

Understanding Student Motivations and Concerns in Entering Postgraduate Study: Initial Findings from an International Investigation

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The research forms part of the work towards *How to Get a Master's* (Claydon and Johnson, Open University Press, 2025).

There are expectation gaps between universities, different education systems, academics as individuals, and students: these gaps speak to issues and experiences around recruitment (inclusivity), admission (and therefore access) and also questions around equality of attainment potential.

Inclusivity, at PGT level, needs to be reframed not only in terms of traditional EDI parameters but also in terms of how *all* PGT is defined for both academic and professional needs. Thus, we ask today:

- 1) what motivates students' entry into PGT study?
- 2) what issues around recruitment, inclusivity, assessment and experience emerge as most significant for PGT students? We hypothesise that one area is in assessment but also expect to find that intercultural education communication needs bolstering more widely.
- 3) if it possible for PGT delivery to address EDI truly globally?
- 4) can assessment and learning models can be adapted to fit the purposes of the majority of PGT students, who study for employment outwith and not within higher education?

Introduction

- Current students who undertake PGT courses straight after UG, and those who come from countries with fewer HE opportunities, do it largely for career development. Those who have some gaps (and are based in the country of study) do it more for personal and career development. Those who do it for personal intellectual development are less stressed than those who do it for career development (FG1 and Int. 2, Int. 4.) but being actively motivated is important:
 - "positive friends usually gave me a lot of motivation to continue my [studies]" (Int. 1)
 - "striving to do something I could feel passionate about and would allow me to make good money, enough to live comfortably in London" (Survey)
- These comments echo Ahmad, Hassan and Al-Ahmedi (2017), who find that for older students (Kurdish international students studying abroad), they study to progress careers and seek strong academic contexts. Int. 4 noted that to progress to PhD study in Pakistan they would need to do a Pakistani MPhil but an international MA/MSc is equivalent. To date, survey respondents are, ironically, noting that problems exist in finding careers support advice (64%, although the return rate is currently low):
 - "I wanted to pursue a specific career [at University X]. I hope that through pursuing my postgraduate degree it puts me in a better position to enter this career". (Survey)
- The data (so far) also shows the shift in attitudes re students (Int. 2, Int. 5) since the early 1990s (prior to PGT Student Loans and significant fee rises) when "students [were] motivated mainly by non-pecuniary considerations, and that monetary benefits and price are not as critical factors as policy-makers appear to think." (Pratt, Hillier and Mace, 1999). Int. 7 (an academic at a UK international campus) noted:
 - "we get a lot of people who have not done well in their degrees; and they [are] actually looking to go back and redeem themselves."

Motivations for entering PGT Study

Admissions and Equality of Access

Whilst PGT study is growing globally and value is ascribed by the market (Wilkinson, 2006), the different approaches mean:

- PGT is still viewed as elite but normal (with 2,863,700 PGT students in China, 2020 (Wang, Wang & Zhu, 2022, 25% of all students); 706,995 in the UK (HEFCE 2021-22, also 25%) and 4,088,217 in India (AISHE, 2020-21 - 10% of all students) so PGT is more about career development and doing what graduates are expected to do in middle-class contexts (FG1). This may signal devaluation (Int. 5).
- Choices about where to apply are based upon ease of access and quality triangulated against the specific student context:
 - "I come from a country where terrorism is everyday" (Int. 4), "the political situation is very difficult" (Int. 3), "It was a practical decision" (Int. 5).
- Fees are counter to the principles of equality of access (Int. 5) and international students travelling to the West feel they are being used as cash-cows (NUS (UK), 2013-2022; Cantwell (USA), 2015; Higher Education Policy Institute (UK), 2021, MacroBusiness (Australia), 2023) whilst UK students currently protest at being used to buffer the cost of living crisis (NUS, 2023)
- International students often do not always understand what will be required of them for PGT courses - often tied to how they apply (Liu, 2010; FG1) unless they search for information themselves (Int. 3, Int. 4)
 - "they are really excited about going out to their studies [but] then [...] you have people who are really full of fear and all full of misunderstanding. They they don't know what to expect in a master's course" (Int. 7, academic)
 - "I wish I had known the teaching methodologies used while delivering module content as well as the expectations of the lecturers in terms of what they would like to see to prepare me ahead of time." (Survey)
- There is a mismatch between what academics expect and predict for majority PGT engagement and motivations and the reality based upon lack of understanding of contemporary student diversity on all levels:
 - "these people are coming from so many diverse regions, there is a difference between their undergraduate, maybe, but not ours" (Int. 7, academic).
- This can be argued to be setting students up for failure (Int. 2, Int. 4) but also reflects fears about recruitment not being led by quality:
 - "Sometimes the MA students who come may not necessarily have the proper foundation." (Int. 6, academic)



What issues around recruitment, inclusivity, assessment and experience emerge as most significant for PGT students?

