested in virtual (e.g. technology-mediated communication), physical (e.g. visits), proxy (e.g. photos and gifts) and imagined (e.g. prayers) co-presence, that is, ways of being 'there' for one another (Baldassar, 2008). Extending the transnational care framework to caregiving in international education, it can be argued that international students are interlinked in relationships of care with family, friends and others which traverse local and transnational spaces.

A few studies in international student literature have looked into the caregiving of international PGRs with their informal networks. Examples include Mwale et al. (2018)'s research on the experiences of international PGRs with accompanying family members in the UK and Bilecen's sole (2014; 2012) and collaborative (Bilecen & Faist, 2015) works on the transnational friendships of international PGRs in Germany. However, these studies approached families and/or friends in isolation, giving a limited view of the constellation of informal care networks accessed by international PGRs. In other works, Nguyen and Robertson (2020)'s study of Vietnamese international PGRs in Australia accounted for the multiple informal networks (e.g. family members, research peers and co-national friends) that international PGRs simultaneously drew upon to meet their academic, emotional, socio-cultural and career needs. Herman and Meki Kombe's study (2019) of international PGRs at a South African university found that they were involved in closely knit informal co-national networks that provided an important 'survival mechanism'.

The studies reveal international PGRs' often strategic investment in time and effort to cultivate and maintain relationships with their informal networks for functional and practical purposes. Nguyen and Robertson (2020) observed that the Vietnamese international PGRs in their study were quick to mobilise locally situated (accompanying family members and Vietnamese students in Australia) and remote informal networks (extended family in Vietnam) to cope with issues in their studies and undesirable life situations. While international PGRs in Bilecen's research (2012) relied on their co-nationals for emotional and instrumental support, the care exchanges tended not to occur locally with new friends in the host country (Germany) but transnationally with existing friends in the home or other countries. This was attributed to the rituals and routines of care which have long been established and sustained with their transnational networks, enabling a safe and intimate space to share personal matters. Similarly, bonding and solidarity with informal networks with shared needs and circumstances featured in Mwale et al. (2018)'s research. The international PGRs provided practical and emotional care to their accompanying spouses and children who experienced isolation and a sense of disempowerment in the UK. There was the tendency for the family unit as a whole to seek local friendships with people from similar national, cultural and/or racial backgrounds for two key reasons. The first

is to have a sense of belonging and identity in which their habitual and cultural ways of being could be affirmed. The second is to tap into the group's knowledge, resources and networks to navigate life in the UK.

Taken together, the works reviewed here show that caregiving among international PGRs involves multiple relationships (with family, friends and others) of varying strength and proximity. While international PGRs are acknowledged as caregivers, the literature have tended to give a heavier focus on the unilateral flows of care from informal networks to international PGRs. More recent studies (e.g. Gomes et al., 2021; Gomes, 2022) conducted during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic have given more coverage of the multi-directional nature of caregiving where international PGRs developed strategies of resilience and resourcefulness with their informal networks to mutually cope with individual, familial and communal challenges. This article adds to the literature by casting attention to multi-directional care exchanges in international education, putting into centre stage the dual role of international PGRs as care recipients and active caregivers, and the impact on their mental wellbeing.

METHOD

The first of three projects, of which findings are discussed in this article, investigated the link between social disadvantage and the mental wellbeing of under-represented PGRs, that is, minoritised individuals with protected characteristics as defined in the UK Equality Act 2010. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with under-represented PGRs who were recruited through targeted convenience sampling using e-mails, advertisements and word of mouth. Using semi-structured interviews and a similar sampling approach, the second project provided an extension to the first project. Two new research dimensions were explored, specifically, the mental wellbeing of under-represented PGRs during the COVID-19 pandemic and their practices of caregiving with their informal networks. Using self-report surveys and semi-structured interviews based on convenience sampling, the third project explored the pandemic experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate international students in British universities including the aforementioned British university. The timeline and role of the authors in the analysis and data collection for the projects are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Scope, Timeline and Role of Authors in Original Projects

Project	Scope	Period of data collection	Role of authors in original projects
1	Social disadvantage and the mental wellbeing of under-represented PGRs	April 2018 - June 2019	Secondary analysis by first author. Data primarily collected by two research assistants with guidance from a Project Manager.
2	Mental wellbeing and caregiving among under-represented PGRs during the pandemic	June – October 2021	Primary analysis by first author. Data collection by a research assistant.
3	International student experiences of the pandemic in the UK	April - May 2021	Primary analysis by second author. Data collection by a research assistant.

