

## **NEON Widening Participation in Postgraduate Study Working Group**

Minutes from the meeting of this group on **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2020**.

### **Present:**

Stephanie Lee (University of Manchester, Chair), Louise Banahene (University of Leeds), Claire Bowen (Cardiff University), Sue Edwards (Lancaster University), Kevin McMullen (Student Loans Company), Jackson Paterson (University of Bristol), Katherine Powlesland (University of Cambridge), Jo Thacker (University of Exeter), Jenn Coates (University of Leeds), Lawrence Cwerner (University of Leeds), Hannah Falvey (University of Leeds), Ali Jackson (University of Leeds), Felicity Wicks (University of Manchester), Rachel van Krimpen (University of Nottingham), Cherryl Jones (University of Warwick), Janice Simpson (University of York), Chloe Marshall (University of Leeds).

Joining remotely: Pamela Cox (University of Essex), Gina Yannitell Reinhardt (University of Essex), Nadia Pollini (University of Oxford), Maria-Anna Petrou (NEON), Martin Thompson (St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge), Julien Boast (SOAS, University of London).

### **1. Welcome and introductions**

### **2. Previous minutes and actions (Stephanie Lee)**

SL confirmed that all actions from the previous minutes had been taken.

- FW has created a Google Drive document for members to share best practice as well as current institutional practice in general.
- The [terms of reference document](#) has been updated, and is available on the Google Drive.
- One of the priorities of the Working Group is to consider and define the meaning of Widening Participation (WP) at PG level. Therefore, in each subsequent meeting, the group will share one to two examples of best practice, engage with stakeholder organisations and define a tangible outcome (such as defining the WP PG criteria).

### Noted

- The need for research into the careers where PG is needed for career entry was identified.
- The Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland have published a paper on [Access to postgraduate study](#). Key findings are that:
  - Representation of full time entrants from deprived areas is lower at postgraduate level than at first degree level
  - Differences in progression rates between students from the least and most deprived areas can be accounted for by differences in first degree outcomes, subject studied and institution attended

- Differences in leaver destinations between those from the least deprived areas and those from other areas are starker at postgraduate level than those observed at first degree level, and persist when subject studied, institution attended and qualification type are accounted for.

### **3. Defining and measuring WP at postgraduate level (Professor Pamela Cox and Dr Gina Yannitell Reinhardt)**

**ACTION 3.1:** Slides from PC and GYR's presentation to be circulated.

GYR and PC explained the work they have done on mapping what WP means across institutions at PGR level. The full report is available [here](#).

- The report compares the UG and PGR profiles within the SeNSS DTP (South East Network of Social Sciences Doctoral Training Partnership) HEI partner institutions with HESA data for social science disciplines, tracking applicants through the application process, in order to provide data to shape new WP definitions and make recommendations on how to improve access and participation in the sector more generally.
- Mapping WP is harder at PG level because of a lack of tracking from sources such as UCAS. This report focuses on creating a WP strategy for Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), considering how to promote more diversity in the applicant pool.

#### Representation of WP and BAME Students

- SeNSS universities are very diverse at UG level, however the data shows that students from WP and BAME backgrounds are not continuing on to PGR study.
- PC and GYR found that BAME applicants are not progressing through the applications stages to access PG study in the same way as other candidates. These students, and those with disabilities, are far more likely to complete UG study and then not continue to further study, while the progression of other underrepresented groups, such as female students and first-generation HE students are comparable for the level of drop.
- The proportion of BAME students accepted onto pathways is lower. However, if these students are given funding, they almost always take it up, though the funding given to BAME students from the government is markedly lower than for other students.
- Non-UK BAME students drop off in applications differently, both at pathway and mission stages. The presence of BAME international students can mask the lack of diversity among UK students at PG level, especially within PGR programmes.
- Intersectionality of applicant groups was also considered; female BAME students increase in proportion through the application process.
- The diversity data used for the report came from application forms and did not distinguish HESA application.

