

# SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT EDUCATION

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Research and analysis

## **Mature students: understanding progression to postgraduate study**

Evidence on UK-based mature students' progression into full-time and part-time postgraduate study.

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## Professional and personal motivations

*'Understanding mature entrants' transitions to postgraduate taught study'* (conducted 2013-14 for Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, published 2016)

# Research questions

- **How do first-generation students navigate their trajectories into taught Master's programmes in England?**
- **How do different aspects of their identities and life experiences shape these journeys?**
- NB: First-generation status  $\neq$  disadvantage or necessarily discerning proxy for WP activity, especially for PGT. **BUT!** It is a really helpful lens to look at a relative and plural inequality and helps to break down simplistic binaries about dis/advantage.

# Fieldwork

Four universities – two co-located pairs in the north and south of England.

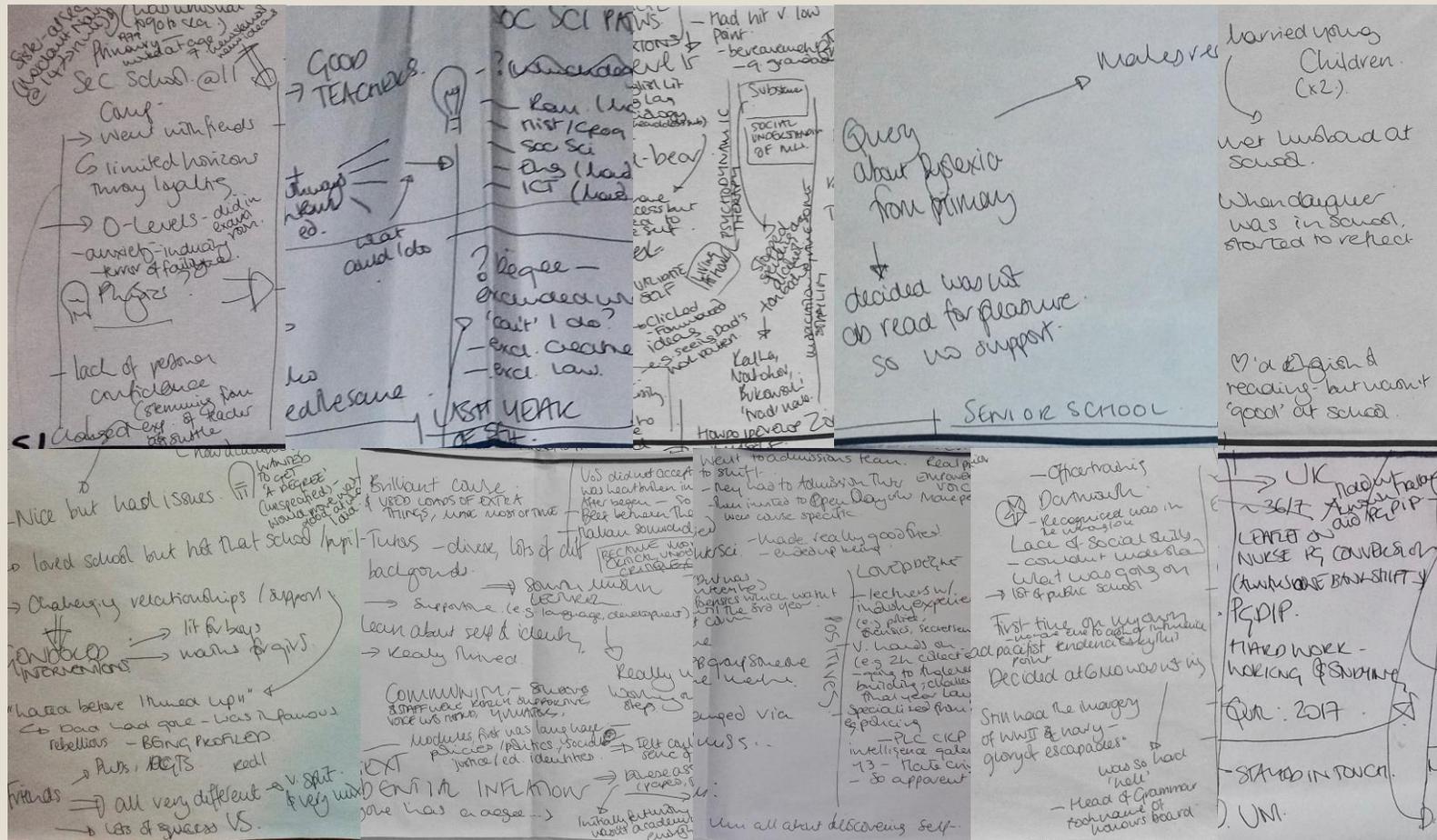
Geography and institutional 'status'\* as key dynamics in people's HE journeys

