

WPAG End of year report 2022-23 (Research)

PPS LU



Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU

1. Project contact information

Project title: Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU (PPS LU)

Project lead: Dr. Ann-Marie Houghton Researcher: Dr Jo Armstrong

Project start and end date (including year of project if funded for multiple years):

2021-2024. Year 2 of a 3 year project.

2. Executive summary

Please provide an executive summary of your project and its purpose. This should be no more than 300 words and refer to the project as a whole.

The PPS LU research project (2021-24) is funded by Widening Participation Advisory Group as part of Lancaster University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) contributing to theme 3: Researching the barriers faced by WP students when accessing and succeeding in postgraduate study (PGT and PGR).

The research builds on previous postgraduate information, advice and guidance research by Houghton (2003) that adopted Tough's (1971) notion of a Learning Project with its 'Helpers' and Planners' to create an expanded framework to explore the process used by students seeking to apply for a Part Time Phd,

The PPS LU project seeks to test out the framework and its application for three groups of students from widening participation backgrounds: disabled students, Black Asian and Ethnic Minority students¹ and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. low income households), described here as 'WP' students.

The focus for each year of the project:

- Year 1: 2021-22 Student perspective on Helpers and Planners
- Year 2: 2022-23 Staff perspective on Helpers and Planners
- Year 3: 2023-24 Building on year 1 and 2 findings, to initiate a PG network / hub for staff, further dissemination of project findings, and producing progression resources for future use.

¹ When originally submitted terminology used at the time Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) was used.

3. Project overview

a) Key aims for the year

What were the aims you set out to achieve this year?

The key aim for 2022-23 was to explore staff perspectives on secondary planners and helpers, and their views on enablers and barriers to progression amongst students from WP backgrounds.

A further aim, drawing on the findings from year 1 and the staff interviews in year 2, was to continue writing for dissemination to both staff and student audiences.

b) Actions taken in year

Please provide an overview of the actions taken this year to address key research questions set out in your project action plan (include here any research and evaluation related activity).

Conducting staff interviews:

- i) Identifying academic staff at LU with role in PG (e.g. directors of PG programmes in departments).
- ii) Identifying professional services staff at LU with role in supporting UG / PG students regarding progression (e.g. careers advisors).
- iii) Preparing and finalising interview schedules for academic and professional services staff
- iv) Contacting individuals and arranging interviews
- v) Conducting interviews
- vi) Analysing transcripts.

Dissemination / outputs:

Creation of 4 briefing papers, one targeted at students and three for staff, as follows:

PPS LU Briefing Paper 4 **SHAPE Questions for reflection** is a paper for students to use to aid thinking and planning for progression. The acronym SHAPE stands for: support, helpers, actions, planners and experience. This paper is informed by the findings from years 1 and 2 of the project and contains a list of resources for students to use to get started on exploring their options, a checklist of actions and a record sheet for students to log their progress. Students have the option to share their record sheet with the research team and we will invite feedback on the resource to be potentially incorporated into future versions.

In PPS LU Briefing Papers 5: student **preparedness**, 6: IAG **provision** and 7: PG **processes** we share staff interview findings and implications. In each paper, we highlight the importance of each issue to students from WP backgrounds and identify the implications in terms of:

- ✓ **helpers**: the range of people who a student consults and guide them on their progression journey.
- ✓ **planners**: the sources of information available and resources used to guide them on their progression journey.

Copies of the Briefing Papers are available at: <https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/reap/pps-lu/>

We are also at the final stage of preparing the first journal article for *Higher Education Research and Development*. In addition to support future dissemination of our work, Houghton's thesis has been made accessible and formatted for online publication.

We have also participated in the NEON Widening Participation Postgraduate network and shared updates with LU colleagues.

c) Progress made

Reflecting on the project action plan, please give an account of the progress made this year toward project aims. Where any intended in-year actions have not taken place or project aims have been missed, please provide a brief rationale and how you plan to address them.

The project aims for 2022-23 were met, details as above.

During the year we discussed the possibility of undertaking some initial student workshops to pilot and develop student facing resources, however, due to unforeseen circumstances the appointment of PhD students to support this activity was not possible and consequently there was an underspend on the overall budget.

4. Research and evaluation overview

a) Data and evidence collected

Please provide details of the data and evidence you have collected this year. Include here a brief account of the approaches taken and procedures taken to ensure robustness.

In 2022-23 we collected data by conducting interviews with academics (11) and Professional Services (6) staff at LU. The interviews were semi-structured, following a schedule of questions (one for academics and one for professional services staff members) which allowed for the collection of comparable information at the same time as allowing for elaboration and additional comments from interviewees.

b) Key findings and reflections

What findings and reflections have emerged this year? How have they contributed to the project and what new insights have they offered?

