

Drivers and deterrents of undergraduate and postgraduate re-enrolment at *alma mater*

Introduction

The University of Westminster (UoW) aims to increase its overall number of postgraduate students. One potential source of postgraduates is re-enrolling undergraduates and postgraduates. The drivers and deterrents of re-enrolment at UoW are little understood, and the decision-making processes are obscured. Additionally, the picture the literature review depicts of the wider terrain is one of considerable complexity with multiple intersecting facets. The present study aims to understand the factors influencing re-enrolment at *alma mater* by engaging with and listening to student voices.¹ To achieve this aim, the findings are presented in two sections. Following the literature review and research design, the first section consists of descriptive statistics and trends highlighting the graduate outcomes of final-year undergraduates from 2017-2018 to 2020-2021. This section also presents quantitative data for undergraduates by college and school, as well as postgraduate destinations. The second part consists of insights derived from 19 one-to-one interviews with undergraduates, current postgraduates (taught and research), and undergraduate and postgraduate UoW alumnae/alumni.

The findings from the interviews are discussed thematically and cover: 1) drivers of breaks in study; 2) course availability and content; 3) employment opportunities and employability; 4) cost and financial considerations; 5) institution ranking and prestige and effects of faculty-student relationships, feelings of belonging, and student support; 6) expectations of postgraduate study; 7) perceptions of education and teaching quality; and 8) flexible study options. In each case, the dynamic may work to the benefit or detriment of Westminster; for example, the perceived reputation of the university may motivate a student to stay or drive them away. A cocktail of factors often feeds into decision-making processes,

¹ Re-enrolment in/at *alma mater* – the present study uses this phrase to refer to student re-enrolment at postgraduate level, this could be taught or research, at the institution where they undertook their undergraduate or postgraduate degree. For example, a student who has completed their undergraduate qualification at UoW and enrolls for a postgraduate course at UoW would be considered to have re-enrolled at their *alma mater*. The phrase covers both *immediate* (within 15 months of graduating with an undergraduate degree) re-enrolment as well as those categorised as *returners* (i.e., those who have taken a break of an academic year or more between undergraduate studies and enrolment on a postgraduate programme).

though some ingredients are likely to predominate over others. In conclusion and recommendation, it is contended that UoW should offer more extensive and intensive information and support about the benefits and conduct of postgraduate study and that key disseminators of this knowledge are academic colleagues and current/former postgraduate students, albeit with the support of professional services colleagues.

Literature Review

Although the literature review is presented by theme, it is important to recognise the intersection of systemic/structural, student/personal, and institutional factors shaping student choices, including re-enrolment in *alma mater*. Some of the literature discussed does not directly address the issue of re-enrolment in *alma mater*; the bulk of material focuses on school-leavers entering undergraduate courses and factors influencing their decision-making. Nevertheless, it is maintained that a wealth of indirect insights can be gleaned from the body of work examining transitions to and within Higher Education (HE). Some research offers more direct insight, such as that on student loyalty and transitions to postgraduate study. The review first looks at non-institutional deterrents/drivers of access to postgraduate study, focusing on debt, loans, career opportunities, and academic preparedness for postgraduate study. The second part examines structural variables, such as class, and their interaction with postgraduate access. Thirdly, the review turns to various institutional variables.

Debt

What financial impediments exist that may act against re-enrolment at *alma mater*? Debt has been examined for its potential to act as a deterrent to HE participation.² Callender and Mason found that debt-averse attitudes were stronger for ‘lower-class students’ than their ‘upper-class’ peers. Such attitudes amongst lower-class students were more likely to act as a deterrent in planning for HE in 2015 than in 2002.³ On the other hand, while concerns about income-contingent loans may hinder HE access for some, they may provide the necessary means for

² Claire Callender and Jonathan Jackson, “Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?”, *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, no.4 (2008), 405-429; Clare Marchant, “Policy divergence: Changes in student funding systems across the UK since 2002/03,” *Higher Education Policy Institute*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/08/10/policy-divergence-changes-in-student-funding-systems-across-the-uk-since-2002-03/>.

³ Claire Callender and Geoff Mason, “Does Student Loan Debt Deter Higher Education Participation? New Evidence from England,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 671, 1 (2017), 20-48.

others to progress.⁴ Additionally, the often higher level of financial commitment held by those considering postgraduate study, such as family or property, can be constraining, meaning they depend on loans to open access.⁵ Mateos-González and Wakeling analysed data related to the introduction of Masters loans in 2016-2017, noting an increase in overall enrolment rates from 8.9% in 2015-2016 to 12.5% in 2016-2017, as well as a change in rates of underrepresented socio-economic groups progressing to taught postgraduate courses, bringing them to a rate similar to their more advantaged peers after 2016-2017.⁶ Therefore, long-term debt is not necessarily an immediate concern of potential students. Rather than future loan debt, immediate financial concerns such as the everyday cost of living assume a prominent position.⁷

However, student views on debt are complex, intersect with personal circumstances and systemic factors, and are not static.⁸ Currently, students commencing a taught postgraduate course can apply for a loan to help with fees and living costs. Those who started their course between August 2021 and July 2022 can apply for up to £11,570; those between August 2022 and July 2023 £11,836; and those who commenced on or after 1 August 2023 £12,167. Loans for doctoral degrees are as follows: £27,265 for those whose course commenced between August 2021 and July 2022; £27,892 for those between August 2022 and July 2023; and £28,673 for those starting on or after 1 August 2023.⁹ Thus, in terms of potential debt, taking out a postgraduate loan constitutes a considerable financial commitment that is compounded for some students once access to underlying financial resources is considered.¹⁰ Students from less affluent backgrounds may lack funding from their relatives, with better-off students tending to have greater access to this resource for longer.¹¹ Access to an underlying reservoir of funding may mean that some can forego student loan debt altogether. Such financial resources may also shape institutional choice, with those possessing ‘low familial capital’

⁴ Marchant, “Policy divergence.”

⁵ Robin Mellors-Bourne, Tristram Hooley and John Marriott, *Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study* (HEFCE, 2014); Margeret M. Baguley, Anne Jasman, Peter McIlveen, Henriette van Rensburg and Rahul Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice: Factors influencing postgraduate students’ decision making,” in *Meanings and Motivation in Education Research*, ed. Margeret M. Baguley, Yvonne S. Findlay and Martin C. Kerby (London: Routledge, 2015), 163-178.

⁶ José Luis Mateos-González and Paul Wakeling, “Student loans and participation in postgraduate education: the case of English master’s loans,” *Oxford Review of Education*, 46, no.6 (2020), 698-716.

⁷ Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, *Abolition of maintenance grants in England from 2016/17* (House of Commons, 2017), 10.

⁸ Hubble and Bolton, *Abolition of maintenance grants in England from 2016/17*.

⁹ “Funding for postgraduate study,” GOV.UK, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/funding-for-postgraduate-study>.

¹⁰ Paul Wakeling, Sally Hancock and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, *Widening Access to Postgraduate Study and the Professions: Understanding the Student Consortium strand report* (York: University of York, 2015).

¹¹ Paul Wakeling, Gillian Hampden-Thompson and Sally Hancock, “Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?” *British Educational Research Journal*, 43, no.6 (2017), 1149-1167.

prioritising the securing of funding and minimisation of financial risk over and above institutional image or reputation.¹² This discussion raises the provision of financial support, in terms of bursaries, studentships, etc., to incentivise students to re-enrol and support them in their studies.

Career and employment prospects

While debt acts as a deterrent for some students, for others, concerns about it are outweighed by drivers favouring the pursuit of postgraduate study. Career opportunities are one such driver.¹³ Students expressed an interest in gaining a more in-depth theoretical understanding of their existing role to perform it better; postgraduate study was not always about securing a new role. Improving salary prospects is also featured in the motivation equation. Upskilling and raising employability and earnings are key factors in determining the take-up of postgraduate qualification.¹⁴ This research can be extended directly to the topic of re-enrolment at *alma mater*, in terms of both *immediate* re-enrollers and *returners*. One hypothesis to investigate is whether the prospect of guaranteed or prompt employment as a result of achieving a postgraduate qualification influences decision-making and how courses offered at UoW match student requirements and expectations. Additionally, leaning on the literature concerned with undergraduate course choice, subject was found to be vitally important in shaping student decision-making, even overriding fears about debt and shifts in geographical location.¹⁵

Student perceptions of academic preparedness and expectations of further study

Academic preparedness and student perceptions of the same may impact both the decision to enrol in a postgraduate course and the continuation of that course once it commences. Students who have transitioned to postgraduate study have reported how they struggled with academic demands and the incorporation of critical thinking into their work.¹⁶ It would be helpful to

¹² Abél Pásztor and Paul Wakeling, "All PhDs are equal but...Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate," *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39, no.7 (2018), 994.

¹³ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, "Spoilt for Choice," 164 & 170. Anthony Hesketh and Peter T. Knight, "Postgraduates' choice of programme: Helping universities to market and postgraduates to choose," *Studies in Higher Education*, 24, no.2 (1999), 151-163; Bill Donaldson and Carolyn McNicholas, "Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students: A review and empirical study," *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 9, no.4 (2004), 346-360.

¹⁴ Donaldson and McNicholas, "Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students: A review and empirical study," 351 & 354.

¹⁵ Callender and Jackson, "Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?"

¹⁶ Carl Evans, Tien Nguyen, Mark Richardson and Ian Scott, "Managing the transition from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study: perceptions of international students studying in the UK," *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23, no.2 (2018), 249-265.

understand in the context of Westminster whether, on reflection, current postgraduates felt prepared for postgraduate study and whether students considering the transition are confident in their ability to succeed at this higher level (see Expectations of Further Study below). Providing relevant information promptly, setting clear expectations regarding the demands of postgraduate study and the opportunities that stem from it, and highlighting what preparedness looks like may help reassure and build the confidence of students considering pursuing postgraduate qualification.¹⁷

Structural Variables and Re-enrolment: Gender, Class, Ethnicity, and Age

Drivers and deterrents interact with structural variables such as gender, social class,¹⁸ ethnicity,¹⁹ age,²⁰ first-in-family to attend HE,²¹ and past academic attainment.²² For example, the underrepresentation of women in postgraduate research degrees has been noted, with the acknowledgement that further research is required to understand this fully.²³ As has the emerging evidence that women and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to receive research council studentships.²⁴ Wakeling commented that, '[m]en were more likely than women to progress to a higher degree.' The differential was greater for research than taught postgraduate programmes, and there was no within-class effect. The author contextualises this finding by noting that the difference in progression may stem from the distribution of men and women across subjects, with some male-dominated subjects generating a higher quantity of registrations for research degrees. Given the hedged nature of this evaluation, the author calls for further research into postgraduate transitions.²⁵ Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka referred to gender as having an 'indirect impact' on institutional choice relating to factors such as security.²⁶ The impact of gender on re-enrolment at *alma mater* remains to be understood. The present study highlights the need to consider the

¹⁷ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, "Spoilt for choice," 169.

¹⁸ D. Reay, J. Davies, M. David and S.J. Ball, "Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process," *Sociology*, 35, no.4 (2001), 855-874.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jane Hemsley-Brown and Izhar Oplatka, "University choice: what do we know, what don't we know and what do we still need to find out?" *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29, no.3 (2015), 254-274.

²¹ Wakeling, Hancock and Hampden-Thompson, *Widening Access to Postgraduate Study and the Professions*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Paul Wakeling and Chris Kyriacou, *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees: A Research Synthesis* (York: University of York, 2010), 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ Paul Wakeling, "La noblesse d'état anglaise? Social class and progression to postgraduate study," *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26, no.4 (2005), 511.

²⁶ Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, "University choice," 261.

intersection of gender with other demographic data (i.e., ethnicity) to better understand factors driving or deterring re-enrolment.

