Breaking down barriers to postgraduate study: Taking an access approach through the 'Get into Masters' Study' initiative

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Abstract: Widening access and participation in higher education now celebrates decades of success in UK Higher Education (HE), particularly at undergraduate entry-level. Yet similar work at entry-level for postgraduate study is less explored, where due to the increased emphasis on Graduate Outcomes in UK HE, there is increasing demand and aspiration for postgraduate study from policy makers and students. This research note reports on a series of presentation workshops from the University of Winchester (UK), titled the 'Get into Masters' Study' initiative. These presentations were delivered in an access approach across Level 5 students to break down barriers to postgraduate study through explaining the practicalities, different options and finances relating to postgraduate study, so students are able to make an informed choice. This paper details the approach taken and topics covered to inform practice elsewhere, as students increasingly look towards postgraduate study to gain further experiences and enhance their career beyond their degree.

Keywords: Widening Participation; Access; Postgraduate; Higher Education.

Introduction

Widening access and participation in higher education now celebrates decades of success in UK Higher Education (HE). In 2022, 39% of 18-year olds were set to progress into University or College degree level study, where widening participation has become core business of university recruitment (UCAS, 2022). There is now a vast body of evidence, research and practice relating to widening participation relating to: breaking down barriers (Kaye, 2021), giving information about the pragmatics of study (Baker, 2020), and raising confidence (MacFarlane, 2018), to motivate and make available undergraduate HE to non-traditional students. The University of Winchester too have prioritised Widening Participation for undergraduate courses (University of Winchester, 2021), with notable initiatives related

to widening access to children of personnel serving in the military (McCullouch, Hall and Ellis, 2018) and care leavers (McKnight, Collins, Way and Iannotti, 2019). In 2017, the University's Careers Team embarked on a new access project relating to widening access and participation to postgraduate study. This research note reports on the 'Get into Masters' project which has now become core practice at the University, and aims to raise aspiration for, and break down barriers to postgraduate study beyond Winchester.

Background

The University of Winchester gained University status in 2005, following 165 years of HE after its initial foundation as a teacher-training institution, King Alfred's College. King Alfred's College was founded as an educational institution to train teachers to teach 'the poor' (being the working-class population of 19 Century Hampshire). The University has held on to its foundation as a Cathedral's Group University prioritising values-based education, enrolling students with lower grade boundaries, and often offering a second chance to students. 'The University has championed the Humanities as its largest area of courses, with high scores in the National Student Survey (NSS) in the 2010s, and overall student numbers growing to around 9000 in 2017Yet, graduate employability and further study remained the institution's main challenge, and through student feedback, progressing onto Masters' level study was outlined as a popular initial aspiration post-university for graduates. In 2017, the Careers Team were actioned to run a series of workshops to break down barriers and demystify postgraduate study as a graduate route for students. This was developed in 2018 to expand the use of the workshops across every undergraduate course at the institution. With a widening participation population at Winchester over 50%, the team knew it was highly likely that many of our students' parents had not studied at postgraduate, or even degree level, therefore the parental education road map (Heath, Fuller and Johnston, 2010), could have been even less present at applying to postgraduate programmes than undergraduate. Therefore, an access approach similar to those deployed by Widening Participation Teams in further education colleges and secondary schools was required for the workshops to succeed.

The 'Get into Masters' Study' initiative

The workshops were titled 'Get into Masters' Study', to increase the accessibility of the topic of the talk, although they would also speak about other postgraduate qualifications, such as postgraduate certificates in education (PGCE) and doctoral study. The sessions would both be run as in class workshops to gain maximum audience, as well as additional optional workshops open to all students during employability weeks. These sessions ran across all programmes at the end of each semester for maximum engagement at second year (Level 5) and final year (Level 6). The delivery team were made up of the Careers and Student Engagement Teams. The structure of the workshops is highlighted below, with the following themes discussed:

