Lancaster University

Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: A review of Information, Advice & Guidance

PPS:LU explores the progression to postgraduate study at Lancaster University. It focuses on three groups of students namely: disabled students; students from a minority ethnic group; and students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background (e.g. low-income households).

PPS LU Series

PPS LU draws upon existing literature and uses a mixed methods approach to gather qualitative evidence that complements the existing student data. PPS LU aims to identify the key people who help and support students (helpers) and the main resources (planners) that they use on their journey from undergraduate (UG) to postgraduate taught (PGT) or postgraduate research (PGR) degrees. Lancaster's Access and Participation Plan (APP) funds REAP (Researching Equity Access and Participation) based in Educational Research to undertake PPS LU.

'Departmental' role in IAG

This briefing paper is for departmental staff and presents a quick-read reflective exercise, for individuals or ideally departments to undertake. We have used 'department' as an umbrella term which includes courses, modules, and programmes of study. Wider literature around inequalities in accessing PG study and information about postgraduate progression interventions shapes the questions.

However, we recognise that you are the experts in your field so would welcome your thoughts about existing Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provision (e.g. what you would change or add if you had the time or resources at the level of the department or faculty), what you feel the university could do to enhance progression and, perhaps, what you would add as useful questions for departmental staff to consider in reviewing their IAG.

10 Questions to reflect on IAG provision

1. How easy is it to access information about PG courses in your department?
2. When is IAG provided within your department?
3. How is IAG provided in your department?
4. Who provides IAG in your department?
5. What is the content of the IAG provided by your department?
6. How are the practicalities of studying at PGT / PGR covered?
7. Do you know what proportion of UG students from your department progress to PG study at Lancaster?
8. Are you aware of any specific opportunities or support that is available for underrepresented or disadvantaged students in your discipline?
9. How does your department work with other staff around the university in relation to supporting student progression?
10. This question is one for you to write… From your experience what would you add as a helpful question for your colleagues to consider when reviewing IAG in their department?

Unpacking the questions with reference to research

Here we take each of the ten questions and provide the rationale for each, drawing on the literature, and some further questions to aid your reflection about existing provision.

1. How easy is it to access information about PG courses in your department?

Often we make assumptions about what students already know and therefore do not need to be told. For example, we may refer to PGT and PGR without defining or explaining the difference. For some students PG study, the courses, funding, content and assessment, still needs de-mystifying (Hancock and Wakeling 2019; Gormley 2021).

- If you were an undergraduate student and wanted to find a bit more about PG study from the website, how easy is it to locate the information?
- Does your department make clear who students should approach?
- Does your department provide accessible events for UG students to attend to find out the 'basics'?

2. When is IAG provided?

A student considering PG study in year 1 may have ruled it out by year 3 and vice versa, intentions change over time (Ball 2016) so delivering IAG at different points in the student journey could be valuable.

- When do you introduce information about PG study to your students? Is this followed up at particular points?
- If information sessions are scheduled, are these voluntary for students to choose to attend or are they integrated into courses or programmes of study so the information reaches all students?

For under-represented groups, assuming PG study is 'not for them' is common. Knowing more about what is involved in PG study and how it may be possible for them to progress to PG study may make a difference.

- If information sessions are voluntary, how might you reach students who have ruled out further study?

They may be ruling out something before they have the information to properly consider it and discover how it might be 'something for them'.

3. How is IAG delivered?

For students from under-represented groups, there are often 'critical moments' (Thomson et al. 2002) or 'turning points' which brought them into higher education, sometimes from encouragement by one particular tutor. What you say could be pivotal in a student's journey.

- Do you provide one-off informal advice and guidance to students on an individual basis?

Some students on the margins already feel they don't belong, gaining access to insider information and helpers may be difficult.

- Do you encourage a student to look into PG courses or apply for funding?
- On what basis do you do this, and could it be more inclusive, more accessible?

4. Who provides the IAG?

The importance of seeing someone like you (representation) enhances a sense of belonging (Ahmet 2020). In turn, if a student feels like they belong and fit in then they may be more likely to consider further study. If a student sees someone 'like them' then it may be easier for them to ask questions about progression and share their concerns.

- Are there opportunities for UG students to talk to PG students?

- Are there opportunities for PGT students to talk with PGR students?

5. What is the content of the IAG provided by your department?

Research by Gormley (2021) highlighted that information on university webpages was a key reference point for students.

A brief review of LU postgraduate webpages suggested some gaps in the content. Namely, covering the 'basics' in terms of what the various courses are (explaining the difference between a Masters and a PhD), and how content is delivered, and offering some FAQ and answers. On the other hand, too much content can be overwhelming. Imagine being a prospective PG student with little knowledge or expectations around further study.

- Would you know where to start and who to go to?
- Or would you experience an information overload and give up?

The [Prospects Postgraduate Study Guide](), was recommended by one of the PGR students working on the PPS LU, what other sources do you use?

6. How are the practicalities of studying at PGT / PGR covered?

Research suggests that students from underrepresented groups in particular may lack access to helpers, such as family members, who have knowledge of higher education (Stuart et al. 2008). The day to day practicalities of being a PG student may therefore remain unknown. For example, McPherson, Punch, and Graham's (2017) study looked at the transition between UG and Masters level. They found a lack of clarity amongst students with regard to what postgraduate

study actually entails and this ambiguity itself was a source of anxiety for students.

- Could your department provide a 'way in', a taster, a day in the life of a Masters student?
- Are there opportunities for UG and PG students to meet each other to exchange information in an informal space?

7. Do you know what proportion of UG students from your department progress to PG study at LU?

Having some context for how your faculty or discipline performs in terms of the proportion of UG students continuing their study at Lancaster may help in identifying issues that need addressing to improve progression rates. The need for better data is increasingly being recognised (see, for example, Gormley 2021).

- Can you access the data in the format you need? Are there patterns by equality group and/or over time?

Often the data is not readily available or difficult to interpret due to the small numbers in some groups. Nevertheless, it might be interesting to have a look and see if it matches your expectations. Getting a sense of the data also means better understanding the context for interrelated work (e.g. towards Race Equality Charter / Athena Swan).

8. Are you aware of any specific opportunities or support that is available for underrepresented or disadvantaged students in your discipline?

Research looking into personal trajectories often reveals specific events or people that result in 'critical moments' which change a

person's life course away from the expected direction (Thomson et al. 2002; Armstrong 2005). The encouragement and knowledge offered by supervisors and other 'helpers' has been identified as pivotal (Gormley 2021; Houghton 2003).

'Coming across' a source of funding or placement by chance could make a difference to an UG progressing to PG or not.

- Do you know of funding that might be available for students from, for example, minority ethnic group backgrounds?
- Is this information provided by your department?
- Are there summer internships available and, if so, are these paid?

9. How does your department work with other staff around

the university in relation to supporting student progression?

Progressing to PG study requires a series of steps involving a lot of different (and changing) parts to come together. If a student has a question about, for example, disability support (practical / financial) do you know where to signpost the student to? Do you have names of colleagues who you can contact if you need updated information about progression related changes? Are you aware of internal deadlines for applications?

10. Your question(s) from your expertise and experience…

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