Social class may also affect participation in HE and institutional choice at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.²⁷ Past studies have shown greater debt-averse attitudes amongst lower-class students compared to those from the upper-class and demonstrate a greater likelihood of being deterred from planning for entry to HE due to concerns about debt.²⁸

Others have drawn attention to structural inequalities that skew access to research council funding.²⁹ Looking at socio-economic inequalities in ‘elite’³⁰ postgraduate access, Mateos-González and Wakeling found persistent differences based on class whilst noting the funnelling effect of educational variables, i.e., students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attain a good undergraduate degree at an elite university.³¹ In a separate study, the same authors reported on the change in the progression of underrepresented socio-economic groups to postgraduate study following the introduction of Masters loans in England, bringing them up to rates similar to those from more advantaged backgrounds.³² In terms of doctoral research, ‘distinct, classed pathways’ have been identified, illustrating how ‘[s]ocial and institutional stratification’ shapes the chances of securing university employment and other highly skilled work.³³ In aggregation, these studies reaffirm the importance of socio-economic status in shaping postgraduate access. Thus, understanding the socio-economic background of UoW undergraduates may aid our comprehension of dynamics underpinning re-enrolment at *alma mater*.

²⁷ Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 262; Reay, Davies, David and Ball, “Choices of degree or degrees of choice?”; S. Baker and B. Brown, “Images of excellence: constructions of institutional prestige and reflections in the university choice process,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28, no.3 (2007), 377-391; Callender and Jackson, “Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?” For a specific look at postgraduate access see José Luis Mateos-González and Paul Wakeling, “Exploring socioeconomic inequalities and access to elite postgraduate education among English graduates,” *Higher Education*, 83 (2022), 673-694; Mateos-González and Wakeling, “Student loans and participation in postgraduate education;” Paul Wakeling, “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?” *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63, no.1 (2009), 102; Wakeling, Hampden-Thompson and Hancock, “Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?;” Wakeling, “*La noblesse d’état anglaise?*”; Paul Wakeling, “Social Class and Access to Postgraduate Education in the UK: A Sociological Analysis” (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2009).

²⁸ Callender and Mason, “Does Student Loan Debt Deter Higher Education Participation?” 41.

²⁹ Pásztor and Wakeling, “All PhDs are equal but...Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate.”

³⁰ Defined as belonging to the research-intensive Russell Group universities.

³¹ Mateos-González and Wakeling, “Exploring socioeconomic inequalities and access to elite postgraduate education among English graduates.”

³² Mateos-González and Wakeling, “Student loans and participation in postgraduate education.”

³³ Pásztor and Wakeling, “All PhDs are equal but...Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate,” 982.

The role of race/ethnicity in HE choice and progression to postgraduate study is contested. Some studies have identified differences between ethnic groups and the factors influencing HE choice.³⁴ Others have noted ‘significant variations’ in rates of postgraduate participation when demographic factors such as ethnicity are observed.³⁵ In a 2009 study, Wakeling argued that ‘British undergraduate education is a qualified success story for the assimilation of the UK’s ethnic minorities.’ The same study identified ‘substantial differences’ between ethnic minority groups and participation patterns, which were shaped by subject of study, institutional location, and prior attainment. Furthermore, whilst underrepresentation of some minority groups is ‘potential’ evidence of disadvantage, it can be ‘interpreted more positively for other groups.’ In all instances, under- or over-representation at undergraduate or postgraduate level requires ‘careful interpretation.’³⁶ Wakeling has described the complexity of this landscape:

‘...the impression that minority groups representation alters little between first degrees and postgraduate study masks a number of complex changes in patterns of study across type of qualification, subject discipline and institutional location at postgraduate level. In particular, whilst the aggregate participation rate for ethnic minority students is very close to what one would expect based on first degree graduation rates, the fate of different minorities varies considerably.’³⁷

For the present study, this highlights the importance of understanding the multidimensionality as to why students may or may not choose to pursue postgraduate.

Mention has been made of the added financial commitments of postgraduates, many of whom are older, compared to school-leavers. The age variable is important beyond finance, taking into account the mode and location of study. In addition to many being over 25, there is a tendency for postgraduates to study part-time and be full-time employed.³⁸ Additionally, age may impact university choice, with mature students being more likely to choose an HE institution near home and being more likely to choose a ‘less prestigious university compared with school leavers.’³⁹ Mature students and those returning to HE and postgraduate study,

³⁴ S. Cho *et al.* “Roles of gender, race, and SES in the college choice process among first-generation and non-first-generation students,” (2008) cited in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 261.

³⁵ Robin Mellors-Bourne, Anna Mountford-Zimdars, Paul Wakeling, Julie Rattray and Ray Land, *Postgraduate transitions: Exploring disciplinary practice* (York: Higher Education Academy, 2016); see also Wakeling and Kyriacou, *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees*, 6.

³⁶ Wakeling, “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?” 86 & 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 262.

rather than school leavers/immediate transitioners, may have different needs, for instance, understanding how their prior learning might support their application and admittance to a postgraduate programme.⁴⁰ Furthermore, considered alongside institutional stratification, social class inequalities increase for those who enter postgraduate study later but are weakest for those who immediately transition.⁴¹ It is also worth investigating if there is a gendered dimension to whether someone immediately transitions or returns at a later date. Albeit based on 2000-2001 data, Wakeling commented that ‘women are much more probable to take a break from study before registering for postgraduate study.’⁴² If this is presently the case, it needs to be asked why this is so and how an institution might devise ways to appeal and be attractive to potential *returners*. The re-enrolment at *alma mater* study did not identify a gendered dimension to breaks in study, though this does not mean the variable should be dismissed.

Institutional Variables and Re-enrolment: Academic Attainment, Mode of Study, Location, Course Offer and Content, Reputation, and Marketing

It would be remiss to exclude academic attainment at first-degree level and the role this plays in informing entry to postgraduate study. Wakeling and Kyriacou have noted that progression to postgraduate level varies according to factors, including attainment at undergraduate level. ‘Attaining first-class honours, graduating in physical science subjects and attending a pre-1992 university are all closely associated with progression to a research degree.’⁴³ Past academic achievement has been noted elsewhere as a key factor shaping institutional choice.⁴⁴ It is always important to consider the broader context, such as variations in prior attainment across and between different demographics. Additionally, it highlights the importance of taking a narrower institutional focus in conjunction with broader contextual factors. Therefore, the extant research suggests cutting UoW’s institutional data to understand progression to postgraduate level study by attainment at first degree. Broadening again, does an increase in the rate of first-class honours awarded to undergraduates affect their re-enrolment for postgraduate study at UoW?

⁴⁰ Jane Castle, “The prior learning paths of mature students entering a postgraduate qualification in adult education,” *Journal of Education*, no.29 (2003), 29-56.

⁴¹ Wakeling, “Social Class and Access to Postgraduate Education in the UK,” 9.

⁴² Wakeling, “*La noblesse d’état anglaise?*” 511.

⁴³ Wakeling and Kyriacou, *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees*, 6.

⁴⁴ Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 254; Wakeling, “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?” 86; Wakeling, Hampden-Thompson and Hancock, “Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?” 1153.

The choice of which institution to enrol at represents a complex interplay of factors.⁴⁵ Are there specific institutional dimensions inhibiting or encouraging progression and re-enrolment at *alma mater*? The literature on flexible admissions systems has produced mixed results. In a small-scale qualitative study involving six participants, one said flexible enrolments were important.⁴⁶ However, Massoud and Ayoubi found ‘no robust evidence’ to support the notion that universities with more flexibility in their admissions systems achieve greater student enrolment.⁴⁷ Flexibility and convenience are important considerations for some students when thinking about their preferred mode of study (i.e., face-to-face, online, or hybrid, as well as part- or full-time study).⁴⁸ There is evidence demonstrating both the value placed on face-to-face study and human contact, as well as the convenience of online study, and how they factor into university choice alongside other factors, including institutional reputation.⁴⁹ The present study supports many of these findings, though it should be noted that students *expect* HE providers to offer flexible study options rather than simply being a “good-to-have.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the findings on mode of study, institutional location is a factor in shaping university choice, interacting with wishes to study part-time/full-time and online/distance-learning/in-person.⁵⁰ Part-time students displayed a disposition towards courses at local HE institutions, possibly due to other commitments such as family or property in the area.⁵¹ Additionally, part-time postgraduates who do not wish to be distance-learners are influenced by affordability, whereas full-time students have more flexibility. Part-time students were also found in one study to be less concerned about institutional facilities than full-time students. Facilities were an important factor for those studying science or engineering but were less so for those studying an MBA (Master of/in Business Administration).⁵² As previously noted, there are differences between school-leavers and mature students,⁵³ and fear of debt amongst students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can influence institution location.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Marchant, “Policy divergence.”

⁴⁶ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice,” 169.

⁴⁷ Hiba K. Massoud and Rami M. Ayoubi, “Do flexible admission systems affect student enrolment? Evidence from UK universities,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 29, no.1 (2019), 84.

⁴⁸ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 354.

⁴⁹ See Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice,” 165 & 168; Jonine Jancey and Sharyn Burns, “Institutional factors and the postgraduate student experience,” *Quality Assurance in Education*, 21, no.3 (2013), 320.

⁵⁰ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 354.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 351-352 & 354.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 352.

⁵³ Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 262.

⁵⁴ I. Oplatka and T. Tevel, “Liberation and revitalisation: the choice and meaning of higher education among Israeli female students in midlife,” *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57, no.1 (2006), 62-84.

That said, concerns about debt may be allayed by course or subject of study.⁵⁵ As might be expected given the earlier discussion of finance, value for money (i.e., course fees and cost structures) can have a bearing on university choice.⁵⁶ However, student perceptions of attending the ‘right’ institution or commencing the ‘right’ programme can outweigh cost considerations. However, some students view this differently, placing cost above institutional ranking and programme quality.⁵⁷ Programme content and structure also factor into the decision-making process. Additionally, whether the programme or course was accredited was important for some students, factoring in a course-specific dimension.⁵⁸ This suggests the importance of understanding student motivations and aspirations, relaying where appropriate how postgraduate study can help them achieve their career, salary, employment, and other goals, whilst ensuring that course content reflects the skills and competencies looked for by employers. Where students are pursuing specialised skills not covered by existing institutional expertise or course offering, it may be a case of accepting that the likelihood of re-enrolment at *alma mater* is unlikely.

Evidence also supports the notion of subject-specific dimensions to progression at *alma mater*. Research confirms ‘institutional, disciplinary and departmental differences in relation to rates of transition to different forms of PG [postgraduate] study.’⁵⁹ It is understood that improving career opportunities is important for determining whether a postgraduate qualification is pursued.⁶⁰ The strength of this motivating factor may vary across courses. For example, Donaldson and McNicholas found it particularly strong for full-time MBA students.⁶¹ However, the picture is complicated. Wakeling found that students from vocational disciplines, law, economics, and management were less likely to have commenced postgraduate study than their peers in ‘academically focused’ or STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects. Additionally, those from STEM subjects were found to be more likely to stay on than those in academically focused disciplines.⁶² Furthermore, there is an

⁵⁵ Callender and Jackson, “Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?”

⁵⁶ Kumudini Sriyalatha Mallika Appuhamilage and Hiroshi Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education: A structural equation modeling analysis,” *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, 13, no.2 (2019), 82-96

⁵⁷ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 351-352.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 351-354.

⁵⁹ Mellors-Bourne, Mountford-Zimdars, Wakeling, Rattray and Land, *Postgraduate transitions*, 5; see also Paul Wakeling, “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?” 91.

⁶⁰ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice,” 167.

⁶¹ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students.”

⁶² Wakeling, Hampden-Thompson and Hancock, “Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?” 1163.

acknowledgement by those researching this area that the flow of students ‘between and within subject areas and institutions’ from undergraduate to postgraduate level remains little understood.⁶³ It is equally important that institutions make efforts to recognise the disciplinary variation in progression to postgraduate study and work with professional bodies and employers to support the provision of information and support.⁶⁴ This reaffirms the importance of understanding existing patterns and trends at UoW down to course level in movements from undergraduate to postgraduate study.

