



Widening Participation in Taught Postgraduate study: a Research project

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the outcomes of an OfS funded project aimed at supporting progression to, and success in, taught postgraduate study. The project commenced in February 2017 and concluded in July 2019.

Widening Participation (WP) into Higher Education has historically received significant attention, with ongoing work across the sector to improve access, transition and retention of students from under-represented backgrounds. However Postgraduate Taught study has not yet received such attention, with a pre-conception that, after undertaking an undergraduate course, students from backgrounds classed as Widening Participation at undergraduate level are on a level playing field with their non WP peers.

This project has challenged this pre-conception. Building on previous research in the field, the project has targeted students previously identified as having lower levels of progression to Postgraduate Taught study, specifically those from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (POLAR quintile 1 and 2) and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students.

The project, delivered in partnership between the Universities of Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York, involved the design and evaluation of non-financial interventions which aimed to support student progression onto Postgraduate Taught study and remove barriers and inequalities.

The aims of the project were to:

- Trial and evaluate interventions aiming to support progression and retention in Masters level study
- Better understand how universities can further support students from under-represented backgrounds to access further study
- Contribute to the evidence base around Widening Participation at Postgraduate Taught level and open up conversations around next steps

Specific interventions trialled were:

1. A programme of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) aimed at undergraduate students from BAME and POLAR quintile 1 and 2 backgrounds.
2. A pre-arrival online course for offer holders to postgraduate taught courses which intended to improve transition into further study and support student progression and retention at taught postgraduate level.

Evaluation included the use of Randomised Control Trials, a robust approach to testing impact in Widening Participation.

Key project findings include:

- **Postgraduate study still needs to be demystified for students**, with a focus on under-represented groups including BAME and POLAR quintile 1 and 2 students. Specifically, students are keen to better understand what postgraduate study looks like, how to navigate the range of options available to them (PhD, Masters, Integrated Masters) and how further study differs from undergraduate study.
- **Postgraduate Taught finance is an area where further information and advice should be provided across the sector**. Some students were unaware of the availability of postgraduate loans; of how much it would contribute to overall costs of studying for a Masters; and how and when it would need to be repaid. This is likely to affect progression to, and success in, taught postgraduate study. The experience of researching and accessing undergraduate funding does not match that at postgraduate level. The absence of a depth and breadth of sources of information makes the process of understanding how to fund a Masters a difficult one.
- **There is a need for pre-arrival support**. Students participating in the project across all academic areas highlighted the challenge of progressing onto Masters level study and the, often unforeseen, step up between undergraduate and postgraduate work, which can make the transition to further study difficult and stressful. Those who participated in an intervention to address this valued the module, whilst those who didn't stated that they wished they had.
- **The use of data to understand diversity at Postgraduate Taught level** needs to be revisited, with consideration given to the data that exists and is collected, and how this can help us understand PGT cohorts and set common measures which help institutions to collect and monitor data, and to contribute to the creation of a national picture around diversity at this level.
- **Representation remains highly relevant** when considering Widening Participation at Postgraduate Taught level. A perceived lack of diversity in the PGT student cohort and within academia can be a barrier to further study for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Institutions, and the sector, should consider how to diversify in terms of both curriculum and staffing, to open up Postgraduate Taught study to a more diverse range of students. This would include reviewing diversity of those entering Postgraduate Research, as the main route into academia.

The application of a Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) led to important learning points:

- Sufficient time should be built in the planning stage for any project which involves an RCT. For a project of the scale and complexity we undertook, in hindsight six months would have been optimal
- RCTs may not necessarily be best placed to evaluate a new or pilot activity. Whilst year 1 / year 2 delivery may be a useful time to learn on the ground, there may be more limited opportunities to collect sufficient data to show robust impact, from a research perspective.
- Using a mixed methodology in terms of evaluation, ensuring the collection and analysis of qualitative data, alongside the RCT findings, is also highly important.

This project has begun to contribute to the sector wide evidence base, whilst also opening up further areas for consideration. Recommendations are for future work to be undertaken to analyse Postgraduate Taught student retention and attainment, at a sector-wide level, as well to review the diversity of both academia and the curriculum at Postgraduate Taught level.

