Final report

Supporting staff to enhance the international student experience

This framework is an output from the Collaborative Enhancement Project **Supporting Staff to Enhance the International Student Experience** supported and funded by QAA Membership.

Lead institution

DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER

Partner institutions

MANCHESTER 1824 The University of Manchester

Manchester Metropolitan University

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

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Project team

Dr Sumeya Loonat (Project Lead, De Montfort University)
Wendy Ramku (De Montfort University)
Dr Hardeep Basra (De Montfort University
Professor Richard Hall (De Montfort University)
Dr Sylvie Lomer (University of Manchester)
Dr Araida Hidalgo-Bastida (Manchester Metropolitan University)
Professor Karen Pashby (Manchester Metropolitan University)
Dr Gladson Chikwa (Manchester Metropolitan University)
Julie Hughes (University of Wolverhampton)

Executive summary

The QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, *Supporting staff to enhance the international student experience*, was developed to contribute to co-creation with students, inclusive frameworks, and staff training. Central aims included improving pedagogy, engagement, and inclusion, underpinned by QAA guidance and a commitment to equality, diversity, and cohesive institutional practice.

By rethinking pedagogical and ethical approaches to better centre international students' experiences, the project supported staff in developing reflexive practices that examine their own assumptions, positionality, and pedagogic decision-making, moving away from deficit constructions of international students and towards an expansive, asset-based understanding of their identities and what they bring to the classroom.

The project was delivered through a cross-institutional partnership involving De Montfort University (DMU) (lead institution), the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the University of Wolverhampton. Each institution served as a host for collaborative staff development workshops, using mapping exercises to explore local contexts, institutional strategies, and pedagogical priorities. These activities highlighted both shared challenges and differences across institutions, while examining the relationships between policy, staff experience, and international student perspectives in ethically complex educational settings.

Three overarching research questions were devised to both address the project context and contribute to the production of three practical outputs aimed at developing inclusive teaching and learning practices for both students and staff.

Table 1: Key findings, outputs and research questions addressed

Key findings	Output*	Brief description	Research question addressed
Dedicated support is physically (buildings, offices, staff) and bureaucratically enigmatic.	Deficit narrative audit tool	Tool for individuals or staff development teams conducting a systematic audit of their provision.	What training and resources are available for working with international students?

Who has the deficit? A reflexive reframe surrounding deficit discourse is necessary.	Deficit narrative audit tool	Tool for individuals or staff development teams conducting a systematic audit of their provision.	How/do those resources challenge or reinforce deficit narratives about international students?
Belonging is a fundamental precondition to best pedagogical practice.	Inclusive practice resource	This resource brings together practical teaching strategies for staff working with international students.	How can critical understandings of globalised inequalities such as decoloniality reimagine the international student experience and support reflexive practice?

*Outputs excluding the conceptual framework to be published alongside this report as complementary resources – conceptual framework is presented in this report.

Background evidence

The extant scholarship on internationalisation in UK higher education identifies internationalisation as an increasingly commercialised, numbers-driven process, with UK government policy setting explicit international student recruitment targets that have consistently been met or exceeded. For instance, the 2019 strategy's target of 600,000 students to be recruited by 2030 was achieved within two years of publication (DfE and DfIT 2019). The UK's most recent International Education Strategy (2026) has since abandoned numeric recruitment targets altogether, replacing them with a £40 billion education export target by 2030, driven substantially by transnational education rather than recruitment to the UK itself (DBT, DfE and FCDO 2026). This shift does not represent a move away from a numbers-driven approach to internationalisation, but a redirection of which numbers are prioritised, from recruitment volume to export revenue.

Despite this sustained growth in recruitment, there is little evidence that pedagogic practice in UK higher education has shifted to reflect it. Instead, an assimilationist model persists, in which international students are expected to adapt fully to a model of teaching and learning treated as inherently superior, contributing to their epistemic exclusion (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023). This reliance on international students' economic contributions sits uneasily alongside contested definitions of who counts as an "international student" (often reduced to nationality, visa, or fee status), and a policy environment that is, in practice, frequently hostile to the same students upon which the sector depends (Mittelmeier 2024).

As Mittelmeier, Lomer and Unkule (2023) argue, much of the research on international students homogenises their experiences and positions them as passive recipients of support rather than active agents. This contributes to a broader pattern of "othering". International students' experiences of racism are frequently reframed by institutions as "cultural adjustment" issues, and tend not to be named as racism. This gaslights students into internalising and doubting their own realities, forming a pattern that plays out differently across intersections of religion, gender, disability, and nationality (Loonat 2025). Immigration policy, including dependency visa restrictions and the shortened Graduate Route, exacerbates this, directly and disproportionately harmed international students.