For this article, we will discuss findings from a combined semi-structured interview sample of 23 international PGRs studying in a single British university from the three projects. The semi-structured interviews were mostly conducted by four research assistants who were international PGRs at the university. Their identities as international PGRs helped to minimise power differences and encouraged the participants to openly share their personal experiences. However, there was a tendency among the research assistants to reach out to friends from the same home country as the starting point for participant recruitment. We addressed this bias by being selective in the participant recruitment, making sure to include as many nationalities as possible in our samples. A good mix of participants was represented in the combined sample in terms of nationality, gender and age, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Participant Characteristics

Project	Nationality	Gender	Age	Total
1	China: 6 Germany: 2 Italy: 1 Japan: 1 Jordan: 1 Kenya: 1 The Philippines: 1 Saudi Arabia: 1 Sri Lanka: 1 Taiwan: 1 Thailand: 1	Female: 10 Male: 7 LGBTQ+: 3	20 - 24: 1 25 - 29: 11 30 - 34: 2 35 - 39: 2 40 - 44: 1	17
2	Nigeria: 2 Germany: 1 China: 1 Guyana: 1	Female: 3 Male: 2 LGBTQ+: 1	25 - 29: 2 30 - 34: 3	5
3	Costa Rica: 1	Female: 1	30 - 34: 1	1

The interviews were audio recorded with permission. They were transcribed verbatim either manually or using NVivo Transcription (with manual checks) before being thematically analysed through a series of coding and re-coding to build an integrated picture of explanations, linkages and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

The research site where the three projects were conducted is a research-intensive public university in the UK with overseas branch campuses. The university seeks to position itself as a global civic-oriented institution with priorities to develop a fully inclusive educational experience for all. Working groups have recently been formed to push forward efforts to improve the mental wellbeing of PGRs (including international students). As a member of the University Mental Health Charter, a voluntary accreditation scheme, the university takes a whole university approach to mental wellbeing which is in line with a newly refreshed sector-wide Stepchange framework (UUK, 2022). The framework, consisting of a set of principles of good practice, supports universities to take a holistic consideration of all aspects of university life in promoting positive mental wellbeing. By 'all aspects', the framework refers to four domains of university life: learn (the way learning is designed, structured and provided), support (services to support students and staff), work (training and engagement with students and staff) and live (the environments, cultures and spaces that students live and study in). While the domains cover a wide range of enabling themes (UNMC, 2023), the focus is largely on university life that is tied to university sites, services, facilities and the university community. Our research findings, presented by the themes below, extends the framework, showing how

international PGRs' caregiving with family, friends and others in wider social contexts (beyond physical university spaces and cross-cutting local and transnational spaces) can promote as well as affect mental wellbeing.

RESULTS

Emotional Double Bind with the Family

Emotional care emerged as the most commonly cited form of care received and given by the international PGRs. They treaded the delicate balance between sharing and not disclosing details about their wellbeing in consideration of their transnational family members' emotions as well as their own. The following excerpt illustrates the emotional double bind (Hu et al., 2022) they faced while studying abroad where caring emotionally for the geographically distant family involved strategic engagement as well as disengagement:

> I keep calling them (family members) like almost every two days, just checking up on them, make sure that things are okay. Sometimes they are just shy from telling you that they need something or they are missing you...that makes me feel even more worried...I don't want to make them feel that I'm worried.
>
> (Xu Li, Female, late 20s, China)

While maintaining closeness through regular video calls with family members in China, Xu Li, a first-time abroad student, limited topics of conversation that could potentially cause her parents stress and worry. These topics include housing and academic issues, which due to geographical distance and unfamiliarity with the rental market and the demands of postgraduate research in the UK, were beyond her parents' capacity to help: "They worry about me, but they can't do anything for me". Although Xu Li wished for real time emotional care from her parents to cope with challenges and difficulties faced in the UK, consideration of the time difference (8 hours) and the possibility of affecting her parents' sleep and emotions led her to believe that caring meant "keep[ing] everything to myself". Potentially caught in an emotional double bind with the family and hesitant to approach the university for mental wellbeing support (Karpenko-Seccombe, 2016), it is likely that some international PGRs lack ready and adequate access to emotional care. The mental wellbeing consequences are likely to hit hardest on students who largely identify with collectivist and/or filial piety values (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021) such as young unaccompanied PGRs with strong attachment bonds to their parents and family members with whom they would have confided in if they were physically co-present with them.

