Lancaster University

Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 7. Postgraduate Processes.

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 **processes** 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 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. These issues are discussed below with illustrative quotes taken from staff interviews.

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. Staff discussed the gaps in students' knowledge about progression to PG study and questions they asked:

What to do first? It's like when to start the process, who to speak to. It's a bit of a covert process. I think it's not sort of spoken about very widely (PS 3 Transitions).

Similarly, another referred to the uncertainties regarding where to begin the application process:

I think the opaqueness of how do you find a way in? … And how do you talk to your potential supervisor about a potential project? That is quite a barrier (FST 14).

Professional services and academic staff noted they themselves would welcome a clearer idea of the progression journey, from when students might usefully begin thinking about the next steps through to applications.

Several staff contrasted the vagueness of PG applications to the well-defined process associated with UG applications:

Everyone seems to know the kind of UCAS timeline when it comes to undergraduate, but then postgraduate, it seems to be this mysterious thing that it's just not really out there very much or you have to really go and look for the information and put it all together. (PS 3 Transitions)

Other staff commented on the multiple factors that students need to consider when deciding about courses and preparing an application. For example:

… sometimes I think there's just so much information. There's such a flow of information. Oh, there's this. Remember, there's this…there's this. But it's knowing when and how to access it (FASS 6).

Staff accounts suggest those involved in talking to students about progression to PG study and acting as **helpers** would benefit from an improved understanding of the process.

What would help in offering IAG?

Something like a timeline as to when to start the process and what the first steps are.… Introductory very basic guides like the fundamentals where to start… like literally, what do you do and when? (PS 3 Transitions).

Such guides would reduce misinformation and mean staff are better equipped to support their students. Common amongst academics was the following request:

I'd like a more holistic understanding of the whole process… I want to get to grips with the timing of things and the processes of things, and at what point are students starting to think about things and then at what point [is] information introduced to them and how all that aligns (FASS 6).

Staff members felt that students were similarly perplexed about the process. For example, one academic commented:

I think [students] generally don't have any clue as to where to start and also they don't know how [applying for PG works] (FST 14)

The lack of transparency in processes and timescales when applying for a PhD, and the role of serendipity found in previous work (Houghton, 2003), was also reflected in PPS LU findings. Our interviews with students also highlighted that PG application processes are not always straightforward and vary greatly by department, and often involve an element of chance where a student 'comes across' a key piece of information by chance.

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 (e.g. application deadlines, discussed below).

The multiple routes and qualifications mean there will be no one size fits all, so including case study student journeys across different disciplines and courses could be valuable in highlighting key points in progression for students to consider.

Deadlines

One key element of application processes is deadlines, both for courses and (perhaps more importantly) for funding. Referring to accessing funding, one academic said:

I know that we speak to [undergraduates] about it and that there's information out there for them (FASS 6).

However, as another academic noted, the deadlines might be at *'all times of the year'* (FST 14), making it more difficult for students to navigate the journey. This is in stark contrast to the UCAS UG application process which has well established milestones and procedures. The earliness of the deadlines was noted as challenging:

And in particular for the funding or funded kind of masters' places… [the deadlines] are quite early. So I don't think they (undergraduates) know about those kind of things and judging from what I hear from academic tutees we're not doing enough basically to tell them about it (FST 14).

Similarly, another interviewee emphasised the importance of students' planning ahead:

… everything goes so fast that for some students, they don't realise that they need to apply with time. And then they are busy on their last year. And sometimes they just get like, they didn't realise that these things need to be planned ahead … many students, they don't reach the deadline (FST 19).

The early deadlines are 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.

We're very bureaucratic with so many different departments and different centres and different people and different areas. It's like, as a staff member that's been here [a few] years, I'm like, who do I speak to about that? So what hope does a student have? So it's more that kind of breaking down barriers and making sure that there's a clear pathway through (PS 5 Careers).

Such complexity is somewhat inevitable given the size of the institution and number of different programmes being offered. Nevertheless, this finding suggests that potential **helpers** need to be made more visible within the university. Such transparency could take the form of, for example, an accessible directory of contacts and services listing where an undergraduate could go for information about various aspects of the postgraduate application process and PG study.

Staff and student interviews suggested that there is a risk, albeit unintentional, that results in postgraduates, especially PGR, being 'overlooked' in terms of some administrative procedures and services. This can make the process of navigating progression more difficult, for both students and the staff wishing to support them.

B) Recommendations

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.

Collaborating and communicating

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'. When asked whether there is anything that would help them in their role one academic suggested that:

Different departments, PGT Directors from different departments. Just maybe checking in and finding out what's happening. Is there any kind of good practice? Is there anything that's worked there? Anything that's been challenging? And everybody's very busy and is already doing lots of things and has lots of meetings, but maybe just a bit of a network of PGT directors? … perhaps even just within a faculty so we can find out what people are doing and what ideas are out there (FASS 6).

