

# Translanguaging as a Motivational Scaffold for International Postgraduate Students in Private Higher Educational Institution (PHEI): A Qualitative Inquiry

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## Abstract

This qualitative inquiry explores the role of translanguaging as a motivational scaffold for international postgraduate students within the English-medium instruction (EMI) environment of a Private Higher Educational Institution (PHEI). Despite the prevalence of "English-only" institutional norms, many students utilize their full linguistic repertoires to manage the cognitive demands of advanced research and complex coursework. Grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study examines how these translanguaging practices fulfill the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10–15 international postgraduates and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that translanguaging serves as a critical "support beam," lowering the affective filter and preventing "cognitive freezing" during high-stakes academic tasks. Furthermore, the study identifies an emerging trend of "high-tech translanguaging," where students utilize wearable AI and digital platforms—such as AR translation glasses and simultaneous interpretation earbuds—to scaffold their learning. The research concludes that embracing linguistic flexibility is a strategic necessity for PHEIs to enhance student retention, satisfaction, and academic success in a globalized economy.

**Keywords:** Translanguaging, International Postgraduate Students, Private Higher Education (PHEI); Self-Determination Theory, Scaffolding, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), Technological Scaffolds, Academic Motivation

## Introduction

The landscape of global higher education has undergone a seismic shift, characterized by the unprecedented mobility of international postgraduate students seeking advanced degrees in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments. Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) have emerged as pivotal players in this sector, often marketing themselves as global hubs of

academic excellence. However, for many international postgraduates, the transition to an LX (non-native) medium of learning involves more than just academic adjustment; it requires navigating a complex linguistic terrain where their native languages are often sidelined in favor of "English-only" norms. Despite the push for monolingualism in these settings, many students naturally resort to their full linguistic repertoires—a process known as translanguaging—to manage the cognitive demands of high-level research and specialized coursework (Pawliszko, 2026).

In the competitive market of private higher education, student success and retention are critical metrics of institutional viability. Unlike public universities, PHEIs often host highly diverse cohorts with varied linguistic backgrounds, where the pressure to perform is exacerbated by significant financial investments from the students. While these institutions provide state-of-the-art facilities, the pedagogical support for "linguistic hospitality" often remains underdeveloped. When international students are unable to bridge the gap between their home languages and the academic medium, they experience a sense of "linguistic disenfranchisement." This creates a unique tension between the institution's desire for internationalization and the student's psychological need for a learning environment that validates their existing linguistic identity.

Despite the growing recognition of translanguaging as a pedagogical resource, a significant gap remains in understanding its psychological impact on postgraduate learners, particularly within the private sector. Current academic structures often treat a student's native language as a hindrance rather than a "motivational scaffold." This monolingual orientation can lead to decreased academic self-efficacy, heightened anxiety, and a decline in intrinsic motivation among international postgraduates who struggle to express complex theoretical concepts in an LX. There is a lack of qualitative evidence exploring how these students utilize translanguaging practices to maintain their drive and persistence. Without a clear understanding of how translanguaging supports the "Self-Determination" needs of these students, private institutions risk failing to provide the very scaffolding necessary for their international cohorts to thrive in a globalized academic economy.

The global higher education landscape has seen an unprecedented surge in international postgraduate mobility, with Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) becoming central "global hubs". However, this expansion has created a stark linguistic divide where "English-only" institutional norms often clash with the actual multilingual realities of diverse student cohorts.

For many international postgraduates, the transition to an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environment is not merely an academic hurdle but a social and psychological one. When students' native languages are sidelined, they experience "linguistic disenfranchisement," leading to heightened anxiety and a decline in academic self-efficacy.

Hence, there is a critical need to re-evaluate the role of a student's full linguistic repertoire as a motivational scaffold rather than a hindrance to academic success. While Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) offer state-of-the-art facilities, the pedagogical support for "linguistic hospitality" often remains underdeveloped, creating a tension between institutional internationalization and the student's psychological need for identity validation.