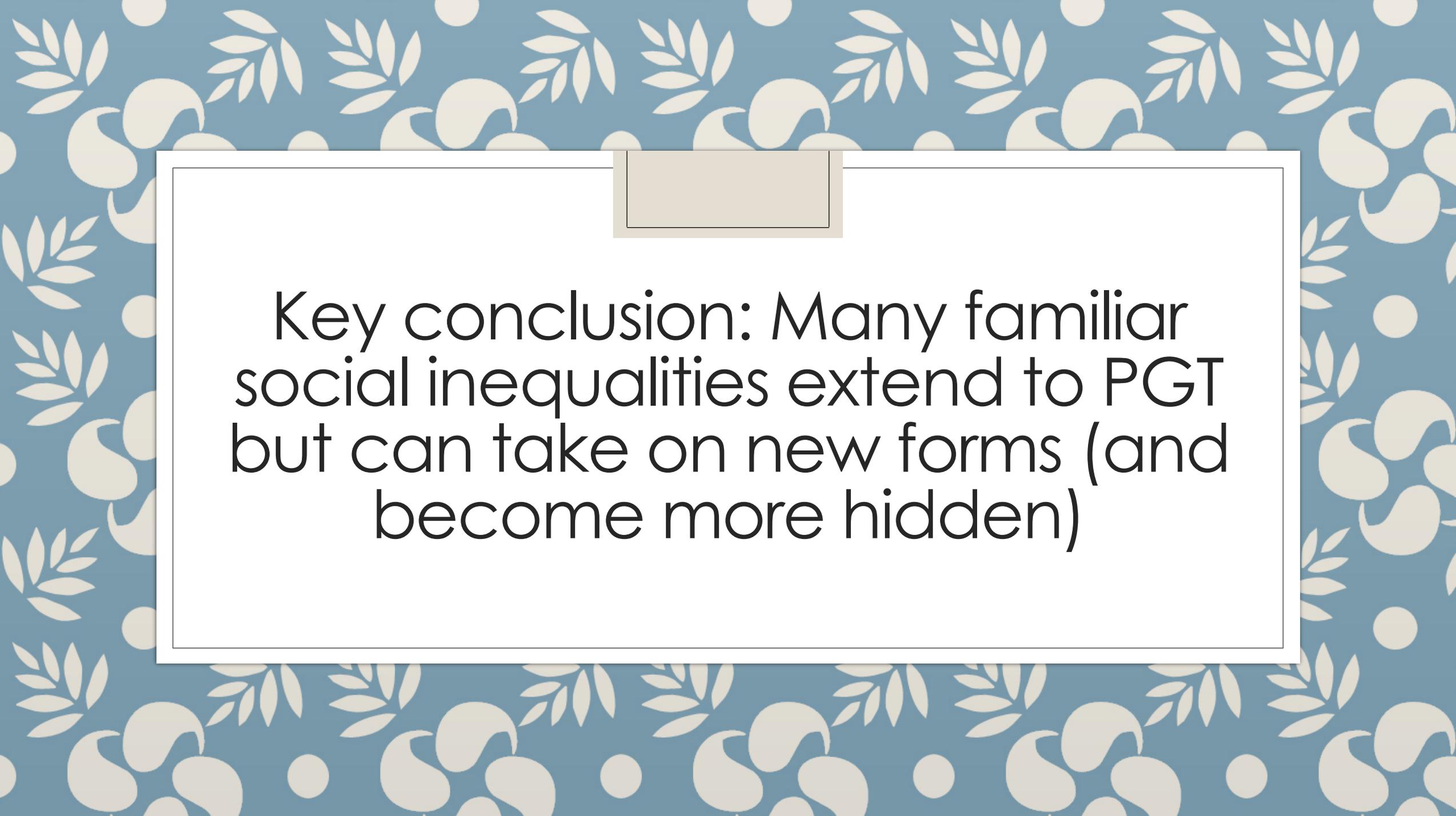
\*About stratification and segmentation not quality or value.

