



Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: Interventions supporting progression

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 method approach to gather qualitative evidence that complements the existing student data. The project 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.

Interventions

This briefing paper focuses on initiatives designed to enhance progression to postgraduate study for students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. It draws on existing literature as well as information collected through desk-based research into projects being trialled both at Lancaster University and elsewhere. The paper uses quotes* from interviews with students conducted during

the first year of PPS LU to illustrate the need for or value of interventions.

The paper is not exhaustive but gives some valuable pointers for us to consider in our work with students. It is worth noting that interventions can take place at different points in the **student journey**, for example, Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) given to undergraduates and transition programmes delivered to graduates who are going on to taught and research postgraduate courses.

A further consideration relates to which group is being addressed by the intervention: UG at LU, UG studying at other higher education providers (HEPs) or external candidates who wish to return to study and may or may not be LU graduates.

Note: The term intervention here is used to refer to what an institution could or does provide. There are however a whole host of factors at play which influence where a student is in terms of their journey and how important or otherwise an intervention may be for them.

SHAPE: A progression pentagon

Progression to postgraduate study is less standardized and typically more individual than the pathway to undergraduate study. It has a number of components which come together to enable a student to progress. The student may receive material **support** (e.g. funding) to enable progression, they may interact with a range of people (**helpers**) who assist in the process, they

*All quotes are anonymised; UG/PGT/PGR indicates a student's level of study; B/D/S indicates a student's WP background: Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority; Disabled; Socio-economic disadvantage.

need to be **aware** of what options are possible and have access to resources and materials (**planners**). In addition, getting **experience** is important in assisting the decision-making process.

These five elements: **S**upport; **H**elpers; **A**wareness; **P**lanners; and **E**xperience can be seen as the points or key elements in the **progression pentagon**.

Here we are proposing that helpers and planners (people and resources) are the **two pillars** that provide the support, awareness and experience interventions.

Individual pathways

Previous experience will influence a student's decisions. PPS LU interviews suggested the pivotal role of both family and school in cultivating the expectation of progression. For students with parents /carers who have no HE qualifications they may have little knowledge about PG options and may have ruled it out as something that is not 'for them'. For students unfamiliar with HE environments, interventions which **raise awareness** of the range of options, together with the associated advantages and disadvantages are clearly valuable.

Some of the PPS LU students from WP backgrounds we interviewed reported that their progression was dependent upon **key helpers** including close acquaintances, staff or colleagues who had provided them with the social **support** to scaffold and encourage them, boosting confidence and offering a listening ear or being a trusted ally who they could confide in. Interventions such as buddying or mentoring schemes could be crucial to reach those students who may lack the helpers who provide the social support or networks other students take for granted.

Most PPS LU students interviewed mentioned both the difficulty of funding their studies and accessing resources (**planners**) to help them navigate their way

through the financial issues they needed to take into consideration. For some students, finances shaped their choices (e.g. searching for courses at institutions with cheaper tuition fees; doing a PhD in a subject that was not their preferred option simply because funding was available). Whilst some students may be able to afford to progress to masters level with the support of parents, for many others, perhaps the majority, whether or not from a low-income background, the cost of undertaking further study (**tuition fees** and **living expenses**) represents a major barrier which can only be overcome by **financial support**.

Opportunities to **experience** research are likely to be valuable for all students – both those expecting to progress and those who are not. For example, a student who does not enjoy the taught elements or exam assessments of their undergraduate study may learn that more independent research suits them. On the other hand, a student expecting to progress may learn through experience that further study is not what they thought it would be.

Types of intervention:

Here we offer examples of interventions that are focused on each of these three elements though we recognise that there is overlap in terms of what a single intervention offers. For example, mentoring schemes designed to offer support to students may also enhance awareness and indirectly provide insights into the experience of PG study.

- a) Enhancing support: 'funds and friends'. Material resources to enable progression; or social networks via mentors or buddies
- b) Raising awareness: improving access to and quality of information about PG study.
- c) Providing opportunities to gain experience (e.g. internships or

undergraduate independent study dissertation modules).

a) Enhancing support

Some interventions focus on providing additional support to students from WP backgrounds in order to level the playing field. These include providing material support through financial awards or fee waivers and psycho-social support through mentoring or buddying programmes.

