



## Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 5. Student Preparedness.

PPS:LU is exploring the progression to postgraduate study at Lancaster University. It focuses on three groups of students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, namely: disabled students; students from a minority ethnic group; and students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background (e.g. low-income households). As part of the project, we are producing practical resources for both staff and students.

In 2021-22 we interviewed 8 undergraduate and 19 postgraduate students and in 2022-23 we interviewed 17 LU staff (11 academic staff and 6 professional services). In PPS LU Briefings 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 to guide them on their progression journey.
- ✓ **planners**: the sources of information available and resources used by students to guide them on their progression journey.

Here we discuss student **preparedness** regarding progression plans. We begin with an overview of the findings, move to recommendations, and then propose future actions.

NB Academic Interviewees are referred to based on faculty and Professional Service staff PS with name of service.

### A) Findings

The interviews with Academic and Professional Service staff confirmed student PPS LU findings that there are different levels of student awareness and preparedness in applying for and beginning PGT (Postgraduate Taught) and PGR (Postgraduate Research) study. Levels of awareness range from not knowing the basics, having misguided expectations, to being savvy and proactive in seeking out support. Below we discuss the key findings.

### Awareness

Staff accounts suggested that students' knowledge of their options regarding PG study varies substantially. For example, one academic said:

Some people have a very clear plan. I mean, I know that I had... and some students don't have any idea what they might want to do. Even until I mean quite late in their studies. And so you start those conversations quite early, which I can only see as being quite a good thing (FST 16).

A member of the Careers team believed students' awareness differed according to their discipline and career interests. They felt that students:

... understand the roots to progressing onto further study within their own areas... But when it comes to the kind of roles [jobs] that might need postgraduate study... or even conversion courses they might be a little bit more hazy on that type of stuff (PS1 Careers).

Some staff suggested that sometimes students don't have a good understanding of opportunities and progression pathways:

I think students' understanding is pretty spotty, or uneven, or sometimes certainly absent. Students, I don't think, have a good grasp of where the undergraduate degree sits in terms of like professional pathways. And I don't think, therefore, that they understand what a Masters programme necessarily enables as a step or a phase in that pathway (FST 9).

Similarly, one of the Careers team believed students weren't generally aware of the possibility to change subjects at Masters level.

## Relevance

Another concern raised by staff was that students don't always understand the value or relevance of PG qualifications:

The other thing I think stops people going from MA to PhD is that sense of where is it going to get me. I don't want to become a lecturer. Why do it? Which is a real shame... So there is that slight disconnect of I want to get job X, a PhD is going to take me away from that route, so why even think about it in the first place? (FASS 15).

Recognising the relevance of a PGT course either for employment or further study was something PS staff also identified:

A big part from my perspective is ensuring students know the relevance, or perhaps not relevance, the value of a Masters

degree compared to an undergraduate degree (PS 5 Careers).

Further, students don't necessarily know what to ask to learn more. As one academic said:

I think we're ... often kind of eliciting questions or trying to stimulate questions rather than getting questions... I don't think they're able to identify the things they don't know I think is how I'd put it (FST 9).

The PPS LU staff interview findings thus support the work of other researchers (e.g. Budd 2017) who point out that doing an UG degree is no guarantee that the playing field will be levelled between students. Being at university does not guarantee individuals will have knowledge of the PG landscape, particularly students who belong to groups underrepresented in HE.

The findings further suggest that resources or **planners** about PG study are either not being accessed by students or are not comprehensive in covering what students need to know. There is a risk that those preparing resources will make assumptions about the levels of preparedness and familiarity with terminology which some students, especially those from backgrounds without family experience of PG study, may not have.

## Expectations

If students don't have accurate expectations about PG study, then they may be deterred from considering it. One academic said that in their experience:

...maybe 70 to 80% of students have kind of a cognitive dissonance between what they think the PhD is going to be and where it's going to kind of take them compared to what it actually is in practise. ... (FASS 15).

This academic contrasted the split between those students who believe that: **they're going to spend lots of time in the ivory towers, the spires of Oxbridge, thinking wild thoughts**, who inevitably get a shock that it is about hard graft.