41 biographical-narrative interviews with current FGS Master's students.

← Graphical time-lining during interviews.

Four workshops after initial analysis to explore, build on, confirm and/or challenge findings (9 participants).





Key conclusion: Many familiar social inequalities extend to PGT but can take on new forms (and become more hidden)

# Affordability

*'I looked at [London-based Russell Group university], I think it was like £18,000 [for a Master's course]. 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

# Belonging

*'I found it more problematic being a working-class person at [Russell Group university] than being a woman in science [...] I found it more jarring and more uncomfortable that there was nobody there, representing me, as a working-class person in my own hometown, in a university in my hometown'*

Beth, Oldsouth

*'I never noticed I used to not say the difference between a "th" and an "f"... you know, "free hundred and firty free"... when a friend pointed it out, I got really self-conscious about my accent... I tried to hide my Essex accent'*

Frank, Oldsouth

# Role models and horizons for action

*'Third year, I was doing my dissertation and I had a lecturer [...] and she was [a hijabi Muslim woman of colour] 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 [...] 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

# Geographical (im)mobility

*'I'm with my girlfriend three years at this point, very happy, long-term renting, we've been living together for ages, we've got a cat, er... it's not really fair on her, and [...] the cat to uproot them, just on a whim, because this is something I want to do. So, it was a case of... "Where can I do one close by?"'*

Roger, Newnorth

*When you come to choose your Master's, you are a bit more constrained. More of your life is settled, you know where you want to be based, you've got family, friends and stuff like that that you can't just pick up and move, so I think that really constrains your choices to a certain extent'*

Anna, Newnorth

# The legacy of WP involvement

*'It was so patronising, the way they would talk at the parents, almost like... it was their fault that their kids were in this cohort [...] There was this woman, I can still see her [...] she would talk at my parents. My Dad was really upset, and I remember hearing them talk when they got back and hearing him say, "Are we stopping her? Is this our fault?" [...] I remember just sitting there and just thinking, "I don't want to do that, if you're upsetting my Dad, he's done nothing wrong but you're making him feel like he's done something wrong".'*

Christine, Newnorth

# Less visible non-linear trajectories

*'I had a chat with [my line manager], and I said, "Look, I want to look at academic stuff, and I'm thinking about doing a diploma in business continuity", and he sat me down, we had a chat, and he said, "Well, if you're willing to spent nine months and that amount of money on a diploma, you should consider doing a Master's degree", and I said, "Yes, that's fine, but I left school at 18 with not even A-Levels, I had four GCSEs, two since then, but I can't enter that route", and he said, "That's rubbish, you've got 20 years' experience, what you need to learn is how to write things in an academic way, how to research and think about things critically".'*

James, Newsouth

# Stepping stone to PGR?

*'Early December, I decided I was going to apply for a PhD [...] I saw the competition because I was going for a specific grant, I looked at the competition, and I remember when I looked at the competition [...] I was like, I've got no chance'*

Steel, Newnorth

*'I've always wanted to do a PhD. I've had a couple of interviews, but not got any further than the interview stage, and they were like, "You need some postgraduate research experience", and I was like, "Well, I've got a little bit, but if I do an MRes, I stand a better chance".*

Ethel, Newnorth

# Conclusions and implications

- **PGT needs to be decisively integrated into HE equity agendas**
  - But rather than replicating UG WP this needs new approaches which are attuned to the particularities of M-level study and students (e.g. embracing non-linear trajectories and recognising people's lives may be relatively more complicated)
- **Many of the dynamics which make PGT possible are 'hygiene factors'**
  - I.e. not motivators in and of themselves but things that make a huge difference when they're not present, including location and cost.
- **IAG is needed by unlikely to solve all the problems alone – findings point towards a need for bigger structural and cultural changes across the sector**
  - e.g. institutional practices and norms especially in 'high status' universities, diversity of cohorts and faculties, challenging deficit discourses, regulating fee levels.
- Further issue is around PGR – how do we approach PG IAG when we know how hard it is to get doctoral funding and move into academia/research?



THANK YOU!

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