Acknowledgements

A consortium, consisting of the Universities of Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York, delivered this project. This report acknowledges the contribution of each individual involved in the planning, delivery, evaluation and governance of project activity from across the partnership.

Particular acknowledgement is given to Dr Sally Hancock and Professor Paul Wakeling, from the University of York, who led on the evaluation of the project, as well as the Project Managers based at each of the participating institutions.

The project would not have been possible without the contribution and participation of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, so thanks is also given to all those involved in the study.

Introduction

This report details the findings of a collaborative project led by the University of Leeds, in partnership with the Universities of Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York. It aims to share the findings from the evaluation of the support models trialled, as well as wider learnings from the project.

The project has targeted Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students from POLAR quintile 1 and 2 areas and those from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, aiming to close the gap in student success outcomes, with a focus on progression to, and success in, postgraduate taught study. Building on previous research, the project targeted groups identified as having lower levels of progression onto Postgraduate study, and focusing on the need for non-financial support within this area.

Differential progression rates to, and success in, Postgraduate Taught study amongst the target groups has a negative effect on earning outcomes (compared to those with a first degree only), access to the professions, as well as progression onto postgraduate research.

The topic of widening access to PGT study is under-researched and to begin to address this, the consortium began working collaboratively on the HEFCE funded Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS) in 2014/15. This project focused on four key themes: financial; academic innovation; Information Advice and

Guidance (IAG); and understanding the student.

A key finding from the project was that, whilst access to funding is an important factor in decision making around Postgraduate study, there is also a need for better non-financial support to compliment the financial offering.

Post PSS, the partnership committed to continue and build on the collaboration, by sharing good practice of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) support for under-represented groups, to foster better progression to PGT.

This project feeds into the evidence base around widening access to Postgraduate Taught study. The limited research available pre-project, from the PSS project and further afield, pointed to the 'difficulty in the mastery of key skills or academic practices' and existing processes which do not account for individual knowledge or skill bases.

All consortium partners have relatively large PGT populations and this project was an opportunity to scale up existing good practice to effect change to the diversity of intakes and student success, both within the institutions and more broadly across the sector.

The project has been evaluated using a mixed methodology, including the use of Randomised Control Trials to understand whether offering access to specific interventions can have a proven impact on progression onto further study.

Background and Approach

This project builds on research undertaken by Professor Paul Wakeling from the University of York, which looks into progression rates for Postgraduate study. Professor Wakeling's research suggests that students from some ethnic backgrounds and those from POLAR quintile 1 are significantly less likely to access postgraduate study.

The project also links to the findings from the Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS) project from 2014/15, which indicated that Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in relation to PGT can be scarce or difficult to access, and that approaches and interventions widely employed in Undergraduate Widening Participation Outreach programmes could be usefully developed to support access to further study.

This project aimed to undertake further research to contribute to the evidence base and to better understand how universities could further support students from under-represented backgrounds to access further study.

To deliver this project, the Universities of Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York worked collaboratively. As

research-intensive, selective institutions, there was a certain level of similarity between consortium partners, as well as a level of geographical coherence and shared similar missions. The partnership also share large Postgraduate cohorts, and together represent 10% of the Home and EU PGT numbers outside of London.

Working collaboratively has allowed the sharing of ideas and approaches that have supported the development and delivery of high quality interventions, as well as enabling activity to be evaluated robustly.

The project was evaluated using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, which included Randomised Control Trials (RCTs). Using RCTs and a research-led approach offered the opportunity to robustly evaluate the impact of interventions.

RCT design and evaluation were independently undertaken by Professor Paul Wakeling and Dr Sally Hancock from the University of York, leading experts on participation in Postgraduate Taught study. Sitting outside of the Project Management team, they were able to evaluate independently.



