

# **‘If no-one’s gone to university in your family, how are you meant to figure this stuff out?’: first-generation students’ journeys into postgraduate taught education in England**

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## **Introduction**

Postgraduate taught (PGT) education is increasingly prominent in the UK higher education (HE) landscape.<sup>1</sup> With the massification of undergraduate education, credential inflation has increased and the (graduate) labour market has become ever-more competitive and precarious (Waller et al., 2014; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017; Ingram et al., 2018). PGT is positioned as one response to the underlying vulnerability (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2016). In fact, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2019) show that UK Master’s enrolment in 2017/18 reached its highest number for several years (334,310, up from 299,110 in 2014/15), perhaps as a result of the introduction of student finance for postgraduate study. At present, this may be an effective strategy for students responding to economic insecurities. PGT currently has clear advantages, including access to professional careers, highly-skilled, ‘prestigious’ work, technical skills development, career progression and significant lifetime wage premiums (Ho et al., 2012; Kember et al., 2014; Morgan, 2014; D’aguiar and Harrison, 2015; Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Strike and Toyne, 2015; Bamber et al., 2017; McPherson et al., 2017; Wakeling et al., 2017: 1; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). It can also propel ‘softer’ outcomes, such as enhancing social networks, transferrable skills, self-confidence and passion for learning (De Boer et al., 2010; Wakeling, 2010; Ho et al., 2012; Kember et al., 2014; D’aguiar and Harrison, 2015; Bamber et al., 2017).

Whilst there has been reasonable interest on returns to PGT, the trajectories which lead to it have been significantly under-researched, particularly from a widening participation (WP) perspective. This gap in knowledge limits our understanding of who can ultimately access the benefits of PGT and what might facilitate, hamper or otherwise shape their journeys, as well as the continuities of inequity from undergraduate to PGT study. To contribute to this ongoing conversation, this chapter presents early insights from an ESRC-funded doctoral research project with current Master's students who were the part of the first generation in their family to enter HE.

## **Background context**

The Bologna Process (1999) was a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of HE qualifications. One part of this involved rationalising the 'second cycle' of tertiary education, establishing a clearer pathway through HE (D'aguiar and Harrison, 2015). Resultant expansion of PGT is evident in the UK: between 1994/95 and 2002/03 there was a 42 per cent rise in the number of students undertaking PGT study (Bowman, 2005) and numbers have continued to grow.

The HE inclusion literature – which overwhelmingly focuses on undergraduate study – has consistently demonstrated how the UK HE sector is beset with classed inequalities for students who do not possess a 'desirable' set of capitals or an embedded sense of the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1997, 2000). Gradations in the system remain striking (particularly within high-status institutions and courses). Namely, undergraduate students' experiences and trajectories are shaped by their socioeconomic positioning, affecting how likely they are to go to university in the first place, which degrees and institutions they access, their experiences whilst studying and their outcomes post-graduation (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2009; Boliver, 2011; Burke and Hayton, 2011; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Bathmaker et al., 2013).

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The limited, frequently statistical evidence on PGT participation of the last few years has begun to show that similar socioeconomic inequalities may extend to Level 7 provision.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the introduction of the postgraduate Master's loan, graduates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds were generally less likely to enter PGT, so cohorts were relatively advantaged (Wakeling, 2005; Wakeling, 2010; Morgan, 2014; Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Strike and Toyne, 2015; Wakeling et al., 2015; Wakeling et al., 2017; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). There are a number of complex dimensions to this. Higher first-degree attainment and attendance at high-status universities are associated with PGT progression (De Boer et al., 2010; Wakeling, 2010; D'aguilar and Harrison, 2015; Wakeling et al., 2015; Wakeling et al., 2017; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). This has significant equity implications, given that graduates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are underrepresented in highly-selective universities and are less likely to obtain first-class degrees (Zimdars, 2007; Boliver, 2011; Wakeling et al., 2017). There are also differences by discipline. More purportedly 'academic' subjects – which more commonly lead to Master's programmes – are taken up by more advantaged students (Wakeling, 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008; Wakeling, 2010; HEFCE, 2013; D'aguilar and Harrison, 2015).

