‘Walking through fog’: social inequalities and the journey to postgraduate taught study in England

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ABSTRACT

Although postgraduate expansion swiftly followed the massification of undergraduate provision, with classed inequalities in access, postgraduate taught (PGT) education has rarely received the same level of scholarly attention as the critical mass of undergraduate research. To address this partial research lacuna, the paper traces 41 biographical narratives of first-generation students enrolled on taught Master’s programmes at four English universities, complemented by four dialogic analysis workshops. Theorising social inequalities as lived and navigated structure and process, the paper traces a continuity of familiar refrains of inequality from undergraduate to postgraduate study. However, it illustrates how these may be reformulations, rather than replications. Firstly, it discusses material and symbolic barriers to PGT affordability including high fee levels, familial histories of debt and religious beliefs. Secondly, it emphasises that geographical mobility may be impossible or undesirable for Master’s students due to relatively more ‘complicated’ lives, emplaced commitments, the subjectivity of social space and affective ties to place. Finally, it underscores that ‘fitting in’ still matters at PGT, as students may either divert from or feel uncomfortable in ‘high-status’ spaces where they feel they do not belong. In concluding, the paper argues the case for fully integrating PGT into HE equity agendas.

KEYWORDS

Postgraduate; M-level; PGT; widening participation; fair access; inequality

Introduction

Despite higher education (HE) massification, undergraduate degrees are frequently positioned as the gatekeeper of stable, well-paid work (Roth 2019). However, access to opportunities is increasingly precarious and competitive (Mignot and Gee 2020). In this context, there was a reasonably quick spill-over to the expansion of higher-level study, particularly taught Master’s programmes (Wakeling 2010). Whilst outcomes of PGT vary depending on social background, gender, discipline, prior study and institutional status (Britton et al. 2020), evidence points to a range of ‘hard’ labour market and wider social benefits (Kember, Ho, and Leung 2014; d’Aguir and Harrison 2015; Strike and Toyne 2015). Thus, since the turn of the millennium, postgraduate taught (PGT) study is increasingly positioned as ‘the new basis for distinction under conditions of mass HE’ (Bathmaker et al. 2016, 148).

However, this is more complex than it first appears. Although the most recent uplift in PGT entrants coincided with the introduction of the Master’s loan, it since plateaued, suggested that while the loan met some latent demand, additional barriers remain (Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020). Moreover, social class is associated with the overall likelihood of progression to PGT and the target qualification, where students from working-class backgrounds are significantly
underrepresented in taught Master’s compared to programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (Wakeling and Laurison 2017).

A rich literature has articulated lived experiences behind historic and persistent marginalisations in UK undergraduate education, with class-based inequalities proving particularly persistent (c.f. Reay et al. 2001; Ball et al. 2002; Crozier et al. 2008; Waller et al. 2014; Harrison and Waller 2018; Read, Burke, and Crozier 2020). This rich scholarship demonstrates the varied, complex ways in which students are enmeshed in material, epistemic and symbolic struggles for value (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Drivers include the neoliberalisation of student finance (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015); habitus disruption or hybridisation (Lehmann 2014); sectoral stratification (Crozier et al. 2008); deficit discourses (Webber 2014); exclusionary pedagogical practices (Haggis 2006) and geographical and regional inequalities (Milburn 2017). This highlights structural context(s) which students occupy and navigate spatially and temporally, informing the position of students and the resources they can draw on. The interplay between these dynamics has been richly articulated in the critical mass of undergraduate research and seminal work by Wakeling (2005, 2010) highlighting quantitative inequalities in PGT access. However, a partial research lacuna persists around how PGT entry inequalities are navigated ‘on the ground’ and how this connects to established knowledge about undergraduate provision. Accordingly, this research attends to micro-sociological dimensions and gaps in knowledge by asking:

(1) How do students navigate their trajectories into postgraduate taught (PGT) study?
(2) How do students’ subjectivities, resources and life experiences inform and shape their journeys and navigations of social inequalities?