“Those with postgraduate qualifications have higher average earnings than those with a first degree...if we value equality of opportunity and diversity in our professions, university system and society then the impediments to greater Postgraduate participation for some groups must be better understood and acted upon¹”

¹ *Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?* Paul Wakeling, Higher Education Quarterly, Volume 63, January 2009

Project Design

Two interventions were developed, based on a body of evidence from across the consortium around Widening Participation at Undergraduate level. For the purpose of the project, two successful models used at Undergraduate level at the University of Leeds were adapted: an access scheme supporting progression into Undergraduate study; and an on course support programme for WP students.

Adapted to focus on Widening Participation into Postgraduate Taught study, the first new intervention aimed to support current Undergraduate students, and the second to support incoming PGT students.

The interventions aimed to support progression to, and transition into, Postgraduate Taught study, and targeted students from two under-represented groups, BAME students and those from POLAR 3 quintile 1 or 2 areas. They were trialled across the consortium.

A focus group was run with BAME Postgraduate Taught students to inform the approach to delivery of the two strands. Key findings were that:

- ❖ Positive representation through current students and societies was the best way to engage with students from under-represented backgrounds
- ❖ Offering clear and honest communications about the research and the approach would help to reduce any concerns around targeted interventions
- ❖ The topic of widening access to PGT is complex, however students find it encouraging that steps are being taken towards improving diversity at Postgraduate level.

“Representation does matter, so much...I think the best way to try [and connect with students] is through societies that are BAME focused” – Student 1, focus group

“It’s good that you’re doing this...it’s gonna be tricky but it’s important” – Student 2, focus group

Discover Postgrad

TAUGHT STUDY AND YOU

Strand 1

This first strand of activity was offered to current final year undergraduate students with the aim of supporting informed decision making and progression onto PGT study. The programme included:

- A mentoring scheme pairing Undergraduate mentees with Postgraduate mentors
- A session on applying for and funding further study
- An alumni led session offering access to role models
- An academic taster session for the relevant area of study
- A series of three e-newsletters providing access to information and case studies

Offered to all home finalists within the intervention areas, with targeted communications for those students from BAME and POLAR quintile 1 and 2 backgrounds. This equated to around 6,000 students across the consortium.



PREPARE FOR POSTGRAD

Strand 2

The second strand offered a pre arrival online course which targeted home PGT offer holders from BAME backgrounds. The course aimed to ease transition to further study, with access to pre-arrival information, community building elements and the opportunity to enhance existing skills.

- Modules include 'Take Control of Your Learning', 'Manage Your Time Effectively', and 'Living Well and Postgrad Life'
- There is reflective space, as well as quizzes to check knowledge gains
- Case study style videos are used throughout
- Postgraduate Ambassadors were employed to offer peer support for incoming students

Evaluation Methodology

This project used Randomised Control Trials (RCT) to evaluate activity. RCTs are considered to be the best method of demonstrating and quantifying the effect of an intervention.

