



Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 6. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provision.

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 7 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 **IAG provision** regarding progression. 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 (PS) staff supported the findings from the undergraduate (UG), Postgraduate Taught (PGT) and Postgraduate Research (PGR) student interviews conducted in year 1 of the project. All suggesting variation in the provision of IAG regarding PG study. While lots of good work is going on, IAG provision appears uneven in terms of:

- **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

Below, these issues of multiple channels (who and where), different content (what) and varied timings (when) are briefly discussed using illustrative quotes from the staff interviews.

Multiple channels

IAG about progression is being provided by departments and services (e.g. careers) and within departments, by lecturers, PG directors, and academic tutors. The multiple channels make it difficult to get a clear overview of provision; staff interviewees were generally only aware of the content they delivered, with some uncertainty about IAG being given by colleagues in their department or by other parts of the university.

I think the department actively disseminates information about pathways and graduate studies. Maybe more than it used to and I think that comes in the form of like announcements or like lecture things slides that might be added to lectures towards the end of terms in 3rd year, that sort of thing (FST 9).

IAG provided by departments and the careers team might be delivered within a course programme or in optional sessions:

I do ones [sessions] within the curriculum and then the ones I've talked about, they were extracurricular sessions actually (PS 1 Careers).

IAG may also be delivered through more informal events, one academic recalled that in previous years there had been:

... an open evening for our own students so they could come along and have a session learning all about postgraduate study... [with] talks on things like funding and we had colleagues and current students talking about applying for PhDs and Masters (FASS 20).

Students will not access optional sessions for many reasons. It is clear from the student PPS LU interviews that paid work to fund their studies, health or disability related factors or commitments to support the family can reduce the time for optional activities, hence there are real benefits to embedding IAG within the curriculum.

Different content

Academic awareness and perception of the IAG content provided by the careers service varied. Some staff suggested Careers IAG was weighted more towards graduate schemes following UG rather than encouraging further study, a perception that was shared by some of the students we interviewed in year 1 of PPS LU.

I think careers advice is pretty limited and very focused on the graduate jobs in big companies... at least my impression, I should say that that is quite a limited impression.... it's based on what I've seen advertised and it's based on what academic tutees tell me... I haven't looked into this properly, but I think there is not a lot that actually focuses on doing a PhD or on how to move into that (FST 14).

In terms of planners (i.e. sources of information), this finding suggests possible bias toward graduate jobs over further study and, within information about PG courses, another interviewee felt there was more about taught than research degrees.

It is important to stress that awareness does not always mirror the information and services provided. In fact over the past few years there has been increasing interest and recognition both nationally via, for example, the NEON WP Postgraduate Network and institutionally, including the LU widening participation [Grow Your Future](#) programme. Such developments have raised the profile of Progression routes to Postgraduate study and provide a useful foundation on which to build.

There is also variation across the faculties and departments as noted by careers:

The inconsistencies between different departments are quite pronounced... I think everyone's trying to do their best [regarding IAG], don't get me wrong, but I think within each [department] there are almost siloed approaches to doing things (PS 5 Careers).

Importance of Academic Helpers

From speaking with PG students from WP backgrounds, we found that often it was certain individuals who had encouraged students to take the next step. Likewise, academics' accounts suggested the individual nature of IAG, in that they had conversations about progression with students they identified as having potential.

These findings suggest the important role of academics as helpers; having conversations with students about PG options appears to boost students' confidence. Having someone – an academic in particular - believing in them, helping them to see that PG study could be a route for them, is important.

Staff interviews signalled some students were more proactive and ready to ask questions (See PPS LU Briefing 5: Preparedness) However, as we heard in student interviews in year 1, academic support is often initiated by the academic member of staff. For less confident students it is therefore possible that there are students whose potential or interest in PG is not being nurtured in the same way. One student from a minority ethnic background spoke about getting information from their peers who'd been encouraged by tutors to consider PG study.

Another academic pointed out that staff experience and knowledge of PG study influenced what IAG is delivered, in this case by academic advisors.

[It] depends on who they have as academic advisor, the guidance they're getting will vary quite a lot... (FST 18)

Staff knowledge may also relate to the length of time they have been in their role. One academic who had recently become the PGT director for their department said:

I'm wanting to learn more about that [IAG in department about progression to PG] ... All I know is that it happens (FASS 6).

PPS LU interviews with staff and students suggest that access to reliable and impartial IAG to inform progression to postgraduate study is currently not automatic and remains quite variable.

Varied timings

Another variation in the IAG experience is that students are given information about progression at different points. Some staff said they encouraged students to begin planning from the start of their UG degree; others pointed to information being targeted towards the latter stages. For example, one academic talking about the academic advisor meetings, explained how discussion of PG study may happen:

... at a very early stage, and then towards the end as well, there are questions on careers and progression and what they plan to do next (FASS 20).

Whereas another academic reported that in their department the academic advisor meetings were a place where students receive IAG:

especially in the third year... we will talk with third year students about graduate study as a pathway they might take after graduation (FST 9).

The timing of IAG varied within as well as between departments, with one academic highlighting the differences in application cycles:

The timing of the communications and where you put say a 10-minute slot within the lectures about 'Have you thought about this?' varies quite a lot depending on the programmes I think (LUMS 13).

Further, staff accounts pointed to (sometimes inevitable) changes over time, including those arising due to the COVID pandemic, making it even more difficult to keep track of provision.