Theorising social inequalities as structure and process

Theorising social inequalities is a slippery and complicated process (Franklin 2012). However, the interconnected diptych of social class literature and feminist Bourdieusian theory offers a productive discursive space. Social class literature highlights that inequalities are best understood as structure and process that are lived: people are navigating these forces rather than being defined by lack or deficit. As Maguire (2006) argues, there is an element of ‘plasticity’ to this: who we were, who we are and who we might become shift over time and become embedded in social, material and affective ways. However, power and friction are ever-present, as class is continually produced through a ‘long discursive struggle’ (Skeggs 2004, 3). Moreover, social class is not simply about economics but something more akin to a multidimensional, processual continuum (Gazeley and Dunne 2007).

Herein Bourdieu’s (1984, 1997) familiar schema is productive. In his framework, capitals are resources inscribed in objective/subjective structures which combine with the habitus (socialised subjectivity) in different fields to produce dialectical positionalities (i.e. practice) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Accordingly, (dis)advantage operates through the acquisition, contestation and deployment of resources, shifting and situated identities and the intransigence of structure. However, certain readings problematise an orthodox application of his work. In particular, his formation of capitals often focusses more on those possessed by subjects at the ‘top’ of the hierarchy and there is a deep scepticism of radical change.

Feminist readings offer fruitful ways forward. Such readings of habitus emphasise constrained agency and critical reflexivity in place of stasis (Adkins 2004; Leaney 2019) and their theorisation of a less tightly-bound relationship between habitus and field makes space for potentially conflictual subject positions to emerge (McNay 1999; Adkins 2002; McLeod 2005). Finally, Skeggs and Loveday’s (2012, 476) concept of ‘person-value’ further complements Bourdieu’s work by thinking about capitals ‘beyond an accrual-acquisition property model to include the excluded and their social values, action and affect’. This suggests how previously ignored factors like loyalty or love may be important ‘tools’ in people’s lifeworld navigations, regardless of their devaluation by the dominant symbolic.

This theoretical assemblage recognises that people live in segmented and powered landscapes with differential access to authoritative tools and strategies. Moreover, it attests that social
inequalities are powerful forces that are navigated, rather than labels which are applied to and define individuals and groups.

**Methodology**

Methods were guided by the study’s research questions and philosophical stance (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Inspired by feminist inquiry, its interpretivist paradigm resists causal relationships, privileging language and interactions as mediators of knowledge (Guba 1990). A qualitative approach was thus most appropriate, activated through subjective biographical-narrative interviews. Given research traditions systematically differ, including how they attend to robustness, the work avoided positivist values of validity (understood as ‘logically’ assessing whether observations correspond with the ‘objective’ world), reliability and generalisability (Kvale 1996). Instead, it favoured a schematic more aligned with feminist-poststructuralist inquiry: apparancy, verisimilitude (‘lifelikeness’) and transferability, addressed through a multivalent analysis strategy (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). This speaks against seeking universalities, whilst deferring to complete subjective relativism; it suggests what might be the case, rather than asserting what ‘is’ (Kvale 1996).

**Ethical considerations**

The research received ethical approval from the relevant University Ethics Committee on 10th May, 2018, addressing key principles of fully informed consent, management of emotional and physical risk and appropriate data handling. The research continued to be guided by two overarching principles. The first was Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) work on reflexivity, ‘ethics in practice’ and fieldwork dilemmas ‘in the moment’. This acknowledges institutional ethical governance cannot account for all eventualities, compelling us to be continually alert to our participants in every moment. The second was Kvale’s (1996) researcher as ‘traveller’, where the researcher–participant relationship is conceived as ‘wandering’ together, rather than ‘mining’ our participants for ‘valuable metal’ to be ‘purified’. Thus, the overarching ethic was to research with, rather than on.

