

WIDENING ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY

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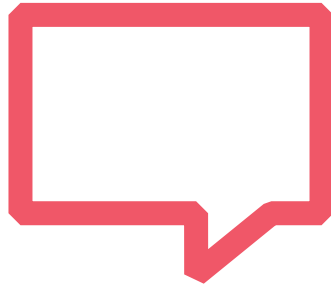
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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE POSTGRADUATE TRANSITIONS PROJECT?

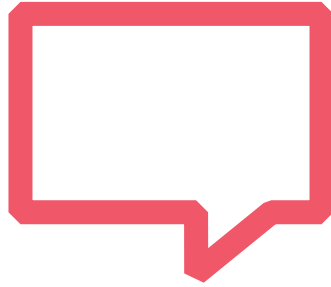
- An interdisciplinary mixed-methods research project at the University of Strathclyde
- A collaboration between the Careers Services, history department and Widening Access
- Online survey (n = 107 students) and 22 one-to-one interviews and one focus group
- Ages ranged between 17 and 65 years (average 33 years old)



BRAINSTORMING TASK

Write your answers in the chat!

What are the existing barriers to postgraduate study from a widening access perspective?



QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

MOTIVATION

Motivation to enter into postgraduate study



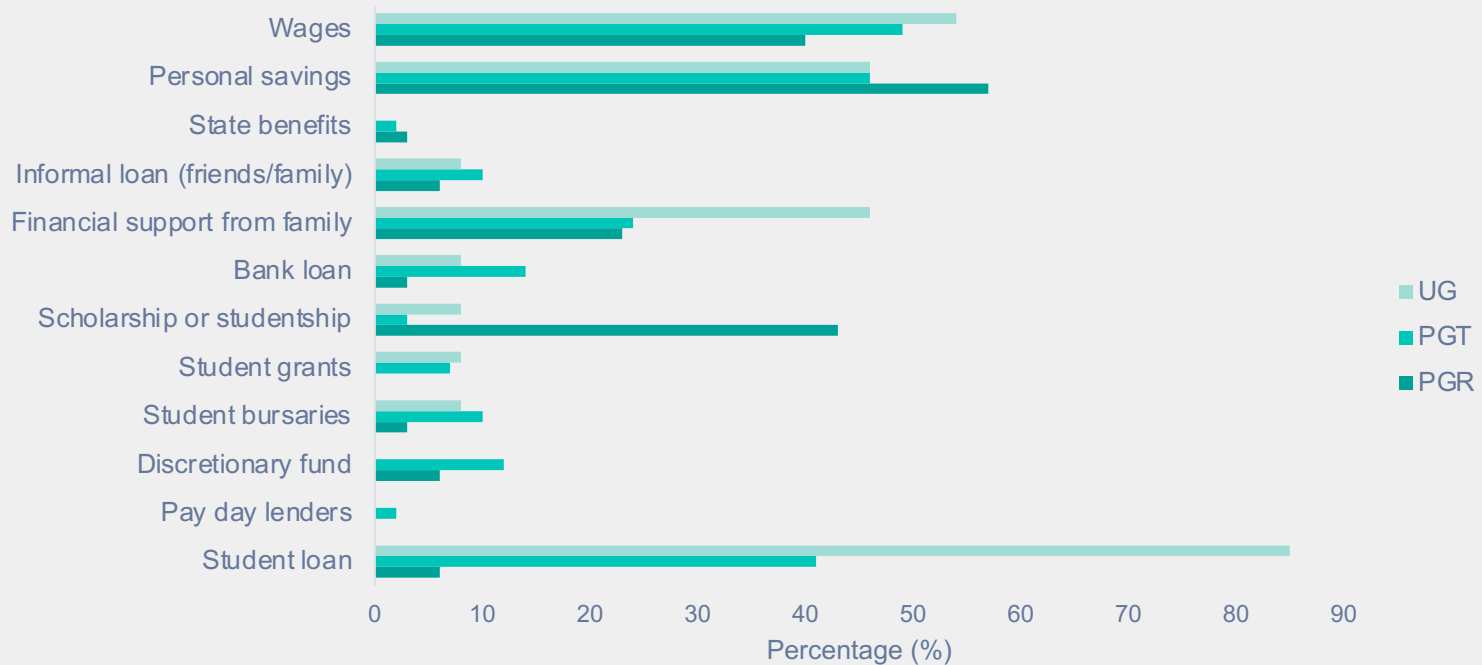
MOTIVATION

DEGREE LEVEL

- Taught postgraduate students are **significantly more likely** to be motivated by the belief that their previous degree (e.g., bachelors) would not be enough to set them apart in the current job market ($p = 0.018$) compared to PhD students, who did not particularly consider this to be a motivating factor.
- Postgraduate research students (PhD) are **significantly more likely** to be motivated to by the pursuit of an academic career ($p < 0.001$) compared to taught postgraduate students.