#### Actions Taken

- Institutions within SeNSS are now starting to develop WP strategies for PGT and PGR, although this is happening to various degrees at each partner institution

- Steps have been taken to broaden the SeNSS applicant pool. One step towards this has been to ring-fence some of the 1+3 awards for students without a master's degree already, to stop the disadvantage that third year UG students faced.
- A move to anonymise previous institution of study was ultimately not taken forward by SeNSS, however this could be a positive move to reduce bias against WP students.
- The group tried anonymising name and gender in the application process (this example was also shared as good practice in place in other institutions), however, it was concluded that this was breached at various points of the application process including in the references, and was found not to be useful for SeNSS institutions.

### Recommendations

- The report suggests that there is value in taking a stages-based approach to considering the decline in numbers of WP students applying at different points in the process.
- At the moment, funding is granted for students who demonstrate "excellence" however the meaning of "excellence" needs to be challenged and closely considered. Quality is seen as being demonstrated by high tariff, rather than taking into consideration potential. This is a barrier that should be further explored.
- Publicly-funded programmes must have fair-access. There is currently no benchmark and Research Councils are not obliged to have diversity plans.
- The quality control processes of DTPs could be reviewed, as sometimes it is just one academic who makes a decision on the basis of 'fit-to-programme'. This can create a tacit set of unspoken assumptions about appropriate or desirable candidates. This can be exclusionary, since it can lead to candidates perceived as more similar or more able to replicate past candidates being more successful.
- SeNSS HEIs are not resistant to diversity, however there is a gap in terms of historic best practice which can lead to it being a struggle to find a starting point.
- The report suggests that SeNSS partners need to develop their own approach around PG WP. If institutions define their priorities themselves, there is more likely to be institutional buy-in.
- There is a need for UG WP teams and PGR teams / Doctoral Colleges to work jointly to share best practice and discuss the approach.
- In order to enhance the fairness of the selection process, recruiters should be encouraged to undertake diversity training.
- This NEON Working Group should share information, monitoring applications and offer-making, as well as how their institutions are admitting and supporting students.
- More analysis needs to be done to decide the best way to utilise the data that is currently available, considering the appetite that exists to consider this. It is recommended that additional outreach around PGR also be undertaken.
- Working within a DTP provides leverage to have conversations around WP at PGT, and the joint approach can encourage buy in.

#### 4. Discussion

The following questions were posed by the Chair, and were subsequently discussed and fed back on.

- What data sets are relevant for your institution? Additional datasets? Qualitative research?
- Who else needs to be involved in the work? (Planning Office, Equality and Diversity, WP teams etc.?)
- Who needs to see the data and do you have linking pieces of work?

Points raised were as follows;

- It is worth starting with some very basic data sets, though different equality and diversity measures are relevant to different institutions. Previous institution is a factor that could be considered. It is also useful to look at gender, ethnicity and disability.
- However, this raises the question of whether research and data analysis should exclude some PGT groups, such as PGCE.
- Perhaps data sets relevant to this could be aligned with criteria used in scholarships for WP students because having data based on household income to provide a richer picture of the reality of disadvantage for students at PG level. Indeed, at this level, postcode-based data is not necessarily a relevant indicator of disadvantage.
- The qualitative elements of getting students to self-define pose some difficulties, especially if this data is collected through application forms. Perhaps the biggest question is over means-tested data because household income is a difficult measure for such a diverse cohort.
- It may be possible to obtain richer data for students progressing on to PG study within the same institution.
- Currently some institutions collect information on the application form about schools attended at 16 and 18 and POLAR for research purposes.
- There will be sector level and institution specific considerations, however the conversation needs to move forwards to putting some of these actions into place.
- External stakeholders to consider in relation to this work include the OfS, UKRI and the Sutton Trust.
- The Sutton Trust in particular are starting to take an interest in PG WP with a report on the topic due to be published.
- Internal stakeholders include Student Unions, Admissions, Careers, Doctoral Colleges, Alumni, Counselling and teams involved in the TEF submission

**ACTION 4.1:** Colleagues to share the criteria used (or planned to be used) within their institutions to the Google Drive to create a picture of the indicators or measures used to define WP at PG level.

## 5. What do we know about finance at postgraduate level? (Kevin McMullan)

**ACTION 5.1:** Slides from KM to be circulated.

KM presented the Student Loans Company's findings after four years of masters funding and 2 years of doctoral funding.