**Site selection**

The undergraduate literature frequently suggests geography hampers and enables different undergraduate trajectories (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). Likewise, institutional type or ‘status’ is as, if not more, important, given the socially-segmented nature of the UK HE sector (Reay et al. 2001; Boliver 2013). Post-massification, throughout political rhetoric and neoliberal artifices such as league tables, there is an implicit differentiating hierarchy of perceived/imposed ‘value’. The system is partitioned between ‘Old’ (pre-1992) and ‘New’ (post-1992) universities, ‘the Russell Group and the rest’ (Boliver 2013, 345). Indeed, the ‘Russell Group’ – 24 selective research-intensive UK universities – is frequently used as ‘policy shorthand for selective, desirable [higher] education’ (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015, 3). Whilst reference to status is made throughout this paper, this reflects stratification rather than value or quality.

Integrating multiple geographies and institutions facilitated an exploration of geo-located resources and opportunities in the context of regional and institutional disparities. Moreover, given policy evidence, which suggests PGT students look closer to home, co-locating institutions allowed interrogation of participants comparing different local options (Pollard et al. 2016). Accordingly, fieldwork took place in four universities in England; one co-located pair in the north and one in the south, with each pair comprising one Russell Group and one University Alliance3 institution. Sites are referred to throughout as Newnorth, Oldnorth, Newsouth and Oldsouth.
Recruitment

Physical posters were displayed in the study and social spaces alongside social media posts and direct departmental and programme-level contacts to promote the call. Whilst some limited selection criteria were deployed (see below), convenience sampling was deemed most appropriate as probability approaches are rarely used in research of this nature which instead seeks ‘information rich’ cases (Harrison et al. 2018).

Participants

Although PGT is a broach church, taught Master’s were the focus as they comprise the largest element of provision, are eligible for state-backed loans and exhibit the most unequal patterns of access (Wakeling 2005). As most students transition to PGT following a break in education (Wakeling and Laurison 2017), current Master’s students were interviewed in order to capture a range of journeys.

In terms of (dis)advantage and class, no proxy is fool-proof (Harrison and McCaig 2015). However, first-generation status4 emerged as most productive. It is by no means an accurate predictor of disadvantage but can be used to interrogate intertwining relative (dis)advantage as it is associated with relevant dimensions such as familiarity with HE, participation rates, attrition, attainment and progression (Thomas and Quinn 2007; Birani and Lehmann 2013). Accordingly, it is used as a lens to get at layered inequalities, not a proxy for working-class subjectivity of background.

Forty-one participants took part in biographical-narrative interviews with inclusion criteria being institution, programme (taught Master’s), first-generation status and UK-domicile, internationalisation being beyond the scope of the research. Fourteen were studying at Oldnorth, 12 were studying at Newnorth, 6 were at Oldsouth and 9 were at Newsouth. Twenty-eight (68%) were in the Social Sciences, with a further eight (20%) in the Arts/Humanities. Twenty-three (56%) were studying part-time and 29 (71%) were working alongside their studies. Twenty-three (56%) were aged 25–34 with a further 10 aged 18–24, although participants up to their 70s were interviewed. Twenty-eight (68%) were female and 35 (85%) were white. Given the study’s feminist-poststructuralist theorisation of class and its disjunction with ‘objective’ or reified class metrics, the research did not impose a simplified measure of class as part of demographic profiling. Nonetheless, all except two (older) participants explicitly located themselves as either working-class or having working-class heritage during the course of their narratives.

Data collection

Narrative interviews traced participants’ story from a starting point of their choice (usually secondary education) up to entering their Master’s. A narrative approach was adopted as people live ‘storied’ lives and use ‘lifecourse imagery’ to make sense of the social (Richardson 1990; Riessman 1993). Experience narratives were sought as these are flexible about time and syntactical structure and encompass all meaningful stories, however, fragmentary (Patterson 2008; Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2008). Elicited narratives in this study do not, therefore, represent monolithic objectification but offer windows into possible experiences (Elliott 2005; Delamont and Jones 2012). Taking inspiration from Wengraf’s (2004) biographical-narrative interpretive method, interviews began with the following prompt:

I’d like you to talk me through your trajectory to your Master’s degree. Start wherever you feel is most important and touch on any moments, thoughts, decisions, people, places or incidents you think matter to your story. You can choose which moments you want to share, however big or small, and refer to any point in your life.