Findings reported below appear in our 4 briefing papers which are available on the <https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/reap/pps-lu/>

The headline findings were:

Student Preparedness

Staff reported that students could be better prepared regarding progression, in terms of their awareness of PG study and its relevance (e.g. what the different courses offered and the value of PG qualifications); realistic expectations of PG study (e.g. the level of difficulty or the time commitment required); and their orientation towards progression, i.e. whether students took a proactive approach to finding information and support. This latter finding regarding orientation was linked to levels of confidence, with the suggestion that while students may have the academic potential to progress, they lack the confidence or sense of belonging to engage and approach academics to discuss the options.

The following activities all have potential to engage and enable students:

- Having a diversity of students talking about their PG progression experience in promotional material or as part of open days or similar activities
- Practical assistance to access taster sessions or open days
- Opportunities to gain experience via, for example, internships.

Considering progression as a potential route is dependent on students feeling they have the capacity and resources to do so, as well as the confidence to view PG study as something for them. Increasing awareness of the options, including the funding available, and the value of PG study is therefore vital.

Opportunities promoting progression need to be accessible, financially and practically, for students to engage (e.g. paid internships, help with travel costs to networking events). Information about such support and who to contact needs to be well advertised alongside the opportunity; in other words, resources or planners need to have all the information communicated in a clear and accessible way.

(See Briefing Paper 5 Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 5. Student Preparedness for further detail).

IAG Provision

While good practice and a move towards greater consistency is evident, PPS LU findings indicate that IAG provision is patchy across faculties and departments, with differences relating to:

- **Who** delivers IAG (e.g. lecturers or professional services staff) and where (within a course or an optional extra).
- **What** IAG is being given, and
- **When** this information is delivered, at what point in the student journey 1st, 2nd or 3rd year or PGT study.

This finding compares to the student accounts gathered in the first year of PPS LU, which also indicated that information about progression varies greatly across the institution.

The key recommendation suggested by staff interviews, supported by findings from the student interviews in year 1, is that IAG provision needs to be consistently embedded within all courses from early in an UG student's journey and within postgraduate taught programmes. This is particularly important for WP students who may have less time to explore options and put together applications. Building time into courses where support is also available could support progression among underrepresented groups of students.

Working towards greater consistency in such a complex area is challenging, particularly in the light of discipline specificity. Nevertheless, establishing a set of guidelines or agreed principles for IAG about PG study with suggested timings for delivery could make a big difference to an individual's progression and would ensure greater parity among students.

Staff comments indicate the need for IAG to cover issues such as the:

- differences between postgraduate taught and postgraduate research,
- range of ways study at PG level is different to UG
- benefits of gaining experience of research (first hand or indirectly) via, for example, internships.

The IAG further needs to be explicit and transparent, providing information about studying at PG level, the value of PG qualifications, as well as the challenges associated with higher level study and the financing of PG courses.

(See Briefing Paper 6 Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 6. Information, Advice and Guidance Provision for further detail).

Processes

The staff interviewee accounts pointed to the complexity of processes involved in progression to postgraduate study. Comments related to the opaqueness of the application process, the importance of deadlines which, in turn, vary across courses and funding bodies; and the complex character of the institution which meant it wasn't always easy to identify who could provide support.

- **Lack of transparency:** Staff, both professional services and academic, commented on the opaqueness of processes at postgraduate level, in terms of what happens when and where to go for information and support with applying for courses. Several staff contrasted the vagueness of PG applications to the well-defined process associated with UG applications.
- The opaqueness and lack of transparency suggests a need for improved communication about the process and who can support students; in other words, a resource or guide (**planner**) to which staff and students could refer. Ideally this would provide overview of the typical steps or stages and what students need to do when and what they need to find out.
- **Deadlines:** One key element of application processes is deadlines, both for courses and (perhaps more importantly) for funding. The challenge of meeting deadlines is compounded by the simultaneous demands on students' time, such as needing to focus on coursework and exams.
- **Institutional context:** Staff further commented that the complexity of LU as an organisation meant that while support may be available, it is not always clear where to go for it.

The key recommendation emerging from the above findings is for enhanced collaboration and communication between staff so that information about processes and who can provide support is more transparent and accessible. The PG landscape is complex and is unlikely to change in the immediate future, given the range of different courses, ways of funding study and lack of an overall national coordinating body. There will be no one simple or standard solution. Nevertheless, at an institutional level, a more centralised hub or space for staff to collaborate and exchange their experience, practices and procedure, might be one way to 'join the dots'. Establishing a network for staff in PG related roles would also be worthwhile in terms of sustaining knowledge which may otherwise be lost when individual members of staff leave their post.

(See Briefing Paper 7 Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 7. Postgraduate Processes for further detail).