### **Significance of the Study**

This inquiry is significant for several key stakeholders within the globalized academic economy:

1. For International Postgraduates: The study highlights how translanguaging acts as a cognitive "support beam," lowering the affective filter and preventing "cognitive freezing" during high-stakes academic tasks.
2. For PHEI Administrators and Faculty: It demonstrates that embracing linguistic flexibility is a strategic necessity to enhance student retention, satisfaction, and the perceived value of the educational investment.
3. For the Field of Applied Linguistics: By integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this research fills a gap in understanding the psychological triggers—Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness—that sustain motivation in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments.

### *Research Questions*

Based on this framework, our study address:

1. How do international postgraduate students in PHEIs utilize translanguaging to scaffold their understanding of complex academic content?
2. In what ways does the practice of translanguaging contribute to the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs (Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness) within an LX medium?
3. How do institutional language policies in the private sector influence students' willingness to employ translanguaging as a motivational strategy?

### **Literature Review**

From Monolingualism to the Multilingual Turn Traditional perspectives on higher education have long been dominated by a "monolingual bias," where the use of a student's first language (L1) was viewed as an interference to the mastery of the target medium of instruction (LX). However, the "multilingual turn" in applied linguistics, championed by scholars such as Sah & Li (2024) and Tai & Wong (2023), has reframed translanguaging not merely as code-switching, but as a sophisticated cognitive process. In this view, international students do not operate in separate linguistic compartments; rather, they draw upon a singular, unified semiotic repertoire to make sense of complex academic worlds. For postgraduate students in private higher education—environments often characterized by high-stakes academic rigor and diverse linguistic backgrounds—translanguaging emerges as a natural and necessary practice for navigating advanced theoretical discourse.

### *Translanguaging as a Cognitive and Pedagogical Scaffold*

Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), translanguaging serves as a "scaffold" that supports learners as they transition from their current level of understanding to higher levels of academic competence (as cited in Henry & Liu, 2023; Kaiypova et al., 2024). In the LX medium, international postgraduates often face a "cognitive overload" where the effort of processing language competes with the effort of mastering subject matter. By utilizing their native language for "inner speech" or peer discussion, students can bridge this gap, using the L1 as a temporary support beam to grasp LX concepts. This scaffolding is particularly critical in the private sector, where the pressure

for timely completion and high academic performance necessitates efficient cognitive strategies to ensure that the linguistic barrier does not become a permanent wall to conceptual mastery.

#### *Impact on Learner Motivation and Self-Determination*

The intersection of translanguaging and motivation is best understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000, as cited in Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2024; Al-Hoorie et al., 2025). When institutions allow or encourage translanguaging practices, they directly support the student's basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence. Being forced to adhere to "English-only" policies can lead to a sense of "linguistic disempowerment," which diminishes intrinsic motivation and can lead to academic burnout. Conversely, when international postgraduates are empowered to use their full linguistic repertoire, their academic self-efficacy increases. As Dörnyei (2009) suggests in the L2 Motivational Self System, reducing the "ideal-to-actual" language gap through translanguaging reduces anxiety and fosters a more resilient academic identity, making the student more likely to persist in their studies despite the challenges of a foreign educational environment (as cited in Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2024; Al-Hoorie et al., 2025).

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by two primary theoretical pillars: Vygotsky's Scaffolding (within the Zone of Proximal Development) and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT). *Vygotsky's Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*

In the context of this study, translanguaging is viewed as a semiotic tool that functions as a "scaffold." (as cited in Turnbull, 2024; Wong, 2024; Zheng & Qiu, 2023).

1. **The Concept:** Scaffolding refers to the temporary support provided to a learner to help them bridge the gap between what they can do independently and what they can do with assistance.
2. **Application:** For international postgraduates, the "LX" (English) medium can often be a barrier. Translanguaging allows them to use their first language (L1) as a cognitive bridge to grasp complex L2 concepts. By utilizing their full linguistic repertoire, students remain within their **ZPD**, preventing the frustration that leads to amotivation.