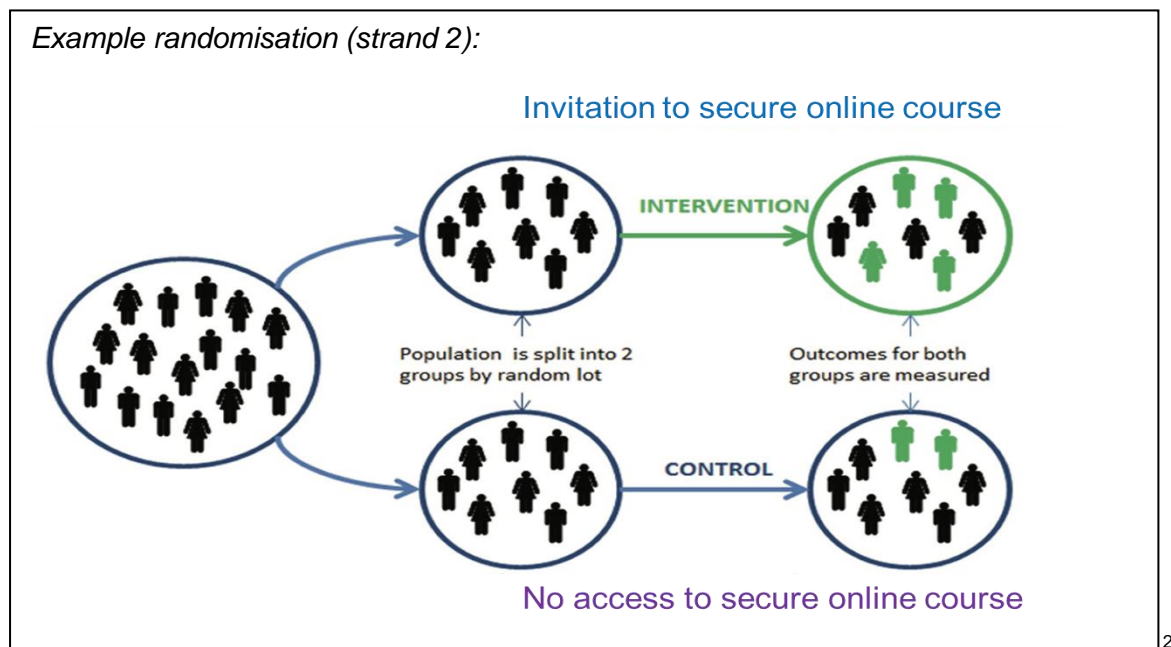
The methodology involved randomly splitting eligible students into two groups, intervention and control. This was done by subject area for strand 1, with institutions pairing to receive opposite intervention and control groups, and by individual for strand 2. Strand 1 measured engagement with the interventions against progression data, whilst also making use of baseline and end surveys to measure attitudinal shifts. Strand 2 measured participation within the course against progression and retention data.

The baseline survey for strand 1 was completed by around 1/5 of the eligible

population (equating to 1,200 students). The end survey was generally well received; with almost half of those who completed the baseline survey offering information for a second time. One fifth of the final sample originated from POLAR quintile 1 or 2 neighbourhoods and BAME students were also well represented.

However, insufficient numbers engaged with the intervention activities and completed both the surveys to be able to draw meaningful conclusions. This meant that an analysis which differentiates the outcomes of BAME and POLAR 1-2 students could not be attempted, due to ethical and data limitations.

Focus groups, case studies and surveys were also used to provide complimentary analysis alongside the RCT evaluation and to help to inform project directions.



² Adapted from Haynes et al., 2012 (p.4) [Haynes, L., Service, O., Goldacre, B., Torgerson, D. (2012) Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials. Technical Report. Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team.]

Strand 1 Analysis

Engagement

In total:

- Approximately one-third of the surveyed intervention group opened all three e-bulletins.
- The event and mentoring based interventions had lower rates of engagement
- The finance/admissions focussed webinar was the most well attended of the events.



Impact

A group named 'Engaged Intervention' were created for the purpose of analysis – this group were those who engaged with at least one intervention.

Interestingly, students within the engaged intervention group had less uncertainty over their future plans, were more-well informed (and more confident about their knowledge) by the end of the programme, but showed less intention of actually progressing into Masters level study. This raises the theme of the “informed decision”, which seems to be key when supporting WP student progression.

In terms of data, Destinations of Leavers was replaced with Graduate Outcomes during the project, so could no longer be used to track actual progression as part of the trial. The project instead made use a consortium level destinations survey, run in October 2018. There was a 47% response rate). Consistent to the intentions reported from the end surveys, those who engaged with the strand 1 interventions had a lower rate of progression to PGT study than was observed for the control group (44% of the control group progressed to PGT, whilst 35.1% of the engaged intervention group progressed on).

Financial concerns

The survey showed that the financial impact of Postgraduate study remains concerning for students, despite the introduction of the Postgraduate loan. The most prominent factors affecting student decisions were course fees, the overall cost of living, and fear of further debt. Similarly important were considerations of how postgraduate study may fit into a particular career path. Gaps were highlighted in knowledge of Postgraduate outcomes, particularly on the topics of employment rates and earnings.

Rerun

Strand 1 was re-run in academic year 2018/19, to re-evaluate student engagement and help inform future activity. Some minor tweaks to interventions were made.

The pool of eligible students was broadened, with removal of the trial methodology, up from subject level to faculty/school level and to incorporate second years.

