

RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON PROGRESSION TO PSYCHOLOGY & COUNSELLING POSTGRADUATE STUDY

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on progression to postgraduate (PG) study which took place between 22 February and 8 March 2021 on the Psychology & Counselling Board of Studies Student Consultative Forum. The summary of student feedback is at <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=24223>.

A student consultation forum was conducted as part of a wider scholarship programme entitled 'Identifying future directions: where do final year psychology and counselling students find information about postgraduate study?' The forum aimed to capture the student voice in understanding the factors that influence progression to postgraduate study either at the OU or elsewhere.

The forum was for all DE300 students and recent (2-year graduates) from the following awards Q07/B07/Z07, Q82, Q83, Q84. One hundred and twenty-two (minimum) students from an eligible pool of 4072 engaged with some aspect of the forum either through reading the posts, completing the poll, and/or posting on the forum. There were 87 student posts on the discussion boards with students tending to contribute to one specific thread depending on their postgraduate study plans. Threads from the original consultation have been consolidated where appropriate to reduce repetition.

A number of key themes emerged within each thread. For those students who planned to progress to postgraduate study, the principle motivation was career development and the area of specialism was often informed by specific content covered in the undergraduate programme which had sparked a personal interest. Tutors were also identified as playing an important role in encouraging the decision to pursue postgraduate study.

Students who did not plan to engage in postgraduate study cited achievement of career ambitions through completion of their undergraduate degree and/or lack of time or funding as the determining factors. Interestingly, these students did indicate that they may be interested in 'bite-size' learning opportunities where these were directly related and applicable to the work role.

The final group of students indicated they were undecided about engaging in future postgraduate study. This indecision resulted from not having a full understanding of the options available, perceived lack of support in planning a route to a particular professional outcome and a lack of time and reserves to investigate the options.

Actions are identified in relation to each of these areas. The potential to support 'undecided' students towards active decision making earlier in their programme of study will be explored in the next part of this scholarship project.

Moderators: Mary Dobson and Rhiannon Edwards (Lecturer & Staff Tutors – Psychology and Counselling)

OU Students Association representative: Billy Docherty

FULL RESPONSE

Poll

At the outset of the consultation, students were asked three key questions regarding their plans concerning postgraduate study the result of which are illustrated below:

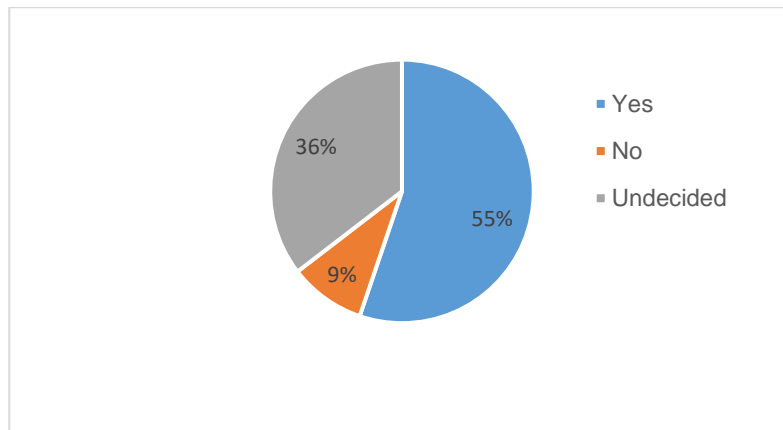


Figure 1. Student responses to Question 1 of the Poll relating to intentions to engage with postgraduate study (N=96).