Shifting and Asymmetrical Emotional Caregiving with the Family

Emotional caregiving with the geographically distant family is not always a straightforward two-way process in which those involved are willingly and equally invested at all times (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). There were times during the participants' studies when care exchanges with their

families were less reciprocal as the international PGRs prioritised their own emotions in an act of self-care. The constant checking up on her wellbeing by her parents made Bing (Female, mid-20s, China) "feel a little bit of pressure", leading to her reluctance to share details about her PhD progress. Her preference to talk about non-academic related topics which were less likely to trigger negative emotions in her reflects a desire to safeguard herself emotionally:

> They (parents) keep asking me questions all the time, like do you feel pressur[ed], don't push yourself too much and take it easy...but for me actually sometimes...I just want to talk about normal stuff.

Bing's communicative strategy illustrates careful virtual co-presence (Alinejad, 2019) where selectivity, omission and silence in long distance interactions form part and parcel of doing emotional care. This is where university support provision can provide an alternative and more neutral source of emotional care that will benefit international PGRs reluctant to turn to family.

Zahrah (Female, late 20s, Nigeria) appreciated the emotional care given by her parents in Nigeria who would regularly call and provide encouragement to her. However, she candidly shared that she could not reciprocate such care:

> Some days, I just turn off my phone or hang up…she (mother) comes with all the emotional issues in this world. I put my phone far away from me. I don't put it on speaker and I don't listen...because sometimes those things actually really stress me out, sort of impact on...my life.

Her deliberate sensory disengagement (Alinejad, 2021) from her mother's voice points out the tensions and contradictions that can occur as international PGRs exert choice and agency in familial caregiving to cope emotionally with study and life pressures in the host country. The exchange of care between international PGRs and their geographically distant family members entails a careful management of emotions as they express and suppress their emotions to strike a preferred degree of intimacy and distance from each other.

Time difference, coupled with asymmetrical access to technological infrastructures such as a reliable broadband connection complicate the quality and availability of long distance emotional care (Cabalquinto, 2018). While technologically mediated communication has enabled Patricia (Female, late 20s, The Philippines) to maintain some degree of co-presence (Baldassar, 2008) with her parents in the Philippines, she recognised the time and technological barriers involved in being readily 'there' for one another:

> They (parents) could be there, using mobile phones and internet, but...if you're coming from the other side of the world, there's a consideration of the time zone difference...in my country, the internet is not stable...we tried to do video call, but it doesn't connect that way.

The technologically mediated flow of emotional care received by Patricia were often disrupted and truncated, causing her to feel a shift in connection with her parents. The examples discussed so far show that emotional caregiving with the non-migrant family can change in dynamics (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2014) as international PGRs navigate new and continuing choices and constraints brought by transnational education mobility, impacting on their mental wellbeing. A whole university approach to mental wellbeing has to consider how informal care relations occurring in transnational spaces frame international PGRs' experiences of university life.

Financial and Material Forms of Care with the Family

Apart from emotional care, the international PGRs received and gave care in financial and material forms to their families. The flow of financial care was mainly one-sided as the majority of the participants wholly or partially relied on their parents financially to study in the UK. Noah's (Male, mid-20s, Germany) family in Germany would send him money every month to cover his living costs in the UK. He occasionally received additional money and gifts as part of a familial routine of proxy co-presence (Baldassar, 2008) to sustain shared traditions and reminders of togetherness: "For my birthday they would send some money or for Christmas because I couldn't be home for Christmas...my mom would send a care package with...things from Germany". The sending and receipt of physical material gifts were less practical for some other participants due to long international delivery times. Money was a reliable form of financial care which as Eminike (Male, mid-30s, Nigeria) rationalised, could be converted to physical items such as groceries and food for his family in Nigeria.

The transfer of money to the international PGRs was not always smooth as some families struggled to fund their tuition fees and costs of living in the UK. In addition, many participants who were fee-paying students felt or were made to feel guilty for using huge amounts of their parents' money. Coming from a large family, Zahrah (Female, late 20s, Nigeria), a self-identified working class international PGR shared that access to the family's financial resources was limited as her family members were tied down to their own financial commitments. Despite this, they still showed financial care by "go[ing] to some really...far extent to actually make sure that I did get some money at some point". Here, she shared the sacrifices her family made to channel money to her: "Even if he (brother) didn't have much, he would try to...share what he had and send me some...my parents had to sell a few things to get some money sent to me". Zahrah tried to reciprocate the care whenever she could by sending small sums of money made from paid university work to ease her family's finances. The emotional burden of not being able to help out more financially was heavy and added to her anxieties about her earnings potential upon the completion of her PhD studies. Zahrah's case highlights how financial caregiving arising from transnational education mobility can contribute to a sense of financial precarity and insecurity

(Mulvey et al., 2023), even within a relatively privileged group of PGRs able to afford education overseas, which has consequences on their mental wellbeing.