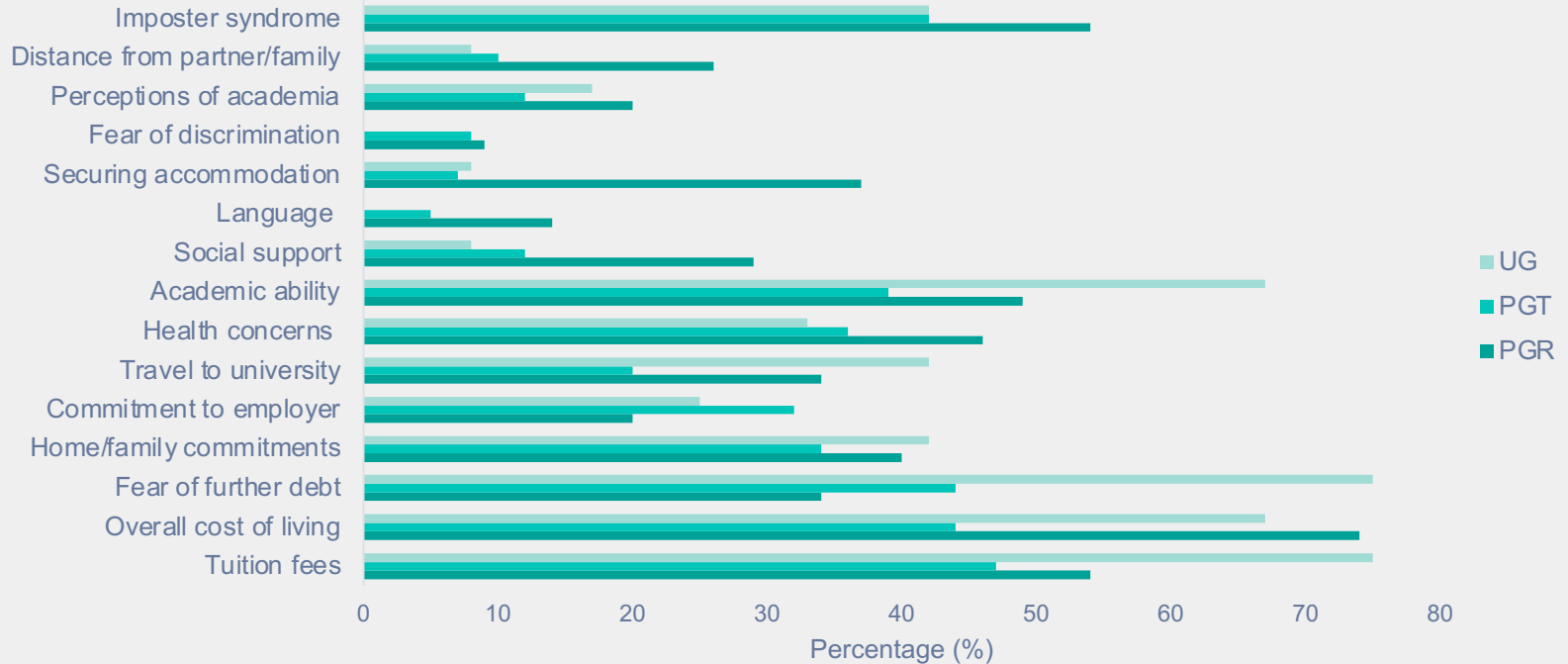
FUNDING

How students financially support their studies



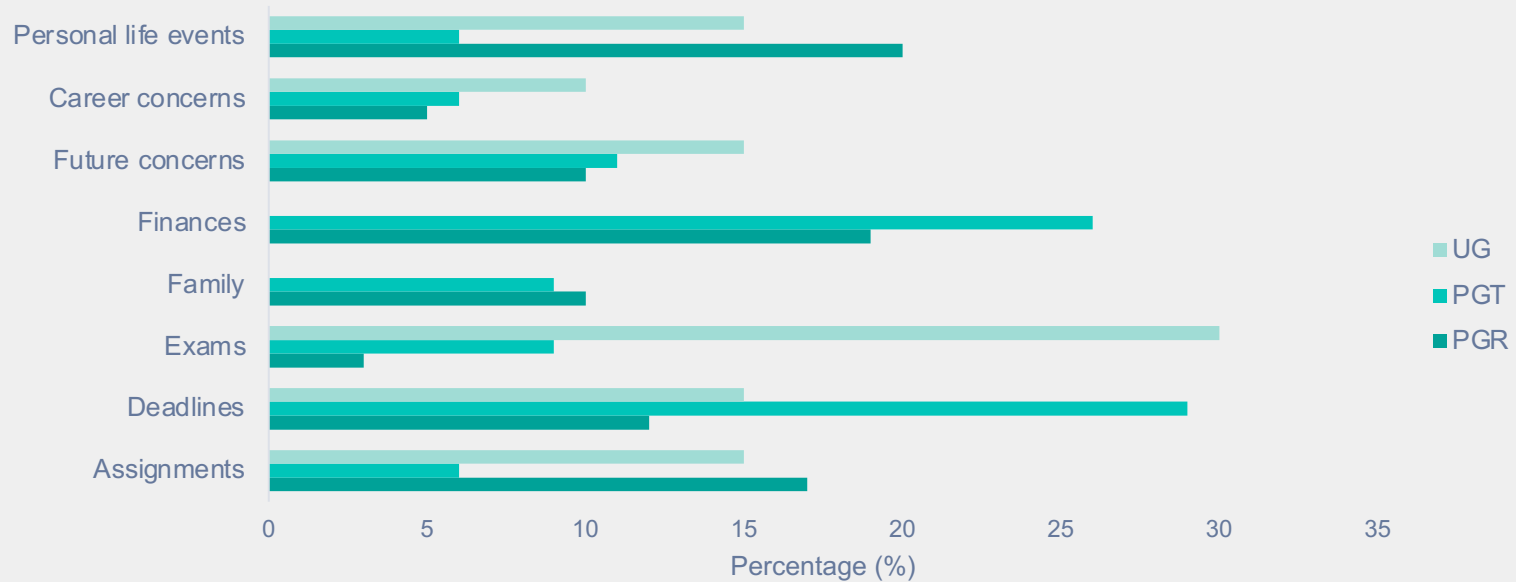
CONCERNS

Concerns & barriers relating to postgraduate study



STRESSORS

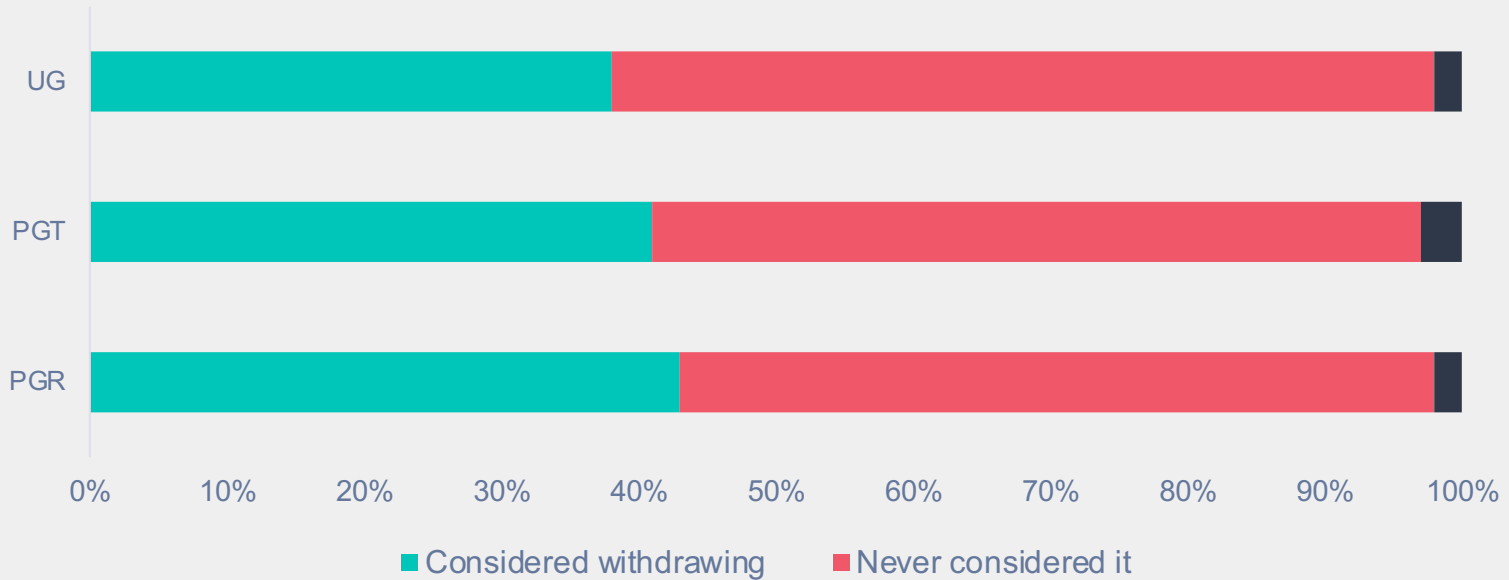
What causes students the most stress?



Note: We did not provide the option for students to select “Supervisor” or “Staff/faculty” which may be particularly relevant for PhD students

WITHDRAWAL

Percentage of students who have considered withdrawing from university



Note: These are the views of the students who **did not** withdraw (therefore does not account for the percentage of students who did withdraw)

FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

- First generation students are significantly **more likely** to be concerned about facing discrimination during postgraduate study ($p = 0.002$) compared to students whose parent(s) attended university.