In addition to more tangible dimensions such as course content and structure, institutional reputation and image, or the student perception of them, can shape decisions about progression to postgraduate study and loyalty to *alma mater*.⁶⁵ In the context of an HE institution in Zimbabwe, Appuhamilage and Torii conclude that university administrators should focus on the services and financial support they provide, the university’s image in students’ eyes, and the benefits gained from the fees paid.⁶⁶ The literature on student experience, satisfaction and loyalty is informative.⁶⁷ Studies have found positive relationships between service quality and student satisfaction and similar relationships between student experience and re-enrolment.⁶⁸ It is unlikely that a potential applicant has experienced the postgraduate course first-hand. Therefore, perceptions of service quality, whether derived from reviews or word-of-mouth sources,⁶⁹ entry qualifications, as well as research and assessment

⁶³ Wakeling and Kyriacou, *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees*, 6.

⁶⁴ Mellors-Bourne, Mountford-Zimdars, Wakeling, Rattray and Land, *Postgraduate transitions*, 7.

⁶⁵ Appuhamilage and Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education;” Liliana Carvalho, Amélia Brandão and Luísa Helena Pinto, “Understanding the importance of eWOM on Higher Education Institutions’ brand equity,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 31, no.2 (2021), 261-279; Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 351; Øyvind Helgesen and Erik Nettet, “Images, Satisfaction and Antecedents: Drivers of Student Loyalty? A Case Study of a Norwegian University College,” *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10 (2007), 38-59; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 262 & 264.

⁶⁶ Appuhamilage and Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education,” 94; Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice,” 164; Mohsin Abdur Rehman, Erisher Woyo, Joy Eghonghon Akahome and Muhammad Danial Sohail, “The influence of course experience, satisfaction, and loyalty on students’ word-of-mouth and re-enrolment intentions,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 23, no.2 (2022), 271.

⁶⁷ Liew Kok Keong, Rohaizat Baharun and Nabsiah Abdul Wahid, “Provide Good Services Quality to Satisfy Students’ Needs and Make The Become Loyal Students,” *International Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 7, no.1 (2018), 2051-3771; Ana M. Arboleda and Julio C. Alonso, “Students’ Emotional Experience at the University: An Alternative Approach to Understanding Students as Consumers,” *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 38, no.3 (2017), 129-141.

⁶⁸ Abu Hasan *et al.* (2008), Duarte *et al.* (2012), and Chandra *et al.* (2018) in Appuhamilage and Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education,” 85 & 86; Rehman, Woyo, Akahome and Sohail, “The influence of course experience, satisfaction, and loyalty on students’ word-of-mouth and re-enrolment intentions,” 271.

⁶⁹ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 349.

scores, may factor into the decision-making equation.⁷⁰ Current postgraduates can reflect on their study experience and make recommendations which may have a positive impact on satisfaction and loyalty, such as communication with academic staff on the nature and content of courses, information about any financial or technical assistance available, as well as the establishment of communities of practice for postgraduate students.⁷¹ Also identified as important were skilled and engaging teachers, access to online sources and a supportive enrolment process, as well as up-to-date technology, library resources, student services and student orientation.⁷²

The previous paragraph intimates the importance of information and its availability in decision-making. This is a point reinforced in the literature, which has reported on the impact of using faculty and tutors as “salespeople” and highlighted the importance of developing precise and targeted marketing and communications.⁷³ Furthermore, potential applicants for postgraduate study are interested in the “lived experience” of a study programme through contact with faculty and current students.⁷⁴ How students are viewed, as consumers or otherwise, determines how the marketing strategy is developed.⁷⁵ However, institutions are not always clear about where postgraduate progression and provision strategies sit. Outside of subjects where postgraduate study was a well-established requirement to enter a particular profession:

‘there were few overt strategies in relation to encouraging transitions from UG [undergraduate] to PG study per se, other than relating to recruitment to an institution’s own provision. This was reflected in what appeared to be very little activity that was intended specifically to promote PG study in general. This is contrasted with strategies to enhance UG employability upon which, in terms of graduate outcomes at least, the institutions are measured...’⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?” 102.

⁷¹ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice,” 176-177.

⁷² Jancey and Burns, “Institutional factors and the postgraduate student experience,” 320; and Felix T. Mavondo, Yelena Tsarenko and Mark Gabbott, “International and Local Student Satisfaction: Resources and Capabilities Perspective,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 14, no.1 (2004), 41-60.

⁷³ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students,” 346, 350 & 357; Jana Lay-Hwa Bowden, “Engaging the Student as a Customer: A Relationship Marketing Approach,” *Marketing Education Review*, 21, no.3 (2011), 211; Appuhamilage and Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education,” 86; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, “University choice,” 254 & 266.

⁷⁴ Hesketh and Knight, “Postgraduates’ choice of programme,” 154-160.

⁷⁵ Melodi Guilbault, “Students as customers in higher education: The (controversial) debate needs to end,” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 40 (2018): 295-298.

⁷⁶ Mellors-Bourne, Mountford-Zimdars, Wakeling, Rattray and Land, *Postgraduate transitions*, 5.

In terms of the employability modules embedded in curriculums that Mellors-Bourne *et al.* investigated, these tended to focus on ‘immediate transitions to employment.’⁷⁷ It is crucial to understand the relevance of this pattern in relation to UoW specifically and what, if anything, needs to change about how postgraduate study is advertised, communicated, and promoted (see section on Maximising Re-enrolment).

Research Design

To understand the drivers and deterrents of student (non-)re-enrolment on taught and research postgraduate study programmes at undergraduate/postgraduate *alma mater*, the following research question and sub-questions were proposed:

Research Question

- What factors drive and/or deter re-enrolment of undergraduates and postgraduates onto postgraduate programmes at UoW?

Sub-questions

- What are the drivers and deterrents (i.e., student-personal, institutional, and/or structural) of enrolment onto postgraduate study?
- What factors (i.e., student-personal, institutional, and/or structural) influence postgraduate HE institution choice?

These aim to garner insights into institutional and student/personal drivers of (non-)re-enrolment (i.e., the qualitative dimension of the research), as well as related demographic (structural) patterns which call upon descriptive statistics derived from UoW’s institutional data.

Research Design: Methodology and Method

Existing studies on undergraduate/postgraduate to postgraduate transition have been built on varying methodological foundations. A majority of those consulted for this study approached

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

the topic from a quantitative standpoint;⁷⁸ though mixed-methods;⁷⁹ systematic reviews;⁸⁰ as well as qualitative studies were also present.⁸¹ In other words, the topic is amenable to various research methodologies.

A mixed-methods approach (see Figure 1) was adopted in conducting this research. First, descriptive statistics detailing the trends related to re-enrolment in *alma mater* were derived from data held by UoW. Second, semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with 19 students covering drivers and deterrents of postgraduate study and institutional choice. The interviews were between 30-90 minutes in length and were recorded (using Microsoft Teams) and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised, removing names and other identifiable information, and were stored password-protected on OneDrive. Interview transcripts were analysed via Thematic Analysis using NVivo.⁸² In some cases, student quotes have been edited for readability. Colleagues involved in postgraduate recruitment and admissions were also contacted for information regarding relevant institutional processes and strategies.

Research Participants

⁷⁸ Appuhamilage and Torii, “The impact of loyalty on the student satisfaction in higher education”; Arboleda and Alonso, “Students’ Emotional Experience at the University;” Bowden, “Engaging the Student as a Customer;” Callender and Mason, “Does Student Loan Debt Deter Higher Education Participation?; Helgesen and Nettet, “Images, Satisfaction and Antecedents;” Damira Ismanova, “Students’ loyalty in higher education: The mediating effect of satisfaction, trust, commitment on student loyalty to Alma Mater,” *Management Science Letters* (2019), 1161-1168; Jancey and Burns, “Institutional factors and the postgraduate student experience”; Massoud and Ayoubi, “Do flexible admission systems affect student enrolment?”; Mateos-González and Wakeling, “Exploring socioeconomic inequalities and access to elite postgraduate education among English graduates;” Rehman, Woyo, Akahome and Sohail, “The influence of course experience, satisfaction, and loyalty on students’ word-of-mouth and re-enrolment intentions”; Wakeling, “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?”; Wakeling, Hampden-Thompson and Hancock, “Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?”; Wakeling, “*La noblesse d’état anglaise?*”; Wakeling, “Social Class and Access to Postgraduate Education in the UK.

⁷⁹ Mellors-Bourne, Mountford-Zimdars, Wakeling, Rattray and Land, *Postgraduate transitions*.

⁸⁰ Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students.”

⁸¹ Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice”; Carvalho, Brandão and Pinto, “Understanding the importance of eWOM on Higher Education Institutions’ brand equity;” Evans, Nguyen, Richardson and Scott, “Managing the transition from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study;” Hesketh and Knight, “Postgraduates’ choice of programme”; M. O. Mbombi and T.M. Mothiba, “Exploring barriers that nurses experience to enrolment for a postgraduate nursing qualification at a higher education institution in South Africa,” *African Journal of Health Professions Education*, 12, no.1 (2020), 41-45;” Victoria L. O’Donnell, Jane Tobbell, Rebecca Lawthom and Maria Zammit, “Transition to postgraduate study: Practice, participation and the widening participation agenda,” *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10, no.1 (2009), 26-40; Pásztor and Wakeling, “All PhDs are equal but...Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate.”

⁸² Victoria Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, no.2 (2006), 77-101.

Eligibility for the study was determined by students matching with one of five student pathways:

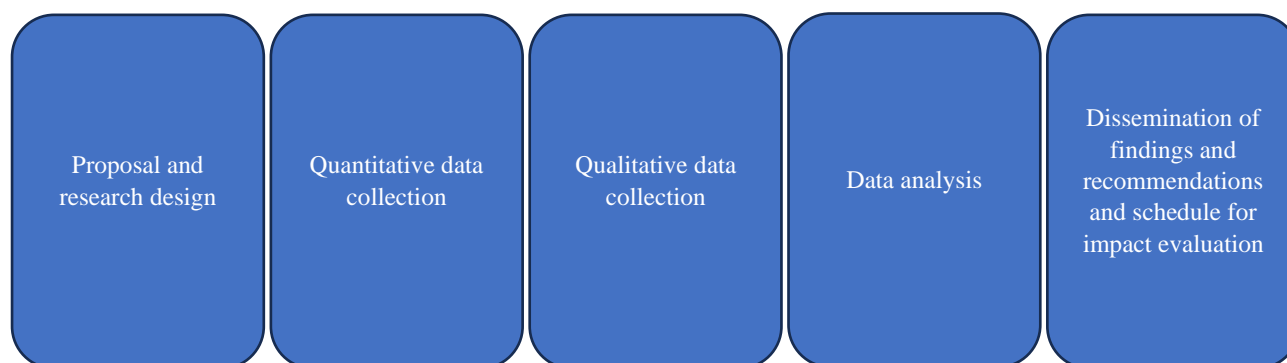
- **Pathway 1:** The student is a current or former undergraduate at Westminster who **is interested** in enrolling on a postgraduate course at Westminster or somewhere else.
- **Pathway 2:** The student is a current or former undergraduate at Westminster who is **not** interested in enrolling on a postgraduate course at Westminster or anywhere else.
- **Pathway 3:** The student is a current or former undergraduate at Westminster who is **not sure** about enrolling on a postgraduate course at Westminster or anywhere else.
- **Pathway 4:** The student is a former Westminster undergraduate or postgraduate who decided to undertake postgraduate study at an institution other than Westminster.
- **Pathway 5:** The student is a current/former postgraduate at Westminster who completed/is completing an undergraduate or postgraduate degree at Westminster.⁸³

The five pathways imply recruitment from three sources: 1) current undergraduate students at UoW; 2) current postgraduate students at UoW; and 3) UoW alumnae/alumni. Current undergraduates and postgraduates were contacted via UoW's Student Experience & Opinion Panel (SEOP), a community of Westminster students who engage in various research activities to improve student experience in exchange for a financial reward; internal communications channels; and the institutional website. UoW alumnae/alumni were contacted and recruited via the Alumni Relations team. Postgraduate research students were approached through each school's Doctoral Coordinator. Information about the project was provided at the point of expression of interest, as well as via a Participant Information Sheet at the registration stage. All participants were required to provide their consent to take part and were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were not obligated to participate. Participants were also provided with a debriefing sheet with details of the incentive for participating.⁸⁴

⁸³ For example, a student who undertook a taught postgraduate (i.e., MA) at Westminster and subsequently undertook another taught postgraduate and/or research postgraduate qualification (i.e., MPhil, PhD, etc.).