For many participants, the plan to reciprocate financial care or at least return the money given to them by family was oriented towards a future where they could ideally obtain highly paid employment. As much as their parents provided financial care, it often came with high expectations to perform academically, complete studies in a timely manner and obtain superior jobs upon graduation. This would make privately funding an international education worthwhile, "money spen[t] [with] in good reason" (Xiu Ying, Female, early 20s, China). The conditional giving of financial care by some parents seems to be conflicted with the giving of a more selfless and compassionate form of emotional care commonly imagined of a sacrificial parent in international education literature (Tu, 2018). Haoran (Male, late 20s, China) described how reliance on his parents for financial resources affected the quality and consistency of emotional care given to him:

> He (father) always complains that..."You don't have the ability to earn money"...I feel guilty about that...sometimes my mother would encourage me, like, someday you will get a good job in the future, so don't worry about your current status, but my father always complains...which makes me sometimes...stressed.

The examples discussed here show how a largely one-sided flow of financial resources tends to be entangled with emotions of guilt and frustration as much as of hope and longing for a future of repaid gratitude and more equal caregiving within international PGRs' families. They show how international PGRs' expectations for transnational mobility have emotional and affective dimensions that go beyond economic and status goals (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Xu, 2022). This adds nuance to the literature, showing how seemingly individualistic and instrumental pursuits for social reproduction and mobility through international education are grounded in relationships of interdependency involving constant and complex juggling of the needs and emotions of the self and others.

Caregiving with Physically Co-present Loved Ones

A few older participants were able to have constant physical co-presence with their accompanying partners and children in the UK. This allowed for ready access to emotional care in ways not afforded by technologically mediated communication. A simple physical touch of reassurance helped Marta (Female, early 30s, Costa Rica) to cope with the isolation and loneliness caused by the mostly solitary nature of PhD studies and which were intensified during the pandemic: "I am so grateful that I am living with my husband, I can hug someone". In other interviews, participants related how they provided emotional and practical care to their physically co-present loved ones. Yuan (Female, early 30s, China) gave practical care to her husband who did not speak much English, such as contacting the pharmacist, doctor and dentist on his behalf. Daily cooking and other household chores which constitute practical care were shared

responsibilities as they negotiated a mutually supportive physical co-presence that would not "overburden" each other. New reforms to student visas coming to effect in January 2024 will restrict the ability of international students not on a postgraduate research route to bring family members as visa dependants to the UK (Gov.uk, 2023). The effect on the mental wellbeing on undergraduate and taught masters international students, especially women and older students with their own families, is likely to be negative as they are blocked access to physically co-present care which has benefitted international PGRs such as Marta and Yuan.

It has to be noted that caregiving within a physically co-present relationship can have its challenges. Emna (Female, mid-20s, Jordan) was carer to her boyfriend who suffered depression and substance abuse. They both came to the UK for their studies - hers a PhD and his, a Masters. However, her investment in time, energy and emotions in caring for her boyfriend took a toll on her studies and mental wellbeing:

> It got to a point where I got sucked into that as well...because of all the pressure...I would just spend the whole day with him and other people...I would take one day off, but then it's a week off...at the end of the semester when he didn't go to any classes, and he needed to pass...I would actually help him write his assignments.

Emna does not reflect the default image of the carefree international student (Waters & Brooks, 2010), independent and unencumbered by responsibilities beyond studying. Instead, her example gives visibility to the heavy caregiving responsibilities that some older, attached and accompanied international students (usually PGRs) shoulder as they juggle care for their physically proximate loved ones with the time- and emotionally intensive demands (Loveridge et al., 2018; Brooks, 2015) of studies.

Friends as Substitutes for Familial Care and Formal Support

Where care was not accessed or readily accessible from their families, the participants sought care from their friends. The forms of care were primarily emotional and practical as the friends provided information and a listening ear to issues they faced. Consistent with findings from the literature (e.g. Herman & Meki Kombe, 2019; Mwale et al., 2018; Nguyen & Robertson, 2020), the international PGRs tapped into their friendship networks consisting primarily of co-national friends in the host and home country, and other international students. This excerpt captures how friends became substitutes for familial care and in some cases, formal institutional support:

> I have a lot of friends (in the home country)...they are doctors, they are experienced about...treatment or...support in terms of mental health, so they kind of let me talk through my difficulty and then guide me...I don't talk a lot [with] my family about [my] personal issue[s] because my mom is very concerned.