Funding has also posed structural issues to PGT equity. Prior to 2016 (when state-backed loans were introduced), PGT funding was virtually non-existent outside of the stipends offered for registered professions such as social work and funded '1+3' doctoral programmes (McPherson et al., 2017; Wakeling et al., 2017; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). Employer sponsorship was also hard to come by. 'Investable' people typically held senior positions within the professions, and the courses which employers were willing to fund often aligned more closely with the needs of business than students' interests (Bowman, 2005; Ho et al., 2012). Historically, therefore, most students were self-funded, using earnings, the Personal Career Development Loan (PCDL), savings or family resources (Ho et al., 2012; Morgan, 2014; Morgan, 2015; Strike and Toyne, 2015; Wakeling et al., 2015; Wakeling et al., 2017).<sup>3</sup> As a result, PGT was (and may well continue to be) an advantaged space (Zimdars, 2007; Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). From 2016, the state-provided Master's loan was introduced, up to a maximum of £10,800 (Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Gov.

UK, n.d.). Although this may open up provision, authors have questioned how revolutionary these new loans are, given that they do not cover the full costs of PGT (necessitating additional subsidy), increase student debt (the perceptions of which are classed), may disincentivise employers from investing in PGT and might not keep up with fluctuations in fees (Boliver, 2013; Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Strike and Toyne, 2015; Wakeling et al., 2017). Indeed, since the introduction of the loan, fees have increased dramatically; the 2019/20 average for home students was estimated to be nearly £8000, compared to just under £6000 two years previously (Baker, 2019). This hides significant variation: lab-based courses are more costly than classroom-based programmes, some selective London universities charge higher fees and programmes such as MBAs are often significantly more expensive than other courses.

Whilst this small but insightful body of research provides a helpful framework for understanding high-level barriers to PGT participation, the literature as yet does not offer deep, qualitative insight into the lived experiences of people negotiating their way towards Master's programmes, which is where this research is situated.

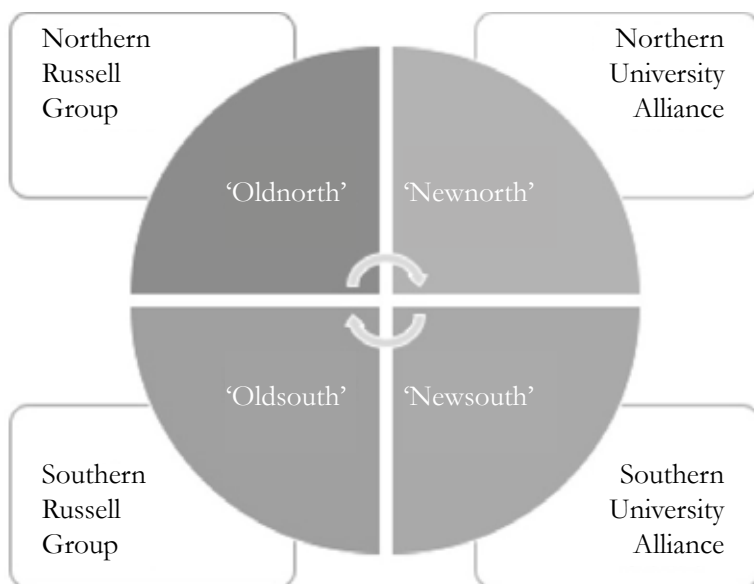
## **Methodology**

### **Site selection**

The literature on HE trajectories frequently demonstrates that there are two major factors which differentiate people's journeys: geographical location and institutional type. These were thus selected as the two dimensions behind site selection. The purpose of the design was to generate diversity amongst the elicited narratives, rather than directly compare locations or institutions. The final research design comprised two pairs of civic universities, one in the south of England and one in the north. Both geographies share an ex-industrial past, although the post-industrialisation economic response has been decidedly different. Each pair consisted of one Russell Group-affiliated university and one University Alliance-affiliated university (see Figure 1), named throughout this chapter as Oldnorth, Oldsouth, Newnorth and Newsouth. The literature demonstrates that there are clear differences between institutions regarding the socioeconomic profile of their students, the trajectories

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Figure 1: Site selection



people follow into them, and the nature and level of their WP practice (Crozier et al., 2008; Burke and Hayton, 2011; Harrison and Waller, 2017). More specifically, the literature suggests that students with high levels of valorised capitals are better-placed to trade on these advantages to enter more selective institutions, whilst students who do not have the same access to supposedly potent resources may place higher worth on local higher education institutions (HEIs), or institutions where they feel they 'belong' (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Crozier et al., 2008). Thus, there is generally a different student profile between paired institutions in the same city.