- 2/3 of the eligible cohort engaged with the e-newsletters.
- Face to face engagement in year 2 was positive, with particular interest in the academic sessions.
- Engagement from the target groups was slightly higher than average. At one institution, 75 Undergraduate students registered interest in mentoring and BAME students made up 50% of this figure.

Qualitative findings

Interventions were well received across institutions, with reported benefits including increased interest and understanding of further study. Receiving clarification on finance and funding related concerns was of particular interest to attendees. Students also reported that hearing from academic staff and current Masters students, particularly when speakers represented a diverse range of backgrounds and areas of study was beneficial. Across the board, students wanted to hear more about the employability benefits of further study, as well as requesting additional tailored information on topics such as how to write personal statements for Masters level study, and the content of particular courses.

“It gave me more knowledge of PG and encouraged me to apply”

“It’s useful to hear the view point from someone who had been through the application process”

Students attending Discover Postgrad events

What did colleagues think?

A stakeholder feedback survey was run with professional services and academic colleagues as the project came to an end, across all subject areas and all institutions, to gain their perspective on the programme.

- “It’s definitely needed - anecdotally students often tell us they find PGT confusing and welcome more information”
- “It is extremely important to provide WP students with an insight to postgraduate study and allow them to discover how it works. A lot of our students wouldn’t have role models who could talk to them about this level of study”.
- “PGT is essential to make rapid progress in my field, but often the diversity of students on those programmes is low”
- “It’s a really good concept. This programme has helped inform students enabling them to make an informed decision”.

Professional Services and Academic staff across the consortium

Demographic analysis

At one institution, demographic data for those engaging in interventions was further analysed, and a clear pattern emerged, indicating that the programme was meeting its initial aim of supporting WP students. Specifically:

- **Mentoring:** BAME students were twice as likely to participate compared to the rest of the cohort (in terms of both expressions of interest and actual pairings)
- **Admissions and funding session:** POLAR quintile 1 and 2 students were twice as likely to sign up / attend compared to the rest of the cohort (in terms of both registrations and actual attendance)
- **E-bulletins:** Click through rates were higher for students from BAME and POLAR quintile 1 and 2 backgrounds than for students from the rest of the cohort
- **Academic session:** Both BAME and POLAR quintile 1 and 2 students were twice as likely to attend compared to the rest of the cohort

In Summary

Strand 1 of the project initially aimed to support a higher proportion of WP students to progress onto PG study. The research concluded that interventions for some groups of students were particularly important but all would benefit. Information on employability and financial support alongside the opportunity to engage with role models are all important, as well as enabling students to decide whether further study is the right option for their career and personal progression.

[Watch our video](#) to hear more about supporting diversity in Postgraduate study.

Strand 2 Analysis

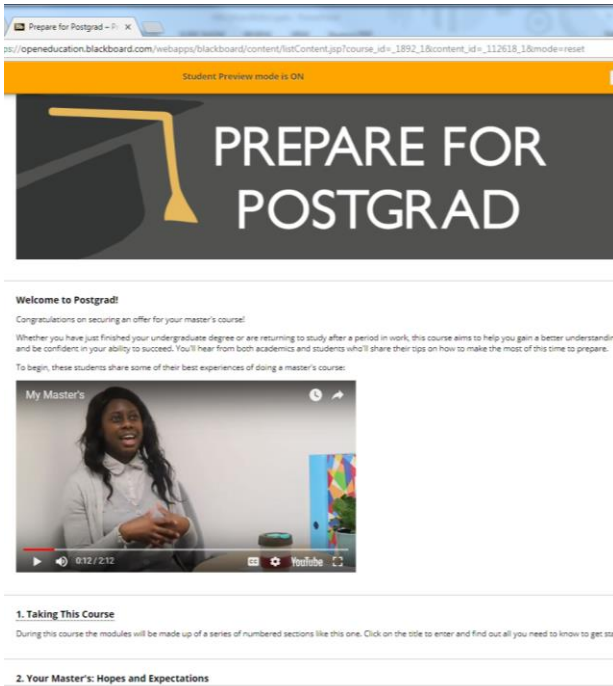
Engagement

Just under half of the offer holders across the consortium who were invited to join the intervention group agreed to participate in the trial (from an initial sample size of 613). Around two thirds of this group then went on to access the online course and watch the opening video. From the group engaging with the course, around a fifth of the intervention group went on to complete at least one module. This “engaged intervention group” equated to 31 students in total.