(Pailin, Female, early 30s, Thailand)

In return, the participants were keen to reciprocate the care in ways they could such as through emotional and financial means:

> Some of them (friends) were depressed, some lost their jobs...I had to come in and encourage them to let them know that "this [effects of the pandemic] is happening and we know what is going on, but we need to keep being hopeful".
>
> (Eminike, Male, mid-30s, Nigeria)

> The little [money] I could send, I would send to them. Sometimes it wasn't just friends in the UK, it was also friends outside the UK. In this case, I had to look for someone that I would send the money to that would send them the equivalent.
>
> (Zahrah, Female, late 20s, Nigeria)

The participants' narratives challenge a deficit model that paints international students as having social and academic disadvantages due to limited contact with local host students (Schartner, 2015). The reciprocity in friendships established with co-nationals and international students reflects an active and purposeful agency to develop a community of care (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Young et al., 2013) to get through relatable challenges and difficulties.

Academic Care

Care also came in an academic form where the international PGRs played a key role as brokers of information and knowledge (Bilecen & Faist, 2014; Pho & Schartner, 2021). Zahrah (Female, late 20s, Nigeria) provided guidance and encouragement to international friends at her university who regularly consulted her on research, coursework and supervisory issues. While she was happy to provide some degree of academic care, she noted how it caused time and mental burden on her part:

> She (friend) came to me with the homework and it's like spending... a whole day... someone called me on company law and I was on the phone for over an hour... It's like everyone's just lazy and they're like, oh yeah, you're the one who's like reading the PhD, you know everything''...They kept chasing me…saying that "oh yeah, there is a deadline and the deadline is approaching''.

Assumptions by her friends that she would be the know-all and be-all due to her PhD status led to excessive and unreasonable expectations of her to provide academic care on demand. Her friends' reliance on informal academic care raises the question of the accessibility and effectiveness of formal academic support for international students. Universities have to ensure that appropriate and effective support (e.g. availability of lecturers and tutors for consultation, training on time

management and independent learning) is reaching out to all international students, and that they feel confident to access it.

In a more spontaneous capacity, Leisha (Female, mid-30s, Guyana) offered academic care to her school-age sister in Guyana by giving her online lessons:

> I...supported in terms of...set[ting] papers for her (sister) because they weren't being given any lessons at some point during the pandemic. So I took it on my own to give her some math and English lessons.

The international PGRs became substitutes for formal provision of education and care in areas and during times that educational institutions in the host and/or home countries could not effectively deliver. Rather than being mere end consumers of international education, they were proactive agents (Hu et al., 2022) who mobilised and coordinated resources to bridge gaps in institutional support provision.

Community of Care During the Pandemic

Lockdowns during the pandemic encouraged some participants to make new friends and reconnect with old ones on the phone and digital media platforms to further develop a system [of care] around [them]" (Eminike, Male, mid-30s, Nigeria). Interacting with friends provided the comfort and reassurance that they were not "alone" (Noah, Male, mid-20s, Germany) as they navigated challenges and uncertainties intensified by the pandemic (e.g. isolation, financial constraints, research setbacks, anxiety and worry over career prospects). The use of digital media platforms is reminiscent of findings in Gomes' single and joint authored works (e.g. Gomes, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020), albeit referring to an Australian context, that international students invest significant time and effort in the digital space for support (e.g. accommodation, identity and belonging), information (e.g. employment, news, entertainment) and mental wellbeing purposes. The caregiving that occurs through their digital engagements are especially important during moments of heightened unpredictability and abruption to their everyday lives and planned futures such as which occurred during the pandemic.

Where allowed and feasible during lockdowns, the participants in our studies received and made physical visits to their friends' homes to drop off food, gifts and items required from the shops. In some cases, this practical form of care was extended to neighbours and faith group and community members as seen here:

> I have this old neighbour who had to shield...once in a while... I ran to the streets to get her something and popped it through her door.
>
> (Leisha, Female, mid-30s, Guyana)

> They (church) would give me loads of food stuff and things...I...[cook] for the church...giving them (community members) food.