- Practicalities
- Broadening horizons
- Finances

Practicalities

The major theme covered in the presentation related to the practicalities related to postgraduate study. The aim of the session was to demystify postgraduate study for a predominately widening-participation student body, many of whom were first-generation students. The first part of the session outlined key words starting with the difference between the words 'postgraduate' and 'undergraduate', then the key programme types such as doctoral, masters' and shorter postgraduate taught courses. The acronyms were outlined, for example explain that MA stood for Master of Arts and MSc stood for Master of Science. When outlining the key words, the practicalities were covered, such as length of study (part time and full time), expectations of workload (particularly the word counts of theses) and anticipation of taught elements. In the second half of the session, practicalities were discussed further regarding the application process, outlining the different practices deployed including UCAS postgraduate (the UK's application website), university websites and interviews. Students were directed to the Careers Team for further detailed advice and guidance on individual applications, and advised to speak with their Personal (Academic) Tutor for advice on course titles.

Broadening horizons

Universities traditionally only speak of postgraduate study in regard to progression onto Higher Education courses at the same institution. With societal trends in the UK seeing students often returning home following their undergraduate degrees (Mitchell, 2017), leading on a Winchester-Masters' only campaign would be exclusive and potentially less successful. Additionally, many students report being in a difficult financial position at the end of their degree, where going back to the parental home may be the only option before debts can be paid or funds can be raised. Therefore, the project lead gained permission at the start of the project to discuss postgraduate options beyond Winchester, which was thankfully granted. This section discussed university options asking students if they intended to return home post university (which were often the majority), and asked them to list all HEIs within 45-minutes commute of their planned location post-graduation. This exercise highlighted the institutional options available to students if already planning to live at home a year post degree, and where staying in Winchester or moving to a new location would be not viable. The workshop facilitator highlighted that there were over 160 UK higher education institutions to inspire students to think more widely for further options. Students were encouraged to search wide for options, and to 'shop around' with tuition fees varying due to no fee regulation in the UK.

Following highlighting the sheer number of options now available to students, the workshop facilitator ran a discussion on 'Why take a masters'. Of course, the initial well-versed reason was communicated relating to career prospects which was not new to the students. The facilitators then communicated several further reasons such as: to further knowledge in the current discipline, to gain an opportunity to specialise in their field (e.g. Creative Writing BA, onto a Writing for Children MA), to change direction to gain access to new disciplines and professions (such as Business Management, Teaching, or Law); or to live in a new city or country. When speaking about wider locations and nations, the facilitator took the opportunity to speak about the varying cost of living and tuition fees across universities in the UK and EU more widely.

Finances

The final part of the workshop could not be avoided – the transparent discussion about finances and student loans. Many students in English HE study at undergraduate level through borrowing £40-£50K in student loans, therefore it is important to be honest with students about the implications of taking on a further loans. The facilitator always outlined the financial implications of further study and importantly, the difference to undergraduate loan schemes in the UK, such as the full loan coming to the student (with postgraduate loans) rather than part direct to the University. Students were asked to take time to plan their finances, living costs, tuition fee and other expenses which they would need to study full time. Part time options were also covered, and students were referred to the Student Finance England website directly referencing their information. Finally, the Careers Team's advice service was advertised to offer application and general career advice relating to further study.

Conclusion

The Graduate Outcomes Survey for the students exposed to the intervention is available, yet there is no measurable percentage difference, with 18.79% of 2020 graduates in some form of further study, compared with 18.72% of 2019 graduates (HESA, 2022). However, it should be noted that this data was collected during the global pandemic where considerable economic disruption occurred, as well as endless individual factors and scenarios of graduate journey disruption. Additionally, when assessing the impact of an intervention in the student experience to improve a metric, gaining causation is rarely possible. Although much research has explored alignment between employability, retention and grades, the factors that impact these aspects for students seem as individual as our students, therefore claiming an increase in students progressing onto further study following these initiatives would be difficult. Given the cost of the initiative was simply staff resource through presentations, the practice is still worth commending when the results have sustained percentage during years of disruption. By taking an access approach to postgraduate study communication, the playing field is levelled for students from first-in-generation families. Through explaining the practicalities, different options and finances,

students are able to make an informed choice. The 'Get into Masters' Study' initiative continues at Winchester, alongside a University wide strategic development theme relating to our graduates' futures. Raising postgraduate study aspiration is just one stream of activity, alongside considerable other careers initiatives to boost students ambitions for new pathways beyond their degrees.

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