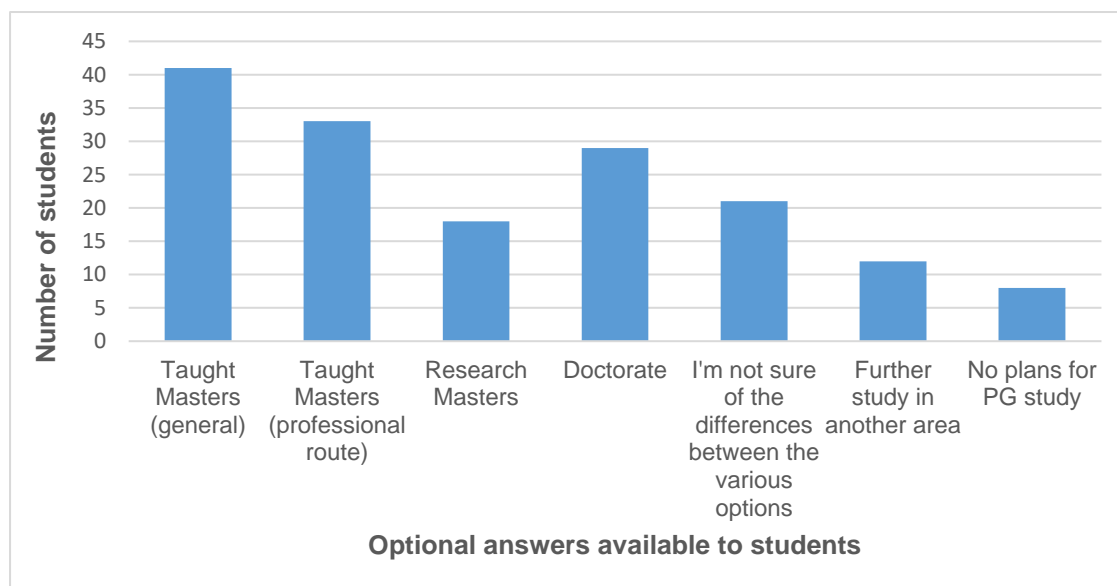


Figure 2. Student responses to Question 2 of the Poll relating to which type of postgraduate programme the student is interested in.

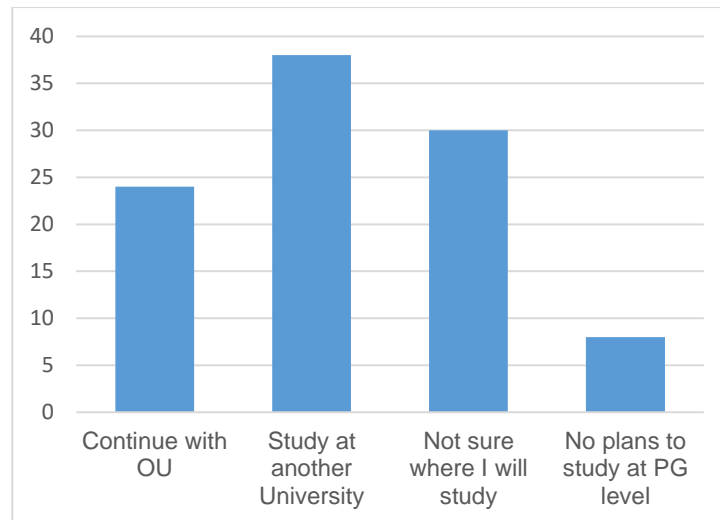


Figure 3. Student responses in to Question 3 of the Poll relating to continuing their studies at the OU.

Commentary

A relatively high percentage of respondents indicated that they were interested in pursuing postgraduate study. However, this may be a reflection of the fact students who were already considering this option were particularly drawn to participate in the consultation. The second question that relates to the type of programme being considered revealed a number of interesting findings. All masters programmes, but particularly those which offered a general or professional training were the most popular option for further study. Secondly, there was also a strong interest in progressing directly to doctoral research although a research masters was also a clear area of recruitment. Finally and possibly most notably given the student population, a significant number of students indicated that despite the late stage or possible completion of their undergraduate studies, they did not feel sure of the differences between the various options which could ultimately impact on their progression to a particular route of study.

The third and final question related to where students planned to study their postgraduate programme. Of the students who responded to this item, there was a clear indication that the majority of students planned to study at another institution or had not yet decided. A minority had indicated that the OU would be their institution of choice following completion of their degree.

These findings are also reflected in the action points below.

Key areas of forum discussion

I plan to progress to postgraduate study

The majority of students who responded to the consultative forum indicated their intention to progress to postgraduate study. Our aim was to explore in more detail: (i) what sparked interest in postgraduate study; (ii) what information was used in deciding 'what and where' to study?

