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Recognising the barriers to postgraduate study for students who identify as working-class.

Authors: Elizabeth Travis MSc[1]*, Carolyn McCrorie PhD [2], Daniel Okeowo MSc [3], Siobhan McHugh PhD[1], Emily Parker MSc [1]

Affiliations: [1]University of Leeds, UK, [2]University of Huddersfield, UK. [3]University of Newcastle, UK.

Abstract

Whilst the widening participation programme aims to increase the accessibility of undergraduate study for students with a lower socio-economic status, much less support is available for students wishing to progress to postgraduate study. Postgraduate study risks becoming a discipline exclusive to those from upper-middle class and upper-class backgrounds, with too few role models from lower socioeconomic backgrounds encouraging uptake. To explore class-related inequalities in academia reported by existing data through the lens of access to postgraduate study, we developed, and piloted, the CLASS (championing lower-class academic and social success) programme within our university. The programme aims to harness the lived experience of working-class individuals to uncover the barriers to postgraduate study and to develop strategies at an institutional level. An initial understanding of the barriers and challenges current students experience have been captured in our pilot programme. Future CLASS initiatives include assessment of these barriers at a national level to harness findings through the development of strategies with universities.

Key Words: Socioeconomic status, working class students, barriers to postgraduate study, academic success.

Socioeconomic status as a barrier to accessing postgraduate study

Existing initiatives to widen participation in higher education (HE) have focused on enhancing access to undergraduate study for students from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (Herbaut & Geven, 2020). Whilst widening participation developments aim to encourage changes to the accessibility of undergraduate study for students from lower SES backgrounds, they do not focus on accessibility beyond undergraduate study for students who wish to progress to postgraduate researcher (PGR) roles (Universities UK, 2021). In the UK, recent studies have found students from lower socio-economic households to have lower rates of transition to postgraduate study and are 28% as likely to gain a postgraduate degree as their more advantaged peers (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017; Wakeling et al., 2017). Despite the PGR student body being perceived as essential in sustaining the academic workforce (Christie et al., 2005) and the number of PGRs rising dramatically within the UK HE sectors (Morgan, 2015; Universities UK, 2021), the experiences of students wishing to progress to doctoral level study (e.g., PhD) appear to have been neglected by researchers and HE institutions (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; McPherson et al., 2017). Consequently, it is necessary to identify potential areas of focus for supporting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds achieve postgraduate degree qualifications.

Higher drop-out rates amongst undergraduate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lewis et al., 2021) and less desire to progress to PGR roles, are unsurprising given the association between student experience and socioeconomic status. Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction theory suggests social class consists of economic capital (financial wealth), cultural capital (familiarity with the dominant culture) and social capital (networks and contacts). The theory suggests the dominant culture (e.g., students with higher economic, cultural and social capital) replicates the characteristics of those already assimilated to that culture, leaving students with lower economic, cultural and social capital to occupy the non-dominant cultural space. As students move away from their peers of a lower class as defined by Bourdieu (1986) towards the elite field of

HE, they are reported to experience discomfort, intimidation, withdrawal, lack of confidence and isolation (Reay, 2021).

The existing evidence base on what support students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may require, especially when considering postgraduate education, is limited. Mateos-González and Wakeling (2022) explored patterns of progression to postgraduate study amongst UK students who had completed an undergraduate degree in the years 2015/16 and 2016/7. Whilst the authors conclude that educational attainment in undergraduate degrees can mitigate the impact of barriers specific to social class, it remains the case that students from lower social class backgrounds are underrepresented in research degrees. This research rationalises improvements to the inclusivity of doctoral degrees. It does not however, explain the trend that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to access research degrees, which participatory research approaches with undergraduate students could shed light on. Socioeconomic status is not a protected characteristic (Equality Act, 2010) and consequently, class inequalities often go unrecognised for postgraduate study or research, making the barriers for some students progressing from undergraduate education challenging to detect. Understanding the barriers to accessing postgraduate study and research posts through the lens of class-related inequalities is an important first step to providing necessary student support.