## **Participant selection and recruitment**

The study targeted UK-domiciled first-generation students, defined as being part of the first generation in one's immediate family to go to university (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Reay et al., 2010). Although this is an imperfect and flawed proxy for class or disadvantage, its potency lies in

being able to tap into a range of different lived experiences and potential barriers to HE. Moreover, the literature demonstrates that first-generation status is associated with lesser knowledge and understanding of HE (Reay et al., 2009; Birani and Lehmann, 2013; Hope, 2014), lower participation and attainment (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Harrison and Waller, 2010; Moore et al., 2013; Hope, 2014), higher attrition (Crozier et al., 2008), constrained choices and opportunities within and beyond HE (Ball et al., 2002; Harrison and Waller, 2010; Hawkins, 2017), issues with feeling a sense of belonging at university (Hope, 2014; Morgan, 2014) and lower PGT progression (Morgan, 2014; Strike and Toyne, 2015; Wakeling et al., 2017). Students were recruited via an open call, disseminated via university gatekeepers, course-level mailing lists, Facebook, Twitter, word-of-mouth and posters in social and study spaces.

A purposive sample of 41 students, none of whom were previously known to the researcher, was recruited to the study. A sample size of around 40 participants was deemed an appropriate size to observe diversity whilst not over-collecting and under-analysing the resultant data (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Squire, 2008; Harrison et al., 2018). Furthermore, narrative interviews are often highly complex and can last several hours, precluding a larger sample (Andrews, 2008). Further demographic details of participants can be seen in Table 1.

## **Data collection**

Data collection primarily involved life history biographical-narrative interviews and graphical timeline elicitation. The majority of interviews (34) were conducted face-to-face, but in order to be as inclusive as possible, telephone interviews were conducted with 7 participants who were not available to meet in person (such as those living in rural areas or those with demanding caring and/or work responsibilities). Interview lengths varied from 40 minutes to 2 hours, depending on how long participants were able to spare, with a mean length of 1 hour. A total of 40 hours of interview data was collected. Telephone interviews generally tended to be a little shorter due to the time pressures of this subset of participants.

Students were asked an open-ended question to narrate their journey into PGT. This provided the framework for loosely structured 'deep

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Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

		N	%
Institution	Oldnorth	14	34
	Newnorth	12	29
	Oldsouth	6	15
	Newsouth	9	22
Master's discipline	Social sciences (including applied)	28	68
	Arts/humanities	8	20
	Natural sciences	5	12
Mode of study	Full-time	18	44
	Part-time	23	56
Age range	18-24	10	24
	25-34	15	37
	35-44	6	15
	45-54	3	7
	55-64	1	2
	65+	2	5
	Not reported	4	10
Gender	Female	28	68
	Male	13	32
	Non-binary/other	0	0
Ethnicity	White	35	85
	Students of colour	3	7
	Not reported	3	7

dives' into different stories which made up their trajectory (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Questions were open and informal to elicit rich data and allow participants to highlight what matters to them, with prompts derived from the literature review and experiences shared (Russell Bernard, 1994; Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). Along with verbally narrating their stories, the researcher – with input from interviewees – constructed

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graphic timelines of their journey, mapping ‘the critical incidents (high and low moments), the supports and hindrances along the way, culminating at the point they are at now’ (Ashwin, 2015: 14). Timelines were a useful physical prompt during interviews, helping participants to map their journeys (Kolar et al., 2015), ‘relive’ and link past events (Gloster et al., 2013), tell ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories (Wengraf et al., 2002; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) and switch between verbal and creative expression (Bagnoli, 2009; Guenette and Marshall, 2009; Berends, 2011). In a pilot interview, a collaborative drawing approach with both the researcher and participant drawing was trialled which ended up taking around three hours, impractical and unethical for participants who faced multiple time pressures. The approach was thus adapted for the fieldwork itself, with the researcher predominantly constructing the timeline in front of the interviewee whilst they spoke, allowing for comment and adjustment as the conversation evolved. Although whole timelines cannot be presented here due to the need to maintain anonymity, Figure 2 presents a collage from a number of different people’s journeys to give a sense of the material object.