In contrast there are students who believe it is much harder than it is and are hampered by what students described as the imposter syndrome and will say things like: *I'm never good enough to do these sorts of things.*

Some of the students interviewed for the PPS LU project similarly talked about the mismatch between their experience and their expectations. For example, one student said they wished they had known beforehand the time commitment required for Masters level study.

A PS transitions interviewee explained that for some students on the autistic spectrum it was particularly important to have a clear sense of what is expected during the application stages. They need:

... something kind of explicit about when you're looking to do a PhD, you should talk to lots of different people to find out about your various areas of interest (PS 3 Transitions).

Making explicit what tends to remain implicit or assumed is likely to be of benefit to all students. Sources of information or **planners** need to be accessible and not make assumptions of what students will know.

## Approaches to getting ready

Some staff pointed to the different orientations or approaches to getting ready among students. They noted that while some students were proactive in seeking information and support, others lacked the confidence or sense of belonging to do so. There was a reticence about whether staff would judge them or think they were appropriate to progress to PG study.

There were also differences among staff regarding their role and responsibility. The two quotes below illustrate the nuances in how faculty staff viewed their role:

We like people or students to be in the driver seat, but they really have to take the initiative. We try to encourage and educate

to take responsibility of their own advancement. Sometimes it works very well and sometimes I see 3rd year students who... surprisingly lack direction (FST 16).

From student PPS LU interviews and other research, it is clear that there will be students including those from the three widening participation groups, who perhaps lack the confidence. This suggests that staff may need to adapt their response according to the student:

There will be super proactive students who will be knocking on doors who will be asking for advice. But then there are also students with... interests, and obviously so much potential, but they're not so forthcoming... so I had to kind of find that balance and support them too (FASS 6).

Our interviews suggest that academics view their role as **helpers** in different ways. Some see their role as simply one of encouraging students to think about progression. Others see themselves as responsible for providing the support to facilitate or enable students to become more proactive. At present what a student experiences depends on how their department organises the academic tutor system and / or what their individual academic tutor believes their role to be and / or the time they have available.

## B) Recommendations

The above discussion highlights the importance of students becoming aware of their options regarding progression, including clarity in expectations, and taking an active role in planning ahead. However, for various reasons, including low confidence or a lack of resources such as time, students aren't necessarily well positioned or prepared.

The key recommendation to support students' preparedness is to somehow better enable or facilitate students to become engaged in planning ahead at an early stage.

## Enabling

University can provide IAG, support and opportunities but students need to engage, take ownership, and understand why it is important to explore options and gain experience by trying out things.

Providing opportunities for students to gain a better sense of study at a higher level is likewise valuable in terms of shaping expectations. Such opportunities may take the form of taster sessions or research internships. In turn, getting experience may foster connections with potential **helpers** and boost confidence, making progression appear more viable as well as desirable. The following activities all have potential to enable students:

- Diversity of students talking about their PG progression experience.
- Practical assistance to access taster sessions.
- Internships to provide experience.
- Building confidence.

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.

A new webpage the [Full list of funding opportunities](#) is therefore a welcome addition.

For WP students, gaining an insight into the diverse routes into and out of PG study, as well as the range of people undertaking PG courses (and diversity amongst academic staff), may engender a greater sense of belonging, in terms of thinking that progression could be something 'for them'. For example, external speakers talking about their journeys or current PG students from a range of backgrounds talking about their experience of deciding and applying to do PG study.

- For WP students who may not have considered PG study, and who don't have family with such experience to act as personal **helpers**, then being exposed to stories from students who have progressed and are from similar backgrounds could be crucial in showing that it is possible.

Staff commented that students don't ask questions because they don't know what they need to know to ask. Talking with people who've been there and can share insider knowledge may help stimulate and elicit questions. One academic (FASS 6) said that when a student did show interest in pursuing PG study then they would put them in touch with a current PG student who shared similar interests.

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.

Enabling students to consider PG study also requires accessibility in another, less tangible but no less important, sense. As one interviewee explained:

And actually there's students have so much potential there already and a lot of it's about just building confidence, making a connection. It could be just a conversation they have with somebody. So I guess just in terms of the general culture that we have of how we make students aware of those opportunities and ourselves available for those moments and conversations. To me, from my own experience of what I've seen, I think those are the kind of things that are important. How do we keep talking to those students that aren't necessarily the ones that are going to step forward and look for the opportunities (FASS 6).