- Expectations and agencies - misrepresenting courses to students and students to Universities (FG1)
- Students crossing from different cultural contexts find political differences problematic to navigate (University of Leicester, MCS Student EDI Survey, 2023).
- Perceptions of exclusion and failure to understand experience because of race and ethnicity (University of Nottingham Student Union EDI and Marginalised Groups Report, 2020, EHRC Report 2019).
- Students seek more consistency in assessment support (e.g. model answers to help adaptation; greater structure for dissertations) (Int. 4) and class scheduling for part-time work needs (Int. 4, Int. 5). This connects to study skills training:
 - "No-one tells you these things like what makes [the dissertation] different from an essay" (Int. 6, academic)
- Cultural expectations of PGT study vary widely. Participatory teaching is atypical in many countries non-exam-based assessment models are viewed fearfully by exam-based education graduates (FG1):
 - "I wish I had known the teaching methodologies used while delivering module content as well as the expectations of the lecturers in terms of what they would like to see to prepare me ahead of time." (Survey)
 - In some contexts (e.g. Nigeria), an unpredictable period of study, finding materials and the teaching modes themselves itself can be a challenge (Igun, 2010)
- **These are matters of intersectionality.**

Intersectionality and PGT Students

- Most work on EDI and Students is generalist and when certain groups are extracted, they are a) based on *prioritised* protected characteristics (linked to funding and policy both in universities and states) and b) largely relying on UG student data.
- For international students often policies (visas, funding, fees) feel stacked against them and implicitly racist, when the majority of PGT students are international and non-white:
 - “PhD funding and places discriminate against brown students” (UoL MCS Student EDI Survey, 2023)
 - EHRC 2019 Report on racial harassment in Universities: “found that around a quarter (24%) of ethnic minority students had experienced racial harassment [...] being most prevalent for Black and Asian students. 34% of this population reported being racially harassed by being excluded or ignored, leaving them feeling invisible.” (University of Nottingham Student Union, 2020: 9).
- Intersectionality though also speaks to other themes, for example: mature students (Int. 3, Int. 4), gender (Int. 1), sexuality (Int. 3), religion (past student conversation and Int.4) and disability (Int. 5):
 - “If a course has blended learning it’s going to attract more students“ (Int. 5)
- What these points exemplify is a failure in HEI systems to think about people fitting into more than one category (this is also mirrored in staff issues) and what the tensions are between these variables both internally to an HE and externally (e.g. UKVI).
- Thus, is it any wonder that students learn the regulations from each other because universities make them obscure: this leads to errors – e.g. phrases like "resit without residence" don't always get understood well.
 - "excruciating circumstances" (previous student conversation)
 - plain English vs. precision and searchability vs. conversational English teaching

- Moving across education systems can be difficult for a variety of reasons (FG1).
- There are global *principles* of equality, diversity and inclusivity but not global applications as the perceptions of these include variables such as: dominant political ideologies versus majority ethics; diversity being seen as a threat to social coherence but being embedded into cultural practice (and that being thought of as inclusive because people occupy as social role).
- Ainscow (2020) notes the role of the UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015 and Ainscow's 2017 follow-up *Guide* to aid delivery) as reflecting the UN principle that education is a human right (and therefore inclusion should be regardless of cultural biases) but this is primary and secondary education focused in remit.
- Regarding work practices, Rodrik (2017) asks if widening participation/inclusivity on a global level can damage the drive for equalities on a national level.
- In universities, there are still issues for staff (salaries, roles) and students (recruitment into disciplines) relating quite explicitly to gender (David, 2015; Claydon, 2018) and regulatory discrimination (by absence) is not uncommon (UG delivery tends to have clearer policy and regulatory frameworks re disability and faith practice recognition).

Is it possible for PGT delivery to address EDI truly globally?

Principles of Global EDI and Negotiated Spaces

If EDI is to be applied equally in global education, then HEIs need to function as negotiated, communal spaces seeking open interaction and clarity rather than gatekeeping education within specific national contexts:

- **Equality** = everyone has access to participate in the same experience and without being excluded for socio-ideological reasons.
 - What does this look like? Ensuring freedom of speech short of hate crime? Avoiding summative assessments too quickly for students in the process of adaptation? Increasing the levels of participation for students with economic but not academic challenges through reducing fees?
- **Diversity** = people of all kinds (educationally and all the protected characteristics) participate and are actively welcomed. Int. 3 and Int. 4 said they had feared racism but had not experienced it during their courses.
 - What does this resemble? Seeking to ensure that student and academic populations, programme design and curriculum content, speak to a wide range of topics, perspectives and contexts. Not just decolonising the curriculum be de-nationalising the context (unless the national is specifically the focus).
- **Inclusivity** = welcoming and respecting the contribution of all. Int. 2 and Int. 4 noted this was central to their experience.
 - How does this work? Creating opportunities for student voices to be heard and listened to in a way that goes beyond student reps (because students who volunteer for these roles tend to be more familiar with the study context). Where student representation does not exist (in some countries, Student Unions, especially politically 'neutral' ones, are not a thing) find mechanisms to facilitate these conversations.
- **Neutrality and Independence** = ensuring that students do not experience biases and that they *know* systems are established with fair practice and processes.
 - Why is this important? Students need to not learn within fear (e.g. MA students not writing about specific projects for fear of political judgement, perhaps leading to international students outside of repressive regimes being assured that their topics remain confidential). Reassurance is often needed that complaints and feedback will not impact upon marks (often perceived in terms of 'X being a hard marker, 'if I say this in my feedback will it impact upon marks', or this lecturer thinks 'this, so I must say that I agree').