Figure 2: Collage of timeline excerpts





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Towards the end of the academic year, four two-hour workshops were held (one in each institution) to discuss the interview findings. Due to difficulties recruiting (resulting from summer holidays and dissertation pressures for many students) nine participants were able to attend across the four workshops. Participants listened to a presentation of overarching findings and had A3 printouts of a selection of thematically-organised verbatim quotations. These were used to prompt discussion of the verisimilitude of initial analysis and the implications of the findings. Workshops were guided by Riaño's (2016) principles for inclusive knowledge exchange: reciprocity, mutual learning, dialogic engagement, personal transformation and access to academic spaces.

## **Analysis**

Analysis utilised both inductive and deductive processes to categorise and condense themes (Fann, 1970; Kvale, 1996). To implement these, Squire's (2008: 44) iterative 'hermeneutic circle' approach was deployed. Deduction began with concepts from this study's analytical framework and the HE literature, prompting exploration of confirmatory and contrary cases across multiple close transcript readings (Harrison et al., 2018). Simultaneously, new themes, induced from these close transcript readings, were added to the framework. Once a final coding framework had been constructed, transcripts were coded via NVivo computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

## **Findings and discussion**

Analysis revealed three broad, cross-cutting themes in the data, each disrupting a dominant yet pernicious myth about the 'ideal' neoliberal student. The first is time, namely how trajectories unfold within, around and against time. Journeys are rarely simplistically linear, yet the normative, 'desirable' student lifecycle is often presented as an unhampered progression through a prescriptive set of phases of education and work. The second theme concerns space and place, in particular the connections between lived lives and spatial material and symbolic concerns. Whilst discourses of 'returns' suggest students should be globally (or at least nationally) mobile to maximise the benefits of HE, this negates the strong ties to home and community that really matter in our stories, as well as

structural barriers to mobility. The last theme is navigation of identity and belonging. The data challenge the notion that university makes everyone middle class – or at least comfortable with performing middle-classness – or ‘natural’ learners, instead showing the continuities of class distinction and complex relationships with education. Middle-classness here is theorised as a fuzzily-bounded concept which comprises economic positioning as well as the cultural and linguistic practices, values and perspectives typically seen as part of middle-class habitus which are highly valued by the dominant discourse (Reay et al., 2009; Burke and Hayton, 2011; Crozier and Reay, 2011).

### **PGT trajectories through time**

You don't just sign up for three years on this one straight path that gets you from A to B, but you sort of meander around it a little bit and maybe end up here or there.... (Georgina, Oldnorth)

No two trajectories shared during the research looked the same; each one had interruptions, diversions and complexity. However, interviewees consistently described their stories as ‘messed up’, ‘turbulent’, ‘odd’, ‘different’, ‘unique’ and smattered with ‘blips’ and ‘set-backs’. These were then compared to the imagined ‘typical’ trajectories of other mythologised students, characterised as linear, deliberate, obstacle-free and smooth. Comparing across institutional types suggests that the journeys of those at Oldnorth and Oldsouth were generally slightly more linear, although this was by no means a clear-cut division and every site represented a diverse range of different trajectories.

There were wider, structural factors which meant that distinct phases of life were compressed or extended in a plethora of different durations. Sometimes, these were practical, material issues. Mothers who were working and studying commented on the gendered double-bind they found themselves in, with the expectation to be both successful career women and nurturing mothers. One student recounted her experiences of an initial postgraduate qualification, which ultimately pushed her to take a career break to relieve the pressure:

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Two of my children were in school by that time [I was doing my undergraduate degree], but...then.... My younger one was in nursery as well, so sometimes it meant dropping him off at nursery, then going and doing a full day somewhere, then picking him up on the way back. It was hard, it was quite a challenge, to be honest, and it was sort of fitting in assignments as and when I could, because, as I say, my younger one, at the time, wasn't sleeping, was taking a long time to fall asleep, and then by the time he'd fallen asleep it was 10 o'clock, then I'd have to start doing work and.... Yeah, quite exhausting. (Emma, Newnorth)