Material/Financial

Research indicates the influence of financial support upon progression. For example, Mateos-González and Wakeling (2020) quantitative analysis of destinations of all UK first-degree graduates between 2012/13 and 2016/17 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.

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 in view of the ethnic minority awarding gap (Ball 2016; Cramer 2021).

The entry requirements for PG courses in themselves may comprise a barrier for students from WP backgrounds who do not attain the grades necessary for a host of reasons unrelated to academic ability. Some are calling for **contextual admissions** to address this barrier (e.g. Moye 2019) though its introduction to UG admissions was somewhat controversial. Further, its use would need to extend to funding bodies so that awards are not dependent upon grades, as noted above.

Some universities offer **targeted financial support** for undergraduates to continue studying. For example, the Sheffield Postgraduate **Scholarship** offers £10,000 to students from a widening participation

background and who have achieved a 1st class degree (Wakeling and Mateos-González 2021). However, in the context of the awarding gap, such schemes may not reach some BAME students and those from a lower socio-economic group (Sucharitkul and Windsor 2021).

PPS LU interviews clearly highlighted that finance is critical. As Katy (PGT:D) said:

If like my dad couldn't help me out with money. I probably wouldn't have done the Masters course.

They also indicated that the sources of support were not always well publicised. For example, a returning student was not initially aware of the **tuition fee waivers** for LU alumni. Similarly, information on **scholarships** or **bursaries**; and **Disabled Students' Allowance** is often located in different places and the associated **deadlines** may be difficult to find.

There are also more specific issues; one student found that they were needing to sign an accommodation lease before they knew whether they'd been successful in obtaining funding. This observation suggests that students may need support with **contingency** planning.

Student comments suggested a need for greater transparency and understanding around the difficulties (particularly in some disciplines) in getting funding and how much is available. They recalled being told about various pots of funding only to find that each was only for a (relatively) small amount of money that while useful was not substantial. Some reported feeling disheartened and cross that nobody had told them about the difficulties in funding further study.

Mentors or buddies

Interventions may also provide ways for students to feel supported and encouraged

to progress through buddying or mentoring programmes. For example, a potential PG student can be paired with a current student; or a new PG with current PG to support transition to a different way of studying.

Such programmes may be structured to include skills development courses or programmes to assist with transition (Hancock and Wakeling 2019). For example, [Bristol University](#) offers peer mentoring and skills development sessions to help current undergraduates decide whether postgraduate study is right for them.

Other research points to the importance of **representation** in enhancing feelings of belonging amongst for underrepresented students and the value of 'role models'. Arday (2021) calls for targeted strategies to encourage communities of practice and peer mentoring to support BAME scholars while Rollock (2019) reports on the experience of Black female professors, noting that mentors need not be Black, the important thing was that someone 'had your back'. Regarding peers, Jackson and Price (2019) discuss the value of informal mentoring opportunities, including across year groups, in progression to postgraduate education. They point to the way networks allow sharing of information about the diverse pathways into PG study.

The underlying rationale for such programmes is for students to learn more about what it means to be a postgraduate student, to get an opportunity to ask questions in a more informal context (which students would not ask of staff), to gain a sense of what is expected at PG level, to have access to 'insider' knowledge, to get a more balanced view (pros and cons), and to learn about what questions they need to ask (e.g. one Masters student interviewed said they felt well-informed upon starting but this was because they didn't know what they needed to ask).

Crucially, having a buddy or mentor may also bolster a student's confidence. Some of the students interviewed in year one of the project talked about the importance of having their own 'cheerleaders' (whether academic staff, friends and family, or colleagues) who encouraged their progression. For students who don't have their own network, having access to an 'ally' via a mentoring or buddying scheme may be particularly valuable.

The value of having access to a mentor or even an opportunity to meet PG students was highlighted in some of the interviews. For example, Catherine (PGT:S) recalled joining an online IAG session where:

there was a student of the previous course who was on the call. And I think that aspect of it was really useful.

Similarly, Michelle (PGR:D) felt that for applicants there should be:

more opportunities to talk to current students.