⁸⁴ A quick note on how student participants have been referenced in this report. Each student reference uses the structure, student ID (i.e., 118109353), pathway (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5), and study level (UG, PG, PGR) to produce a reference as follows: 118109353/P3/UG.

Figure 1. Design and research sequence



Institutional Context: Patterns in Re-enrolment at *alma mater* and “In study” Graduate Activity

Utilising institutional data, it has been possible to describe the activities of graduates for the academic years from 2017-2018 to 2020-2021. All the data discussed in this section relates to the activity of Level 6 undergraduate qualifiers, with a particular focus on those “In study”. A qualifier is a student who has qualified with a HE award during an academic year. The discussion of graduate destinations has been informed by responses to the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey. The GO survey is completed by graduates 15 months after they have completed their studies and covers anyone who has recently completed a course at UoW, including full-time and part-time courses and qualifications from Higher National Certificate (HNC) level, as well as any member of staff that has completed a postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education (PGCHE). In terms of pinpointing those “In study”, the survey asks graduates to identify their most important activity during the census week.

Top-level Figures

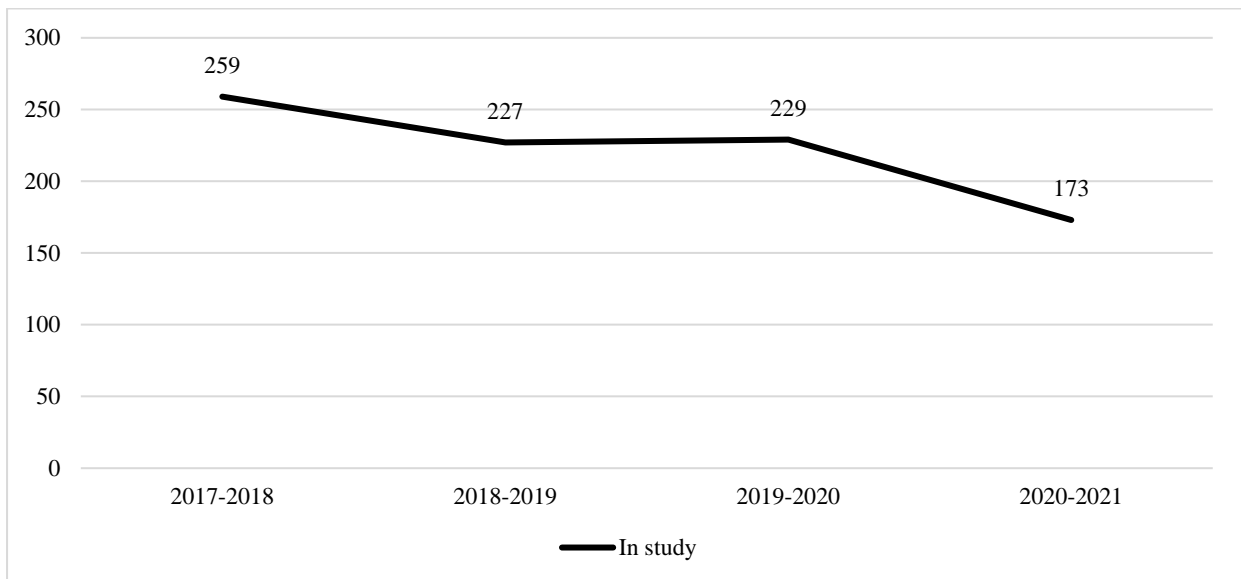
At the top-level, it is helpful to get a sense of graduate activity (Table 1). It is important to note the proportions of students for whom graduate activity is given as “Unknown.” On average, for the academic years under analysis, the graduate activity of 53% of students is not known to UoW; for those listed as “In study,” the average is 6%. For every year, the data indicates that, for those students who gave “In work” or “In study” as their most important activity, most students enter the workplace, averaging at 84% for “In work” and 16% for “In study”. The

number of students going into study (see Chart 1) has dropped by 33% when we compare 2017-2018 (n=259) to 2020-2021 (n=173), while the overall number of students has fallen by only 6% (2017-2018, n=3,798; 2020-2021, n=3,588). In percentage terms, there has been a fall year-on-year since 2018-2019 of students “In study.” In 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, 7% of the total cohort were recorded as “In study,” this fell to 6% in 2019-2020 and 5% in 2020-2021.

Table 1. Graduate activity of Level 6 (undergraduate) qualifiers, 2017-2018 to 2020-2021

Study level	OfS award level	Graduate activity	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Level 6	Undergraduate	In work	1,333	1,029	1,191	1,136
Level 6	Undergraduate	In study	259	227	229	173
Level 6	Undergraduate	Other	306	342	288	227
Level 6	Undergraduate	Unknown	1,900	1,858	1,862	2,052

Chart 1. Level 6 (undergraduate) qualifiers “In study”, 2017-2018 to 2020-2021



College- and School-level Figures

Looking at college and school levels (Table 2), a higher proportion of known students from the college of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) were “In study” (20% (2017-2018 to 2020-2021)) compared to their counterparts in Design, Creative and Digital Industries (DCDI) (8%), and the Westminster Business School (WBS) (10%). Examining percentage change from 2017-2018 to 2020-2021, the proportion of those “In study” has fallen for each college: -40.3% (66

to 32) for WBS, -14.2% (51 to 31) for DCDI, and -14.5% (142 to 110) for LAS. Disaggregated to school level, the raw numbers present a mixed picture of rise and fall. The latest year, 2020-2021, can be characterised as one of fall from the previous year, the exceptions being Life Sciences and, to a lesser extent, Computer Science and Engineering, and Organisations, Economy and Society.

Table 2. Level 6 (undergraduate) qualifiers “In study” by college and school

College	School	Graduate activity	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
DCD	Architecture and Cities	In study	8	8	11	<5
DCD	Computer Science and Engineering	In study	14	17	9	10
DCD	Westminster School of Media and Communication	In study	18	19	19	9
DCD	Westminster School of Arts	In study	11	11	17	8
LAS	Life Sciences	In study	43	47	33	42
LAS	Social Sciences	In study	39	28	37	30
LAS	Humanities	In study	16	23	25	16
LAS	Westminster Law School	In study	44	31	38	22
WBS	Applied Management	In study	<5	<5		<5
WBS	Organisations, Economy and Society	In study	20	14	10	11
WBS	Management and Marketing	In study	25	18	12	11
WBS	Finance and Accounting	In study	18	10	18	7

Study Destinations

For those students “In study” it is crucial to understand their study destinations. In many instances, we are dealing with small, often suppressed (i.e., <5) numbers. Therefore, the analysis has been restricted to study destinations where five or more UoW graduates are known to have attended in any given academic year from 2017-2018 to 2020-2021. This amounts to 540 students in total (2017-2018, n=162; 2018-2019, n=133; 2019-2020, n=132; 2020-2021,

n=113). Of these 540, 134 entered institutions “Not known” to UoW, and a further 111 re-enrolled at UoW, though this number has been falling since 2018-2019 (2017-2018, n=34; 2018-2019, n=38; 2019-2020, n=24; 2020-2021, n=15).

Excluding those “Not known” and those who re-enrolled at UoW, we are left with a figure of 259. The most striking point to note is locational. All the listed destinations are located or have campuses within the boundaries of the M25. To emphasise this point, the 12 institutions are, on average, 5.1 miles from UoW’s Regent Street Campus; excluding the three institutions over 10 miles away, the average falls to a distance of 2.5 miles. For the academic years 2017-2018 to 2020-2021, 26% (n=76) of those “In study” at a known institution that is not UoW gave their study destination as University College London (UCL), 22% (n=64) listed King’s College London (KCL), 15% (n=45) stated Queen Mary University of London, and 12% (n=36) City, University of London; accounting for 75% of the 259 students presently under analysis.

Considering the cross-section of known graduate destinations and award classifications reveals that students awarded a First-Class degree are proportionally more likely to move to another London-based institution to continue their studies. 17% (n=18) of First-Class honours students re-enrolled at UoW; larger proportions enrolled at UCL and KCL, 34% (n=35) and 30% (n=31), respectively. This picture changes for students receiving upper second-class honours, where 32% (n=57) of students re-enrolled at UoW, followed by UCL and KCL at 18% (n=32). Excepting suppressed figures, study destinations of students awarded lower second-class honours are split n=26 (Not known) and n=24 (UoW). Most students “In study” have moved on from UoW for all award classifications. A key aim of this project is to understand why students decide to move on, in many instances to institutions higher placed in UK university rankings.⁸⁵

Furthermore, it is possible to calculate the financial implications of students studying at a destination other than Westminster for postgraduate education using average tuition fees. For the 2020-21 academic year, the average postgraduate fee for a home student stood at £10,072.45. 161 of the 173 students “In study” were eligible to pay home fees, and 12 were not eligible. Assuming all students received the 20% alumni discount, the average fee falls to

⁸⁵ For example, looking at overall ranking, the most recent *Guardian* university guide places UCL at 8; KCL at 23; City, University of London at 61; and Queen Mary’s at 73. University of Westminster was placed 117. *The Guardian*, “The best UK universities 2024- rankings,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2023/sep/09/the-guardian-university-guide-2024-the-rankings>.

£8,057.96, meaning potential earnings of £1,297,331.56. However, only 13 students “In study” pursued further study at Westminster, bringing total earnings from postgraduate fees to £104,753.46. In terms of students not eligible to pay home fees, the numbers are small (<5) and thus suppressed. Nevertheless, if 4 of the 12 international students continued their studies at Westminster, this amounts to total earnings of £47,699.56 against a potential total of £143,098.68.⁸⁶ Therefore, a considerable discrepancy exists between potential and actual earnings from continuing students.

Qualitative insights on drivers and deterrents of re-enrolment at *alma mater*

Introduction

This section discusses the findings from 19 one-to-one semi-structured interviews between the author and students from a range of study levels (i.e., undergraduate (n= 11); postgraduate taught (n= 3); and postgraduate research (n= 5)). Themes drawn from the data are discussed in turn and cover drivers and deterrents of re-enrolment at Westminster. The second part of this section discusses methods of increasing re-enrolment at *alma mater*, with many of the means revolving around increased, improved and more targeted communication, as well as highlighting precisely who students want to hear from (in the case of undergraduates) or found most valuable (in the case of current/former taught and research postgraduates), as well as the most effective means of disseminating that information.

Disaggregation revealed differences between study levels across various themes. The demographic data collected from students allowed for a deeper, granular analysis of themes, highlighting different student groups' postgraduate experiences and aspirations. For example, students who are the first in their family to attend HE would benefit from more clarity about the expectations and outcomes of postgraduate study, as well as routes into further study. Additionally, this exercise highlighted the importance of detailing the value-added of postgraduate study to the families of South Asian females.

Break in Studies

Why do students take breaks in their studies, and what could UoW do to incentivise students to re-enrol immediately? The phrase “to take a break” conceals the fact that some students

⁸⁶ This is based on average international fees for postgraduate study in 2020-2021 of £14,906.12; the 20% alumni discount brings this figure down to £11924.89.

choose to pause their educational careers while others are compelled to do so (see Cost and Financial Considerations below). Reasoning underpinning a break in studies can be assigned to one of four categories, though these may overlap. Firstly, taking a break may be a strategic move to allow students to think about the exact course they want to take in their personal and professional lives. For example, one student commented: ‘I personally feel there needs to be a gap to be able to make the right decision and figure it out.’⁸⁷ Secondly, and running parallel to thinking time, is the wish of some to see the value of their undergraduate degree through gaining first-hand experience in the labour market.⁸⁸

Thirdly, students' financial circumstances can dictate whether postgraduate study is feasible; this is the case across all study levels, pathways, and student origins (i.e., home or international).⁸⁹ One current PhD student gave their personal perspective:

‘I wanted to do a PhD and it was not the easiest process. I don’t have the luxury of funding myself, so looking for funded opportunities was one of the things that made it harder. I actually got rejected from about eight applications before getting this one. So, yeah, it was about a year out just trying everything.’⁹⁰

Intersecting with allowing time to deliberate on further study, students do not want to ‘waste...time and money.’⁹¹ Fourthly, for some students, the missing of administrative or other deadlines delayed re-enrolment to postgraduate study, with examples given including ‘visa issues,’ as well as the need for more time to conduct research for their PhD proposal.⁹²

Analysing the data by various student demographics reveals subtleties in the findings. Thus, while there is a crossover between undergraduates and postgraduate research students on the importance of thinking time, the former are more explicit about using that time to get experience in the job market (see Employment Opportunities and Employability below). There is also an international dimension, with delays or obstacles in the visa process holding up entry into postgraduate study.