#### *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)*

To understand "motivation," the study utilizes SDT, which posits that for a student to be intrinsically motivated, three basic psychological needs must be met (as cited in See & Goh, 2026; See et al., 2026 a, b).

1. **Autonomy:** Translanguaging empowers students to take ownership of their learning process by choosing the linguistic tools that work best for them.
2. **Competence:** When students can clarify difficult theories in their native language, their sense of mastery and "academic self-efficacy" increases.
3. **Relatedness:** In a private higher education setting, allowing translanguaging fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion, as the student's cultural and linguistic identity is validated rather than suppressed.

### Conceptual Framework

The relationship between these variables can be visualized as a process where translanguaging acts as the "support beams" for the student's motivational state. (refer Table 1).

Table 1

*Conceptual framework*

Theoretical Component	Function in Study	Expected Outcome
<b>Translanguaging</b>	The Independent Variable / Tool	Use of L1, L2, for sense-making.
<b>Scaffolding</b>	The Mechanism	Cognitive support and reduction of anxiety.
<b>SDT Needs</b>	The Psychological Trigger	Increased Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness.
<b>Motivation</b>	The Dependent Variable / Goal	Higher engagement and persistence in PG studies.

### *Addressing the Research Gap*

Current literature frequently overlooks the specific challenges of postgraduate learners in the private sector, where financial investment and professional pressure exacerbate linguistic stress. Furthermore, this study identifies a novel trend of "high-tech translanguaging," where students utilize wearable AI—such as AR translation glasses and simultaneous interpretation earbuds—to independently scaffold their learning.

By documenting these "lived experiences" through a phenomenological lens, this study provides the qualitative evidence necessary to shift the traditional "English-only" paradigm toward a more inclusive, effective, and psychologically supportive academic environment.

### Research Methodology

#### *Research Design*

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in a phenomenological approach. This design is selected because it allows for a deep exploration of the "lived experiences" of international students. By focusing on the subjective perceptions of the participants, the study aims to understand how translanguaging acts as a psychological and pedagogical support system (scaffold) that influences their academic motivation.

#### *Research Site and Context*

The study is situated within a private higher education institution (PHEI). Private institutions often provide a unique linguistic landscape, as they frequently host a high density of

international students and operate under market-driven pressures to ensure student satisfaction and retention. This environment offers a rich context for observing how linguistic flexibility impacts student engagement.

### *Participants and Sampling*

A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants who meet the following criteria:

1. **Status:** Full-time international postgraduate students (Master's or PhD).
2. **Linguistic Background:** Non-native speakers of the primary medium of instruction (LX).
3. **Diversity:** A mix of nationalities to ensure a broad range of "home language" influences.

The sample size will target 10–15 participants, or until data saturation is reached—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

The primary data collection tool is the semi-structured interview.

- 1) **Semi-structured format:** Allows the researcher to follow a set protocol while maintaining the flexibility to probe deeper into unexpected participant responses.
- 2) **Mode:** Interviews will be conducted via Zoom/Microsoft Teams or face-to-face, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes.
- 3) **Language:** While the interviews will be conducted primarily in English, participants will be encouraged to "translanguage" during the interview itself if they feel it helps them express complex emotional or motivational states.

### *Data Analysis Procedure*

The data will be analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021):

1. **Familiarization:** Transcribing interviews and reading transcripts repeatedly.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Labeling key segments of text related to "motivation" and "language use."
3. **Searching for Themes:** Grouping codes into broader patterns (e.g., "Confidence Boost," "Cognitive Ease," "Social Inclusion").
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Ensuring the themes work in relation to the entire data set.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Refining the specifics of each theme.
6. **Writing the Report:** Linking the themes back to the research questions and existing literature.