Of those engaging with the course, interestingly 83% had applied to one of the consortium institutions from an institution outside of the Russell Group. However the proportion of students from outside the Russell Group in the intervention group as a whole was only 56%.

Whilst there was a relatively even split of genders in the intervention group, 73% of those engaging with the course were female.

All trial participants for strand 2 were home BAME students.



Prepare for Postgrad - [X]

ps://openeducation.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=1892_1&content_id=112618_1&mode=reset

Student Preview mode is ON

PREPARE FOR POSTGRAD

Welcome to Postgrad!

Congratulations on securing an offer for your master's course!

Whether you have just finished your undergraduate degree or are returning to study after a period in work, this course aims to help you gain a better understanding and be confident in your ability to succeed. You'll hear from both academics and students who'll share their tips on how to make the most of this time to prepare.

To begin, these students share some of their best experiences of doing a master's course:

My Master's

0:12 / 2:12

1. Taking This Course

During this course the modules will be made up of a series of numbered sections like this one. Click on the title to enter and find out all you need to know to get started.

2. Your Master's: Hopes and Expectations

Impact

The Randomised Control Trial highlighted differences in enrolment rates for those eligible for the intervention. The decline rate observed for the control group was 8.4% higher than that of the intervention group and the enrolment rate of the intervention group was 22.2% higher than the control group. Further, more of the intervention group remained enrolled in December 2018 - by a difference of 8.7%. Looking only at the subset of “engaged intervention” participants, we also saw enrolment and continued enrolment rates of 100%.

Given the stark differences and the size of the “engaged intervention group”, it is difficult to fully attribute these findings to the intervention, and suggests that further work should be undertaken to further understand the complexities of this picture. Qualitative findings were that the intervention had a predominantly positive impact however, and this should not be overlooked.

Qualitative findings

The feedback received from surveys issued after course delivery ended (completed by 12 participants) was predominantly positive, both in relation to the course concept and content. All participants offering feedback felt that the course had enhanced their academic skills, improved their understanding of what Masters level learning would entail and prompted them to consider their lifestyle and wellbeing at Masters Level.

“The course gave me an idea of what to expect, and the support services available” (Student commencing postgraduate study at a new institution).

Module content was generally well received, with the majority of students (all bar one) stating that they found modules useful or very useful.

In terms of tools within the course, the feedback showed that there were varied viewpoints on whether use of Facebook and course tools such as Padlet and Progress Checkpoints, had been useful.

Generally however, feedback was positive, with students highlighting the Time Management content and contributions from current students as particularly beneficial.

Feedback was also taken from students who had been offered the course, but who had chosen not to participate. This gave interesting insight into why students may not have engaged with the resource. Common reasons included lack of time and other priorities.

Despite not participating in the course at the time, focus group participants continued to cite their transition into Masters as “overwhelming”, “intensive” and that there was a notable lack of support in comparison to that received whilst at Undergraduate level. Most felt that in hindsight, the course would have helped them with this transition.

“I was working nine-to-five so I didn’t have time for it. I felt like it would have prepared me more to come into the Masters. But it was just time” (Student offered access to the Prepare for Postgrad course).

Focus group participants unanimously liked the Postgraduate Ambassador roles, and mentioned that it would be great to see a wider range of students represented, ideally one per faculty, offering wider relevance and a range of viewpoints

In Summary

The project indicates that pre-arrival support is important in supporting students. Those participating in the project across all areas continued to talk about the “**challenge of progressing onto Masters level study**” and the, often unforeseen, step up between Undergraduate and Postgraduate, which can make the transition to further study difficult and stressful. Pre-arrival resources or support should be implemented to ease this transition and prepare students for the reality of further study.

