

Progression to, and Success in, taught postgraduate study by students who are BAME and/or from POLAR quintile 1 or 2 areas

Executive Summary

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 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.

Specific interventions trialled were:

1. a programme of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for undergraduates
2. a pre-arrival online course for postgraduate taught students.

Particularly interesting has been the engagement from both WP Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students in the interventions and their eagerness for institutions to do more in this area.

Interventions were evaluated using Randomised Control Trials, a robust approach to testing impact in Widening Participation.

Key project findings include:

- ***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.
- ***Postgraduate study still needs to be demystified for students,*** with a focus on how it can be beneficial and how students can be supported to progress. 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.

- **Taught Postgraduate finance is an area where further IAG should be provided.** Some students were unaware of the availability of postgraduate loans; unaware of how much it would contribute to overall costs of studying for a Masters; unaware of how and when it would need to be repaid. The topic of Taught Postgraduate finance and funding is a complex one, however the lack of a central place to locate information and the range of different (Taught Postgraduate scholarship/bursary) offers from institution to institution seemingly makes the process of understanding how to fund a Masters a difficult one.
- **Employability was highlighted as an area where there are knowledge gaps** for students. 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.
- **Representation remains highly relevant** when considering widening participation at Postgraduate Taught level. A perceived lack of diversity in the Taught Postgraduate student cohort and within academia can be a barrier to further study for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Moving forward, the recommendation would be for institutions to consider how to diversify in terms of both curriculum and staffing, to open up Taught Postgraduate study to more diverse groups of students. This would include reviewing diversity of those entering Postgraduate Research, as the main route into academia.

The challenges to delivering and evaluating a Taught Postgraduate widening participation project highlighted other key learning points.

- Throughout the project, supporting informed decision making was a primary focus for the institutions involved, opposing the assumption that Taught Postgraduate study is the best option for all students. In order to support this informed decision making, more needs to be done to simplify and bring together clear information, advice and guidance, particularly on the topics of finance and funding, and in relation to the employability benefits of further study.
- 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. A key factor to the delivery of an RCT is ensuring a minimum timeframe of 6 months for scoping and planning, before the first intervention is even developed. 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 Taught Postgraduate student retention and attainment, at a sector-wide level, as well to review the diversity of both academia and the curriculum at Taught Postgraduate level.