Having established an initial skeleton, unstructured interview then followed, responsive to each participant’s story. Alongside open probes (using the same terminology as participants), non-verbal
cues and echo responses helped participants elaborate in greater detail (Elliott 2005; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Simultaneously, graphic timelining was used where critical incidents, facilitators and obstacles were mapped out by hand (Ashwin 2015). As a physical prompt, they helped participants ‘relive’ past events and link them to recent happenings (Gloster et al. 2013) and tell ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Analysis

Pluralistic analysis combined abductive thematic and narrative approaches, following Richardson’s (2000, 934) crystallisation to reach a ‘deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic’ by making sense of data multiplicitously. This involved freewriting and iterative data encounters, aligning with Piercian abduction (Fann 1970). Initially, the HE literature offered initial codes, whilst new ideas emerged from multiple close readings, line-by-line and axial coding. Appropriate to the paradigm, coding was reflexive (Braun and Clarke 2006). This captured semantic codes, followed by closer interrogation to explore underlying, implicit latent codes, with these then developed into distinct, coherent and internally consistent themes, in part through the analysis workshops (see below). Simultaneously, narrative analysis read ‘down’ the data through longer stretches of stories, introducing troubled subjectivities and richness to enhance themes (Phoenix 2008).

To bolster apparency and verisimilitude, four dialogic analysis workshops were conducted in June and July 2018, following thematic analysis by the lead researcher. This proved effective; participants challenged biases and positioned interpretations, allowing for reformulation, whilst confirming other constructions. Busy schedules meant only nine self-selected to contribute, comprising two participants each in Newsouth, Newnorth and Oldsouth and three in Oldnorth. Each lasted between two to two and a half hours and was audio-recorded. Workshops are oriented to producing second-order (i.e. analytical) narratives, not new data (Elliott 2005). Thus, participants sense-checked emerging themes pinpointed saliency and helped shape recommendations. To instigate discussion, participants received a summary of each theme with A3 print outs of anonymised quotations. Workshops were guided by Riaño’s (2016) principles for inclusive knowledge exchange: reciprocity, mutual learning, dialogic engagement, personal transformation and access to academic spaces.

Findings

Bringing findings into conversation with the undergraduate literature highlights that familiar refrains extent to PGT. This paper articulates three particularly pressing ones: (in)affordability, (im)mobility and belonging. However, these do not manifest as direct replications from undergraduate study but instead are reformulated in the specificities of M-level study. Accordingly, this paper provides new insights into how these barriers may present in new ways, requiring adapted responses. Firstly, economic inequality is a known obstacle in undergraduate study, but this paper traces how the lack of fee regulation and differential student finance produces new precarities. Secondly, studying locally is often discussed in undergraduate widening participation (WP), but this paper articulates how stakeholders need to consider PGT lives as more ubiquitously emplaced. Finally, the paper articulates how (a feeling of) fitting in is persistently salient, yet with differential institutional funding regimes, geographical (im)mobilities and institutional specialisations, students may be less able to prioritise affective dimensions.

‘It’s still a financial struggle’: increasingly constricted landscapes of choice

In the modern individualised student finance epoch, money significantly constrains when and even if people are able to engage in study. However, PGT students may have relatively more committed
financial outgoings and there has historically been little economic support to facilitate engagement (Pollard et al. 2016). The Master’s loan is a new policy measure in this landscape. Understanding was entirely absent amongst older participants who often were under the misapprehension it was a bank loan. For younger participants, it was the only way to pay. This mirrors findings from the national evaluation which argued the scheme allowed people without independent funds to engage earlier than they would otherwise have done (Adams et al. 2019). However, despite the loans, some participants still suggested that the ‘right’ time to study was later in life to avoid reliance on (student) debt and heavily constricting one’s income. Alumni discounts (typically around 10%) were generally deemed insufficient to make much of a difference.