Using RCTs in WP work

Within Widening Participation, **the ability to robustly evaluate activity is invaluable** and using an RCT can offer proof that interventions work and are of value to the institution. Being able to share research-led evaluation findings can lead to enhanced buy in and enable further expansion of WP work, taking forward interventions which are proven to have had impact.

The project identified a number of key learning points relevant to future projects and the sector.

One of the first learnings from the project is that **RCTs may not necessarily be best placed to evaluate a new or pilot activity**. Evaluation using an RCT assumes high levels of engagement and therefore interventions that have been in place for some time may be easier to evaluate using this method. A pilot run may offer more limited opportunities to collect data and robustly evaluate impact. New programmes might need the opportunity to be embedded and scaled up before evaluating at this higher level and null results may mean having to run the intervention again before fully understanding its impact.

In line with this, the use of RCTs and their subsequent findings can be a good opportunity to adapt and refine and existing intervention or policy.

Dependent on the circumstances, it can be important to note that **legal and GDPR related constraints may impact on the size of the sample**, particularly if students have to opt into the trial. This project experienced challenges around ethical, GDPR and legal practices linked to data sharing which impacted on timescales and engagement.

[Watch our video](#) which showcases project learnings around using RCTs within a Widening Participation setting.

Sufficient time should be built in the planning stage for any project which involves an RCT. For a project of the scale and complexity we undertook, in hindsight six months would have been optimal.

This planning time allows for a range of factors to be considered, including previous research, analysis of existing activity, access to data, the size and predicted engagement with trial participants and the length of time required to be able to assess impact.

The pilot year of the project also showed the **challenges of engaging with students**, particularly those from WP backgrounds. In addition to the usual challenges, there were significant factors which may have impacted on engagement, including industrial action in Spring 2018 and unusually bad weather, which led to events being cancelled due to staffing issues and a lack of students on campus. Similarly, it was felt that a short lead time for embedding and advertising the programme may have had an impact. A recommendation would be to run an RCT of this type over a minimum of three years, to capture sufficient data and mitigate risks related to external (and unforeseen) factors.

Finally, **the value of mixed methodology in evaluation should not be underestimated**. Analysing qualitative data alongside the RCT findings helped the project team to build a full picture of the impact of activities and to explain findings. In our instance, the additional qualitative analysis from focus groups, event feedback, demographic information and attendance numbers, explained some of the “why” and the “how”.

Postgraduate Student Involvement – an unexpected finding

One of the unexpected findings of this project has been the eager enthusiasm of students on Postgraduate Taught courses to engage with widening participation activities.

The project has primarily engaged with Postgraduate Taught students via a mentoring scheme for final year undergraduates. Moreover, master's students have also shared their experiences and perspectives via webinars, videos, skills training workshops and focus groups.

During the project:

- Over 600 Postgraduates have signed up to the mentoring scheme, acting as mentors to final-year undergraduates
- 60 students have taken part in webinars, videos or events
- A call for BAME postgraduates to attend a focus group resulted in over 40 expressions of interest in under a week
- 10 Postgraduate Ambassadors have supported the delivery of the pre-arrival online course for postgraduate taught offer-holders.

Some of the reasons for participating included:

- Wanting to give back to the institution (i.e. if they had received a scholarship of bursary in support of their studies)
- Wanting to share their experience having not fully understood the process themselves at the time
- Wanting to join the conversation around diversity at PGT level

“I wanted to get involved, because representation matters. If I had gone to an event when I was an undergraduate and seen someone from my background doing a Masters and having a positive experience, that would have made me more confident to pursue master’s study” (PGT student, University of Manchester).

Such support from Postgraduates is especially valuable given the importance of peers and informal networks as sources of advice and guidance. Participating institutions are now taking this finding and looking at how to continue PGT student involvement in WP work and more broadly.



Mohammed and Zoe, Prepare for Postgrad Ambassadors

Recommendations for the future: The project provided many learning points, and some of the key areas are summarised below.