A further way in which universities may seek to enhance support is by putting in place **reverse mentoring** for academic staff. One university created a scheme whereby students from low socioeconomic backgrounds mentored senior members of the medical faculty (Curtis et al. 2021: 7) to help them understand the experience of underrepresented students and the challenges they encounter. The scheme appeared to effect a positive shift in staff discourse whereby '*diversity and difference were no longer represented as a 'problem' to be fixed or accommodated within current systems*'. The intention was to encourage staff to see things from a student's perspective and better understand the barriers with a view towards implementing change.

Helpers and Planners: The above discussion suggests that interventions offering **support**, whether **financial** or **social**, can work to widen the range of

helpers accessed by students from WP backgrounds as well as provide a greater range of resources or planners to help in removing material barriers to progression.

b) Raising awareness: providing information

A common assumption is that undergraduates will know about postgraduate study and that completing an UG degree will level the playing field. However, research suggests there is still need for basic information and that inequalities persist beyond UG (Gaskell and Lingwood 2019; Budd 2017).

‘For recent graduates from under represented backgrounds, we believe there is a need for outreach and ‘demystification’ work, mirroring that which takes place at undergraduate level’ (Wakeling and Mateos-González 2021: 65).

Although the students we interviewed used both paper and online resources which represent the planners that influence their process, online materials dominated.

The lack of a single system such as UCAS which clearly shapes the undergraduate application process inevitably influenced how prospective students they found their PGT or PGR course. Navigating the system was very individual and even where students attempted to be systematic, several recognized the ad hoc and serendipitous nature of the process.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that such complexity is something staff appreciate is a challenge. **So what can be done?**

One research project (Hancock and Wakeling 2019) between a consortium of universities trialled a programme of IAG for undergraduate students from WP groups (BAME and POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 backgrounds). The intervention aimed to support progression into PG study and was well received by students with reports of increased interest and understanding of further study.

PPS LU findings from the student interviews suggested a number of challenges regarding information about PG

study as well as ways resources could be improved. These are discussed below. The range of issues suggests that a broader sweep or ‘mainstreamed’ (or inclusive / embedded) changes and improvements may be more appropriate than introducing specific interventions.

Embedded IAG: In terms of programmes or sessions offered by universities to support progression upon completion of undergraduate study, some commentators (e.g. Gaskell and Lingwood 2019) point to the need for the IAG interventions to be integral or embedded rather than optional add-ons. Furthermore, they believe they should go beyond notions of ‘employability’ and graduate salaries. If presented as part of a course, information on the various options, including further study, would reach more students, some of whom may not have considered it as an option.

From the PPS LU student interviewees it seems that current provision is varied across and within subject areas, suggesting a need for greater consistency in terms of the information students receive about postgraduate study, when and how often. For example, one student heard about PG options via a friend who had learned more from a lecturer. Another commented that:

I wasn't actually aware of what an MRes was like... It had been mentioned once in passing (Chris, UG:D/S).

Inclusive and accessible:

Information needs to be presented in a way that it offers representation of different student groups so that it becomes something a potential PG student can identify with, as being an option that could be for them. Information needs to be accessible to external and internal applicants (e.g. one LU graduate returning to study found it difficult to access information on the fee waiver for alumni).

Representation in events, videos and IAG material was identified as important for signalling what is possible. For example, Sandra (PGR:S) recalled where:

they had one [video] with a woman, a mature woman talking with one of the professors... being interviewed about her experiences and I thought she's not that dissimilar to from me. [And I thought well] if she can do it, I think I can do it.

Quantity and quality: There is a vast amount of information and this is part of the problem as it quickly becomes overwhelming and is difficult for a student to sift and assess its quality. Students we interviewed admitted that their searches were often partial and commented that they weren't sure whether the information they found was reliable or accurate. Some interviewees suggested a need for greater clarity in the information, especially guidance about the application process.

Sometimes it's not as obvious as I think it should be, how to apply (Mark PGR:S).

Location of information:

Students pointed to the time-consuming character of finding out what they needed to know.

Applying to do a PhD's almost a full time job in itself... balancing you know your actual masters course with that is hard. If you were working like a part time job at the same time as doing your studies at the same time as trying to apply for PhD, I think that would be pretty horrible. Mark (PGR:S)

I did do quite extensive research, but a lot of the resources weren't sort of terribly well signposted by the universities themselves (Ben PGR:D).