So this [IAG for PG study] has been a bit variable across the years, so last year I did

it in kind of a brief talk to undergraduate students, any from any year (FST 14)

While the interviews suggested unevenness in IAG provision, one academic felt there is a move towards greater consistency overall:

It [IAG to UG about PG study] changes or it gets updated all the time, there's a continual thing I think to push towards consistency across all the departments in FST and presumably then also within the university as a whole (FST 12).

The developments associated with [Lancaster's Curriculum Transformation Programme](#) (CTP) offer possible ways of thinking about what IAG is available to support progression to postgraduate study as well as when and who will provide it.

Particularly relevant to PPS LU is the promised CTP benefit of embedding inclusion, diversity and sustainability at all levels.

B) Recommendations

The key recommendation suggested by the above findings, 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.

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.

Embedding IAG

Building in career planning sessions to all undergraduate programmes, as suggested by academics and highlighted by others

(e.g. Gaskell and Lingwood, 2019), would allow time for students to:

- explore resources and discuss options with their network of helpers,
- share experience by meeting current PG students or alumni to get exposure to different pathways and 'insider' knowledge,
- reflect on the practicalities including financial implications of different decisions,
- gain support to prepare applications.

IAG could begin in year one of UG programmes with an outline of the PG options and how they vary. This foundation could be built upon incrementally during subsequent years. While thinking about progression in year one of an UG programme may seem too early, for students with little prior knowledge of postgraduate study, learning the 'basics' could be important in 'sowing a seed'.

- WP students who are doing paid work to support their current study have less time to put together applications and explore options. Building time into courses could help in levelling the playing field.

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

- differences between postgraduate taught and research,
- range of ways study at PG level is different to UG
- benefits of gaining experience of research (first hand or indirectly) via [research internships](#)
- Being explicit and transparent

IAG also needs to indicate the requirements and challenges, and to reach all students rather than being given in 'optional' extra-curricular sessions.

- For WP students (e.g. those with no family history of HE) this is particularly important as these students may not

have considered further study as being 'something for them' so wouldn't necessarily attend optional sessions. Further these students may not have confidence to ask what they consider questions that 'everyone else' knows the answers to, meaning IAG is crucial.

Findings from the staff interviews also pointed to the importance of making explicit the value of PG study.

Not making assumptions about what students know is important for all students, but particularly those who come from WP backgrounds, who may be getting pressure to get a job after their UG degree. For example, one academic recalled:

I had a PhD student who must be the first person who's doing a PhD, but possibly first person in her family to even do a degree of any kind... I think she was sort of getting a lot of family telling her 'What's the point of what you're doing kind of thing?' (FST 18)

But at the same time, IAG needs to be honest and transparent about the commitment required in PG study and the challenges around getting funding. As one academic commented:

[We have had] students do the MA programme because they saw it as the kind of the fourth year of an undergraduate programme and were quite shocked when they turned up that we expect you to be properly full time (FASS 15).

The interviews with students indicated their appreciation of getting information that was honest. Some students had received encouragement to progress to Masters study but in hindsight felt frustrated as the helper had not adequately communicated to them the challenges and demands associated with the higher level of study or had failed to acknowledge the difficulties in acquiring sufficient funding to continue.

C) Future actions

In this section, we propose some actions derived from the above discussion, and use the term action to indicate a step or bridge to help get from where we are towards what we're recommending might enhance progression in the longer term.

Building an IAG framework

The interviews indicated differences in IAG provision across faculties and departments, though the extent of variation is unclear, in part because of multiple deliverers and timescales. Gathering case studies of selected courses could be used to identify good practice and contribute ideas towards building a framework for PG IAG provision.

Factors to consider relate to when and where IAG feature in a students' experience, including:

- Where and when information is presented and how (e.g. in PowerPoint slides within lectures; on departmental webpages; in hard copy).
- The clarity and transparency of the information (e.g. outlining the 'basics', not assuming prior knowledge, defining terms and acronyms).
- Impartiality of the information (e.g. are students directed to look at courses at other universities and given advice and guidance on what to consider).

Who would deliver this information (**Helpers**) would also need to be agreed and appropriately resourced. PPS LU findings thus far suggest value in different categories of helpers in progression journeys. For example, while an academic in the student's discipline may provide encouragement and boost confidence, a current postgraduate student may offer information about the experience of studying at the next level, and a member of professional service staff might be important in navigating the application process.

D) Concluding thoughts: enhancing IAG

The findings therefore suggest the value of creating a framework or set of guidelines regarding what IAG degree programmes should standardly provide regarding progression to PG study. Such a framework would need to be generic to apply across

disciplines but could nevertheless be a useful step in delivering more consistency across the university. Its development could be supported by audits of existing IAG provision and establishing a network of staff contacts in professional services and departments, allowing further insight into existing provision. (See Briefing paper 7 on PG processes).

Summary table: findings, recommendations and actions

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.	Explore 'what works and why' regarding student engagement in IAG about progression: to find out more about student experience of IAG Aim: greater understanding of student view on planners and helpers to enhance student engagement
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.	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. Aim: enhance consistency and clarity in sources of information (planners) to work towards greater parity in IAG students receive
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.	Begin to establish network of staff involved in PG IAG and applications: to work towards information sharing and connectedness. Aim: to identify key stages in the progression process and helpers to support students.

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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