Theme	You Said	We did / next steps
What sparked your interest in postgraduate study?	The principle motivation to engage in postgraduate study was related to career development and the recognition that in order to work in a particular field (e.g., forensic psychology, counselling, psychotherapy) additional post degree training would be required. Students identified an aspect of the subject matter they had covered as part of their undergraduate module materials as being instrumental in driving the motivation to follow a career (and postgraduate study) in a specific area.	Module chairs to reinforce link to potential future career paths throughout module.
	Specific tutors also appeared to have a key role to play in influencing future career directions and the progression to postgraduate study, with a number of students identifying tutor encouragement as being a key factor in their decision-making process.	The student feedback from the consultation forum will be used to facilitate discussions with tutors about how career discussions can be embedded within learning events and correspondence tuition.
What information have you used in deciding 'what and where' to study?	Students reported their intentions to study a broad range of postgraduate programmes including social work; teaching; counselling; psychotherapy; mental health science; clinical; forensic; educational; sport and exercise psychology; and clinical neuropsychology. Across all areas the determining factor in where to study was repeatedly linked to the professional accreditation associated with a programme. Whilst many students had enjoyed their experiences of study at the OU, the lack of availability of accredited masters provision in a particular area of interest (e.g., counselling) or lack of accreditation for an existing masters course (i.e., MSc Forensic Psychology) was a key factor in determining the decision to study at a different Higher Education Institution. Sometimes this move was seen as a positive opportunity for a change of institution, but for others it was a matter of regret that they could not continue with the OU as the quality and style of delivery had suited them well to this point.	The consultation organisers will feedback to the School Board of Studies findings regarding the significance placed on professional accreditation of postgraduate programmes to inform the planning and design of future programmes.
	One additional point to note relates to doctoral level study and the perception that research students at the OU have fewer opportunities to engage in career relevant activities compared to brick university students. This is an area which requires further exploration to ensure that the teaching and/or collaborative	The consultation organisers will discuss (with doctoral research lead and the Student Support Team lead) the comments regarding teaching/collaborative opportunities in the School for research students and explore ways to develop further if required.

opportunities which do exist can be articulated more clearly to potential doctoral candidates.

I do not plan to progress to postgraduate study

You Said

Students who indicated that they had no plans for further study reported two main reasons for this decision. Firstly, that they had achieved their study/career goals on completion of their undergraduate degree, and secondly there was a lack of funding and time for further study.

It is interesting to note that a few students commented that, whilst they may not be interested in pursuing a full masters programme, they had already completed or might be interested in studying shorter career focused courses (e.g., open learning courses) that would provide additional skills in the workplace.

We did / next steps

The consultation organisers will report back to the School Board of Studies about the potential to offer 'bite size' work focused learning options as an alternative to full programmes of postgraduate study.

I am undecided

You Said

The final group of students to respond to the forum classified themselves as being 'undecided' regarding future study options. Review of the comments revealed an interesting and consistent dominant theme in that the reported indecision was related at least in part, to being unsure of a range of factors concerning postgraduate study ranging from the basic information regarding programmes (time, cost, application etc.), to more fundamental questions concerning the range of programmes available and which would provide the best route of study to help them reach their future career goals. They often reported being unsure of the options that were available to them and what was required in order to make a successful application.

We did / next steps

Student's contributions in this consultation will be used to further develop the wider scholarship programme and to investigate in greater detail the factors which determine preparedness for future career planning amongst OU Psychology and Counselling students.

Whilst students responding to this theme did have many outstanding questions regarding potential future study, they did recognise the availability of resources within the University to support their decision making including the University Careers Service, British Psychological Society (BPS) online career resources and careers videos posted on the Open University Psychology Society (OUPS) website. Although these were useful as a general background, students would welcome more targeted personalised support with career planning for example contact with alumni currently working in particular fields.

Project leads to arrange a meeting with University Careers Service to share findings of the project and explore suggestions regarding working with alumni.

Conclusions

This student consultative forum has provided a rich insight into the experiences of students at the end of their degree and the factors influencing the decision whether to continue to postgraduate study. There is widespread recognition across all groups that postgraduate study has the potential to offer considerable advantage to one's career plans. However, the programme must 'be right' to justify the commitment of time, energy and financial investment. Students were consistently clear that the 'right' programme was defined by increased specialisation, recognised professional accreditation and work focus. Whether students would choose to continue their studies with the OU if such programmes were available was less clear. Whilst some students indicated that they would like to continue to study at the OU for postgraduate provision, a number of students discussed looking forward to the challenge of a new learning experience in a different environment.

What will be interesting to explore further in the development of the wider scholarship programme, are the factors that differentiate 'undecided' students from their forward planning counterparts. The potential to help these students towards active decision making earlier in their programme of study will be a positive outcome in supporting all students to thrive in their chosen career following completion of undergraduate studies.

Date: 5 June 2021