The above suggestion to construct a space where staff can meet other staff involved in PG admissions could be one way to enhance collective knowledge of processes and procedures. Virtual or in-person meetings could be used to exchange good practice, share resources and experience, map out the roles and responsibilities (who does what and where to signpost students for IAG and potential sources of funding) and problem solve.

Establishing any network requires commitment, particularly given the multiple demands on staff time. However, providing opportunities for colleagues to work collaboratively could in the longer term save time rather than duplicating effort and lead to greater consistency and familiarity of the processed involved in the PG progression journey.

Collaboration between staff could result in a clearer map or directory in terms of the support available, thereby better equipping them to effectively signpost students.

➤ Greater clarity in progression processes could be particularly valuable to students from WP backgrounds who may have few contacts (particularly personal **helpers** such as family and friends) to ask

about postgraduate study and who may lack confidence in seeking out support with the process.

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. As one staff member recalled:

We had a bit of a shortage of sort of full time in place experienced professional services. The person who used to be in charge of coordinating PG retired, having done it for a long time and took all the knowledge with them… We had people in more temporarily who did a great job, did the best job they could have done, but when you've got somebody who really knows how it works and how to organise it, administrate and do it properly, it makes a big difference (FASS 20).

The above quote also points to the importance of **helpers** within professional services and ensuring these individuals have the necessary knowledge of PG processes and key contacts to refer students to. Ensuring professional service staff members are well-informed is particularly important given that they may well be the first point of contact for students seeking information.

A forum could also be a space to share ideas about how to break down barriers to PG study for underrepresented students; something one academic said they would like to know more about:

Information about the types of barriers that are there and ideas of how to tackle those would be really useful because as I said, I wouldn't even know how to talk to it. It's a bit of a sensitive subject (FST 14).

This quote indicates the demand for more insight and understanding of the barriers facing different groups of students, for example, those from minority ethnic backgrounds. A forum or meeting would be

one place to share ideas about how such barriers could be overcome, perhaps inviting students to speak about their experiences of what helped or hindered them in accessing PG study, including people and sources of information (**helpers** and **planners**).

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.

Building a network or hub

Mindful of the numerous meetings staff attend, joining a hub of PG staff should not be too onerous in terms of time or additional work. Rather, connecting staff from academic departments and professional services should, certainly in the longer term, save time and energy for staff and result in more seamless progression processes for students.

For example, information about funding, deadlines, and new PG opportunities could be shared rather than individual staff each pursuing their own lines of enquiry. Such a network would allow different categories of **helper** (e.g. professional services staff and academics) to meet and exchange valuable sources of information or **planners**.

Examples of progression paths

A further related action would be to work with current students to produce 'case studies' of their progression journey. These case studies would outline when individuals began thinking about PG study, who they talk to about their options, what services they use, what steps they take in preparing and submitting applications, and when and where they look for information about funding. Such accounts could include students' 'top tips', for example, starting the planning early and getting research

experience, as well as 'hazards' such as being careful not to miss deadlines.

Concluding thoughts: networking helpers and mapping processes

The above discussion suggests processes associated with progression are akin to a jigsaw where students do not have the overall image to refer to when putting the pieces together and where pieces may have to be located from disparate sources. Students often need to call on different services or helpers to compile a comprehensive picture but may not know that these helpers and services exist; staff similarly may not know who to signpost students to. Therefore, actively bringing together different helpers in one space may forge connections, 'networking helpers'.

In turn, 'networking helpers' could be developed to run a 'one-stop shop' for UG students interested in progressing to PG (by faculty) or PGT students exploring PGR options. These one-stop shops could be organised as drop-in sessions and promoted by departments, with both in-person and online options.

However, no matter what the processes or whether they are clear, one of the key challenges is to get students engaged and for them to believe that PG study could be an option for them. This issue of engagement is discussed in briefing paper 5 where we highlight the importance of recognising the barriers to becoming engaged or prepared, particularly for students from widening participation backgrounds.

Sharing diverse experiences and journeys, perhaps in the form of short case studies or talking heads, could help in promoting greater student engagement; if both staff and students talked about their individual journeys then the extent of diversity in trajectories could be highlighted.

Showcasing such variety may help in breaking down misinformation or stereotypes and ultimately bring out 'points of connection' for students who may not otherwise consider PG study as an option.

Staff and students could be encouraged to create and share their 'processes to progression', identifying the key milestones, sources of information and help, hurdles and support services in their journeys. These trajectories could be used to identify similarities and highlight variety in pathways, including more circuitous routes where an individual returns to PG study after being in employment.

Summary table: findings, recommendations and actions

Paper theme	Findings	Recommendations	Actions
Student Preparedness **PPS LU 5**	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**	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**	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

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

About us: REAP Researching Equity, Access and Participation. We are a small team of researchers based in the Department of Educational Research.

How to reference this paper: Armstrong, J. and Houghton, A. (2023). *Progression to Postgraduate Study at LU: 7. Postgraduate Processes*. Available at: https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/reap/pps-lu/