



Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: An overview

PPS: LU explores factors that influence undergraduates' progression to postgraduate study. We consider barriers and enablers that widen access to postgraduate study amongst underrepresented groups (e.g. disabled students; students whose parent/s do not have Higher Education qualifications; from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] background).

PPS LU Series

The PPS LU project is funded as part of Lancaster's Access and Participation Plan (APP). In 2021-22 the project undertook a review of existing literature, to inform empirical data collection and initial guidance for departments. PPS LU also produced the following briefing papers:

1. An Overview of PPS LU
2. Reviewing provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in your department

What is the PPS LU study about?

The **PPS LU** project aims to better understand the barriers and enablers to progression to postgraduate (PG) study. On a national level, data shows that some groups of students are underrepresented at PG level, including certain minority ethnic groups (Jackson-Cole, 2021).

At Lancaster the picture is less clear due to the relatively small numbers within specific groups of students, and substantial variation across the faculties. Nevertheless,

there is growing consensus regarding the need more generally to identify what helps and hinders students in accessing PG study, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage or potential discrimination.

Three target groups

- **Disabled students** (i.e. those students declaring a disability, including those in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance [DSA] and those who are not);
- **Students from a minority ethnic group** (i.e. 'Home' Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students);
- **Students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background** (i.e. students from a low-income household, and/or from a neighbourhood with low participation in HE).

Why focus on PPS? The broader context.

The rationale for **PPS LU** derives from several developments at the national level, including:

- The **growing policy attention** on progression to postgraduate study (e.g. the Office for Students announcement of £8 million funding for 13 programmes to address progression to PG for BAME students).
- The recognition that inequalities do not begin and end with gaining an undergraduate degree; rather, they continue in different forms upon graduation (Budd 2017).
- The **shifting context** with increased focus on the 'third phase' (i.e. beyond graduation) of the student journey in the

The wider context continued:

field of WP, moving on from the concentration on access to, and success and retention in, undergraduate study (Gaskell and Lingwood 2019).

- Rising numbers of undergraduate students meaning that **postgraduate qualifications** are perceived as increasingly important in gaining graduate employment (Wakeling and Laurison 2017; Wakeling and Mateos-González 2021).

PPS LU 2021-24 Research

In 2021-22, the focus is **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)**, helpers and planners.

In year 2 (2022-23), the focus is **academic preparedness and transition experience** shaped by year 1 findings;

In year 3 (2023-24), the focus is **retention and success**, building incrementally on previous years' findings.

2021-22 Research question

Based on previous research (Houghton, 2003) the overarching research question is:

How do helpers and planners influence access, retention and successful progression in PG study for students from a widening participation background?

The project aims to identify and make explicit the people and processes involved in successfully making the transition, that otherwise may remain assumed or implicit.

Data collection methods

The **PPS LU** study uses a mixed methods approach.

An initial literature review of policy and related initiatives complements desk-based research into the provision of IAG at LU, exploring the resources available via the LU webpages.

Student engagement

All Lancaster based Undergraduates (UG), Taught Postgraduates (PGT) and Research Postgraduates (PGR) will be invited to complete an online questionnaire that asks about their future plans, including the resources they access and the formal and informal 'helpers' they approach for IAG.

- The online questionnaires will support the recruitment of students for interview.
- The interviews (individual and group) will collect more detailed qualitative data to better understand the factors enabling and hindering progression.

PPS LU Research Focus

- a. What is the **current context**? What information is available via websites? Which staff (academic and professional services) provide IAG? And what is their experience of providing IAG?
- b. What are the views of **prospective PG students**? How is postgraduate study perceived by WP-UG students? Where do they go for information? Who do they approach and why?
- c. What are the **retrospective views of current WP-PG Students**? Who and what was important when progressing from UG to PG? What do they wish they had known as undergraduates? What way did the secondary planners (e.g. process) influence them?

PPS LU links with other WP and EDI work at Lancaster

There is a synergy between PPS LU and several developments at LU, with the project potentially informing and being informed by, for example, work in the Careers service (Edwards 2020), disability and inclusion service, and specific WP initiatives such as GROW your future, Transitions, Lancaster Success Programme, RAID's PGT recruitment, Doctoral Academy, REC and Athena Swan.

What is the purpose of doing the PPS LU study?

As a sector the need to move beyond access to UG study to address inequalities within PGT and PGR is growing. Existing research suggests various factors that may underlie differential progression to PG study, these fall into three broad areas of consideration:

Capitals

- Cultural capital shaping use of resources 'planners'
- Social networks shaping 'helpers'
- Economic

Engagement

- Student experience and sense of belonging
- Connecting to their personal context
- Happenstance

Finance

- Attitudes toward loans and debt
- Access to funding linked to attainment

Capitals

Evidence suggests that existing differences in progression to and through undergraduate study continue to influence progression to postgraduate study.

Marvell's (2021) biographical-narrative study with masters students identified knowledge of and access to academic pathways as connected to the range of factors influencing individual students' lived and student experience.

Harvey and Andrewartha's (2013) Australian study highlights the under-representation of socio-economically disadvantaged students as well as noting the disciplinary pipeline and institutional differences impacting on PG progression.

Within PPS LU we associate cultural capital with the knowledge of postgraduate PGT / PGR application processes and confidence when engaging with the 'planners' or sources of information designed to support progression.

Social capital relates to the networks and 'helpers' students are comfortable approaching.

Engagement

Qualitative research by the Institute for Community Studies (2022) for the Guild HE

found that ethnic minority students (who collaborated in the research) identified a sense of belonging as crucial when making progression decisions.

Other research suggests that UG experience and feelings of belonging influenced who students asked for help, and who offered them encouragement to consider PG study (Hancock and Wakeling 2019; Ahmet 2020; Studies 2022; McPherson, Punch, and Graham 2017).

Studies further point to the importance of serendipity or happenstance (Marvell 2021). For example, Houghton's (2003) original research on who PG students identified as 'helpers' noted the ways chance encounters influenced decision making.

Economic Considerations

Over the past decade research confirms concerns relating to economic capital and/or attitude towards loans/debt as restricting progression to PG study (Davies 2018; Ball 2016; Stuart et al. 2008) especially when the current economic climate emphasises the perceived opportunities to gain employment (Ball 2016).

Mateos-González and Wakeling (2020) quantitative analysis of destinations of all

UK first-degree graduates between 2012/13 and 2016/17 (N=1,360,965) suggests that the introduction of the Master's loans saw both increased participation in PGT study and rates of socio-economically under-represented groups rising more rapidly.

Williams et al. (2019) from Leading Routes, an initiative tackling the pipeline of Black academics from African Caribbean background, identified access to financial support linked to degree attainment as a concern. Their findings are supported by other research into the ethnic minority awarding gap (Cramer 2021).

Initiatives to support postgraduate progression

Within the sector interventions to improve access for particular groups are being developed and trialed (Hancock and Wakeling 2019). These include: fee waivers; research internships; and targeted IAG. (See PPS LU Briefing Paper 3).

REAP is also contributing to wider conversations around progression through, for example, the NEON (National Educational Opportunities Network) 'Widening Participation in postgraduate study' group.

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About us: REAP Researching Equity, Access and Participation. We are a small team of researchers based in the Department of Educational Research.

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