Harms are amplified by punitive media narratives and unequal institutional support, witnessed during crises such as the pandemic. These narratives are predicated upon deficit language such as "barriers, challenges, problems, stresses, needs, struggles", which dominates how international students are described, more than descriptors such as "capable, able, coping, managing" (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023, p. 1254). As a result, across HE, English proficiency is often conflated with intellectual capability, disadvantaging students who are fluent but linguistically different. Crucially, deficit language matters for staff development specifically: where training materials and institutional resources reproduce this framing rather than challenge it, staff are left without the tools to recognise and reflect on their own assumptions, reinforcing rather than disrupting the deficit narratives this project seeks to address.

Based on this existing scholarly work, there emerged a strong and growing focus on the student experience within internationalisation, engagement, and inclusion initiatives. However, analyses of how to meaningfully engage and support staff themselves, as a critical element in facilitating quality pedagogy and cohesive relationships with international students, has been comparatively neglected. Previous Collaborative Enhancement Projects have evaluated the potential of co-creational approaches to ensure students' perspectives are central to addressing engagement, retention and inclusion, building an important evidence base for student-facing practice. This project sought to complement that work by turning attention specifically to staff, recognising that staff development is equally critical to the outcomes these initiatives aim to achieve. This gap served as the inception for the project Supporting staff to enhance the international student experience.

Project details

As part of the QAA's Collaborative Enhancement Projects, Supporting staff to enhance the international student experience was developed in order to contribute to co-creation with students, inclusive frameworks, and staff training. Central aims include improving pedagogy, engagement, retention, and inclusion, underpinned by QAA guidance and a commitment to equality, diversity, and cohesive institutional practice.

By rethinking ethical and pedagogical considerations that centre the experiences of international students, this project served to provide quality outputs for staff professional development practices and opportunities. It did so by centring reflexive practice for staff that acknowledged the complex environment in which they work, shaped by various national and institutional pressures and the surrounding ecology. Specifically, the project sought to address the following research questions:

1. What training and resources are available for working with international students?
2. How do those challenge or reinforce deficit narratives about international students?
3. How can critical understandings of globalised inequalities such as decoloniality reimagine the international student experience and support reflexive practice?

To achieve these aims, a cross-national and cross-institutional partnership with four universities was employed, the institutions being De Montfort University (host institution), the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the University of Wolverhampton; each institution had at least one collaborative partner to represent it, as detailed in the 'Project team' section. The project was designed so that each collaborative partner would facilitate one staff development workshop focused on supporting staff to enhance the international student experience. Specifically, these were collaborative mapping workshops to illuminate the local and contextual nature of each institution with different internationalisation strategies and pedagogic priorities. The mapping exercise identified convergences and divergences between institutional policies (at different levels), staff expertise and experience, and international student perspectives within ethically complex spaces.

The scope of the project also permitted the development of other outputs, those of which were a narrative audit tool and a conceptual framework for practitioner self-evaluation for internationalisation, in addition to a resource for inclusive practices to share the findings with the participants from the workshops and to the wider field of higher education and any practitioners or researchers involved with or interested in supporting staff to enhance the international student experience.

Although the focus for this project was specifically international students and supporting staff to enhance the international student experience through co-creative pedagogy and continuing professional development opportunities, the results and aims

are widely applicable to a panoply of students and staff (in academic and non-academic roles), particularly for highlighting typically marginalised voices and demographics, making this a universally applicable means of professional development and profound self-evaluation for those of whom have an interest in ameliorating their practice.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the project was sought from the Business and Law Faculty Research Ethics Committee, at DMU. This followed discussion between project partners about: the scope of the project; the participative methodology to be deployed over collaborating institutions; processes for recruitment and ensuring privacy/confidentiality; and data management and sharing across institutions. No concerns were identified, and only minor clarifications were sought for this low-risk project. The project was given a favourable opinion (BAL ID: 2610275) and approved documentation and the approval letter were sent to the collaborating institutions.

Data protection

Data collected during the project included handwritten notes taken by the project lead and research assistant to draw out key themes from workshops, audio recordings of participant reflections taken towards the end of workshops and signed consent forms and contact details. Handwritten notes and audio recordings were collected only from participants who had given consent, using encrypted DMU voice recorders.

All data were transferred securely via a DMU encrypted laptop on the DMU network to Figshare, with handwritten notes digitised and then shredded, and audio recordings deleted from the recording device following analysis. Access to shared project data was controlled through editing rights managed by the PI, with named collaborating project members given online access to relevant materials.

Data were anonymised during analysis: there is no link between consent forms and the transcription of audio files or field notes. While the location of participating institutions can be inferred from the nature of the project, individuals within them are referred to anonymously throughout.

In line with QAA's open research requirements and DMU's Research Data Management Policy, the anonymised dataset will be deposited in Figshare and retained for approximately ten years following project completion, after which all digital data (including consent forms, audio files, notes, transcripts, and analysis) will be deleted.

Research questions

This project sought to enhance the learning experiences for international students by using a co-creation approach to rethink ethical and pedagogical considerations that centre the experiences of international students within proposed staff development outputs. It aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What training and resources are available across the UKHE sector for supporting international students?
2. How/do these resources challenge or reinforce deficit narratives for working with international students?
3. How can critical understandings of globalised inequalities such as decoloniality reimagine the international student experience and support reflexive practice?