## C) Actions

In this section, we propose some actions derived from the above discussion, and use the term action to represent a bridge in terms of helping to get from where we are at as an institution towards what we're recommending may enhance progression.

### Enhancing student engagement.

PPS LU interviews with both staff and students point to the value of students being prepared, planning ahead and getting experience as well as suggesting ways to facilitate such engagement (e.g. research internships, talking with current postgraduate students).

However, more in-depth study of the factors influencing attendance at events about PG study or applying for internships could lead to greater insight into what works to facilitate or enable engagement.

#### Research internships

There are multiple schemes across the university including disciplinary internships funded by departments or professional bodies and the expanded WPAG Internships which now include internships outside academic departments. Evaluating the features of these different schemes and identifying those aspects which appear to be most useful for enabling students facing challenges to progress to PG study or make an informed decision to pursue their career goals would be useful. From a PPS LU perspective we would advocate talking with UG students undertaking a research internship to find out about what:

- **planners** such as information and guidance is provided by departments and the careers service or specialised services e.g. Disability and Inclusion.
- **helpers** like family, friends or academic tutors, prompted them to apply.

In other words, planners and helpers may be in place, but we need to understand the links or factors which enable access.

Another action could be to gather student views on what works in promoting engagement in progression planning, with focus groups to get feedback on existing initiatives (e.g. peer mentoring) and generate new ideas.

### Concluding thoughts: facilitated engagement

As the above discussion has indicated, information and support as well as opportunities may be present, unfortunately this is not necessarily sufficient for students to feel confident and prepared to engage with the processes involved in progressing to PGT or PGR study.

Although further research is needed to fully understand the barriers, one issue may be the sheer volume of information that students (and staff helping them) are expected to process. One of the students interviewed said:

I know we get like emails and stuff on careers. But in all honesty, it's not something that I regularly like look at because you get them so often, and in terms of like lecturers and GTAs [Graduate Teaching Assistants] ... it's not really something spoken about. This is the thing, to be fair, I don't think I've seen emails on postgraduate study, more like careers advice. (Debare, UG, BAEM/Socio-economic disadvantage)

Further, the PPS LU interviews with students suggested that it is not just the amount of information but also how best to filter it and search efficiently; each PG student we spoke to seemed to have used different strategies, often coming across something by chance that led them to take the next step.

Perhaps then, universities may need to facilitate engagement by organising or embedding sessions within the curriculum which are solely focused on the next steps (see **Paper 6 on IAG provision**). Although of course some students will be proactive, it

would appear it would appear that it is better to start from the premise that planning is something that may need 'scaffolding'. In other words, students may need initial support as a step towards their taking ownership and responsibility for their futures.

Mainstreaming this support would help in bringing about greater parity between those students who have already been 'coached'

(by family or school helpers) to be proactive and those who have not had such help or whose helpers may not be familiar with the actions that need to be taken. Students whose financial circumstances mean they need to do paid work, or whose disability results in study taking more time, may be too pressured to have the time and/or energy to consider their options unless it is built into their existing study.

## Summary table: findings, recommendations and actions

Paper theme	Findings	Recommendations	Actions
<b>Student Preparedness</b> PPS LU 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Awareness of options and value of PG qualifications</li> <li>b. Expectations of PG study</li> <li>c. Orientation or approach to progression</li> </ul>	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><b>Aim: greater understanding of student view on planners and helpers to enhance student engagement</b></p>
<b>Information, Advice and Guidance provision</b> PPS LU 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Multiple channels: different deliverers of IAG</li> <li>b. Different views of IAG content and inconsistencies.</li> <li>c. Varied timings in providing information about PG study</li> </ul>	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><b>Aim: enhance consistency and clarity in sources of information (planners) to work towards greater parity in IAG students receive</b></p>
<b>Postgraduate Processes</b> PPS LU 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Opaqueness: unclear progression journey</li> <li>b. Time pressure and competing demands</li> <li>c. Complex and changing institutional context</li> </ul>	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><b>Aim: to identify key stages in the progression process and helpers to support students.</b></p>

## 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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