(Zahrah, Female, late 20s, Nigeria)

Religious/spiritual care featured in the narratives of Christian students who shared that they regularly gave and received prayers from family members, friends and faith group members. While religious/spiritual caregiving was firmly in place for the students pre-COVID, it was circulated through new means during the pandemic such as online church services and social activities (e.g. Bible studies, movie night and online games). The church provided a platform for the students to bond with and expand their social networks (Koo et al., 2021; Yu, 2020) where religious/spiritual care intersected with academic (e.g. opportunities to improve English language skills), emotional (e.g. encouragement and advice), practical (e.g. accommodation search and cooking) and financial care. Again, these examples show proactive efforts among international PGRs to be part of a community of care (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Young et al., 2013) where they not only received but also provided care in a variety of forms to others.

While religious/spiritual care was not brought up by participants of other faiths and beliefs in our relatively small sample, an earlier study of Muslim students (including international PGRs) at the university revealed their dissatisfaction over the lack of campus facilities for religious services, rituals and/or study groups (Hopkins & Mearns, 2019, p. 2). The majority of these students spent time to practise their religion outside of the university (e.g. praying together, going to the mosque, having *halal* food, etc.). This suggests that they were able to access religious/spiritual and other forms of care through informal networks and non-university institutions. It drives home the point we make that international PGRs are hardly passive but resourceful in building relations of care in sites and spaces that go beyond the university. Caregiving in their wider social contexts forms a core aspect of their university life and needs to be accounted for to arrive at a 'wholer' university approach to mental wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

This article has given contextual and nuanced insights into caregiving among international PGRs at a British university. It has extended the transnational care framework used in migration research to show international PGRs' interlinked relationships of care (emotional, financial, practical, academic and religious/spiritual) with family, friends and others in local and transnational spaces. Our key contribution is highlighting the link between caregiving and international student experiences, showing how international PGRs exercise choice and agency to circulate care in different spaces, times and situations with their informal networks that impact on their university life and mental wellbeing. We emphasise that the university life of international PGRs is not confined to university sites, services, facilities and the university community, but involve wider social relations and contexts. University support for international PGRs has to be attuned to the multiple and overlapping spaces and relations they are a part of. The findings recommend that a whole university approach to mental wellbeing

(UUK, 2022) needs to incorporate a wider holistic understanding of the interplay of internal and external factors that impact on international PGR experiences. It is evident from our data that the forms of care that international PGRs engage in are not mutually exclusive and tend to intersect. Through new and continuing exchanges of care with family, friends and others, international PGRs are invested and embedded in inter-dependent relationships that reflect the emotional and affective aspects of pursuing education overseas. Although some aspects of their caregiving have an instrumental dimension, that is, involving relationships that are deliberately formed and sustained to meet specific needs, there are also elements of spontaneity, binding obligation and altruism that involve less or no strategic planning. This article has therefore, casted light on the multi-dimensionality of international PGRs that goes beyond individualistic and instrumental narratives of social reproduction and mobility.

While some international PGRs may not approach the university as a first point of contact for support, they are likely to make proactive attempts to mobilise and utilise informal networks to access a variety of care. This spells a need to challenge any deficit-centred understandings of their needs present in university support provision where focus is given to their assumed problems and inadequacies in adjusting to dominant normative standards in the host country, rather than their strengths and resourcefulness in navigating issues and challenges (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023).

It is known that international PGRs are less likely to approach the university for support due to reasons such as a lack of knowledge of support available, culturally influenced stigma and shame in formal help-seeking and the perceived lack of staff who understand the specificities of their issues and challenges (Karpenko-Seccombe, 2016). Universities have to dig deeper into understanding how their sites, courses, support services, training and community can be made into safer, more relevant and welcoming spaces for international PGRs to seek care from and within the university, alongside care from their informal networks in local and transnational spaces. Inclusive, tailored and accessible university support that is attentive to the unique needs and circumstances of diverse international PGRs is important in this respect. Widening the representation of staff (e.g. student services, supervisors) who have relatable identities and lived experiences of transnational education mobility and PGR studies will help to inform the co-production of appropriate and effective support with and for international PGRs.

The emotions, tensions and contradictions that arise from caregiving, as shown by the findings, suggest that it cannot be assumed that all international PGRs are getting sufficient and quality care from their informal networks, even when care from them is preferred. Universities have an important role to play in bridging gaps in care. This requires rethinking the neo-liberal imperative of generating student revenue which largely governs the scope, resources and policies in providing care for international students (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023). As

the higher education sector rebounds from the pandemic with a renewed commitment to enhancing student experiences, it is timely to reflect on how support structures for international PGRs and the wider international student community can evolve to become more holistic, inclusive and genuinely caring.

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