Given the reasons above, there are several strategies that UoW could explore to foster *immediate* re-enrolment, as well as mitigate the other challenges or concerns faced by students.

⁸⁷ 118109353/P3/UG. Also, 121103332/P3/UG; 118124891/P5/PGR

⁸⁸ 118109353/P3/UG; 121103332/P3/UG.

⁸⁹ 118109353/P3/UG; 121103332/P3/UG; 118163152/P1/UG; 118124891/P5/PGR; 121157206/P5/PGR; and 1211160886/P5/PGR.

⁹⁰ 1211160886/P5/PGR.

⁹¹ 121103332/P3/UG.

⁹² 119353818/P5/PGT and 119694022/P5/PGR.

Students interested in continuing their studies could be incentivised to re-enrol *immediately* by offering a staggered discount rate. For example, whilst retaining the base-level 20% discount for alumni, *immediate* re-enrollers would receive a larger discount than students returning several years later. Establishing closer links between the university and industry through increased placements, work experience and graduate job routes may also increase the re-enrolment rate at *alma mater* for undergraduates considering taught postgraduate programmes, particularly where there are concerns about the value of their degree given the emphasis placed on employability.

Course Availability and Content

It is difficult to overstate the importance of course availability when it comes to decisions about potential re-enrolment for postgraduate study.⁹³ Course offer and availability work both ways. It can act as a driver for current students to remain at Westminster and for former students to return. However, it is also a force that compels some students to look elsewhere. An objective for UoW must be to minimise as much as possible the number of students lost due to lack of course availability, while accepting that no institution can be all things to all people. Participants, including undergraduates and postgraduates who left Westminster for a Masters before returning to commence PhD studies, recounted the driving force which is course offer: ‘I actually went away for that [i.e., postgraduate taught studies] at UCL because there wasn’t anything offered at Westminster that I wanted to do.’⁹⁴ Course offer and content may present as attractive to potential returnees: ‘[T]hey [the UoW website] gave a brief [overview] of the course as well. I was like, yes, these are the things I want to learn.’⁹⁵

The duality of course availability and content has been highlighted. However, the quotes presented thus far do not fully capture the sentiments of students with an intention to study at postgraduate level and who expressed a preference to undertake those studies at UoW but are unable to due to the course they wish to take not being offered. This can be a difficult decision for those with a strong attachment to Westminster:

⁹³ Callender and Jackson, “Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?”

⁹⁴ 121160886/P5/PGR. Also, 119694022/P5/PGR; 119353818/P5/PGT; 119369276/P5/PGT; 119103745/P1/UG; and 121103332/P3/UG.

⁹⁵ 118124891/P5/PGR. Also, 119353818/P5/PGT; 119369276/P5/PGT; and 121157206/P5/PGR.

‘Unfortunately, our university doesn’t do PGCE...[I]t puts me in a tough position because I like studying at Westminster and I like the teachers...[I]t is just quite sad because they don’t have my course.’⁹⁶

The unavailability of the PGCE was a recurring driver of undergraduates away from Westminster, ‘[u]nfortunately, [I would enrol] away, just because they don’t offer my course. Otherwise, I would stay.’⁹⁷ Relatedly, UoW offers the Explore Teaching Scheme as part of its employability offer.⁹⁸ This potentially adversely affects re-enrolment, with students who participate in this scheme being guided away from Westminster’s current postgraduate offer and into PGCEs at other institutions. As a significant driver of re-enrolment at or enrolment away from Westminster across all study levels, striking the right balance of courses and ensuring they are up to date is an important consideration when it comes to course re-validation and the introduction of new courses; the insights of market research could be invaluable in this area.

The magnetising force to or away from Westminster of course availability, particularly where there are similarities in course content at UoW and another institution, creates more room for a broader range of variables to feed into the decision-making process. Considered alone, such factors are not decisive in determining the destination of postgraduate study. However, in combination with course offer, they produce a snowballing effect. In the case of one student who elected to pursue postgraduate study away from UoW, additional factors sent that snowball on a trajectory directed away from Westminster:

‘...I had a good network [at] Westminster, everything was great...But I will say this for the degree that I wanted to do, which is healthcare-related, more human-related, moving away from the bacteria, viruses, I feel like Westminster is less suitable for that. They don’t really have as many facilities.’⁹⁹

Another combination working against Westminster, where two comparable courses are on offer, is the desire among students to experience a “Top 10” university or another institute of HE that specialises in a particular area.¹⁰⁰ Competing in the arena of ranking may be a losing battle. It would be more advisable to shift the narrative away from ranking tables and towards

⁹⁶ 118554386/P1/UG.

⁹⁷ 119015380/P1/UG.

⁹⁸ For information on the Explore Teaching Scheme, see here <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/employability-and-career-development/improving-your-employability/work-experience-and-placements/teaching-placements>.

⁹⁹ 118345847/P4/PGT.

¹⁰⁰ 118345857/P4/PGT; 119353818/P5/PGT; 119103745/P1/UG; and 119171540/P1/UG.

those areas praised by students (see Ranking, Reputation, Faculty-Student Relationships, Belonging and Student Support below).

Illustrating the intersection of many themes raised during interviews, such as course offer and employability, is worth unpicking in more detail. As will be shown, the majority of students spoken to, including all of the undergraduates, stressed the importance of enhanced employability as an outcome of undergraduate and postgraduate study. While some students were very clear on their long-term career goals, for instance, those undertaking a PhD to pursue an academic career, others were more hedged or had not decided on future career goals until a more advanced stage of their undergraduate studies. These students expressed a sector within which they wished to work but also desired some flexibility enabling them to carry out associated roles. As such, exploring the existing range and demand for combination postgraduate degrees, such as cybersecurity and project management, may be beneficial.¹⁰¹

Employment Opportunities and Employability

A major preoccupation of students concerns consideration of their existing and future employability and employment prospects; this confirms findings from the wider literature.¹⁰² In terms of general drivers of postgraduate education, being “job-ready” or having discernibly improved employment prospects as a direct result of further study sit at the top of the pile. For students committed to pursuing a postgraduate degree, employment prospects occupy a rung near course offer and availability. For instance, if two institutions offer identical or closely matched courses, the one with the better post-study prospects will likely win out.

The link between enhancing employment prospects and (de)motivation towards further study was particularly pronounced amongst undergraduate participants.¹⁰³ All 11 undergraduates who participated in the research spoke about employability as a driver of further study in general. It is crucial for students to see tangible outcomes, first and foremost employment, from any postgraduate study they undertake.¹⁰⁴ There is also a strong perception that undergraduate degrees are now so common that obtaining a Masters is a requirement in order to get an edge over others in the labour market: ‘...[T]here’s so many undergraduates

¹⁰¹ 118564668/P1/UG.

¹⁰² Baguley, Jasman, McIlveen, van Rensburg and Ganguly, “Spoilt for Choice;” Hesketh and Knight, “Postgraduates’ choice of programme;” Donaldson and McNicholas, “Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students.”

¹⁰³ 118564668/P1/UG; 119015380/P1/UG; 119103745/P1/UG; 119171540/P1/UG; 121103332/P3/UG.

¹⁰⁴ 118100850/P3/UG.

and people keep applying, but if you do another Masters that sort of gives you additional opportunity to go into another job.’¹⁰⁵ Additionally, receiving a Masters degree was something to aspire to as it opened up ‘so many different opportunities,’ including “better” or more high-paid jobs.¹⁰⁶

However, it should not be assumed that all students see pursuing a Masters or other postgraduate degree as an automatic or guaranteed enhancer of career prospects. Conversation with one undergraduate unsure about undertaking postgraduate study rounded on the value of undergraduate degrees and whether they will be ‘job-ready’ upon completion of that degree.¹⁰⁷ There are two angles to this statement. The first is that some students need convincing of the merits of postgraduate study, something which clear communication on the benefits of further study, especially that from academics and current/former UoW postgraduates, can help with (see Maximising Re-enrolment below). The second requires a degree of sensitivity on the university’s part. If students are not job-ready on completion of their undergraduate degree and are or feel pushed into postgraduate study, then what is the value of their first degree? Some students want to test that value where it matters: in the labour market. Communications on the benefits of postgraduate study should anticipate this question. Furthermore, if UoW were to explore the route of a staggered discount incentive, communications need to recognise that students may wish to gain on-the-job experience before returning to education. In this way, the university can navigate a potentially treacherous arena that devalues undergraduate degrees by acknowledging their value, simultaneously leaving the door open at Westminster for *returnees*.

PhD students view improved employment prospects as an outcome of further study through a different lens. Employability is something that PhD students consider: ‘[The PhD] provided me with a whole new career opportunity.’¹⁰⁸ Employment prospects as a driver of further study are particularly pronounced for those wishing to pursue a career in academia.¹⁰⁹ However, this coexists alongside a desire to learn or continue in a research environment: ‘For the research postgrad[uate], I just really, really missed doing research, and I felt really out of place not being at a university setting.’¹¹⁰ Current taught postgraduates are closer to the postgraduate research perspective than the undergraduate viewpoint, and it could be that the

¹⁰⁵ 118163152/P1/UG.

¹⁰⁶ 118099017/P3/UG.

¹⁰⁷ 118109353/P3/UG.

¹⁰⁸ 121157206/P5/PGR. Also, 118124891/P5/PGR; and 119694022/P5/PGR.

¹⁰⁹ 121160886/P5/PGR.

¹¹⁰ 121160886/P5/PGR.

latter would talk about subject passion or interest once in postgraduate study rather than deliberating about the merits or otherwise of further study *per se*. As an illustration, two respondents are worth quoting. Firstly, ‘...I love education...So, it was just interest in the topic and stuff [that drove them to re-enrol for postgraduate study].’¹¹¹ A second student was much more explicit about the importance of further study enhancing their employability:

‘So, whether it’s for a PhD or a job I have applied for, the most common feedback I get is that you need more research experience...So, that Masters gives me one year of extra research experience that I can add to my CV and hopefully it will translate into me getting a job.’¹¹²

Understandably, students think about their future careers and wish to place themselves on solid financial foundations. Ensuring and strengthening the linkages between courses, academia, and industry through the provision of placements, work experience and other job opportunities, as well as highlighting and signposting the offer from the Careers and Employability Service, may help Westminster to retain existing undergraduates interested in further study.

Cost and Financial Considerations

Finance may present a serious impediment to the pursuit of postgraduate studies. It can be the ultimate deal-breaker – if a current student is set on re-enrolling on a higher-level course at Westminster but cannot raise the funds to undertake it, they will not re-enrol. Disaggregating the data by various student attributes (i.e., sex, age, disability, ethnicity, first-in-family to HE, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) deciles) did not reveal considerable differences in the role of finance. However, given the fee differentials between home and international students, *immediate* re-enrolment may be impeded by insufficient finance, necessitating a break in studies. One international student spoke about not jumping straight into postgraduate study owing to the ‘huge amount of fees’ already paid for their undergraduate.¹¹³ Illustrating the role of financial circumstances as a deterrent, another stated: ‘[I]t’s the academic fees that tend to be super high[,] and the visa process.’¹¹⁴

Contrary to the wider literature, everyday concerns about the cost of living were not prominent, with study fees taking primacy.¹¹⁵ The view of finance as prohibitive to further

¹¹¹ 119369276/P5/PGT.

¹¹² 118345857/P4/PGT.