Contrastingly, Laura had had to leave mainstream schooling for health reasons. For a number of years, she moved between different further education providers across three cities, trying to obtain enough qualifications to access A levels and, later, university. Managing this proved difficult:

I got unwell pretty much every month, like, I was on antibiotics.... Erm.... So, that made it harder, and that made me annoyed when I ended up having to drop out [...] I didn't manage it very well. I had jobs and lost jobs because I missed days and stuff like that [...] At one point I was getting really disheartened, because I was like, 'I'm never going to be able to do this'. (Laura, Oldnorth)

Alternatively, some students' journeys had changed direction due to sudden and unexpected critical moments in their journeys. Some were fortuitous, such as meeting the right person at the right time. For Maryam, this was meeting a lecturer who both represented her and encouraged her to progress to PGT study:

It got to third year, I was doing my dissertation and I had a lecturer [...] and she was Somali as well [...] It was only when I saw her I clicked, it clicked in my head, 'Maybe there's a space for me, to actually do this kind of thing'. That's why representation matters so much, because I could not see myself pursuing a career in academia whatsoever, and it.... I don't know what I would have done, honestly, if I hadn't seen her. Because she changed my mind

about education and further study, she completely changed it. It was like a turning point in my whole life. (Maryam, Newnorth)

For others, turning points were more misfortunate, including incidences of severe trauma or relationship breakdown which necessitated diversions or interruptions from predetermined pathways.

## **Space and place**

The second theme concerns students' geospatial mobilities and lived lives 'in place'. Challenging the myth of the mobile student-citizen of neoliberalism, the data suggest that students' trajectories are intrinsically situated in the places where they need (or want) to work, live and study, and that trajectories involve complex processes of constructing social spaces. There are two sides to spatial considerations. The first is material and the second is symbolic.

For a number of working students or those with caring responsibilities, the notion of undertaking a Master's degree anywhere other than a local university was out of the question. There was a gendered aspect to this, with women being particularly likely to comment on the balancing act of being present for their children and needing to find a workable solution:

That was my local university, and obviously I wasn't in a position – with having children – to be able to travel too far or to move somewhere else. And, to be honest, it's got a really good education reputation, among other universities, so, it wasn't a bad choice all round. And...I did look at the one that they offered at [another nearby university], but I thought, you know, getting to [the city]'s alright, but if they stick me in a placement the other side of [the county].... (Emma, Newnorth)

Another material constraint was the affordability of locations. A number of students studying at the two northern universities commented that they had been economically excluded from considering any PGT programmes further south due to the high level of rent and basic living expenses:

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Money's always the one that will keep me up north – moving down south would just tear into your living costs. (Anna, Newnorth)

Others commented on the need to be nearer to home in order to be able to afford to travel back to visit family or friends. This was more often linked to decisions about undergraduate study (when students were more likely to consider moving for a course), but fed into PGT choices as most people had stayed reasonably close to where they first studied:

I always had this idea that I'd go far away as possible [...] until I realised the cost of transport back home.... (Jonathan, Oldsouth)

Last was the cost of fees itself. A few students explained how the variation in fees geographically and institutionally had shaped their decision-making. The greater levels of bursary funding afforded by Russell Group universities was one such factor. For example, Tom explained how he decided to attend Oldnorth rather than an ex-1994 group university as Oldnorth was able to offer double the amount of grant. Additionally, a number of students explained that the uncapped nature of Master's fees meant they had been effectively priced out of some of the more selective central London universities, as the Master's loan was only enough to cover as little as 50 per cent of the fees in some cases. Combined with the financial pressures of living in or commuting to the capital this made the opportunity inaccessible:

I looked...because there aren't very many places that do public policy, erm, and a lot of the London universities do, but their fees are extortionate. I think I looked at [one Russell Group university], I think it was like £18,000. I really wanted to do it, they have like a gender department there, and that's what I had my heart set on doing. Um, but like, there was just absolutely no way that I could afford the fees and to live in London. (Olive, Oldnorth)