The above questions formed the basis of the research and guided the ultimate research questions which were refined to:

1. What training and resources are available for working with international students?
2. How/do those challenge or reinforce deficit narratives about international students?
3. How can critical understandings of globalised inequalities such as decoloniality reimagine the international student experience and support reflexive practice?

Methods

Recruitment and timeline

For the purposes of maximising the number of workshop attendees in general, the workshops were open to all staff across all sectors and disciplines at the host and

partner institutions, totalling four universities and each institution had idiosyncratic approaches to recruitment. All workshops required in-person attendance due to management and consistency of recording responses. Recruitment was also open to students at any level of their academic career in order to encourage authentic student voices to be heard by the staff attendees.

De Montfort University, the host institution, used a repository of staff members to identify individuals whose work concerned internationalisation and international students, or was adjacent to the theme. To these individuals, tailored emails were sent inviting them to select a date and time that was most suitable for their attendance to the workshop. After a majority vote had been reached and a date and time decided, a broader range of staff were identified using the repository, internal networks and connections, and snowball emailing. The emails included a description of the workshop agenda and a promotional poster (see Appendix). The promotional poster was also shared via popular employment social networking site *LinkedIn*. In total, 42 people registered their interest in attending the workshop, and 26 people ended up participating in the workshop on 02 December 2025.

Recruitment of participants for the workshop at Manchester Metropolitan University was planned through targeted invitations to academic and professional services staff with an expressed interest in internationalisation, including all Departmental/School International Leads across all four faculties: Science and Engineering, Arts and Humanities, Business and Law, and Health and Education. Recruitment was further supported by promotional information disseminated through the internal Community of Practice "The International Experience", and via the institutional activities calendar to widen engagement. Invitations provided an overview of the planned activity and outlined its connection to the wider QAA-funded project, ensuring prospective participants were fully informed of the aims and context prior to involvement.

At University of Manchester, staff with an interest in internationalisation were identified by a web search, referral and existing networks and knowledge of the co-researcher. Individual tailored invitations were extended, including an option to refer a colleague or team as well or instead. Additional advertisements were circulated through existing networks such as PGCertHE participants. Finally, at the University of Wolverhampton, the research partner drew upon existing groups and communities whose focus was

upon support for international students' experiences and staff development. The session was also advertised more widely to staff and students.

Table 2 below shares the registered number of participants against the achieved participation numbers with the date of the workshop.

Table 2: Workshop participation across the five institutions

Higher education institution	Registered participants (n)	Achieved participants (n)	Date of workshop (dd/mm/yyyy)
De Montfort University	42	26	02/12/2025
University of Manchester	52	35	22/01/2026
Manchester Metropolitan University	22	11	22/01/2026
University of Wolverhampton	N/A*	17	07/01/2026
Total	116**	**89**	

* Issues surrounding the University of Wolverhampton's registration form were raised as they did not use the DMU-issued invitation and registration link, and lost access to their independently devised one.

**Excluding the unknown potential numbers from the University of Wolverhampton.

The attrition seen in the table above was not outwardly connected to the project or workshops, and may have been related to undisclosed personal circumstances of the participants. However, the workshops did occur in December and January, potentially affecting attendance due to the academic Christmas holiday break occurring between.

Data collection and sources

Prior to participants' workshop attendance, all participants who registered their interest were emailed with a participant information leaflet and a consent form (see Appendix) which was a prerequisite for their attendance. To account for any participants who did not fill in the consent form prior to the workshops, all project partners delegated a few minutes at the beginning of the workshop for participants to confirm their consent or to fill in the necessary consent form.

Across the institutions, two parts of the data that was collected came from in-person discussions which were recorded and transcribed for accuracy, and researcher observation notes. For the sake of consistency, at least one member of the host institution (De Montfort University) attended all workshops to record discussions and observations. Due to each workshop being managed independently by the colleagues at the collaborative institutions, the data sources varied in addition to the aforementioned discussion recordings and researcher observation notes, as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Data sources at staff workshops across the five institutions

Institution	**Source**			
	Researcher observation notes	Group discussion recordings and transcriptions	Participants' written notes (e.g., on paper, sticky notes, etc.)	Arts-based activity (collage and zine)
De Montfort University	✓	✓	✓	
University of Manchester	✓	✓	✓	
Manchester Metropolitan University	✓	✓	✓	
University of Wolverhampton	✓	✓	✓	✓

The researcher observation notes were undertaken in an unstructured and free-flowing way, with the researcher moving from table to table and hovering over group discussions to understand the general contents of the conversations that were happening; the researcher did not participate in the discussions. The recorded group discussions (both by hand, verbatim, and by device) were later transcribed while the participants' written notes and outputs were left behind post-workshops and collected by the attending researchers; these were later compiled and written out digitally for data analysis purposes. In a similar vein, the collages and zines produced by participants at the University of Wolverhampton were left behind, but photos were taken of the productions in order to serve as a basis for data analysis.