### Applications and History

- The Masters Loan was launched in 2016/17 for postgraduate students domiciled in England. It was the only statutory funding available in the UK.
- Engagement with the loans has plateaued slightly in the last few years.
- The Doctoral loan was then launched in 2018/19.
- These loans are different to a UG loan, with one block sum, rather than a tuition fee and maintenance loan. There is no grant for students with caring responsibilities at PG level.
- In 2016/17, there were 64,000 applicants for the Masters loan, while in the year to date there have been 93,000 (although this figure is likely to decrease over the year as ineligible candidates withdraw).
- Applicants are split into two groups: students who took out the full amount of the loan and students who took out a lower amount, such as the cost of tuition fees only.

### Platforms and Advertising

- 50% of loan applications are for one-year courses and a further 35% are for two-year courses.
- The Student Loans Company (SLC) uses a range of platforms to advertise, with varying results. It has been working with the Student Room, Think Postgrad and Find-a-Masters, as well as through other social media channels. KM also suggested that the SLC could promote PG loans to exiting UG students, to raise awareness of the funding options.
- The SLC places a great emphasis on the responsibilities of loan repayment. The two loans (UG and PG) will be paid concurrently, adding an additional 6% to the amount deducted from the students' salary. KM highlighted that two loans is the reality for many students (some of whom have taken out the Advance Learner Loan).
- Particularly debt-averse students are reluctant to take out the loan and the SLC would like to find out where they can promote the loan with clear information, in formats such as videos to support these students to make informed decisions.

### Q&A

Discussed:

- University funding departments would likely be a good place to advertise the PG loans, as UG students often seek advice here, however institutions are encouraged to work internally to locate the best place for this information to be stored and shared out to students.

- Funding remains a complex area, and students should be directed to the 'expert' within their institution to receive the most accurate and up to date information.
- Of particular relevance is sharing information to students on the different payment plans available so they can make an informed choice on the best option for them.
- The impact of integrated masters programmes on loan repayment, including the possibility of students losing their 'gift year' and questions of whether this new reality has affected the take up of integrated masters.

**ACTION 5.2:** SLC to provide data at the next meeting on the impact of time out between UG and PG study in relation to access to the masters loan

## **6. Case study- AGCAS focus on supporting WP students (Felicity Wicks)**

FW provided updates on behalf of Caroline Everson in relation to the AGCAS Social Mobility Group.

### Main Points

- Linking up the work of this group with the AGCAS Social Mobility Group, as well as with the AGCAS PGT and PGR groups. The terms of reference for all AGCAS groups are available on their webpages.
- Paul Wakefield has spoken at the PG group around the WP agenda.

**ACTION 6.1:** Chloe Marshall to circulate relevant tool kits and resources from the AGCAS group and to make chair of PGR group aware of this NEON group.

## **7. Date, time and venue of next meeting**

University of Warwick to host the next meeting – proposed for May, w/c 11/05 or 18/05

- This third meeting will hear from Nadia Pollini about the UNIQ+ programme at the University of Oxford.
- Warwick will investigate whether their Doctoral College can join to present an agenda point.
- Defining WP at PG level will remain on the agenda.

If colleagues have any ideas for future meeting topics over this academic year or would like to share best practice at their institutions, they should contact FW or JC.

**ACTION 7.1:** Date of next meeting to be confirmed by JC.

### Action Summary Table

Action Number	Action	Who	Deadline
3.1	Slides from PC and GYR's presentation to be circulated to members of the working group	JC	With minutes
4.1	Colleagues to share the capture criteria used within their institutions to the Google Drive to create a picture of the indicators or measures used to define WP at PG level.	ALL	Before next meeting (May 2020)
5.1	Slides from KM's presentation to be circulated to members of the working group	JC	With minutes
5.2	SLC to provide data on the gap between UG and PG study		Before/at next meeting (May 2020)
6.1	CM to circulate tool kits and resources from the AGCAS group and make the chair of the AGCAS PGR group aware of this NEON Working Group	CM	Before next meeting (May 2020)
7.1	Date of next meeting to be confirmed	JC/CJ	With minutes