Not all considerations of space were so practical. There are clear symbolic and affective dimensions to place. For example, universities were characterised as specific geographically-located places but were imbued with particular meanings, values and ways of being. Initial impressions

were often formed prior to undergraduate study (for those who had Bachelor's degrees) and rarely changed later in life. Students could be dissuaded from considering institutions when they appeared elitist (a quality often attributed to selective or Russell Group universities):

I just did not fit in; I did not like it. I was sitting in one of the lectures and these people sitting next to me, their accents were so posh, and they had their Mum and their Dad with them, and I just had my Mum with me, not because my Dad didn't care but he just said, 'I don't know anything about it, you guys carry on' [...] I just thought, 'I don't fit in here, I don't like it'. (Christine, Newnorth)

Alternatively, feeling welcomed and included in an institution could spark a deep sense of affinity and subsequent loyalty – something more commonly attributed to newer, post-1992 institutions:

Everybody I saw and everybody I spoke to was...friendly, warm and passionate about their research, and every person, nothing was too much trouble and felt really welcoming, and what had been a... 'this might do' had gone to 'actually, I really want to do that, I really want to go and do that'. (Elaine, Newsouth)

However, it was not just institutions but the cities in which they were situated which held sway for interviewees. Feeling 'like home' was an important sensation in participants' decision-making, particularly for the familiarity and safety that this offered:

When I worked down in London, one person asked me, 'Do you think you could move down here?' and I was like, 'Nope'. It's not because...I went down there and met some really nice people [...] it's just that that's nowhere compared to home. (Steel, Newnorth)

Alternatively, moving to a new place could offer new, exciting opportunities. Jonathan decided to change institutions in his first year of undergraduate study because of the perceived lack of vibrancy in the town he initially was studying in:

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Everyone looked like they were having so much fun in these big places [...] [Where I first went to university] for instance didn't even have a Nando's! I'm not saying that that's like the deal breaker, but that shows there really wasn't too much there. Even [my hometown] had a Nando's! (Jonathan, Oldsouth)

## **Navigating identity and belonging**

The final cluster of findings concerns identity and belonging. Class distinction emerged clearly, despite not being mentioned in any recruitment materials or initial interview questions. Participants often drew on the language of class to interpret their experiences, sometimes in intersectional ways. For example, Maryam explained that she did not only see herself as working-class, but also needed to think about other dimensions of her identity in her HE decisions: 'my intersectionality, I'm Muslim, I'm a woman, I'm black [...] I have to be very cautious where I go'. Several participants explained that their sense of class distinction only became clear after entering university and this was particularly exacerbated for those students who had completed their undergraduate education in Russell Group institutions:

I didn't realise I was poor until I went to university. You don't feel poor when everyone comes from the same socioeconomic background you do. (Terry, Oldnorth)

This was often a source of disquiet which made participants feel deeply uncomfortable, and they particularly commented on how attending selective institutions at undergraduate level had made them feel isolated, embarrassed and unsure of their sense of belonging, a feeling that did not fully – or in some cases even partially – dissipate when progressing to PGT study:

The first year, I was just a bit embarrassed about being low-income [...] I spent the first year denying that that's what was going on, and it was trying to play catch-up. It was like, stupid things. I didn't know what certain things are, or just social customs, does that make sense? (Olive, Oldnorth)

It's just like...a weird implicit atmosphere when you don't feel welcome. [...] Nobody else was working class, everybody had money [...] I found it more jarring and more uncomfortable that there was nobody [...] representing me as a working-class person in my own hometown, in a university in my hometown. (Beth, Oldsouth)

Some interviewees thus felt the need to adopt particular classed performances to fit in with the expectations of how to 'be' within UK HE, particularly the perhaps more 'professional' or 'academic' stage of PGT study:

I want to maintain my identity, whilst renegotiating, actually, that feeling of belonging to university...it's basically, it feels like a balancing exercise, where you have to keep thinking, 'OK, is that important to me?' or 'Can I negotiate that and make a bit of change?' or 'Is that so important for my identity that I don't want to lose it?' (Maham, Newnorth)

However, learning how to perform the 'rules of the game' within HE could provoke ambivalence and discomfort when returning 'home'. Several interviewees recalled tense moments with extended family, neighbours or friends where they were judged negatively for having 'changed':

That whole sort of narrative that we have in society is that, 'Well, you've gone to university now, you've ascended in some way' [...] I think some of my family have a bit of a bee in their bonnet about people that go to university and how I'm 'one of them'. (Georgina, Oldnorth)