5. Summary

a) Overview of the year

Please give a summary overview of the year, including any significant observations and reflections.

The 2nd year has allowed us to build on previous work, gathering staff perspectives to complement those of students gathered in the third year. Our research and development approach has allowed us to consider the practical as well as the theoretical potential of the work.

From a practical perspective we have identified a gap which we can begin to address in the third year of the project, this will complement other activities being taken forward within the university including: curriculum transformation programme (CTP), doctoral academy, disability and inclusion activity relating to the Disabled Students' Commission Commitment, Grow Your Future Careers activities linked to progression to postgraduate study, and the student success undergraduate internship scheme.

From a research perspective, we've identified an additional 'Helper' (secondary / virtual pundit helper) who increase the diversity of voices about the range of progression routes to postgraduate study which enable potential students to recognise this as a possible option for themselves. Additionally, an emerging idea from the PPS LU work to date is the possibility of a 'helper network' that not only supports the potential student on their learning project about progression to postgraduate study, but also provides support for peripatetic helpers working within the university. A final avenue we wish to explore in greater detail are what (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014) describe as 'intensifiers' which appear to impact on how students engage with and are influenced by resources.

b) Future Plans

How do you foresee the project progressing into the future? Are there any areas for improvement? What unforeseen barriers have been identified?

Plans for 2023-24, building on findings from year 1 and year 2:

- Organising meetings for members of LU staff to begin establishing a 'hub' or network for individuals with a role in student progression to exchange information and share good practice. Staff involved in the PPS LU interviews, along with other staff members identified during the course of the project, will be invited.
- Recruit a small number of current PG students to co-create and pilot resources/activities to engage undergraduate students in thinking about progression (this activity would build upon the SHAPE student resource created in 2022-23).
- Micro audit of IAG provision (desk-based research focusing on LU web resources in a particular department or service)
- Journal article / Blog for Conversation or HEPI focusing on the specific issues facing disabled facing disabled students, this will draw on existing student and staff interviews and be informed by focus group or further interviews relating to institutional discussions about the Disabled Students Commission Commitment.

c) Additional information

Please share any other relevant information about your project that you wish to share with WPAG.

The project has benefitted from the support of colleagues from across the university with whom we have discussed the project and its findings, especially those colleagues who we have been able to interview. We appreciated the support including revised reporting form provided by Leanne Taher-Bates and Matthew Pawleski.

The PPS LU findings thus far indicate the value in further work around standardising and making accessible IAG about progression to PG study as well as making more transparent the processes relating to progression (for both staff and students). Whilst the evidence we have drawn upon relates to the three target groups: disabled students, Black Asian and Ethnic Minority students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. low income households) we believe the work would support all students. Clearly, such work is complex, not least because of disciplinary differences, but small steps could bring large rewards in terms of supporting individuals' progression, particularly for students from a WP background.

Summary table of 2022-23 findings

Paper theme	Findings	Recommendations	Actions
Student Preparedness PPS LU 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Awareness of options and value of PG qualifications b. Expectations of PG study c. Orientation or approach to progression 	Enabling and facilitating student engagement with progression planning.	<p>Explore 'what works and why' regarding student engagement in IAG about progression: to find out more about student experience of IAG</p> <p>Aim: greater understanding of student view on planners and helpers to enhance student engagement</p>
Information, Advice and Guidance provision PPS LU 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Multiple channels: different deliverers of IAG b. Different views of IAG content and inconsistencies. c. Varied timings in providing information about PG study 	Embedding IAG: agreed roles and responsibilities; more consistent provision; incremental programme of IAG.	<p>Auditing IAG across selected UG programmes: start to collect good practice and form structure for an IAG framework about progression and who will deliver it.</p> <p>Aim: enhance consistency and clarity in sources of information (planners) to work towards greater parity in IAG students receive</p>
Postgraduate Processes PPS LU 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Opaqueness: unclear progression journey b. Time pressure and competing demands c. Complex and changing institutional context 	Enhancing staff collaboration and communication about progression to share knowledge and exchange good practice.	<p>Begin to establish network of staff involved in PG IAG and applications: to work towards information sharing and connectedness</p> <p>Aim: to identify key stages in the progression process and helpers to support students.</p>

References

Houghton, A. (2003) *The 'Initial Guidance Learning Project': A framework for exploring the pre-entry informal learning of part time PhD learners*. Lancaster University

Tough A (1971) *The adult's learning projects. A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning*, Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Winchester-Seeto, T., Homewood, J., Thogersen, J., Jacenyik-Trawoger, C., Manathunga, C. Reid, A and Holbrook, A. (2014) 'Doctoral supervision in a cross-cultural context: issues affecting supervisors and candidates', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33:3, 610-626.

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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