Such concerns are materially legitimate; simply being at university entails considerable costs (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Tett and Hamilton 2019). This is exacerbated for PGT where fees vary significantly and the loan is not enough to cover maintenance or living costs (and in some cases fees). In this landscape, participants’ narratives illustrated that far from operating as the proverbial ‘marketplace’, PGT ‘choices’ are heavily, inequitably constrained (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015). Once fee levels couple with the loan cap and regional differentiation, students are decisively excluded from particular spaces. As Olive explains, she was effectively barred from her desired course as it cost £7000 more than the maximum loan at the time, alongside the costs of living in or commuting to London:

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. But, like, there was just absolutely no way that I could afford the fees and to live in London. (Olive: Social Science student, Female, White, 18–24, Oldnorth)

Furthermore, since the Master’s loan was introduced, alternative means of funding study appeared to be dissipating. Participants frequently suggested that employer funding was only offered to senior managers undertaking MBAs. Moreover, the bursary provision was patchy. Social Science student Christopher highlighted how Russell Group universities offered bigger and greater numbers of bursaries, leading him to choose Oldnorth over a non-Russell Group research-intensive university after being offered double the grant value. This may produce inequitable opportunities for those reliant on bursaries. For example, Rosie – a younger Social Science student – explained that enrolling on a Master’s ‘hinged’ on receiving a scholarship; her loan could cover her fees but the only available (precarious) part-time work in the local area could not meet basic living costs.

Money is also symbolic, evident in habitus disruption about taking on (additional) student debt (Lehmann 2014). At Newnorth, Social Science student Maryam explained that the loan was the only way to fund her chosen programme but it produced ‘a real internal conflict […] because … it’s got interest ascribed to it. I feel guilty’. Inner turmoil and ‘heaviness’ came from her religious beliefs; Islam typically prohibits loans which accrue interest (riba), an issue affecting many Muslim students (Pollard et al. 2019). Similarly articulating situated affective resistance, a number of students discussed classed aversion to debt and the legacy of familial economic histories (Callender and Mason 2017). Rebecca discussed how prior experiences of financial precarity meant student debt still felt like debt and the loan was a number ‘hanging over’ her head.

I was worried about getting into debt, but I think that was coming from a family where there was not much money around. I’m still like it now, I can never get out of the mind-set. (Rebecca: Social Science student, Female, White, 25–34, Newnorth)

This complicated picture emphasises how PGT students are increasingly ‘struggling and competing for scarce and highly desirable resources’ in differentiated and hierarchical fields (Crozier et al. 2008, 172). Moreover, it underscores how the loan has not fixed even just financially related barriers (Mateos-González and Wakeling 2020).
‘It’s local, it’ll fit in around my job’: PGT students emplaced

As Bourdieu (2018) notes, space expresses social hierarchies and distances. Rather than being an inert object, it is imbued with meanings and values and thus is a situated and powered phenomenon (Farrugia 2018). Accordingly, participants were engaged in highly complex place-based navigations. Terry narrated his geographical explorations, beginning with material constraints of wanting to be close to family after a bereavement. However, he later introduces positionality to his interpretation – ‘if you’re poorer […] space is bigger’ – illustrating how physical space is subjectively interrogated (Fincham, McGuinness, and Murray 2010). Moreover, he brings sociality and the affective to space through reference to avoiding an ‘alien’ world, indicating the importance of ‘home-feel’ (hooks 2015).

I wanted to be close enough to my Mum as well [after a traumatic family event] […] I didn’t want to move too far away from home, but also, I didn’t have the confidence to want to move far away from home. So, I wanted to move to do something different beyond what [my hometown] was offering me, but I didn’t want to move to an alien world, where, you know, I couldn’t return to home if I needed to. So … And also, I’m wondering part of the reason I mention [my hometown] is that … the sort of class composition of the area. The way you experience space if you’re poorer rather than richer, space is bigger rather than smaller. So, on the basis of your financial income as well. Because I’m from a poorer economic background, Oldnorth’s further away from me, economically, than it is to someone of a richer background. (Terry: Social science student, Male, White, 25–34, Oldnorth)