- First generation students are significantly **less likely** to have received a scholarship ($p = 0.011$) or funding from an employer ($p = 0.031$) or encouragement from a family member ($p = 0.028$) in relation to applying for postgraduate study, compared to students whose parent(s) attended university.

Implications: Systemic? Second-hand advantage? Cultural capital? Awareness?

DISTANCE TO UNIVERSITY

DISTANCE TO UNIVERSITY

- The closer to university students live, the **significantly higher the demand** for additional mental health support ($p = 0.015$) and paid work experience ($p = 0.002$).

Why? Students living very close to university (e.g., < 5 miles) are more likely to be living away from home and therefore don't necessarily have the emotional, psychological and financial benefits of living at home.

- The closer to university students live, the **more likely** they are to have considered withdrawing from university ($p = 0.045$).

45% of students living less than 10 miles from the university have considered withdrawing from university, compared to 23% of students living at least 31 miles or further from the university.

DEMOGRAPHICS

ONLINE SURVEY (n = 107)

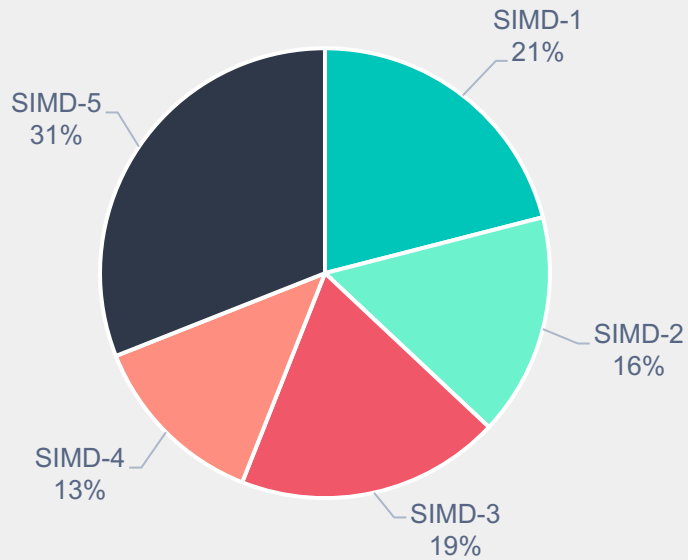
- Average age 32 years old (min 17; max 65)
- 66% female; 34% male
- 6% belong to a black or ethnic minority
- 2% are care-experienced
- 11% currently are or have been estranged
- 60% are first-generation to attend university
- 74% are first-generation to continue onto postgraduate study
- 33% identify as LGBTQ+
- 15% are from low-progression schools