In the face of such complex and often fractious processes of navigating selfhood, participants lauded the importance of familial capital, whether that be work ethic, belief in education or love and support:

Mum always supported me, she said, 'It doesn't matter, if you need something, I'm going to go over everything and sacrifice myself'. She sacrificed herself a lot, because we had a lot of family problems



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[...] she always supported me because she wanted me to do well.  
(Homer, Newsouth)

However, not all participants had this strong backing, and they explained how they had found it deeply challenging when their immediate family questioned the value of education or were not able to offer support or guidance.

Class was not the only aspect of identity navigation in the journey to PGT, as interviewees were also negotiating their identity as a learner. A number of participants felt that they had a lifelong affinity with learning, describing themselves as 'geeks' or 'nerds' from an early age which had supported their move to Master's-level study. However, others had a trickier path. For example, students like Terry had periods of disillusionment with education:

I had quite a negative experience of doing my dissertation [...] I feel I was an ugly duckling for a long time through university, in terms of who I wanted to be. (Terry, Oldnorth)

These students spoke of either needing time to fall back in love with education, or particularly seminal experiences which changed their feelings:

I felt insular in my first degree, I stuck with the same group.... I wanted to experience what I didn't do before...and [studying abroad] was SO GOOD for me, I'm so much more confident, I'm not a wallflower anymore. And it made me realise I love education and I want to stay. (Frank, Newsouth)

## Conclusions

Findings presented in this chapter offer some early indications of insights from this doctoral research project. It was particularly striking that there is no 'typical' Master's student or trajectory into PGT study and that trajectories involve dynamic changes and many sites of struggle for those who were part of the first generation in their family to enter HE. In particular, trajectories are complex, rarely linear and can take any number of diversions. PGT education is a broad church; people come to it at any point in life and from many different starting points. Therefore, myths about a 'traditional' – or 'ideal' – student lifecycle are at best inaccurate,

and at worst misleading and distancing for students who do not feel they ‘fit’. Institutions and policymakers may wish to consider promoting the significant diversity of life stories and origins amongst their PGT communities to challenge some of these dominant misnomers.

Further, spatial concerns are paramount – there are material constraints ‘in place’ as well as legitimate emotional attachments to institutions and places of home which may trump any notion of maximising labour market returns on PGT education. This suggests that PGT recruitment activities of institutions may wish to maximise local connections, including fostering and maintaining strong links with third parties such as further, adult and community education providers as well as employers. Moreover, policymakers should consider ways to redress the significant geographical disparities in costs of living and study which shape people’s ability and means of engaging with PGT study. Furthermore, institutional and policy discourse which privileges mobility as an indicator of success should be roundly challenged.

Finally, Master’s students cannot be assumed to be either ‘HE experts’ with an easy relationship with education, or to have ‘become’ middle class or even comfortable with performing middle-classness. In line with the body of critical WP research, this suggests that there is still significant work to be done across the student lifecycle to make our institutions inclusive and supportive of students along their journey. In particular, attention should be (re)focused on to the structural dimensions of institutional and pedagogical practice, rather than replicating deficit models of ‘lacking’ students.

PGT policymaking has often focused on funding, information transmission and other instrumental concerns. Although economic-instrumental decision-making is one (small) part of people’s journeys – and being able to afford study is critical – this research emphasises that influence of structure, content, emotions, relationships and identity should not be underestimated or side-lined. Widening participation to PGT is not a panacea for social inequality within and beyond HE, but it remains one critical part of the puzzle alongside wider societal action for positive change. Overall, the research suggests that whilst the barriers

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to participation that have been well-researched at undergraduate level are not simply replicated at entry to PGT, there are clear continuities in the exclusions and tensions which (potential) PGT students face, demanding our continued focus.

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## Endnotes

1. Qualifications at Master's level which involve a series of taught modules and may include independent research as opposed to research degrees which are based on independent research without a taught element.
2. Level 7 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The RQF contains 8 levels, and Level 7 is the level equivalent to Master's-level study.
3. A bank loan of up to £10,000 where the state pays off interest payments during study, to be paid back from graduation, regardless of earnings or employment status.

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