### *Trustworthiness (Validity and Reliability)*

To ensure the rigor of the study, the following strategies will be employed:

1. **Member Checking:** Participants will be given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure their views were accurately represented.
2. **Peer Debriefing:** Discussing the coding process with a colleague to minimize researcher bias.
3. **Audit Trail:** Maintaining a detailed record of all raw data, field notes, and coding iterations.

*Ethical Considerations*

The study will adhere to strict ethical guidelines:

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants will sign a form detailing the study's purpose and their right to withdraw.
2. **Anonymity:** Use of pseudonyms (e.g., Participant A, Student B) to protect identities.
3. **Data Security:** All recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected drive.

Table 1 shows the Summary Table for this study.

*Table 1*

*Summary Table for this study*

Component	Description
Paradigm	Interpretivism
Approach	Qualitative (Phenomenology)
Participants	10–15 International Postgraduates
Primary Tool	Semi-structured Interviews
Analysis	Thematic Analysis



**Findings**

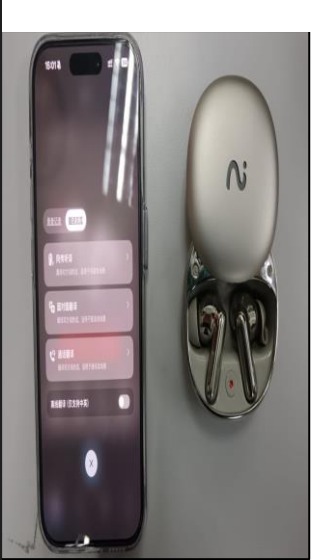

The practice of translanguaging serves as a critical psychological buffer by lowering the "affective filter," a concept that describes how high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, or lack of motivation can block the path of language acquisition and academic performance. In the high-pressure environment of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), international postgraduate students often face intense linguistic stress that can lead to cognitive freezing. By allowing students to move fluidly between their native language and English, the perceived "threat" of the foreign language environment is diminished. This reduction in stress fosters a safer emotional space, enabling students to engage more deeply with complex course materials and participate in academic discussions without the paralyzing fear of making linguistic errors. Furthermore, translanguaging validates the multifaceted identities of international scholars, ensuring they do not feel forced to abandon their cultural and linguistic heritage in pursuit of an advanced degree. When students are encouraged to use their full linguistic repertoire, their first language (L1) is recognized as a sophisticated cognitive tool rather than a hindrance to be overcome. This validation strengthens their sense of "relatedness" and belonging within the institution, as it acknowledges that their prior knowledge and identity—formed in their native tongue—are valuable assets. Consequently, students remain connected to their authentic selves while mastering the academic conventions of the LX (non-native) language,



preventing the "linguistic disenfranchisement" that often leads to social and academic isolation.

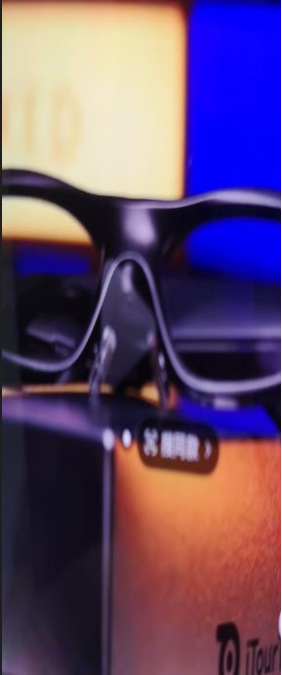
Ultimately, for many international postgraduates, translanguaging is not merely a preference but a necessity for academic survival and the production of high-quality research. The leap from general English proficiency to the specialized, abstract discourse required at the Master’s and PhD levels is immense. Translanguaging acts as a cognitive bridge, allowing students to use their L1 to unpack intricate theoretical frameworks before re-encoding those ideas into formal academic English. This scaffolding ensures that the intellectual depth of their research is not compromised by their current stage of English fluency. By providing this "support beam," institutions empower students to meet the rigorous output expectations of a higher degree, ultimately supporting student retention and long-term academic success. (refer Table 1).