Data analysis

The data that was analysed was collected from the data sources detailed in Table [XX]. All data collected was compiled into a digital document shared with the project team members and included a combination of verbatim quotations from the audio recordings and textual artefacts, researcher observation notes, and photographs of the arts-based activities' outputs. The data was collected and organised into themes according to particular research questions pertinent to the project (see Research Questions) and categorised by institution. The written pieces were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), coded according to the research questions with the project team's own positionality and interpretive judgement recognised as active in the process of theme development, while the visual artefacts were analysed in relation to participants' descriptions of them. The results of the analysis were used for the purposes of this report, and to fulfil the objectives of the narrative audit tool and conceptual framework in addition to providing a resource to suggest and support inclusive practice. The central themes and motifs identified through this analysis of the workshop data directly shaped the four lenses (Positioning, Epistemology, Reflexivity, Structure) that underpin the conceptual framework and audit tool.

Conceptual framework informed by findings

This section will detail the findings and introduce a working conceptual framework which can be executed and practiced at an institutional or individual level. This conceptual framework is one of three outputs based directly on the findings and will be available as an independent resource to download alongside a Deficit Narrative Audit tool and a resource for inclusive practice.

The structural condition: how deficit narratives are produced

International students arriving at UK universities do not arrive into a neutral space. They arrive into a context shaped by at least three intersecting forces that this project takes seriously as the starting conditions of any pedagogic encounter.

The institutional framing

Across all four workshop sites, participants named without prompting the way institutions frame international students as financial assets rather than pedagogic partners. The term 'cash cows' was used directly and repeatedly by staff who found the framing both accurate and deeply uncomfortable. This matters because the financial logic of recruitment shapes: the conditions in which students arrive, the speed at which they are expected to integrate, the support made available to them, and the way their presence is communicated to academic staff. An institution that recruits students as a financial strategy and then tasks individual educators with the consequences of that strategy is producing a structural injustice, not a pedagogic problem.

The hostile external environment

International students do not only navigate institutional conditions. They arrive into a country whose political and media climate has become actively hostile to their presence. Visa restrictions, net migration targets that include international students, and sustained press coverage framing international students as a burden on domestic students or a threat to migration figures (Mittelmeier 2024). All of this shapes the experience of students before they reach the classroom. Several workshop participants noted the financial precarity that accompanies this climate: students overworking to cover fees and living costs, too frightened to disclose this to staff for fear of

jeopardising their visa status, and navigating what Wolverhampton participants described as risks of modern slavery and exploitative employment. These are not peripheral concerns. They are the conditions in which students are expected to think critically, participate actively, and produce assessed work.

The deficit narrative

From these structural conditions emerges a persistent narrative that positions international students as lacking: lacking language proficiency, lacking critical thinking skills, lacking familiarity with UK academic conventions (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2021). Participants at every workshop site identified this framing in the institutional language around international students, in the training materials they had encountered where these existed, and, with considerable honesty, in their own assumptions. The deficit narrative is not simply an attitude or behavioural problem. It is a structural product. When institutions recruit students as financial assets, when the political climate frames students as a problem, and when staff receive no dedicated support for working with diverse international cohorts, the deficit narrative fills the gap.

> "Cash cows are a common term to describe international students, but no action is being taken to challenge this. The university is docile." workshop participant, University of Manchester

The reframe: who has the deficit?

The most important shift this framework asks of us is a question, not an answer. When workshop participants were asked how international students are positioned in their classrooms, a recurring counter-narrative emerged: the deficit may not lie with the student. It may lie with the staff member who lacks understanding of the student's educational history. It may lie with the institution that provides no or minimal dedicated professional development. It may lie with a curriculum that treats eurocentric academic conventions as universal. It may lie with an assessment framework that was never designed with diverse/ minoritised learners in mind.

This reframe does not dissolve the real challenges that international students face. Students do navigate genuine transitions: linguistic, academic, cultural, and social, but

the question of who names these transitions as deficits, and in whose interest that naming operates, is a political as much as a pedagogic question.

One participant at the University of Manchester articulated the shift with particular clarity:

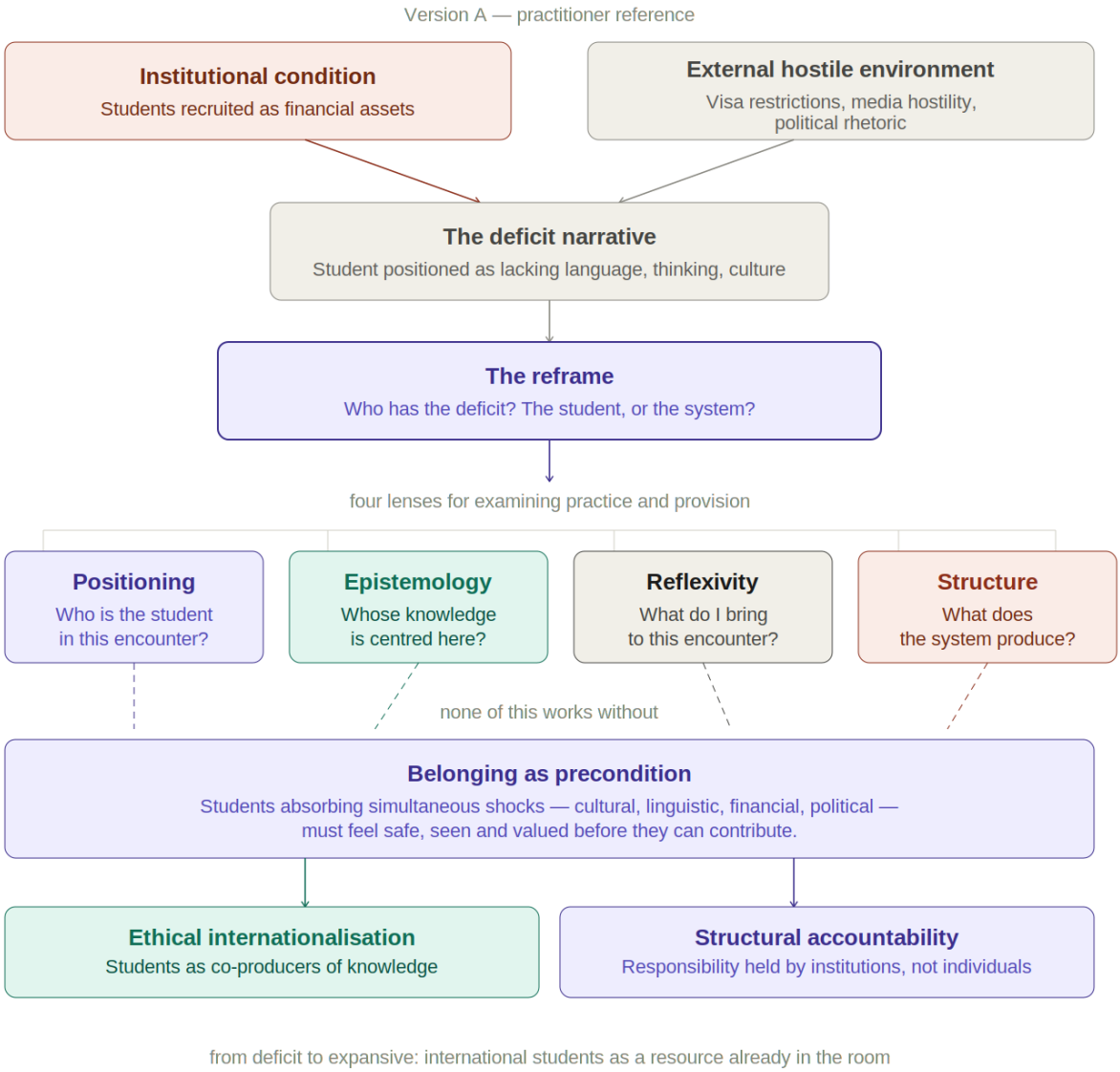
> "I went from a deficit mindset to an expansive mindset. Ask students what they already know. Find gaps, commonalities, and even learn something new from them. International students are a treasure that's already in the room with you." workshop participant, University of Manchester

This shift, from deficit to expansive, is the orienting commitment of the framework. It does not require abandoning rigour or pretending that all students arrive with identical preparation. It requires asking a more honest question: whose standards are we applying, and why?

One dimension of this reframe deserves particular attention in the classroom. We frequently read a quiet student, or a student whose written English does not conform to academic conventions, as someone who cannot think critically. But what we are often actually doing is measuring thinking through a particular linguistic and cultural lens, one shaped by Eurocentric academic traditions, and finding it absent when it arrives in a different form. This matters for every pedagogic decision: how we interpret seminar silence, how we respond to written work, whose contributions we follow up and whose we let pass. The association between fluency in dominant academic English and intellectual capacity is not a neutral standard. Scholars who study language and power call this a raciolinguistic ideology, a set of assumptions about whose language counts as evidence of intelligence, and it systematically disadvantages students whose thinking operates through different linguistic traditions (Ramjattan 2024; Loonat 2025). Naming it is the first step to examining it in our own practice.

The framework is presented in two forms. Figure 1 offers a quick reference overview of the key concepts and their relationships, designed to be used alongside staff development sessions or returned to during teaching. Figure 2 presents the same framework in fuller conceptual form, grounded explicitly in the workshop data and the voices of participants across all four institutions. Both are intended to be used together.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework, practitioner reference



Belonging as precondition

A consistent thread across all four workshops was the relationship between belonging and learning. Each institution contributed distinct evidence of what happens when belonging is absent, and what becomes possible when it is genuinely cultivated.