¹¹³ 118109353/P3/UG.

¹¹⁴ 119103745/P1/UG.

¹¹⁵ Hubble and Bolton, *Abolition of maintenance grants in England from 2016/17*.

study or an unpredictable risk factor was also held by home students and across all study levels.¹¹⁶ For example, a student intending to undertake a postgraduate degree at Westminster or elsewhere commented:

‘I wanted to do it [i.e., enrol immediately], but the fees are too high. It was around £15,000...[I]f you are a Westminster student you only get 20% discount, so it’s still £12,000. I also don’t qualify for all the student finance...So, obviously, I have to spend my own money for I, which I haven’t got.’¹¹⁷

This was not an isolated view.¹¹⁸ Finance places severe constraints on many students’ ability to (*immediately*) enter postgraduate study. Coupled with a finite number of scholarships and other financial assistance, some students will need to take a break from their studies to earn the required funds or explore flexible study options (i.e., part-time courses) (see Flexible Study Options below).

Nevertheless, the offer of the 20% alumni discount is viewed positively by students and acts as a draw encouraging students to remain at Westminster: ‘...you would get a 20% discount as well. So that does really influence my decisions to study in this university.’¹¹⁹ While not the most important factor for another student, they did reference friends at Westminster for whom the discount was ‘a major factor for them to decide [to re-enrol].’¹²⁰ Predictably, the offer of a higher level of discount would likely be popularly received.¹²¹ Westminster’s general cost competitiveness was also highlighted:

‘I think the university can really highlight the fact that the MBA degree is much cheaper to study here than other universities...I think that will really have a big impact on people who have a financial constraint over them.’¹²²

However, the pull of discounts comes with caveats. The university must always consider the intersection of driving and deterring factors. For instance, promote the alumni discount but also make explicit the value of a postgraduate qualification, or as one student put it, explain how ‘I will be adding value to my [undergraduate] degree.’¹²³ Also, while discounts are valued and

¹¹⁶ Also, 121157206/P5/PGR; 121160886/P5/PGR; 1181345847/P4/PGT; 119353818/P5/PGT; 119369276/P5/PGT for a range of views from home and international students across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research.

¹¹⁷ 118163152/P1/UG.

¹¹⁸ 118554386/P1/UG; 119015380/P1/UG; 119035155/P3/UG; and 119171540/P1/UG.

¹¹⁹ 118100850/P3/UG; 118345847/P4/PGT; and 119353818/P5/PGT.

¹²⁰ 118109353/P3/UG.

¹²¹ 118163152/P1/UG.

¹²² 118100850/P3/UG.

¹²³ 118109353/P3/UG; and 118163152/P1/UG.

appreciated by students, they do not supersede course offer: ‘I cannot even consider [the discount] because, point number one, the subjects are not here. So, everything aside, it’s just not possible.’ To enhance Westminster’s pull-factor, its competitiveness against other London HEIs should be highlighted, and the value-added of postgraduate study communicated, including reference to economic and employability prospects and social and support benefits.

Ranking and Reputation; Faculty-Student Relationships; Belonging; and Student Support

The themes in this section are considered together due to considerable overlapping. In other words, while university ranking acts for some as a driver of postgraduate study to as well as away from Westminster,¹²⁴ others are almost completely indifferent.¹²⁵ This requires some explanation. Where ranking is important, it may intersect with employability and or prestige. One undergraduate shared that they would ‘like to go on to a university with a higher ranking.’ This decision was driven by the industry the student aspires to work in and the HEIs they tend to recruit from:

‘I found that when I put University of Westminster as my undergraduate, I’d find I’d be rejected straightaway from a lot of firms where somebody who had the same experiences or less but went to somewhere like LSE [London School of Economics], [University of] Oxford, or UCL, they got the offers or went straight through the interview stage. [Whereas universities like] Westminster, SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies], Greenwich, [and] London Met[ropolitan University], they’re known as non-targets.’¹²⁶

As such, a nuance of ranking rests in student perceptions regarding the reputation or prestige of Westminster in the eyes of employers.¹²⁷

However, reputation and prestige may be distinct from ranking. Like ranking, prestige may act as a driver to and away from UoW.¹²⁸ An institution’s subject specialisation as a driver of further study can work for and against Westminster. For example, UoW’s Prison Project,¹²⁹

¹²⁴ 118100850/P3/UG.

¹²⁵ 121103332/P3/UG; 121160886/P5/PGR; and 118124891/P5/PGR.

¹²⁶ 118099017/P3/UG.

¹²⁷ A second student (118554386/P1/UG) commented: ‘It doesn’t matter to me, but it does matter to a lot of people...[T]he thing is, if you really think about it, I do know that when I want to be a teacher, they will look at my ranking of university I went to, and they will look at my grades and stuff.’ Also, 119103745/P1/UG.

¹²⁸ 119035155/P3/UG: ‘I think it’s quite a well-known, reputable university.’

¹²⁹ 119369276/P5/PGT; and 119694022/P5/PGR.

as well as its reputation for law act as magnetising forces.¹³⁰ This point was well-relayed by one undergraduate participant:

‘I would like to go to a more reputable uni, but I don’t think that’s got anything to do with numbers or ranking. I think it just comes down to that speciality, like if they’ve got a really renowned...department, then it might coincidentally be a really high-ranking uni.’¹³¹

It will be argued (see Maximising Re-enrolment) that Westminster should focus more on showcasing academics' research and its “real world” impact to enhance institutional reputability.

Delving deeper into the data vis-à-vis ranking, it is evident that league tables are least important for postgraduate research students who prioritise good faculty-student relationships. All five postgraduate research students expressed this sentiment.¹³² The comments of one student are illustrative of this broader point. On ranking, they said, ‘I think I did check the rankings, but it didn’t matter at all in that moment.’ However, when asked to explain why they chose to re-enrol at Westminster, they stated that, ‘...the most important thing was that [the] interpersonal bond between lecturers or staff and students is very good...’ This student contrasted this with their experience of postgraduate taught study at another UK HEI before going on to talk about feeling valued at Westminster:

‘And I just have the feeling at Westminster, like, people actually care about what I write. And I remember showing my Masters dissertation to...my director of studies and he was like, “Oh, I would have loved to be your tutor.” It’s just this other form of appreciation.’

Crucially, this student added, ‘I would say that my former lecturer definitely shaped [my] enrolling back [at Westminster].’¹³³ Furthermore, while this was particularly pronounced for postgraduate research students, it was not exclusive to them, with some undergraduates and postgraduate taught students expressing similar sentiments on the faculty-student relationships.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ 119353818/P5/PGT.

¹³¹ 119171540/P1/UG.

¹³² 121157206/P5/PGR; 121160886/P5/PGR; 118124891; 119694022/P5/PGR; and 121111512/P5/PGR.

¹³³ 119694022/P5/PGR.

¹³⁴ 118109353/P3/UG; 119035155/P3/UG; 119171540/P1/UG; 118564668/P1/UG; and 119369276/P5/PGT who commented, ‘...I would say my lecturers, the course leaders and the course module leaders. I’ve just known them now for, what, seven-eight years, they’re like family...[T]hey’re so incredibly supportive...there’s absolutely no way I’m sacrificing what I already have at Westminster, which is such a supportive environment.’

Other factors mitigating against Westminster's relatively low position on university league tables are belonging and support networks and/or provision. In one instance, ongoing communication with an undergraduate alumni helped to foster an 'emotional attachment' to Westminster.¹³⁵ Others spoke more generally about institutional familiarity and belonging.¹³⁶ While some students considered broadening their horizons by experiencing the environment at a different institution, this does not necessarily indicate an absence of belonging.¹³⁷ However, the absence of a sense of belonging may be a contributory factor driving students away from Westminster:

'And also, just looking at belonging to a place. I found that in my undergraduate that most students, I'd say about 90% of students, they weren't really ambitious...So I found I want to go on to a place where students are very ambitious about their futures.'¹³⁸

This statement raises a key point about how Westminster integrates students to help them reach their full potential. It may be that efforts to raise attainment during the first year of undergraduate study go some way in encouraging more students into postgraduate study in later years.

In terms of support networks, these can contribute towards building a sense of belonging and act as a deterrent to enrolment in postgraduate study away from Westminster. This was particularly pronounced for students in receipt of Disability Learning Support (DLS), where leaving Westminster produced an apprehensiveness about losing existing networks: 'I've had my DLS mentor for years, and [they're] incredible, I know [them] really well, [they're] really helpful. So just knowing everybody, I'm feeling really comfortable in the institution, I think, was a massive factor.'¹³⁹ In a separate interview, a student stated:

'...I've also got a lot of support at the university as well. I'm signed up with disability learning support because of some health issues...So, that support network is really important to me. And so, that is one of the driving factors as well that I would choose to do postgraduate education at Westminster.'¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ 118124891/P5/PGR.

¹³⁶ 118345847/P4/PGT; 119335818/P5/PGT; 119369276/P5/PGT; 118100850/P3/UG; 118163152/P1/UG; 118554386/P1/UG; 119035155/P3/UG; and 121103332/P3/UG.

¹³⁷ 119171540/P1/UG; 118100850/P3/UG.

¹³⁸ 118099017/P3/UG.

¹³⁹ 119369276/P5/PGT.

¹⁴⁰ 121103332/P3/UG.

For present purposes, ranking was seen as one item in a menu of factors contributing to the pursuit of postgraduate study at or away from Westminster. Ranking may be important, but it depends on other items on the menu. One factor that might override ranking was a meaningful faculty-student relationship, which raises a question about the direction of first engagement, i.e., student to academic or academic to student. This is especially pertinent for getting more postgraduate taught students into PhDs. The data showed a mix of directions of first contact. However, while students interested in pursuing a PhD will likely initiate contact, those who are unsure would benefit most from a proactive approach from current postgraduate research students, alumni, and academics. An increase in frequency and a more systematic approach to conversations between these groups and potential re-enrollers may be beneficial in encouraging those unsure to apply. One-to-one conversations between academics or Personal Tutors would likely prove most valuable for students, followed by other online and on-campus events.

Expectations of Further Study

Postgraduate research students, more so than undergraduates and those on taught postgraduate courses, commented on the expectations of further study. When undergraduates or postgraduate taught students spoke about the transition into Masters, it was as a deterrent to further study in general, with concerns regarding the ‘intens[ity]’ and/or workload involved,¹⁴¹ as well as the level of independence expected of postgraduate students: ‘I want to be in it [i.e., postgraduate study] but at the same time I know that with doing a Masters it would take a lot of research time and you have to be very independent, which I think is a bit scary.’¹⁴² The logistics of undertaking a Masters was also raised, with students wanting more information on balancing work and postgraduate study and supporting a ‘full-time’ study lifestyle.¹⁴³ Equipping students with a realistic expectation of postgraduate study experience, including guidance and tips on how to support studies from current/former postgraduates, may be crucial in allaying some students’ apprehensions regarding further study.

More specifically, some work could be done concerning demystifying the PhD. The research postgraduates who participated in this study shared their thoughts and doubts regarding undertaking a PhD. In terms of the expectations of PhD study, some were aware of gaps in their knowledge:

¹⁴¹ 118163152/P1/UG and 118345847/P4/PGT

¹⁴² 119035155/P3/UG.

¹⁴³ 119171540/P1/UG. Also, 121160886/P5/PGR.

‘Not much, I didn’t know much at all. It was, I think, for everyone it was a bit like a mystery. I want to do it, but what is it? And I tried to attend all these meetings where they try to explain to potential PhD students what it is. And even after these meetings, I still lie with the sense, but what is it?’¹⁴⁴

There were similar gaps in self-perceptions of preparedness, or not, for the academic demands of a PhD. One student spoke about ‘this huge imposter phenomenon’ and questioned whether they were intellectually able to carry out and complete a PhD.¹⁴⁵ Another spoke of challenges faced, in particular by international students entering a different educational system, though educational experience at undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels may ameliorate this issue.¹⁴⁶

For some students, it may be that engagement regarding the potential pursuit of a PhD breaks down perceptions of study at this higher level and who PhDs are for. The comments of one student highlighted that age might act as a deterrent for *immediate* re-enrolment; they explained that prior to commencing their PhD, they did not believe they were the “right” age to undertake a research degree: ‘I’m too young, I’m not going to do it. I’m going to only do a PhD when I’m bored with my life in my 50s...And that preconception of PhD is like four years...and I’m too young to sit around for a PhD; it’s too much.’ They later reflected, ‘I think that I should have done it five years ago, 10 years ago.’ This example demonstrates that as an institution, we need to be cognisant of the range of factors that might deter (*immediate*) re-enrolment. Remediating this situation requires conversations between students and academics and forums whereby current and former postgraduates can share their decision-making processes, apprehensions, and what clinched it for them to re-enrol.