INTERVIEWS (n = 26)

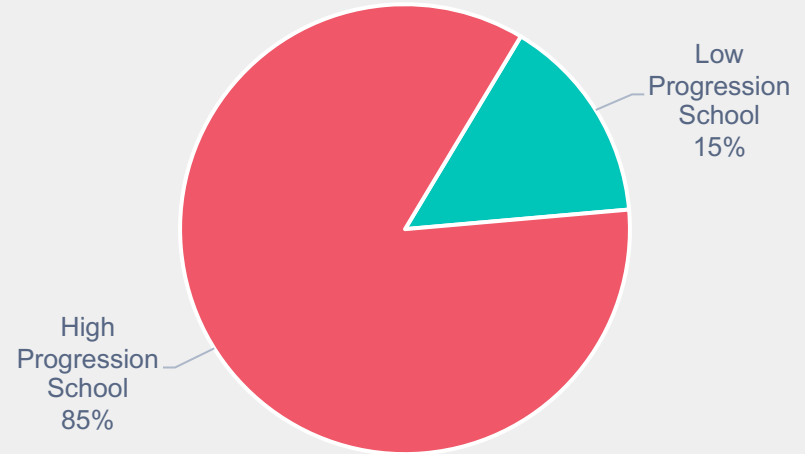
- 22 one-to-one interviews & one focus group
- Average age 34 years old (min 22; max 55)
- 46% female; 54% male
- 15% belong to a black or ethnic minority
- 8% are care-experienced
- 12% currently are or have been estranged
- 54% are first-generation to attend university

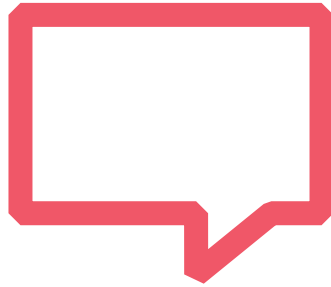
PRE-UNIVERSITY DEMOGRAPHICS

SIMD quintiles based on home postcodes



Participants' school progression rate



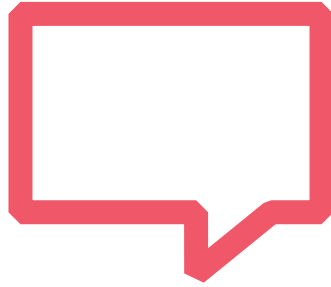


BRAINSTORMING GROUP TASK

Discuss in break-out rooms! (3 min)

*What can universities do to widen access to
postgraduate study?*

What good practice already exists?



QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Note: All names have been changed and personally-identifying information has been redacted



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Support system as a leaky pipeline

“Sometimes information gets trapped between people raising the flag and shouting for help, middle management just deny it, and then the people at the top just go, ‘Oh so everything’s fine then’.” – Henry, 26 year-old MSc student

SUPPORT SYSTEM AS A LEAKY PIPELINE

INFORMATION NOT ALWAYS PASSED ACROSS LEVELS

- “They’ve changed the whole structure, and so some people just don’t have that information [...] so I think **that lack of information is a challenge to certain people**, especially those who aren’t in their undergrad just now, people like myself who left and moved away.” – Ben, 26 year-old MSc student (first generation)
- “I think that the uni has a lot of things to give, but I think for postgrads **we need to have a better understanding of how to get that message across.**” – Elena, 27 year-old PhD student
- “**Better signposting at the start** would be helpful. To know if you’re having an issue, if you don’t know who in your course to turn to, it’s this person. Right from the bat.” – Ben, 26 year-old MSc student (first generation)
- “It’s been a strange cycle. Sometimes the help and support is there and it’s very nice. And sometimes it’s abundant. **But over times it’s non-existent and just shying away and just unreachable.**”
– Henry, 28 year-old MSc student (first generation, estranged)