Terry’s narrative points towards the ‘stickiness’ of place which intensified around PGT study compared to undergraduate transitions. Although neoliberal logic rewards geographical hypermobility (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018), not everyone is able or willing to access mobility so exalted by the dominant discourse due to material constraints and ‘pragmatically rational’ or affective navigations (Taylor 2012). Work, caring and managing a home make demands on our time and even with increased digitisation, these are generally embedded in place (Taylor, Snyder, and Lin 2020). This is particularly relevant for M-level students who may often have established and emplaced lifeworlds (Tobbell, O’Donnell, and Zammit 2010). Considering where participants were living in the immediately preceding years to PGT entry highlighted that most (N = 32, 78%) stayed local. They, therefore, only considered PGT courses within a commutable radius. Emplaced time savings were paramount, even down to the granularity of a closest bus or train station. This pulls against the dominant neoliberal understanding of students as agentic ‘choosers’ who strategically make decisions to maximise economic-instrumental gain. In the Newnorth workshop, Anna summed up the constraints:

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: Natural Science student, Female, White, 25–34, Newnorth)

Anna’s reflections were echoed by most participants. For Social Science student Teddy, PGT entry was shaped by sudden place-stasis after his father became ill and required long-term care. Plans to enter a London-based graduate scheme were shelved. Although he worried about becoming ‘stuck’, he was unwilling to leave his mother as sole carer, leading him to apply for a Master’s at Oldnorth. This narrative was fairly anomalous; familiar gendered divisions of caregiving were more prominent, with many women speaking about how loved ones and children located them (Kruijswijk, Da Roit, and Hoogenboom 2015). However, this was not necessarily pejorative. Maintaining nurturing connections was frequently prioritised over ‘better’ – neoliberal economic-instrumental – outcomes that might be obtained from attending an institution further away. For example, Jess at Newsouth recently returned to the UK with two teenage children. For her ‘the key thing was that it had to be local’, as her priority was ‘to settle the kids into a new culture’. However, engaging in PGT was also a way of ‘role modelling to my kids’, by visibly challenging herself whilst simultaneously being physically present. These navigations are indicative of Skeggs and Loveday’s (2012) person-values as, even if devalued by the dominant discourse, these feelings and bonds are powerful resources to
navigate life. As Social Science student Frank at Oldsouth noted, ‘what’s so wrong about [prioritising] someone that you know will be there for you, provide support for you, look after you?’ Other dynamics proved more unsettling. Maryam explained that the intersectional subjectivity she occupies – ‘I’m Muslim, I’m a woman, I’m Black’ – meant avoiding spaces where she had previously experienced Islamophobia or misogynoir (Crenshaw 1991).

Drawing insights together indicates that although mobility may be positioned in the neoliberal symbolic as a way to better life chances, the ability and desire to relocate are not evenly distributed. Instead, space is classed, gendered, raced and otherwise positioned and thus navigated (Taylor 2012; hooks 2015). Moreover, there are entirely valid reasons for prioritising safety and ‘home-feel’ whilst otherwise being launched into an unfamiliar milieu (Crozier et al. 2008).

‘I haven’t suddenly sprouted tweed!’: PGT students within-without in the neoliberal academy

Universities are far from a transactional service; they are lived in so are embodied, affective and distinctly social spaces and communities. This means belonging matters, as feeling ‘ill-fitting’ can be a profound source of habitus reformation or recalculation (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Read, Burke, and Crozier 2020). However, experiences do not play out evenly, reflecting the deep segmentation of the UK HE landscape (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003; Waller, Bovill, and Pitt 2011).

‘High-status’ institutions often embody a visible absence of diverse ways of being, producing a reified ‘typified’ student trope (Burke and McManus 2011). Participants portrayals of such universities reflected this, with descriptors including ‘posh’, ‘elite’, ‘rich’, ‘snobby’, ‘impersonal’ and quite ‘Rupert [...] all, like, polo shirts’. Reflective of research which indicates that other institutions may be more diverse and perceived as more inclusive, antithetical descriptors were offered for post-1992 and FE providers (Burke 2000; Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003). This included being ‘down-to-earth’, ‘inviting’, ‘friendly’, ‘chatty’, ‘warm’ and ‘passionate’.