Can assessment and learning models can be adapted to fit the purposes of the majority of PGT students, studying for employment outwith and not within higher education?

In short - not in all systems without considerable redesign of the common structures for master's programmes.

- Int. 2 and Int. 5 argue that more practical content, internships and real-world modelling are needed to encourage transferability
- Int. 4 observed that HEI environments need to work with contemporary student needs (e.g. staffing support on national holidays)
- Int. 5 reflected on the difference in success levels re practical content and essay-based assessment (re work versus academic experience and disability support inconsistencies across levels)
- Int. 7 discussed the potential for assessments modelled on workplace experiences without needing theoretical engagement and asks if overly structuring helps all students, advantages the most able or, ultimately, doesn't push those who are weaker far enough to be truly 'M level'.
- Problems with assignment composition translation (Int. 3 and Int. 4) and format (int. 5) from systems (international and level-based) are evident.
- The dissertation/final project model has variable expectations of supervision/mentoring, who defines the project content, the role of independent study – Int. 7 and previous student/staff conversations. The percentage of students who have done a solo project at length at UG level is much lower in some disciplines that it once was (in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences it's more like 10-20% of all M level students)

So, what do we do?

Perhaps more fundamental questions need to be asked for assessment and learning re language, the education system assumptions and other variables made by HEIs and academics.

- How do we explain how courses work in a clear, precise and internationally relevant way (e.g. what can be learned from 'searchability')?
- How do we position theory as relevant?
- How can we assess theoretical comprehension and engagement in non-traditional forms:
 - "[M]ore theoretical knowledge is better. For [...] physical systems, hands-on practice is good, but I'd like to learn what advanced design philosophy we have in the [...] system design" (Survey).

Yet, difference is the reason people like to move globally and across disciplines:

- "I am very honored to have the opportunity to complete my Master's studies in the UK, and I really enjoy the cultural atmosphere and study atmosphere here. I have experienced the traditional western education style (more freedom and choice, and the space for independent learning). It is very different from the Chinese exam-oriented education model" (Int. 1)
- The two most popular reasons for changing in the survey are: a) availability of course content and b) moving to another country.

Participation concerns: there is an implication from non-Western students that Western universities need to think more about learning traditions, how culture is embedded into teaching and assessment structures (e.g. state ideological frameworks) and how to teach students to adapt across them by engaging more informally outside of class and reassure that conversation is welcomed (FG and Int. 4).

Thus, the implication is that for assessment and learning to function across academic and employability needs, across boundaries of education systems and styles, flexibility and needed in thinking about how students achieve learning objectives which may lead to optional assignment structures that students can tailor for their own ambitions.

Findings

Biggest motivations: career progression or salary improvement dominate but personal development is a close second.

Biggest concerns: risk of failure, adapting to different universities or assessment models, employment problems faced after graduation.

EDI issues are a feature for PGT anxieties (both felt and experienced) but are variable context to context. International students often choose to travel because of EDI matters.

Assessment is difficult to match to all needs and students should be introduced to new assessment forms (as a pedagogical principle) but too much pressure is placed on new forms without the space for practice in many systems.

Assessment needs to engage more with the employability concerns (not in the sense of the Japanese model, with a semester just about supported job-hunting) via practical assignments, formative exercises and clear articulation of how assessment correlates with employment options... but not to the exclusion of the academic theoretical and critical content so that academic careers and high-level engagement are included. This balance is hard to achieve in one-year Master's programmes but it more successfully obtained in 1.5-3 year courses where there is more space for flexibility. Challenges are present where we see issues around equitable assessment and how quality is assured (and would need full mapping).

How do we explain the "hidden curriculum" for students coming from such a wide variety of educational and cultural backgrounds onto PGT programmes?

How do we demystify PGT processes, using plain English, whilst these explanations are still precise and searchable?

What are the affective factors in PGT experience? How much of a block are fears, anxieties and shame to student success?

How do we give the right advice at the right time to PGT students, particularly in large programmes, and given the short length of programmes?

How do we ensure that PGT programmes are negotiated, communal spaces?

Questions for Discussion

Call to Participate



<https://nottingham.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/experiences-of-postgraduate-masters-study>.

Are you (or anyone you know) potentially interested in participating and/or can you distribute the survey more widely to help us collect lots of data?

As PGT specialists would you be interested in being in a staff-centred focus group or being interviewed about your opinions?

Take a photo of this slide and follow the link or the QR code, and/or, jot your contact details on the sheet of paper at the front and we'll be in touch!



Thanks