SUPPORT SYSTEM AS A LEAKY PIPELINE

ENTITLEMENT ≠ SUPPORT

- “They do know about these issues, but it seems to take a very long time for action to happen. **In a very real way, it can prevent some students from progressing further.** I forget where the exact statement was recently, but the university made a statement about how finances should not be a barrier to study. I’d love to see some meaning behind those words. **I’ve proven myself capable at postgraduate study. I need a bit more, I need a lot more support, but even a little would help.** If they help me a little, I will get on with things, I will do much better, and then I will work my way up and out of my situation, as I should have proven by now.”
– Henry, 28 year-old MSc student (estranged, previously made homeless during UG degree, first generation)
- “Student hardship is an area where **there’s various funds available, but they’re segregated by categories which some are very hard to get into.**” – Henry, 28 year-old MSc student (estranged, previously made homeless, first generation)



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Sense of belonging

“So much of my life has been at the University of Strathclyde that it’s hard to say that it’s not a part of me.”

– Ben, 26 year-old MSc student

SENSE OF BELONGING

UNIVERSITY AFFINITY

- “I feel sheltered in a way, but that is nice, to feel like in an educational institution, to feel sheltered in that way, **there is a sense of belonging, a sense of safety here, security**, and I’m confident that when I do get my master’s degree and I do go out into the real world, that my experiences here will 100% help me, not just qualification-wise, but personally as well, like, individually with my personality and stuff. I do feel sheltered, but I don’t mean that in a negative way at all, I mean that in a very positive way. There is definitely a massive sense of security in being here.” – *Cameron, 22 year-old final year undergraduate (first generation)*
- “I just really like Glasgow and Strathclyde, so there is a real sense of belonging that I have here, even just coming through on the bus half an hour ago, I was pleased to look up and see the Strathclyde library that I’ve spent so many hours in in the past. **I plan on passing through these streets and these buildings as many times as I can in the future. I really love the place.**” – *Chris, 31 year-old final year undergraduate (first generation)*



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Physical and metaphorical spaces

“Those spaces can be a bit more difficult for mature students to enter, and feel like they belong” – Ellie, 32 year-old PhD student

PHYSICAL AND METAPHORICAL SPACES

ARCHITECTURAL IMPACT

- “I have my own space in the office, like I’ve got my own computer, I’ve got my own desk, a place where I can leave my stuff, so **I feel like you know I have a place, like a physical place in the university that’s mine**, which is great, and when I walk through the building I’ll see people that I know.” – *Ellie, 32 year-old PhD student*
- “If you look at any of the other buildings, they’re all nice and modern and new and done up. Livingstone Tower’s a bit of a tip. [...] Our offices are always a bit tatty. Our desks are a bit small, we’re all a little bit squished in. [...] I think that would be quite good, **a bit more investment in the physical environment**, especially in Livingstone Tower.” – *Martin, 28 year-old PhD student (first generation, estranged, care-experienced)*
- “I think the office staff in Lord Hope, especially on my floor, are really good at making you feel like a small child, like, ‘Who are you? Who are you here to see? **You’re not important enough to come in!** You wait there! Behind the glass door! You don’t have key-card entry.” – *Sarah, 27 year-old PhD student*

PHYSICAL AND METAPHORICAL SPACES

STUDENT UNION AS AN INACCESSIBLE SPACE

- “With the things that the student union puts on, and a lot of the clubs, people have been like, ‘Oh why don’t you join?’ and I’m like, ‘because there’s going to be a bunch of 18 year-olds there, and I’m going to have nothing in common with them? Like I’m 32, they’re on a completely different wavelength!’ [...] So you know, I think that sometimes **those spaces can be a bit more difficult for mature students to enter, and feel like they belong** in those spaces.” – *Ellie, 32 year-old PhD student*
- “I used to try going on one of the trips organised by the Union, but **I felt that I was a fish out of the water**, because they are mostly undergraduates or doing their masters, so they have their own kind of peers or groups to socialise with.” – *Mariam, 38 year-old PhD student (BME)*



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Disillusionment of an academic career

“It doesn’t matter how much passion you have for a subject, if it’s not permanent then it’s not viable, you know? It just isn’t viable as a career choice.”