What makes this so relevant to PGT is that these views persisted across the lifecourse. Initial perceptions – an open day, a school assembly – could cast unshakeable shadows years or decades later. Social Science student Homer recalled a summer school at one of the most selective institutions almost 15 years prior. This established his long-standing view that a ‘high-status’ university ‘just wasn’t my culture’, discounting them from any subsequent thinking. Similarly, Anna discussed that she ‘just like[d] being at old polys’ because of how she felt during her first forays into HE, regardless if they are denied the same research funding or equipment as a more affluent university. Whilst other studies have discussed the immediate impressions of outreach on HE enrolment, this research indicates how feelings may be far longer-lasting (Gazeley 2018).

Indeed, some continued to make decisions at PGT about where they feel they would ‘fit’ (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Ingram, Abrahams, and Bathmaker 2018). However, this became complicated because of the specificities of M-level study. Students were navigating a range of parallel coercions like cost, location, programme specialisms, bursaries and institutional ‘reputation’. This is particularly exemplified through Beth’s narrative. Having completed her undergraduate degree at her local post-1992, she undertook her (first) Master’s at the local Russell Group. For the first time, she encountered ‘a lot of, like, class-related issues’ and ‘a weird implicit atmosphere where you don’t feel welcome’ and was shocked to find no staff or students who, like her, were from the local area with a local accent. Her story indicates an uneasy disjunction between occupying a space and feeling comfortable (Ahmed 2012):

Nobody else was working class, everybody had money. There was nobody representing me as an academic at all, and it was the case that I found it more problematic being a working-class person at [Russell Group university] than being a woman in science, even though there were literally like two women in the department. 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: Natural Science student, Female, White, 25–34, Oldsouth)
Beth was, subsequently, very wary when she sought a second Master’s to pursue a PhD. After years of unsuccessful applications, she reluctantly accepted a funded offer at Oldsouth, full of reticence that this ‘last resort’ would be a repeat of her prior experience. This came to fruition – she (and most Oldsouth interviewees) discussed how their ‘regional’ or ‘working-class’ accents were frequently mentioned or mocked by those around them and Beth felt isolated as a working-class woman. Her narrative shows how the fears and exclusions born of elitist institutional habitus continue to play out in the PGT space. This features differently to undergraduate transitions, partly as PGT students mostly have personal HE experience, but also because PGT study is more bound up in less generous student finance landscapes and more limited landscapes of choice (Reay et al. 2001).

**Discussion and implications for policy and practice**

Financially, the capped Master’s loan coupled with unregulated fees has effectively priced out non-affluent applicants from certain programmes or institutions. This makes an almost-unarguable case to regulate providers that accept loan-funded students and underscores the need to re-instate and/or extend institutional bursaries for underrepresented students. Simultaneously there are sociocultural and affective inequalities connected to neoliberalisation of student finance. Students felt coerced to take out loans regardless of legitimate aversion to debt whether because of familial history, classed positioning (Callender and Mason 2017) or religious beliefs (Pollard et al. 2019). This connects with wider conversations about the ethic of neoliberal student finance in the context of the public good of HE, alongside questions about retreating employer contributions given they benefit from higher-level skills with increasingly small investment.

Spatially, PGT entry is balanced against a range of other emplaced pressures including work, caregiving and relationships, restricting potential applicants’ ability and willingness to relocate (Taylor, Snyder, and Lin 2020). However, narratives of care and love which interviewees invested in the place(s) they called home offer a complicating story to the dominant discourse’s apparently desirable ‘globally-mobile’ citizen (Farrugia 2018). Firstly, this suggests devolution agendas should consider HE as an integral part and universities could integrate PGT and their civic missions more decisively. Secondly, serious questions must be posed of research funders, employers and institutions who perceive mobility to be a marker of motivation or value as place is sticky and regional and municipal opportunities are not evenly distributed.