The CLASS (championing lower-class academic and social success) programme

The authors of this paper are all PhD students and early career researchers in the field of applied healthcare. Driven by their own experience in academia and the lack of empirical evidence explaining the disproportionate number of working-class PGRs and academics, we developed the CLASS (championing lower-class academic and social success) programme. To be as inclusive as possible, CLASS is open to any student who self-identifies as working-class. The programme aims to harness the lived experience of working-class individuals to not only uncover the barriers to

accessing postgraduate study but offer potential solutions at an institutional level. To address these issues, the CLASS programme proposes the following aims and objectives:

Programme Aim

To…

1) identify barriers that exist for students who identify as working class that impact their level of motivation or ability to study at postgraduate level.
2) work with students to develop strategies at an institutional level for overcoming these barriers.

Programme Objectives

To …

1) understand and address the barriers, challenges and concerns related to academic progression for individuals who identify as working-class.

2) share barriers, challenges and concerns with decision makers to implement initiatives that can improve access to postgraduate opportunities for people who identify as working class and address gaps to work towards a more inclusive environment.

The CLASS Programme

During 2022, three interactive CLASS workshops were piloted online and in-person. All sessions were developed with student input and facilitated an informal, trustworthy environment. The initial scoping session prompted discussion around defining student's experiences as working-class academics, and what benefits and barriers they perceived to PhD study. Based on the student feedback shared within the initial scoping session, a programme of events was developed.

Students conceptualised their working-class identity as a cultural way of being, a social group who satisfied their needs rather than wants, perceived as individuals who work harder than their middle-class counterparts to afford a living. Working class was seen as working to survive, fighting a system to be valued and respected. Some students considered this term old-fashioned,

preferring ‘lower socio-economic background’ instead. Finally, many students felt passionate about identifying as working-class, enabling them to be their authentic self, within the middle-class spaces they now occupy.

Financial issues were a key barrier raised by students who thought that PhDs were self-funded, most being unaware of stipends and that these were tax-free. A lack of awareness about the financial support that could be available to students was apparent, with students worried about having to save in advance or be employed elsewhere whilst studying. Students were not aware that there were tax free stipends, council tax exemption, free childcare allowance, postgraduate government loans and opportunities for combined teaching and research roles, all avenues of income.

Feelings of imposter syndrome, not belonging or fitting in with the ‘lecturer upper middle-class' stereotype were discussed, alongside the impression that academics lacked understanding of their lived experiences as working-class students. A lack of comprehension of academic language and representation and not relating to current lecturers, perceived to be middle/upper class contributed to a lack of interest in a career in academia. How students were perceived by family and friends if they undertook a PhD also mattered. Many students felt proud of their working-class status and did not want this status to be perceived by friends and family as something they were trying to escape.

These preliminary workshops have enabled us to gain an initial understanding of the barriers, challenges and concerns related to academic progression for individuals that identify as working-class, first-generation students or students that have successfully completed access courses (Objective 1). Furthermore, we have begun to increase student’s awareness of networks and different career opportunities. It is our intention to continue to focus on these programme objectives through our research, design and development of upcoming resources and sessions.

Considering Future CLASS Initiatives

Looking ahead to the next academic year (2022/2023), first, we plan to conduct an electronic Delphi study, a systematic and qualitative method to achieve consensus of opinion through several rounds of questions (Skulmoski et al., 2007). The study will achieve consensus on the barriers surrounding access to PhD study for students who identify as working class. Future research will also explore and receive feedback from students on potential solutions implemented at an individual and institutional level. We will share barriers, challenges, and concerns with decision makers to design initiatives that work towards a more inclusive environment (Objective 2). Informed by our research findings we then intend to widen the access and availability of resources and sessions developed, making these more readily available to students across the UK and potentially internationally. It is our intention to then develop a virtual platform which will provide students with a portfolio of new and developed resources, including live online workshops hosted by ourselves. For a visual summary of the key findings and next steps for the CLASS pilot workshops discussed, please see supplementary file 1.

Conclusion

We consider individuals, but more so institutions, to be the agent of change for rectifying the barriers that exist for students who identify as working class that impact their level of motivation or ability to study at postgraduate level. We are interested in facilitating a movement towards an academic environment that responds to the needs of those from wider class backgrounds, rather than simply expecting and placing the ownership on individuals to socially adjust. Through shining a light on the lived experience of working-class, prospective PhD students, we intend to work with HE institutions to facilitate their progression into and experience within, PGR roles.

Author note.

ORCiD's: Elizabeth Travis https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1140-1822

Emily Parker: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5379-2070

Siobhan McHugh: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5153-8092

Carolyn McCrorie: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2673-6839

Daniel Okeowo: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3219-4439

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