– Cameron, 22 year-old undergrad student

PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIA

AN IMPOSSIBLE CAREER PATH

- “It’s an extremely difficult place to get into and it’s a lot of time and effort to put into something like a PhD and then you maybe get there, you maybe get your one year of teaching and then **you get no guarantees at the end of it.**” – Ben, 26 year-old PhD student
- “If you do want to go down the route of academia, **you’re sort of hung out to dry**, you have to do it yourself. **No-one’s going to help you there.** [...] And from what I’ve heard, when you finish your PhD, you’ve become a doctor, there’s no permanent jobs for you.” – Cameron, 22 year-old final year undergraduate
- “It is so hard to get into academia. **It is near impossible to get into academia. It is the most competitive field to get into, especially if you’re in social sciences.**” – Blanche, 22 year-old MSc student



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Importance of personal connections

“There are definitely some teaching staff that are role models, and certainly some that if I didn’t have them as a tutor or lecturer, I might not have gone on to master’s level.”

– Cameron, 22 year-old undergraduate student

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS (BEFORE)

HONESTY OF STAFF AND STUDENTS

- “Unless you ask what it’s going to be like, they don’t tell you what it’s going to be like. And I suppose they don’t want to put you off, cause obviously it’s going to be harder, but I feel like they could explain a bit more.” – Cameron, 22 year-old final year undergraduate student going into MSc (first generation)
- “Even like following the funded students on social media has really helped, because they give really honest descriptions of what is expected.” – Blanche, 22 year-old MSc student (first generation)
- “Better expectation building from the start of the year. Or even from before, if you’re gonna do undergrad to master’s. Have maybe some master’s students come in and be a bit more blunt about it.”
– Ben, 26 year-old MSc student (first generation)

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS (DURING)

SOCIAL ISOLATION OF POSTGRADUATE STUDY (ESPECIALLY PHD)

- “That kind of feeling of isolation with not being in a research team, so it really is just you and your work, kind of **isolated from other forms of support that you might have.**” - *Ellie, 32 year-old PhD student*
- “In my discipline, people are doing their research alone. So I don’t know that we communicate that much. [...] That’s one of the reasons I signed myself up to so many courses, **just to get myself some kind of socialisation, just to meet other people!**” - *Mariam, 38 year-old PhD student (BME)*
- “Because I’m 31, obviously, and a lot of the people on the course, they’re straight from undergrad, so maybe there’s just a disconnect. I mean, I’m 10 years older, I have my own place, I have a job, so I’m in a very different place, with considerations like older parents and a partner and all that kind of stuff. So **maybe we just didn’t click cause of that?**” - *Katherine, 31 year-old MSc student*

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS (BEYOND)

CAREER PATH PERCEIVED AS ACHIEVABLE THANKS TO REPRESENTATION & ROLE MODELS

- “It’s also been nice to get to know some of the early career lecturers because [...] when I talk to them, I actually can see like, okay well **maybe this is achievable for me, because your level doesn’t seem like a thousand levels above mine**. Whereas my primary supervisor, she’s a professor, so that seems so far beyond anything that I’m capable of at the moment.” - *Ellie, 32 year-old PhD student*
- “Obviously it can help someone from other countries that come and see someone that looks like them, and has a similar story from them, obviously to see someone and say, “Oh, okay, **I can be that one day. I know that I can because I’ve seen it and I know that I have the capability to do it.**” [...] I think it can only help, not only for people who come from outside, but also people who come from the UK as well, to open their eyes for the value that other people also bring.” - *Elena, 27 year-old PhD student*



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University as a place for personal growth

“As education does, it broadens your horizons. [...] I now have much broader interests and appreciations for a lot of different things that I didn’t have before.”