Table1  
Findings from Visual Artifacts and Technology Evidence

Image Reference	Category of Finding	Specific Observation	Motivational/Cognitive Impact
	<p><b>Wearable Translation Tech</b></p>	<p>Use of <b>iTourTranslator AR glasses</b>. This allows for real-time visual translation of lecture slides or printed text.</p>	<p>Provides a "safety net" for comprehension, reducing the fear of missing critical information during live sessions.</p>
	<p><b>Audio Scaffolding</b></p>	<p>Use of <b>viam translation earbuds</b>. Students use these to hear simultaneous interpretations of English lectures in their L1.</p>	<p>Supports <b>Competence</b>; it ensures the student can follow the pace of postgraduate discourse without cognitive exhaustion.</p>

	<p><b>Platform Integration</b></p>	<p>Use of <b>Tencent Meeting</b> for collaboration, which features built-in translation and transcription tools.</p>	<p>Facilitates <b>Relatedness</b>; allows students to interact with peers and content using a familiar interface that bridges language gaps.</p>
	<p><b>Visual Aid &amp; QR Codes</b></p>	<p>Promotion of translation apps and specific "Scanning Translation" features on posters/flyers.</p>	<p>Indicates an institutional or peer-led "culture of support" where multi-modal translation is normalized rather than stigmatized.</p>

	<p><b>Student Reflection</b></p>	<p>Handwritten/Typed response sheet stating:  <i>"Expressing myself in my native language makes me feel a sense of belonging."</i></p>	<p>Directly confirms the link between translanguaging and the psychological need for <b>Relatedness</b> and <b>Autonomy</b>.</p>
	<p><b>Mobile Scaffolding</b></p>	<p>Use of mobile-based translation interfaces during study sessions.</p>	<p>Enhances <b>Persistence</b>; students can quickly resolve linguistic roadblocks on-the-go without stopping their research process.</p>

	<p><b>Institutional Perspective</b></p>	<p>Response sheet discussing the "strict English-only" vs. "flexible" environment.</p>	<p>Highlights the tension in PHEIs; flexibility is viewed as a "support beam" for those struggling, while others value English immersion for professional growth.</p>
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The findings of this study suggest that translanguaging serves as a critical cognitive bridge for international postgraduate students, allowing them to navigate the complexities of advanced academic discourse. Rather than viewing their native language as a hindrance, students utilize it as a sophisticated tool for "organizing and clarifying theories," particularly when English proficiency lags behind their intellectual capacity. This process is most evident during high-stakes tasks, such as conceptualizing research frameworks or drafting complex assignments, where the ability to think through ideas in a first language prevents "cognitive freezing" and ensures that the depth of their academic contribution is not lost in translation.

A standout discovery in this research is the proactive role of technology in creating "technological scaffolds." Students are not merely passive recipients of language; they are active architects of their own learning environments, integrating AI-driven tools like AR translation glasses and real-time translation earbuds to survive in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings. This use of wearable and digital technology reflects a high degree of "Autonomy" under Self-Determination Theory, as students intentionally select and leverage these tools to bypass linguistic barriers and maintain the pace of postgraduate rigor.

From an institutional perspective, the data indicates that linguistic flexibility significantly enhances the perceived value of the educational experience within the Private Higher Education (PHEI) sector. Students associate the freedom to translanguage with a supportive "language culture," which they often link to their financial investment in the institution. When a university fosters "linguistic hospitality," it directly addresses the students' need for "Relatedness," making them feel seen and valued as multilingual scholars rather than deficient English speakers. This institutional validation acts as a powerful motivator, reinforcing the student's belief that their education is "worth the investment."