Perceptions of Education and Teaching Quality

Education and teaching quality were discussed as concerns, but it was predominantly by current undergraduate students. This is significant as it might prompt students to consider leaving Westminster. For instance, when a lecturer is perceived as poor, and the student finds them to teach the postgraduate course they are interested in, the student might consider this a reason to leave: ‘I might get a better education.’ Less hedged, student perceptions of teaching quality might act as a firm shove away from Westminster. One student with no intention of remaining

¹⁴⁴ 121111512/P5/PGR.

¹⁴⁵ 121111512/P5/PGR.

¹⁴⁶ 121157206/P5/PGR.

at Westminster said: ‘I wouldn’t say I really got an education here. It was very outdated. The resources. The topics. A lot of them were very out of date.’ The same student continued that teaching quality was a ‘huge concern’ that ‘put me off from studying at Westminster anymore.’ Nevertheless, several students praised the teaching quality. When cross-referenced against their responses to the question as to whether they had considered re-enrolment at Westminster, three of six said yes; one said maybe; and two said no, though, in the case of the latter, the main driver for not considering re-enrolment was course offer.¹⁴⁷ This indicates that perceptions of education and teaching quality are likely to be course- and module-specific. Ensuring consistency in quality teaching across the length and breadth of the institution may encourage more students to consider re-enrolling at Westminster.

Flexible Study Options

Participants acknowledged that having a range of flexible study options is positive.¹⁴⁸ While the availability of different study options was not on the radar of some students, there was a level of expectation that HEIs would provide a range of study modes.¹⁴⁹ As such, flexible study options were rarely discussed as a specific driver to or away from Westminster. One exception was an international student who found a course similar to one on offer at Westminster at another provider before ultimately settling on Westminster:

‘I had some backup universities as well, and some of those were backup because they were actually offering the course online. So, I was like, OK, if you know, at the end of the day, I’m not able to entirely afford it, I can just remain within my country and, you know, just study online. But again, I mean it’s not as fun, and obviously, it’s a completely different experience from in-person teaching and learning.’¹⁵⁰

This case highlights where flexible study options might be crucial in the decision-making process. Additionally, it highlights that flexible study options often intersect with considerations of costs and finances. For instance, a student undertaking a postgraduate degree part-time or with an online element may have the flexibility to work whilst studying and save

¹⁴⁷ 119015380/P1/UG; and 119103745/P1/UG.

¹⁴⁸ 118189353/P3/UG; 118554386/P1/UG; 118564668/P1/UG; 119015380/P1/UG; 119103745/P1/UG; 119171540/P1/UG; 119694022/P5/PGR; 121157206/P5/PGR; and 119369276/P5/PGT.

¹⁴⁹ 118163152/P1/UG; 118554386/P1/UG; and 119035155/P3/UG.

¹⁵⁰ 119353818/P5/PGT.

on commuting costs. Furthermore, we know from other institutional research that having that flexibility may help students balance other duties, such as caring responsibilities.¹⁵¹

Maximising Re-enrolment

Communication, Communication, Communication

Recommendations about maximising re-enrolment centre on enhancing communications and the preferred sources of information for students considering re-enrolment at Westminster. Overall, communication of the availability and benefits of re-enrolment in postgraduate study requires improvement. Some students feel they have received sufficient information and support.¹⁵² However, other students felt unsupported and received no information about progression to Masters.¹⁵³ Topics covered should include how a postgraduate degree adds value to their undergraduate and the enhanced job prospects of further study.¹⁵⁴ The interviews suggest that students would benefit from and appreciate hearing from their lecturers about postgraduate options, whether in class or one-to-one sessions.

Earlier, we saw how a lack of clarity concerning expectations of further study may act to deter (*immediate*) re-enrolment. Providing more detail may benefit students, particularly those unsure about further study.¹⁵⁵ It is helpful here to quote at some length a current postgraduate student who spoke with undergraduate students about the transition into Masters:

‘I think...at undergrad[uate] there’s an assumption that Masters [is] like, “Wow, like that is so high level. Oh my God, am I good enough? Am I smart enough? Is it going to be too challenging?” And I think Masters courses are designed well enough to really build you up from that rather than just launch [you into] it unless you take something that’s completely different to what you took [at] undergrad[uate], it’s gonna be very [a] different experience if you’re taking a similar subject. I think helping people to understand that actually you can make that jump and it’s not too much. So, I think a lot of undergrads came and spoke to us at the end of that panel, and they were kind of saying, you know, this has really helped to, like, calm us down about...Masters.’¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Scott Rawlinson, “‘Little Islands’: Challenges and Opportunities for Student Carers at the University of Westminster,” University of Westminster – Institutional Research (2023).

¹⁵² 119015380/P1/UG.

¹⁵³ 118554386/P1/UG; 118163152/P1/UG; and 119171540/P1/UG.

¹⁵⁴ 118109353/P3/UG; and 118163152/P1/UG.

¹⁵⁵ 119035155/P3/UG; and 121103332/P3/UG.

¹⁵⁶ 119369276/P5/PGR.

Therefore, there is a need to break down the preconceptions of some undergraduates regarding further study. The exact mode via which this information is relayed could vary from workshops or events where undergraduates can meet and talk with current postgraduates and alumni, as well as postgraduate taster days/sessions. Increasing the volume and visibility of such initiatives would equip undergraduates with the information they need to make informed decisions about their educational futures.¹⁵⁷

In these conversations, being honest and upfront about what postgraduate study entails is essential. This is especially so for those interested in pursuing a PhD, which requires a lengthy commitment to a narrow topic: ‘You have to be fully sure that you are committed. It’s a huge commitment. I even like make it in a funny way that you can get out of a serious relationship, but you can’t get out from this...’¹⁵⁸ Of course, PhD courses can be terminated. However, the central point remains concerning the importance of discussing the demands of such study, the level of independent study expected, as well as how PhD study can be balanced with duties such as caring responsibilities:

‘So, I knew a little bit about how it [i.e., PhD study] would be quite demanding. A lot of things that I read would [be] like, it’s basically like having two full-time jobs at the same time. And then so I was like, OK, I’m gonna be prepared and disciplined and know what work I need to do at certain points. I know I need to have like quite a rigorous structure in place to be able to balance everything, not just with uni, but with life as well in general. And so, I think going in, I was thinking it was gonna be a lot more intense. And then once I started, I was like, oh, there really is nothing holding you back from just sitting in front of the telly all day.’¹⁵⁹

Hearing directly from current and former PhD students would benefit prospective research students (see Sources of Information below).

Most students interviewed were aware of the alumni discount. However, there were a couple who were not.¹⁶⁰ Ensuring that all students know about the discount is essential if we consider the prevalence of cost and financial concerns (see Cost and Financial Considerations above). Targeted communications about various funding opportunities and what financial assistance students are eligible for would benefit students, particularly those without recourse

¹⁵⁷ 119171540/P1/UG.

¹⁵⁸ 118124891/P5/PGR. Also, 121157206/P5/PGR.

¹⁵⁹ 121160886/P5/PGR.

¹⁶⁰ 119035155/P3/UG.

to existing or family funds.¹⁶¹ Additionally, while undergraduate funding structures are broadly understood, there remain knowledge gaps regarding postgraduate funding and opportunities:¹⁶²

‘...[O]ne thing that a lot of undergrads aren’t aware of is like, what are the funding options for Masters? I think it can be a little confusing, and if you arm them with that information as early as possible, they can then start to factor that into their decision-making, whether it be understanding there is funding for it because some people didn’t even know you could get a postgrad[uate] loan, but on the other side of things, the way that funding works is a little bit different, you know, you get it paid all in one lump sum. You have to pay your fees directly to the university and you don’t get anywhere near as much maintenance loan as what you get at undergrad[uate]. Just so that students can prepare for that. I think from my experience last year there were a couple of people on my course that maybe didn’t anticipate how expensive it was and how little money they would have left over having done it full-time as well.’¹⁶³

Given these gaps in understanding, students must be made aware of and understand the financial assistance available to them, including how payments are received and paid out.

Disaggregation of the data reveals certain student groups who might benefit directly from improved communications or where Westminster could enhance its cultural sensitivity with regard to student experience. For instance, an intersection between limited cultural capital and first-in-family to HE status was identified. Nine of the 19 participants were identified as first-in-family, nine did not identify as first-in-family, and one preferred not to say. Five of the nine, split across all study levels, spoke about what could be categorised as limited cultural capital or having no one to share or relate to about the HE experience, which can deter further study. A couple of examples are quoted below:

‘I’m not sure, that’s why I’m taking a break, and then I’ll speak to mentors and stuff and then ask their opinions and their advice and see what they say because I’m pretty sure there’s so many people like me that’s struggling, and I want to know how they help them because I haven’t got any idea because I’m the first generation to go into uni.’¹⁶⁴

A postgraduate taught student shared the following:

¹⁶¹ 119171540/P1/UG.

¹⁶² 121157206/P5/PGR.

¹⁶³ 119369276/P5/PGT.

¹⁶⁴ 118163152/P1/UG.

‘On the other hand...when you’re the first of your family to go to university, your family don’t quite understand why you’re spending so much money and so much time on getting a degree, like, “Why aren’t you going out on the street and selling coal or something.”¹⁶⁵

Westminster must be cognisant of its student demographics as many students are categorised as first-in-family to HE. This group may have less base knowledge about the intricacies of postgraduate study than their non-first-in-family to HE peers and would thus gain from familiarisation and understanding of processes and routes in further HE.

In terms of maximising cultural sensitivity and ensuring that students feel as though they belong, a female student of South Asian background highlighted some family stigma associated with their pursuit of *further* HE:

‘Well, it certainly seems “out there” to my family members. There's also a little bit of a stigma, unfortunately, in my community about women pursuing higher education, let alone a woman pursuing further higher education, a further degree. So it's been a bit hard to, where people ask, “What are you doing now?” I'll say I'm about to graduate in a couple of months, and they'll be like, “OK, so what do you plan on doing after?” and I'll say a postgraduate degree in teaching [...] had the others very surprised, but yes, there's that...I feel as though if I had other people in my family that I could look up to, and then it doesn't primarily have to be parents, maybe even aunts, cousins, it would have been far easier.’¹⁶⁶

Another expressed frustration at what they perceived as a superficial cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of Westminster:

‘I know this is very specific about University of Westminster and enrolment to postgraduate, but I think for me a lot of my reasons are individual, like my background, my family status, my ethnic background and that stuff, and I'm wondering if there's much of a focus on it in the university. I know Westminster does talk about South Asian stuff a lot, and it's quite [a] strong community...you know, we have World in Culture week and wellbeing or the cafes and stuff, you know, it's quite a prominent feature of our university. But when it comes to [the] finicky side of stuff, the sort of admin work, it's like it all sort of disappears. And it's just a little bit of support in, OK, I understand that for your background, it might not be the easiest thing. Here's how we can work around that and manage that.’¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ 119369276/P5/PGT.

¹⁶⁶ 119015380/P1/UG.

¹⁶⁷ 121160886/P5/PGR.

However, this is not to say this is a universal experience for students from this group.¹⁶⁸ Instead, it reinforces the need for tailored communication with students and their families. These statements also highlight where student characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, intersect. Correspondence with students should aim to demonstrate an understanding of such intersections as they may impact the decision to re-enrol.