– Chris, 31 year-old undergraduate student

UNIVERSITY AS A PLACE FOR GROWTH

UNIVERSITY CHANGES YOUR WORLDVIEW

- “I think that what really has changed in me is the level of my knowledge and understanding, so, and **the lens that I see the world has changed**. [...] Actually I think I have kind of understood myself better, because back then [...] I was kind of lost with the, or frustrated with this inability to explain myself or my theoretical worldviews, but at this point, when I, you know, read this literature and I thought, it’s not just my case, I am not abnormal! There are so many great thinkers out there that think like me!” – *Mariam, 38 year-old PhD student (BME)*
- “Educationally I am very excited for [my master’s]. I’m just excited to learn about everything, and yeah, I feel like **it’ll be a defining year for me. It’ll be the year that I’ve sort of grown**, if you like, and then I feel like I will be able to finally enter full-time work, like a proper career and stuff” – *Cameron, 22 year-old undergraduate student (first generation)*

UNIVERSITY AS A PLACE FOR GROWTH

UNIVERSITY AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE LIFE PROSPECTS

- “Academia’s always been very empowering, because you know, I never came from the most privileged background, and to me, it’s always been like, **the further I take my academia, the more I’ll succeed and that’s my way out of quite a bad background.** So again, that’s always been my focus. If I can achieve in academia and succeed, then that has made my life well lived.” – *Martin, 28 year-old PhD student (care experienced, estranged, first generation)*
- “Occasionally you meet people, they’ll go, ‘Is that not down to your choice? Your financial planning?’ Well no, none of this. And yeah, what did I choose really? **I chose a better education to then improve my employability prospects.**” – *Henry, 28 year-old MSc student (estranged, previously made homeless during UG, first generation)*



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Financial barriers before, during & beyond university

“We know the student loan doesn't pay enough. They know the student loan doesn't pay enough. And you know the student loan doesn't pay enough.”

– Henry, 28 year-old MSc student

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

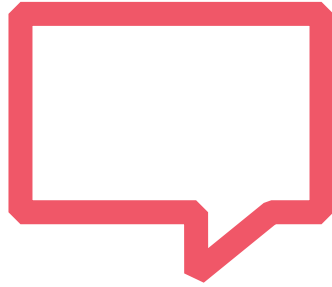
STRUGGLES WITH SELF-FUNDING

- “I received [a studentship], which covers my tuition fees but it’s not covering my living costs, so this might be **one of the insecurity points for international students, because of the visa restrictions**, because we are allowed to work only 20 hours per week and it’s very difficult to find a suitable job [...] so for me, I totally completely rely on my savings.” – *Stan, 30 year-old PhD student*
- “I feel like **there is a stigma for people who are self-funding**, and I’m not sure if it’s people that put a stigma on it, or if we put a stigma on ourselves. Because sometimes, and I was saying to him, like, sometimes you feel like you’re not good enough, because you’re not funded by someone else because someone invested in you, but because you decided you were going to do it.” – *Elena, 27 year-old PhD student*
- “**I just can’t justify spending that sort of money on continuing with it**. And there’s no support because I’ve already got a master’s, even though I paid for that myself, there’s no support or funding available. I can’t even take an educational loan out.” – *Diane, 55 year-old PGT student (choosing not to continue from certificate to MSc)*

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

FINANCIALLY-LIMITED PARTICIPATION

- “Everything came down to 4th year, so because I knew that, I didn’t go back to Edinburgh to work or anything, I just saved up over the summer and had a very lean diet throughout the year so I could have a very miserable 9 months just working. It paid off of course but it was a long year.” – *Chris, 31 year-old undergraduate student*
- “A lot of those emails for international students is more about like “let’s take a tour” and sometimes I don’t want to take a tour! Sometimes I want to stay in Glasgow, like what am I going to do? And a lot of those things, like if you’re an international student or from Europe or whatever, you’re struggling financially already, so you don’t have money to just go on those million tours.” – *Elena, 27 year-old PhD student*



MOVING FORWARD

QUICK WINS

WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO TO WIDEN ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY?

- First Generation Society
- Better information on applying to postgrad
 - Both online & in person (e.g., sessions for UG students on applying for PG)
- Create a sense of community from early on, even for distance learners
 - e.g., branded merchandise
- Honesty (e.g., from course leaders, from current/past students)

CONCLUSION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Postgraduate cohorts are far more diverse than at undergraduate level, and face different barriers
- Funding is important, but there are more than just financial barriers to postgraduate study
- First generation students face similar barriers to other WA groups, and yet are often not included in widening access initiatives
- Providing more avenues for information around postgraduate study (what to expect, how to apply, etc.) is critical for encouraging students to apply & succeed in PG
- Transition into PG is not to be treated as insignificant
- Don't default to SIMD (or perhaps POLAR)



Thank you for listening!
Questions?