
Breaking down barriers to postgraduate study: Taking an access in the “Get into Masters Study” initiative.

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Abstract: Widening access and participation in higher education now celebrates decades of success in UK Higher Education (HE). Particularly in England where in 2019, 50% of 18 year olds progressed into University or College degree level study, where widening participation has become core business of university recruitment. There is a wide body of evidence, research and practice relating to widening participation relating to; breaking down barriers (Fuller, Foskett, Paton and Maringe, 2008; Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, and Slack, 2006), giving information about the pragmatics (Baker, Z., 2020) and raising confidence (Moore, Sanders, and Higham, L., 2013), to motivate and make available undergraduate HE to non-traditional students. The University of Winchester too have prioritised Widening Participation for undergraduate courses (University of Winchester, 2021), with notable initiatives related to widening access to military children (McCullough, Hall and Ellis, 2018) and care leavers (McKnight, Collins, Way and Iannotti, 2019). In 2017, the University’s Careers Team embarked on a new access project relating to widening access and participation to postgraduate study. This case study details the “Get into Masters” project which has now become core practice at the University break down barriers and raise aspiration for postgraduate study beyond Winchester.

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

Introduction

Widening access and participation in higher education now celebrates decades of success in UK Higher Education (HE). Particularly in England where in 2019, 50% of 18 year olds progressed into University or College degree level study, where widening participation has become core business of university recruitment. There is a wide body of evidence, research and practice relating to widening participation relating to; breaking down barriers (Fuller, Foskett, Paton and Maringe, 2008; Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, and Slack, 2006), giving information about the pragmatics (Baker, Z., 2020) and raising confidence (Moore, Sanders, and Higham, L., 2013), to motivate and make available undergraduate HE to non-traditional students. The University of Winchester too have prioritised Widening Participation for undergraduate courses (University of Winchester, 2021), with notable initiatives related to widening access to military children (McCullough, Hall and Ellis, 2018) and care leavers (McKnight, Collins, Way and Iannotti, 2019). In 2017, the University’s Careers Team embarked on a new access project relating to widening access and participation to postgraduate study. This case study details the “Get into Masters” project which has now become core practice at the University break down barriers and raise aspiration for postgraduate study beyond Winchester.

Background

The University of Winchester gained University status in 2005, following 175 years of HE after its initial foundation as teacher-training institution, King Alfred's College. King Alfred's College was founded as an education institution to train teachers to teach the poor (being the working class population of 19th Century Hampshire). The University has held on to its foundation as a Cathedral's Group University prioritising values-based education, taking on students with lower grade boundaries and often offering a second chance to students. The University has championed the humanities as its largest area of courses beyond education, which saw student numbers ground to c.9,000 students in 2017 and scored highly in the National Student Survey (NSS) in the 2010s. Yet graduate employability and further study remained the institutions main challenge, and through student feedback, progressing onto masters level study was outlined as a popular initial destination for Winchester graduates. In 2017, the Careers Team were approached to run a series of workshops to break down demystify postgraduate study as a graduate routes for students . This was developed in 2018 to expand the workshops across every undergraduate course at the University. With a widening participation population at Winchester over 50% the team knew it was highly likely that many of our students parents had not studied at postgraduate, or even degree level, therefore the parental education road map (Heath, Fuller and Johnston, 2010) was even less present at applying to postgraduate programmes than undergraduate. Therefore, an access approach similar to those deployed by Widening Participation Teams in colleges and schools, was required for the initiative to succeed.

The "Get into Masters Study" Initiative

The workshops were titled "Get into Masters Study", to make simple the topic of the talk, although they would also speak about other postgraduate qualifications such as postgraduate certificates in education (PGCE) and doctoral study. The sessions would both be run as in class workshops to gain maximum audience, as well as additional optional workshops open to all students during employability weeks. The sessions ran across all programmes at the end of each semester for maximum engagement. The delivery team were made up on the Careers Team, Student Engagement Team and Head of Student Engagement and Employability. The sessions covered three main themes throughout to break down barriers, including; practicalities, broadening horizons, and finances. The structure of the workshops is highlighted below, with the themes discussed following:

1. Key words and length of courses (Practicalities)
2. University options (Broadening Horizons)
3. Why study at postgraduate level (Broadening Horizons)
4. Applying for postgraduate study (Practicalities)
5. Course costs and student loans available (Finances)
6. Further advice and guidance

Figure 1: Structure of "Get into Masters Study" workshops.

Practicalities

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

Broadening Horizons

Universities traditionally only speak of postgraduate study in regards to progression onto Higher Education courses at the same institution. With societal trends in the UK seeing students often returning home following their undergraduate degrees (Mitchell, 2017), leading on a Winchester Masters only campaign would be exclusive and potentially less successful. Additionally many students report to being in difficult financial position at the end of their degree, where going back to the parental home may be the only option before debts or funds can be raised. Therefore, the project lead gained permission at the start of the project to discuss postgraduate options beyond Winchester, which was thankfully granted. Section 2 above discussed university options asking students if they intended to return home post university (which were often the majority) and asked them to list all HEIs within 45 minutes commute. This exercise highlighted the institutional options available to students if already planning to live at home a year post degree, and where staying in Winchester or moving to a new location would be not viable. The workshop facilitator highlighted that there were over 150 UK Universities and 1000s abroad, to inspire students to think wider of further options. Students were encouraged to search wide for options and to "shop around" with tuition fees varying due no fee regulation in the UK.

Following highlighting the sheer number of options now available to students, the third aspect introduced why take a masters. Of course, the initial well-versed reason was communicated relating to employability which was not new to the students. The facilitators then communicated several further reasons, such as further knowledge in the current discipline, the opportunity to specialise in their field (e.g. Creative Writing BA, onto a Writing for Children MA). Changing direction was highlighted, such as teacher training, to highlight that students could move into new disciplines such as Business Management, Teaching and Law. The final reason highlighted was the ability to live in a new city or country – where the facilitator to the opportunity to speak about the varying cost of living and tuition fees across Universities in the UK and EU more widely.

Finances

The final and crucial part of the workshop could not be avoiding – the honest discussion about finances and student loads. Many students in English HE study at undergraduate level through taking out £40-£50K of student loans, therefore it is important to be honest about taking on further loans. The facilitator always outlined the importance of considering the financial implications of further study and important differences to undergraduate, such as the full loan coming to the student rather than to the University. Students were asked to plan their finances, living costs, tuition fee and other expenses which they would need to study full time. Part-time options were also covered and students were referred to the Student Finance England website directly referencing their information. Finally, the University Careers Advice Service was advertised to offer application and general career advice relating to further study.

Conclusion

When assessing the impact of an intervention in the student experience to improve a metric, gaining causation is rarely possible. The factors that impact a student's employability, retention or grades are as individual as our students, therefore claiming an increase following these initiatives would be difficult. At the time of this paper, the Graduate Outcomes Survey for the students exposed to the intervention were not yet available. However, given the cost of the initiative was simply staff resource, the practice is still worth commending when the results do show an increase. By taking an access approach to postgraduate study communication, the playing field is levelled for students from first in generation families. Through explaining the practicalities and finances, students are able to make an informed choice, as well as a choice beyond their current institutions. The Get into Masters initiative continues at Winchester, alongside a University wide strategic development theme relating to our graduates' futures. Getting into masters study is just one stream of activity, alongside careers initiatives to raise students' aspirations for new pathways beyond their degrees.

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