At the University of Wolverhampton, participants used zine-making and collage activities to map the shocks that international students absorb before their first seminar: navigating unfamiliar transport systems, adjusting to regional accents and dialects, managing finances, experiencing loneliness, missing home, finding food, and learning to read an entirely new physical and social landscape. One participant described the experience through a collage image of hands holding a flower: international students are placing their growth in our hands. The Wolverhampton workshop also surfaced the acute material stakes involved: students working excessive hours to cover fees and living costs, too frightened to disclose this to staff, navigating what participants described as risks of exploitative employment. These are not peripheral concerns. They are the conditions in which students are expected to belong.

At De Montfort University, the workshop generated a strong sense of what becomes possible when belonging is actively cultivated from the start. Participants recognised that international students bring new worldviews into the classroom and can identify with concepts and contexts that enrich learning for the whole cohort. There was also honest awareness of the conditions that can work against this. Students arrive in week one already navigating jobs, visas, unfamiliar systems, and cultural adjustment, and are expected to form relationships, engage critically, and prepare for assessment simultaneously. Participants were clear that week one is the most important moment for academic staff to develop what one participant called a cultural consciousness, an active curiosity about who their students are, rather than an assumption that students should simply adapt to existing norms. The observation that was returned to repeatedly was this: if they do not feel safe, they cannot be critical.

At the University of Manchester, participants identified isolation as one of the most persistent features of the international student experience. Home students and international students do not tend to interact, meaning that deficit assumptions go unchallenged and genuine community rarely forms. Staff noted that international students are frequently surrounded by others from the same national background and

have no experience of integration into something new. This is not because they are unwilling, but because the structures that would support integration are absent. The Manchester workshop also raised the mental health implications of this isolation explicitly, with community building named as fundamental to student wellbeing. Dr Sylvie Lomer, as the workshop facilitator at Manchester, reflecting on the session, noted something that extends the belonging argument beyond students alone: that academics who concentrate on internationalisation and inclusive pedagogies often end up feeling isolated in their daily work. She left the workshop deeply encouraged, but also concerned about how to sustain the enthusiasm that such events generate once the grind of daily work is re-established. This observation matters because it points to a structural condition that this framework takes seriously: belonging is not only a student experience. Staff who care about this work also need institutional conditions in which that commitment is recognised, supported, and sustained.

At Manchester Metropolitan University, participants reflected on how programme design in the contemporary university creates conditions that undermine belonging structurally. Class sizes too large for individual recognition, staff too stretched to address specific needs, and students clumped together under the category of international without regard for the diversity within that grouping. These are institutional choices, not natural conditions. One participant became aware through the positionality mapping exercise of her own situational advantages: proximity to family, familiarity with bureaucratic systems, a support network close at hand. She reflected on the gap between her own experience of arrival and what she was asking of her students.

The implication across all four sites is significant: students absorbing simultaneous shocks, cultural, linguistic, financial and political, must feel **safe, seen and valued** before they can contribute. This is not a soft concern supplementary to the real business of teaching. It is a precondition for the kind of critical engagement, collaborative participation, and co-creative practice that this framework advocates for. Belonging in this framework means something specific. It does not mean that students feel comfortable or are welcomed with a warm induction event. It means that students are recognised as individuals with histories, knowledge, and perspectives of value, not as a homogeneous category defined by fee status or visa type.

This has implications for timing. Belonging cannot be treated as something that develops over an academic term. It must be actively cultivated from the moment of arrival, and arguably from the moment of recruitment. An institution that communicates warmth and partnership in its marketing and then delivers a deficit-framed induction has already begun to undermine belonging before teaching starts.

> "Hands holding a flower: international students are placing their growth in our hands." workshop participant, University of Wolverhampton, collage activity
>
> "If they don't feel safe, they can't be critical." workshop participant, De Montfort University
>
> "Community building is fundamental to prevent mental health issues and isolation." workshop participant, University of Manchester
>
> "International students don't have safety nets to retake a year." workshop participant, University of Wolverhampton

Four lenses for examining practice and provision

Once belonging is established as the enabling condition, this framework offers four interconnected lenses for examining both institutional provision and individual practice. These lenses emerged from what participants across all four institutions consistently raised when asked how international students are positioned, whose knowledge is centred, what educators bring to the encounter, and what the institutional system produces. They are grounded in practice, not sequential steps, and each shapes how the others operate. **They underpin the Deficit Narrative Audit Tool that accompanies this framework**.

> **Lens 1 Positioning**
>
> How is the international student constructed in this encounter? As a contributor to knowledge and culture, or as the bearer of deficits that must be fixed? Positioning operates in language, in assessment design, in curriculum content, in how feedback is given, and in the assumptions that shape each pedagogic decision. Workshop participants

consistently noted the tendency to homogenise international students as a category, speaking of them as having shared needs, shared limitations, and shared characteristics when in fact the diversity within the group is at least as significant as the diversity between international and home students.

Lens 2 **Epistemology**

Whose knowledge is centred in the curriculum, the classroom, and the institution? Eurocentric academic conventions such as essay writing, seminar participation, oral argumentation, and a particular style of critical reasoning are frequently treated as universal standards that students must attain. Yet these conventions reflect particular traditions of knowledge production. They are not neutral. A curriculum that draws exclusively from Global North scholarship, that treats Western epistemological frameworks as the baseline for all intellectual work, and that pathologises students whose thinking operates through different traditions is not simply failing to be inclusive. It is making a political choice about whose knowledge counts.