Although there were requests for a single, central hub of information, students recognised that the variation between subjects would make this difficult.

Timeliness: Interviewees pointed to the timeliness in learning crucial information. For example, needing to know there are deadlines they need to find out about (e.g. for funding or course applications); information about a course such as its start date, timetabling, and forms of assessment, in order to make decisions and plan ahead. Timeliness is important for all students but may be particularly so for certain groups (e.g. disabled students who need to know about assessment, carers/parents, or students who are combining their study with employment).

Transparency: interviews suggested the appreciation by students of information that is honest and transparent. For example, wanting to know the time commitment expected (though recognising difficulty in assessing this as it varies so much); wanting information about the challenges that may be involved in getting funding; valuing information about the difficulties as well as the rewards associated with PG study. Ben (PGR:D) valued his supervisor's approach saying they had been very good at:

just sort of being quite open and honest about the challenges of doing a PhD,

Similarly, Catherine (PGT:S) stated:

I think it's also important to say look, you know there are some aspects of the course that are tough. There's a lot of work to you know and kind of, I suppose just tell people to be ready.

Helpers and Planners: For effective **awareness** raising, the above discussion suggests that: planners (or resources) need to be reliable, transparent and accessible. This applies to information that, for example, is presented in prospectuses, open days, and on departmental faculty webpages. Helpers also need to be aware of the resources available, and where these can be found so to signpost and guide students.

c) Providing opportunities to gain research experience

Interest in further research related study may be inspired through experience. A large-scale survey at a research-intensive university (Spronken-Smith, Miroso, and Darrou, 2014) signalled that student engagement with the research culture was associated with several positive outcomes, including greater understanding of the topic, and greater motivation and interest, and, for some students, it had inspired them to pursue postgraduate study.

Likewise, Lopatto (2004) reports on the multiple benefits associated with undergraduate research experience in the sciences, including enhanced retention and progression among underrepresented groups.

Opportunities to experience research first hand (and to explicitly connect that experience to doing PG study) are present in UG courses (e.g. dissertation modules) and also through internship programmes.

The value of gaining such experience was suggested by some of the students interviewed who emphasised that PG study is a lot different to UG study, a difference that only becomes evident through practice. In turn, this highlights the importance of encouraging UG students to gain research experience, as they may find it preferable to the teaching and assessment associated with their UG degree.

Internships

Internships allow students to undertake research, learn by doing and gain personal insights that help them to find answers to questions such as:

- What is a researcher?
- What do they do?
- Is research something I could do?
- Would I enjoy engaging in research?

There are a variety of internships available at Lancaster each with their own eligibility criteria as well as differences in length, opportunities and expectations of what they might do during the internship.

Note- internships may also be referred to as placements or summer schools in some disciplines or institutions. The term internship is used here to refer to schemes designed to offer research experience.

During 2022 there were 45 places available to WP students at [Lancaster](#). Other universities offer varying schemes (see, for example, [Bristol University](#), [University of Nottingham](#)). A brief review suggested differences in content (paid opportunity/length and timing of internship); travel/accommodation (provided or costs supported); eligibility criteria (including whether need to be UG student at same university or open to UG from other universities); and preparation and follow-up activities.

Research led teaching

Undergraduates also gain opportunities to access and experience research and the role of a researcher via the content of their curriculum as well as those who teach them, whether they are Postgraduates or Academics undertaking research.

Undergraduate research conference

What has been a great success and which provides opportunities for students to see people like them undertaking and disseminating their research is the Undergraduate Conference [2022 UG Conference](#)

Helpers and planners: different groups of helpers can provide or signpost students to opportunities to experience research; and planners need to clearly present the information about these opportunities, how they can be accessed and the associated advantages.

Concluding points

1. Interventions may focus on different elements: improving support; raising awareness; and offering experience.
2. Helpers and planners are the two key pillars delivering interventions designed to support, raise awareness and provide experience
3. More collaboration between helpers and sharing information or resources that operate as planners that inform the decision-making process could result in benefits to all, students and staff.
4. Different forms of intervention may be more or less appropriate for specific groups of underrepresented students, remembering too that intersecting inequalities give rise to qualitatively different experiences.
5. There is growing consensus about the need for further interventions to tackle the underrepresentation of WP students in PG study.

References

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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