Finally, how people feel within and at universities continues to be salient for PGT. For some, long-held beliefs about the exclusionary habitus of ‘high status’ institutions preclude considering them (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013), whilst others who had fewer ‘choices’ felt discomfort in occupying a place where they did not feel welcome (Ahmed 2012). The multifarious implications of this are layered and complex. In part, institutions should be challenged to move away from ‘one size fits all’ pedagogies and provision which can be affectively and materially exclusionary. Moreover, questions should continue to be posed over whether it is ever possible to subscribe to a discourse of protecting ‘cohort quality’ without being elitist. Further, increasing pressure should be applied on universities failing to demonstrate tangible equity across the student lifecycle. However, responsibility does not lie within the sector alone, as employers and wider society are complicit in maintaining the myth of the ‘good’ university and all that comes with this.

**Contextualising the study and future research tangents**

This study marks one point in a constellation of avenues of inquiry for postgraduate education, offering a number of possibilities for further research. Firstly, whilst the narrative data provides rich memories, histories and stories, more longitudinal research could trace how these dynamics unfurl over the lifecourse, rather than looking solely at a cross-sectional moment in time. Secondly, the study was limited to universities, a legally-enshrined title which only makes up part of the sector.
Exploring whether similar or different navigations are present, within alternative HE provision – private providers, for example – would be very worthwhile given policy rhetoric about diversification. Thirdly, participants here are those that ‘made it’. Whilst some inferences can be drawn, future research should pay particular attention to prospective students for whom the barriers proved impassable.

**Conclusions**

I’m reminded of a game I used to play with my sisters … […] if you don’t know what the aim is, it's a bit like walking through fog, you don’t know what’s happening. Not knowing […] what’s behind that fog is really frightening […] I feel like that’s really scary, and also knowing that you’ve got that baggage you have to pull behind you […] do I have to walk, or do I have to crawl? Can I run? All this stuff. (Maham: Social Science student, Female, Mixed Race, 25–34, Newnorth)

When I asked one participant, Maham, to tell me what it felt like to navigate the journey the PGT, the story and emotions she shared – detailed partially in the above quotation – indicated it can be a complex, fraught and perturbing road, akin to ‘walking through fog’. Whilst prior research has established that capitals and (dis)advantage become entrenched throughout school and undergraduate study, this research demonstrates ongoing continuity in the social inequalities that people navigate up to and including PGT study (Harrison 2018; Pemberton and Humphris 2018). Refrains may be familiar, but the way they play out is situated and worth of deeper reflection. Accordingly, this research occupies a productive vantage point which supports Tobbell, O’Donnell, and Zammit’s (2010) argument that we cannot assume potential Master’s applicants are ‘HE experts’ by dint of their limited exposure, if any, to the sector.

There is a clear sectoral case for decisively integrating PGT study into equity and social justice agendas (Wakeling 2005; Tobbell, O’Donnell, and Zammit 2010; Wakeling and Laurison 2017). The extension of inequalities begs questions of the legacy of WP itself. The complex navigations which participants were enmeshed in suggest that historic approaches have been unsuccessful in unsettling these issues in the long-term, whilst recognising that WP is only one area of HE practice, and the HE itself sits within an unequal society. Nonetheless, the existence of these inequalities means HE institutions and policymakers cannot leave (potential) Master’s students to navigate the terrain with only a loan in their arsenal and limited (if any) punitive frameworks for institutions with inequitable postgraduate access. As Burke (2002), Waller et al. (2015) and Harrison and Hatt (2010) have argued, if life chances continue to offer inequitable opportunities and outcomes, there is a need for wider sectoral, structural and societal change, even if our influence is limited and progress may be slow.

**Notes**

1. A postgraduate course to train graduates to become teachers, most often through university-led training with local school placements.
2. Pre-1992 universities were those with university status prior to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Post-1992 university are former polytechnics and other providers that obtained university status after this point.
3. University Alliance is an association of large to medium technical and professional UK universities.
4. Defined here as someone being part of their first generation in their family to attend university.

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