Lens 3 **Reflexivity**

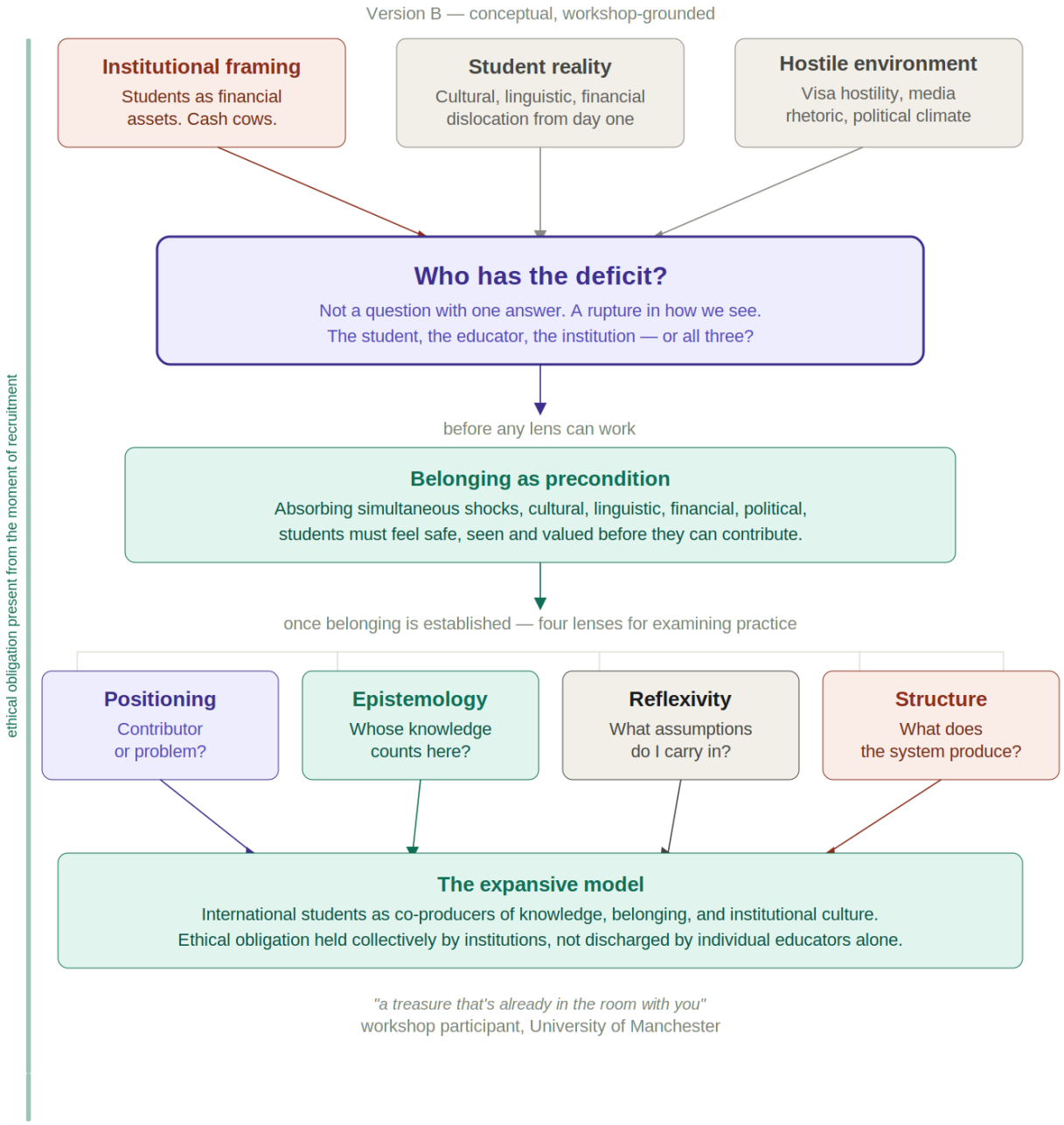
What does the educator bring to the encounter? Positionality mapping exercises used across all four workshops invited staff to examine their own educational backgrounds, linguistic identities, and the privileges they hold as educators in a UK higher education context. This was consistently the most generative and the most uncomfortable part of the workshops. One site noted that positionality discussions can generate hostility among colleagues, a finding that speaks to how much is at stake when we ask educators to examine the assumptions that underpin their practice. Reflexivity in this framework is not about guilt or self-criticism. It is about the honest awareness that makes change possible.