Ultimately, the synergy between translanguaging and these various scaffolds directly impacts student retention and persistence. By reducing the "ideal-to-actual" language gap and lowering the affective filter, translanguaging prevents the onset of academic burnout and frustration. As students feel more competent and connected to their academic community, they exhibit higher levels of engagement and a greater willingness to persist through the challenges of their Master's or PhD programs. Consequently, translanguaging is not just a linguistic habit but a vital motivational scaffold that ensures international postgraduates can fully develop their academic potential. (refer Table 2).

Table 2  
 Framework Components Supported by Participant Evidence

Component	Observation in Data	Supporting Quotes from Participants
<b>Translanguaging</b>	Frequent use of L1 for sense-making and technology-assisted translation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"At critical times, I use software/apps to support my understanding in language that I cannot understand."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Flexible usage of both English and Chinese benefits me at the optimum level."</i></li> </ul>
<b>Scaffolding</b>	Acts as a mechanism to reduce anxiety and provide cognitive support during high-stakes tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I use my mother tongue to repeatedly organize and clarify theories to complete the homework."</i></li> <li>• <i>"I cannot produce output accurately... I say what I know to get to my point [using translanguaging]."</i></li> </ul>
<b>Psychological Needs</b>	Directly triggers increased feelings of Competence and Relatedness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Relatedness:</b> <i>"Expressing myself in my native language makes me feel a sense of belonging and connection."</i></li> <li>• <b>Competence:</b> <i>"Translanguaging makes learning manageable... It allows us to fully develop our potential."</i></li> </ul>

<p><b>Goal (Motivation)</b></p>	<p>Results in higher engagement and a willingness to persist despite linguistic barriers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"The freedom to translanguage is a factor that makes my educational experience feel 'worth the investment'."</i></li> <li>• <i>"It helps me to understand and keep up with the progress of the course."</i></li> </ul>
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**Discussion and Conclusions**

*Discussion*

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that translanguageing acts as a vital "motivational scaffold" for international postgraduate students navigating English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments. By utilizing their full linguistic repertoire, students are not merely translating words; they are performing a complex cognitive maneuver that allows them to maintain the intellectual rigor required at the Master’s and PhD levels (Ulum, 2025; Masumbe, 2026; Angwah, 2026). As observed in the data, the use of the native language to "organize and clarify theories" aligns with the concept of cognitive scaffolding. When students face "cognitive overload" due to the double burden of learning new, complex content in a non-native language, translanguageing serves as a temporary support beam that prevents academic failure and fosters a sense of Competence.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the integration of AI-driven technology—such as AR translation glasses and real-time earbuds—highlights a modern evolution of student Autonomy (Yu, 2026; Wiryani et al., 2025 ; Zhu & Li, 2025). These students are no longer passive recipients of a monolingual policy; they are proactive agents who leverage technological ecosystems to ensure their own academic survival. Furthermore, the findings suggest that "linguistic hospitality" within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) fosters Relatedness. When an institution allows or even subtly encourages the use of L1, students feel a stronger sense of belonging and identity validation. This emotional safety net lowers the "affective filter," reducing anxiety and making the substantial financial and personal investment in their education feel "worth it."

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, this qualitative inquiry demonstrates that translanguageing is an indispensable asset for the modern international postgraduate student. It is a multi-dimensional tool that bridges the gap between a student’s existing knowledge in their native language and the high-level academic expectations of an EMI program. The study concludes that the traditional "English-only" paradigm in higher education may inadvertently hinder student motivation and deep learning by stripping away the very linguistic tools students need to succeed.

The research highlights a shift toward "high-tech translanguageing," where wearable AI and digital platforms provide real-time scaffolding. For PHEIs, embracing a more flexible linguistic culture is not just a pedagogical choice but a strategic one that enhances student satisfaction, persistence, and retention. To better support international scholars, institutions should move away from viewing the native language as a barrier and instead recognize it as a cognitive and

motivational foundation. By validating the multilingual identities of their students, universities can foster a more inclusive, effective, and psychologically supportive academic environment.

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