The Informed Decision

As showcased through delivery of strand 1 of the project, supporting students to make an informed decision about further study is key, rather than encouraging all students to progress on. Masters level study is not the right option for every student, however the provision of Information, Advice and Guidance needs to be reviewed, and in some areas improved, to enable all students, regardless of their background, to make this informed decision.

Finance

The topic of finance was raised throughout the project by students as an area where **further IAG needs to be provided**. Common questions focussed on:

- The loan and how much it would contribute to overall costs of studying for a Masters
- How and when the loan would need to be repaid
- Whether there were maintenance grants for Postgraduate study
- Alternative sources of income to contribute to Masters costs and how to find these
- Where to locate information on bursaries and scholarships and how to apply for these

Some students were even unaware of the existence of the Postgraduate loan.

The topic of Postgraduate finance and funding is a complex one, however the lack of a central place to locate information and the range of different offers from institution to institution seemingly makes **the process of understanding how to fund a Masters a difficult one**.

A recommendation from the project would be to **simplify the route to provision of IAG around finance and funding**, to ensure there is a level playing field and so as students from all backgrounds can find and understand the full range of options and information related to finance, particularly when looking to move institution or return to study. This will support students to make informed decisions about the financial undertaking of doing a Masters.

Employability

The topic of employability has also been highlighted as an area where **there are knowledge gaps for students**. Through work undertaken by the project, the project team attempted to showcase information on common career paths, salary information and benefits of further study, including qualitative findings from alumni such as skills acquisition and honing of practices. This work was halted however as the information was not easily available, and the project timescales did not allow for further work to be undertaken on the topic.

Given this, it is not surprising that students struggle to understand or articulate the benefits (or not) of undertaking Masters level study. Because of the significant financial undertaking for many students, and particularly those from WP backgrounds, our recommendation is that

further work be completed to support students to locate and understand the benefits of further study in their preferred area of study.

On a related theme, institutions may be able to improve their approach to embedding Postgraduate study within their 'progression' offering. The project found that it was common for **Careers based staff to not have access to information on further study**, meaning that they were unable to offer the option of PGT study to students considering their next steps.

Additional research

There is still limited research into Widening Participation at Postgraduate level, particularly in relation to retention and attainment of students. It would be advisable for further research to be completed to better understand these areas and to highlight any groups who are at risk, so as models of support can continue to be trialled to support all students. In addition to this, measures used at Undergraduate level such as POLAR no longer remain relevant at PGT level, given the non-homogenous nature of the student cohort, so it is recommended that additional work be undertaken to consider **“what does Widening Participation mean for Postgraduate level study?”**

Proposed next steps:

This project has taken significant steps in contributing to the evidence base in an area of limited previous research, and generated interesting findings on the theme of widening participation at Postgraduate Taught level. Important learnings have also been found about the use of Randomised Control Trials as an evaluation methodology within WP work, with recommendations now being shared with others around the sector. The project has started conversations at a sector level, producing areas for discussion and future consideration in relation to Postgraduate Study. The following next steps are now proposed:

- Creation of centralised resources and clearer information on finance and funding options for students considering further study
- A joining up and showcasing of the employability benefits of further study to enable Careers and WP practitioners alike to articulate this to students, enabling them to make an informed decision about their next steps
- A review of diversity within academia, including Postgraduate Research as a direct route into this
- Research to review retention data for students at Postgraduate Taught level, highlighting at risk groups and enabling development of support models for these groups
- Research to review attainment data for students at Postgraduate Taught level, highlighting at risk groups and enabling development of support models for these groups
- Further evaluation of what Widening Participation means at Postgraduate Taught level and the types of measures which would be useful for institutions to consider for their student cohorts

The newly established NEON Widening Participation into Postgraduate Study Network will build on these recommendations, with a focus on:

- Bringing together practitioners with existing practice in WP at PG and Careers, as well as those interested in developing this work
- Ensuring effective collaboration between member institutions around initiatives to widen participation in postgraduate study
- Considering metrics for the evaluation of interventions to support WP student progression to PGT study
- Actively seeking opportunities to share best practice collectively at a national level

Contact felicity.wicks@manchester.ac.uk for more information or to join this group.