An undertone of much of what has already been said is the importance of personalised or tailored communications. Students are clear about wanting to hear about course-specific information about routes into postgraduate study: ‘I think people should be given tailored advice to their individual circumstances.’¹⁶⁹ However, this is not always happening: ‘...I haven’t really been told the specific routes that one could take.’¹⁷⁰ While students set on re-enrolling at Westminster are likely to benefit from tailored guidance and advice, those sitting on the fence might be encouraged to come down on the Westminster side that would gain the most and feel valued by the institution in the process.

Showcasing Research Interests and Impact

There needs to be more communication about postgraduate study and funding opportunities in general. That said, there is a wish on the part of students to hear directly from academics about their research interests and its impact beyond the walls of the university. There is an overlap here with the perceived prestige of a HE provider – students are attracted to the idea of working with an academic whose research has “real world” impact.¹⁷¹ Postgraduate taught and research students may find this a particular draw. In addition to a desire for improved promotion and advertisement of PhD positions, they want the identification of an academic’s research interests and impact to be easily accessible.¹⁷² Accompanying these should be evidence of supervisory experience, with video or written student testimonials attached to the academic’s profile on the website, again shifting from the general to the personal:

‘[Student testimonials] should be placed in a strategic way on the website...maybe have it on the supervisor’s page where it’s a bit more personal. Once someone has supervised a couple of students, ask them to write specifically for them...then once you open their page, OK, here’s

¹⁶⁸ For example, 119353818/P5/PGT.

¹⁶⁹ 119103745/P1/UG.

¹⁷⁰ 119035155/P3/UG. Also, 118109353/P3/UG.

¹⁷¹ 118109353/P3/UG.

¹⁷² 118345847/P4/PGT.

my potential supervisor. Here are the bullet points on what their research interests are. OK, that fits me or doesn't. And then, OK, here are the students he supervised before.¹⁷³

Therefore, creative usage of academic profiles, rather than relying on generalised communications, could help Westminster stand out from the crowd.

Sources of Information

The source of information should be distinguished from the means of communication. For instance, emails are perceived as a useful and easy means of communication. However, it is their ease and proliferation that also make them easy to ignore. The rate at which emails are ignored may be ameliorated via greater personalisation. Where email was mentioned by 12 of 19 participants, only three mentioned social media. The institutional website was regularly used as a source of information about courses. Workshops¹⁷⁴ and other events are also valued as conduits through which information is provided.

Students are very clear on who they want to hear from about postgraduate study: academics and current/former postgraduates. There were a handful of mentions for industry professionals and library services, whereas 15 of 19 mentioned faculty, and 12 of 19 mentioned current or former students. However, is it the personal and relatable touch of academics that is highly valued: '...it's the lecturers that drive me most because...I know the lecturers are expert in their subject. So, if someone who is in the industry...teaching more than 25 years...I think that holds up value.'¹⁷⁵ Owing to the ongoing "mystery" regarding the PhD, academic advice and guidance on all stages, from searching for a programme, to application, enrolment, and the practice of doing the PhD and the viva would be greatly appreciated.¹⁷⁶

The views and experiences of current postgraduates and alumni are deemed equally valuable. 'I think hear[ing] from past students had helped and also past lecturers who have done postgraduate courses.'¹⁷⁷ Several undergraduates gave specific examples where they had heard from students studying at a higher level than themselves and the value they derived from the interaction:¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ 121111512/P5/PGR.

¹⁷⁴ 118345847/P4/PGT; 118564668/P1/UG; 119035155/P3/UG; 119369276/P5/PGT; and 121111512/P5/PGR.

¹⁷⁵ 119103745/P1/UG. Also, 118100850/P3/UG; and 118109353/P3/UG.

¹⁷⁶ 121111512/P5/PGR; and 121160886/P5/PGR.

¹⁷⁷ 119035155/P3/UG. See also, 118124891/P5/PGR; 118564668/P1/UG; 119103745/P1/UG; 119171540/P1/UG; 119369276/P5/PGT; and 121103332/P3/UG.

¹⁷⁸ 1211103332/P3/UG; and 118109353/P3/UG.

‘So, there’s this app called Unibuddy, and I can actually talk to those studying in Westminster or its alumni. I downloaded that, and I spoke to this very nice girl...and I was like, “OK, so I want an honest opinion. What’s it like? What’s your experience like? Which campus do you study at?” And she was so nice and just explained it all to me. And I think that was the moment I was sure that I was going to go for Westminster because I didn’t just hear the university speak about it or its associates or its agents or the people in charge or whatever; a student actually told me about her experience.’¹⁷⁹

This can also be impactful for students considering progression from postgraduate taught to postgraduate research: ‘...speaking to people, seeing people that have done their PhDs at Westminster, which kind of encouraged me with the same.’¹⁸⁰

Existing postgraduate students and alumni are an under-utilised resource when it comes to promoting Westminster to current undergraduates and postgraduates. This is unfortunate as there were many instances throughout conversations where participants were highly complimentary towards the university. We saw earlier the glowing praise PhDs gave their supervisors. Others highlighted the sense of community that came from remaining at Westminster¹⁸¹:

‘I guess one of the biggest attractive points was the fact that I knew the department very, very well because of my undergrad and compared to my Masters, it felt a lot more of a community, it felt a lot more like you weren’t just swimming in the ocean by yourself. So, I knew I was going to have good supervisors, good support, even if it wasn’t from the department itself...’¹⁸²

Unfortunately, some students perceive a gap between different study levels: ‘...there’s a bridge between the students who do postgraduate and undergraduate, and they kind of live in two different worlds.’¹⁸³ Westminster needs to find a means of bringing different study levels together to relay information about further study; societies and sports clubs may be a route to explore in this regard.

In summary, as repositories of knowledge and as “salespeople,” academics and current/former postgraduates could be utilised more effectively. However, there is the risk of over-reliance or placing too much pressure on the shoulders of these groups. It is unrealistic to expect students and academics to answer every conceivable question; as such, professional

¹⁷⁹ 119353818/P5/PGT.

¹⁸⁰ 119694022/P5/PGR.

¹⁸¹ 119694022/P5/PGR; and 121157206/P5/PGR.

¹⁸² 121160886/P5/PGR.

¹⁸³ 118109353/P3/UG.

services have an important role in assisting with technical questions, such as those regarding the intricacies of finance or post-study visas.

PhD Applications and Admissions Process

Finally, concerning the application and admissions experience of prospective and new postgraduates, with a particular emphasis on PhD students, the tone of student comments was generally positive, though there are areas for improvement. The speed of correspondence was praised. In one instance, the dialogue between student and university, described as ‘mind-blowing’ and ‘absolutely amazing,’ acted as a driver of further study at Westminster. In contrast, ‘there would be time[s] where universities just stop[ped] responding to me...’¹⁸⁴ Similarly, current PhD students spoke fondly of the level of support they received from their (prospective) supervisors from thinking about undertaking a PhD, to applying, enrolling, and researching. However, it is apparent that without the guidance of an academic to take them through the process, particularly when they are the first in their family to undertake a PhD, more information on how to find and apply for a PhD is required: ‘Knowing how to apply, that was one of the big ones. I did have my [family member] to talk to about [it], but even then, it was still quite subject-specific.’¹⁸⁵ In summary, students value that they feel supported and invested in; the key is ensuring that this is an institutional trait.

Conclusion

The study highlighted a mixture of structural, institutional, and student/personal drivers/deterrents of re-enrolment at *alma mater*. It was found that breaks in study are driven by careful consideration of where students see their lives heading, wishing to see the inherent value of their first degree, with undergraduates especially eager to test that value in the labour market, cost barriers, the missing of deadlines; or an interplay of these factors. It was argued that exploring the practice of variable discount rates and greater links to industry might work to incentivise students to re-enrol immediately.

Course offer was identified as crucial, either clinching re-enrolment for Westminster or driving students elsewhere. Ensuring that Westminster runs the courses students want could be aided by annual market insight exercises on course patterns and trends, as well as emerging and popular job titles, descriptions, and specifications. This information is then fed into course

¹⁸⁴ 119353818/P5/PGT.

¹⁸⁵ 121160886/P5/PGR.

re-validation processes. Work towards addressing the latter is an aim of Westminster's Employer Engagement Survey. Additionally, where Westminster's course offer is similar to a higher-ranked competitor and where competing on the terrain of ranking would be futile, the university needs to market to its strengths as testified to by students themselves (i.e., quality and meaningfulness of faculty-student relationships).

Furthermore, students want tangible outcomes from the studies, notably good-quality employment. Linked to this, Westminster needs to be aware and empathetic that students may wish to see the value of their degree before the commencement of postgraduate study. As such, pushing students immediately into postgraduate may suggest their first degree has no or limited value. This can be ameliorated by clear and personalised communication of the benefits of postgraduate study, alongside the offer of variable discounts, which may encourage *immediate* re-enrolment without ostracising potential *returnees*.

In maximising re-enrolment, the key points pertain to communication and ensuring the right people are communicating. Westminster needs to ensure that key messages get maximal coverage. This study and the wider literature identified that finance can make or break immediate and future re-enrolment. Therefore, the availability of the alumni discount needs to be broadcast widely, as should the sources and receipt/payment structures of postgraduate funding opportunities. There is a need for greater tailoring and personalisation. With colleagues' support, academics could improve how they showcase their research to potential postgraduate students through creative use of their profile pages on the institutional website, such as attaching student video testimonials of students they have supervised to their personal profiles. The PhD would benefit from demystification, with detailed and honest conversations between students and academic colleagues working towards this goal. Finally, while professional services have an important support role to play, work at the coalface would greatly benefit from academic colleagues' and current/former postgraduates' input as these are the sources of information that potential re-enrollers want to hear from and place the most value in.

Recommendations

- Heads of School should make use of institutional data on an annual basis to understand re-enrolment patterns down to the course level, considering how variables such as degree classification impact such patterns. Understanding these trends will provide

insight into courses that re-enrol students at a relatively higher rate and act as an example of best practice to learn from.

- Exploring the possibility of a variable discount rate for re-enrolling students. This might entail retaining the base-level 20% discount for alumni while providing a higher discount rate for *immediate* re-enrollers compared to those returning several years later.¹⁸⁶
- A key concern of students is whether they are “job-ready.” Establishing or enhancing closer links between the university and industry through increased placements, work experience, and graduate routes would help to reassure students of the improved employment prospects as a result of postgraduate study and help them build networks and contacts in their target industry.
- This study identified inconsistencies in the messaging about postgraduate study. Therefore, efforts should be made to improve marketing and promotion of postgraduate study and its benefits. This needs to be a mixture of general information, covering topics such as finance and what to expect from postgraduate study, as well as tailored communications, such as links to financial schemes for care-leavers or student carers or industry-specific information about progression from study to employment.
- Finance is a major obstacle to the pursuit of further study. Therefore, it is recommended that Westminster review fee levels for postgraduate study and consider the introduction of targeted financial assistance schemes (e.g., through scholarships) or more intensive and extensive promotion of existing monetary support.¹⁸⁷
- As some students expressed a desire to keep their employment options open or have flexibility within their chosen field, exploring the range and demand for postgraduate combination degrees would be beneficial.
- Students want to hear directly from academics and current/former postgraduates. Efforts should be made to increase the number and range of opportunities for academics and current/former postgraduates to talk to undergraduates and postgraduates about further study. This could be achieved through mentoring, workshops, and other events.
- While the number of students lost to Westminster due to course offer is unknown, this study found evidence of students leaving because UoW did not run the course they wanted to pursue. Westminster should explore annual horizon scanning of popular

¹⁸⁶ We define *immediate* re-enrollers as those undertaking a postgraduate within 15 months of graduating from undergraduate. This aligns with the timeframe of the Graduate Outcomes survey.

¹⁸⁷ Wakeling, Hancock and Hampden-Thompson, *Widening Access to Postgraduate Study and the Professions*.

postgraduate courses, and emerging job titles/specifications and feed these into course creation/re-validation exercises.

- Improved and creative showcasing of academics' research and impact. For example, for greater personalisation, student testimonial videos could be attached to the supervisor's institutional webpage in addition to being used for general marketing purposes.

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