Lens 4 **Structure**

What does the system produce? Individual pedagogic goodwill cannot compensate for structural conditions that make inclusive practice impossible. Workload pressures, block teaching constraints, large class sizes, late arrivals due to visa restrictions, the absence of dedicated professional development, and the financial logic of mass international recruitment all shape what is possible in any given classroom. Workshop participants at every site expressed genuine commitment to supporting international students and genuine frustration at the structural constraints that limited their ability to do so. This lens asks institutions to take responsibility for the conditions they create, rather than leaving individual educators to carry that responsibility through personal effort alone.

These four lenses form the analytical basis of the Deficit Narrative Audit Tool, a companion instrument developed as part of this project. The audit tool enables staff and staff development practitioners to apply the lenses systematically to existing training resources and to their own practice.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework, workshop-grounded



"a treasure that's already in the room with you"
workshop participant, University of Manchester

Ethical internationalisation: obligation, not aspiration

The ethical argument of this framework begins with a disconnect that was named at every workshop site: between the lived realities of international students and staff navigating internationalisation in the classroom, and the claims that institutions make about how well they support international students. That gap is not simply a matter of resources or implementation. It represents an ethical deficit that this framework asks institutions to take seriously.

When an institution recruits a student from overseas, taking significant fees, issuing a place that shapes that student's future and making promises about the education and experience they will receive, it incurs an obligation that goes well beyond logistics. That obligation is not met by an induction week, an international office, or a voluntary English language class offered on the assumption that language deficit is the primary challenge students face. These gestures, however well-intentioned, can inadvertently communicate that the institution has done its part and the rest is up to the student. What is required instead is sustained, resourced, and institutionally embedded commitment to the conditions in which international students can genuinely thrive: academically, socially, and personally.

This project argues that ethical internationalisation has three defining features. First, it is relational rather than transactional: it positions students as partners and co-producers rather than consumers of a service. Second, it is structural rather than individual: it locates responsibility at the institutional level rather than delegating it to individual educators through personal commitment alone. Third, it is critical rather than celebratory: it does not treat diversity as an enrichment opportunity while ignoring the structural inequalities that produce and constrain that diversity.

Principles for practice

The following principles distil the framework into actionable commitments. They are intended as a shared language for staff development, curriculum review, and institutional policy, applicable across all four partner institutions and beyond.

01 Recognise before you teach

Before any pedagogic encounter, recognise who is in the room. Recognise them as individuals with histories, knowledge, and perspectives, not as a category defined by fee status or visa type. Belonging begins with recognition.

02 Locate the deficit honestly

When a student appears to struggle, ask where the deficit actually lies. In the student? In the curriculum? In the assessment design? In the support available? In the assumptions the educator brings? Honest diagnosis is the precondition for honest intervention.

03 Centre the voices of international students

Co-creation is not a methodology. It is an ethical commitment to working with students rather than on their behalf. Decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and support should be informed by the actual experiences of the students they are intended to serve. What opportunities do international students have to share their stories?

04 Act where you can, and name what constrains you

Inclusive practice requires both individual commitment and institutional change. When workload, class sizes, or institutional policy make it harder to support international students well, name this as a structural issue rather than a personal failing and continue to act within whatever space you have. Educators who care about this work are not absolved of responsibility by structural constraints, but they are also not responsible for carrying institutional obligations through personal commitment alone.

05 Hold the ethical obligation from the moment of recruitment

The duty of care towards international students does not begin at induction. It begins when recruitment promises are made. Institutions that recruit internationally carry an ethical obligation to resource the conditions in which students can genuinely thrive and succeed.

06 Move from deficit to expansive

The goal is not to fix international students. It is to expand the pedagogic imagination of institutions and educators. See what international students bring rather than what they lack, and to build the structures that allow those contributions to be recognised and valued.

Conclusion

The QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, Supporting staff to enhance the international student experience, sought to address the salient dearth of literature and institutional evidence on appropriate pedagogical internationalisation practices from a staff-facing perspective. In collaboration with three UK-based institutions (University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the University of Wolverhampton), four workshops were held with both staff and students to better understand the contextual circumstances of internationalisation at the corresponding universities. Following the collection of audio recordings, researcher observation notes, and any further physical artefacts produced in the workshops, three key findings emerged:

1. Dedicated support is physically (buildings, offices, staff) and bureaucratically enigmatic.
2. Who has the deficit? A reflexive reframe surrounding deficit discourse is necessary.
3. Belonging is a fundamental precondition to best pedagogical practice.

These findings were consistent across institutions and warranted a practical approach to tackling concerns around the lack of internationalisation support for staff at the universities. In response, three opportune outputs were produced:

1. A conceptual framework
2. A deficit narrative audit tool for individuals and institutions
3. An inclusive practice resource.

These outputs are particularly pertinent to both the academic and political tensions surrounding internationalisation across UK-based higher education institutions, and totalled with the findings from the workshops, present a hopeful and positive picture of future measures for instilling best pedagogical practice for both staff and international students. All staff, whether academic or professional, are encouraged to engage deeply with the conceptual framework detailed in this report and the supporting outputs. Combined, the three outputs will facilitate a profound change in personal and institutional framings and practices of internationalisation, deficit narratives, and belonging.

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