Session Title:	4.4 "It's not our fault if they don't apply": debunking myths about the postgraduate pipeline
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| Speaker/Institution Bio/Information: | NM is the Postgraduate Widening Participation Manager at the University of Cambridge working in a small team. NM has worked in this area for three years, previously in UGPW. Based on the UG experience, she thought PGWP would be easier than it is. The difference is that in UGPW the groundwork has already been done, but in PGWP the team are still fighting these battles.

Three years ago, the PGWP team started running programmes and working on setting themselves up and getting the university ready for change. Primarily they looked at what information they collected about UK PG students, what they were doing with the information and if additional information needed to be collected.

It was important to figure out what processes were already happening at the university because the PG admissions process is desentralised and every department has their own focus and process of setting targets and dealing with PG applications. The team tries to harness and bring everyone together where possible.

The team also connected with other PGWP teams to see what was out there. The aim is to make changes in the admissions process, applicant support and research internship programmes to then hand over the programmes and get the departments to work on this. The team can then start new programmes. The team is not currently permanent, which is why it's important to embed the work and future proof it. |
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| Overview/Aim of session: | Obstacles to PG Explore mindsets about PG Discuss myths when working with colleagues in the institution and debunk these myths |

Workshop Content	There are a lot of myths about the PG pipeline, some of which come from ignorance or prejudice, but this is not the prevailing attitude at Cambridge. It's important to be mindful about how to approach difficult conversations with colleagues and debunk myths because they need to be part of the journey too. **Current Team Projects:** *Close the Gap (with Oxford)* ● Addressing PGR offer gap ● Working to embed equitable admissions practices ● Academics part of the project delivery team, focused on the admissions processes *AIM Applicant Support* ● Support for MPhil and PhD applicants ● 50 applicants ● Peer mentoring and online group sessions with departments for help with application and interview ● 4-week online programme with mentor to support in making a research proposal ● PhD or MPhil short 2-hour session with support to work on something of their choice *Research Internships* ● Paid research placements for students (not Cambridge students) who are interested in pursuing PhD study and gaining research experience ● 6 to 8 weeks based in Cambridge ● Option to work on own project or join research group. ● Building PG work into APP – under progression from UG element application support programme, research internships and funding for master students have been added ● After internship, participants successfully applied to research programmes and this is a good way to build PG pipeline *Use of Contextual Data* ● Additional information to support well-informed decision-making
Case Studies/Examples:	1. **"We can't help it if they don't want to apply"** The view is that this isn't 'our' problem, because it's up to the applicant to apply. The obstacles are a lack of competitive applicants, we are not able to reach applicants, and they are not interested in PG opportunities. In reality, it is our problem if they don't want to apply, and we have a responsibility to address this. First, it's

important to find out what is putting them off, and what attitudes and ideas exist about studying at the University.

Cambridge is the 4th biggest provider in PG research in the UK and therefore has a huge impact in the sector, industry, research, careers and academia.

Resolving this involves listening to difficult truths and the students' experiences regarding the challenges in applying and getting through their studies.

2. "Everyone has a UG degree – it's a level playing field"

This assumes that there is an equal chance of success and is used as a counterargument to justify additional support for certain groups.

However, there are clear differences in offer and progression rates according to the previous institution the applicant attended because not all degrees are viewed and valued in the same way. Not all degrees will prepare students to study at Cambridge, for example institutions with a non-research heavy focus and background. Currently, progression rates show Cambridge at the top:
1. Cambridge
2. Oxford
3. other Russell Group institutions
4. non-Russell Group institutions (UK only).

There is a huge discrepancy between Cambridge and Oxford and non-research focused institutions. It's important to explore what can be implemented to support the application process. Contextual data can help in understanding this further.

3. "Childhood socioeconomic data is no longer relevant at PG level"

It is very difficult to obtain this information, and the team don't benefit from centralised admissions like at UG-level. Getting all to use data in a consistent way and update the system has been challenging. Prior to 2020, no contextual data was collected. Now data on free school meals in secondary school, 1st generation, care responsibility and care experience are collected.

The impact of disadvantages or disruption in early life is still significant at PG level and should be taken into consideration. For example, applicants may have a limited choice of UG institution due to grades, the need to be close to home and the financial support available. Difficult circumstances may be ongoing throughout UG study too,

	for example carer responsibilities or the need to work while studying due to finances.
	For competitive applicants at non-competitive institutions this can result in undermatching (process of well-qualified applicants not matching with competitive institutions due to background). It's therefore important to identify competitive applicants from a non-competitive institution in the admissions process.
	A few years ago, a pilot programme was started at Cambridge to collect qualitative data on UG study and circumstances of this (extra responsibilities etc. that had an impact on the allocated time for study). This was then passed on to assessors. This is still in place, and the team has received very positive feedback as the assessors value having this information.
	4. "Everyone has access to the same information about applying – that's fair" This myth is tied to the argument of not giving an advantage to certain groups by providing extra access. But access to information is unequal, particularly for those with no access to insider knowledge. The website is difficult to update and those that haven't studied or know someone that has studied at Cambridge don't have access to the same knowledge.
	Progression rates are better for Cambridge students. One challenge is the less formal application system for PG compared to UG application. The team doesn't have much knowledge of what goes on outside of the regulated process.
	For example, some courses require applicants to contact a supervisor by application. It will depend on the specific supervisor if the applicant gets a response and if the supervisor will help them develop an application. If the applicant is already a student at Cambridge, they may already have a connection and supervisor that has helped or encouraged them to apply.
	A lot of work is carried out in different institutions to tie this process up and make it fairer. WP students will be disadvantaged by these informal processes.
	Different groups need access to different information. WP practitioners are not always the best people to deliver this information. A student may be much better, so it's important to take this into consideration when building programmes.

	5. **"Current admissions practices do an adequate job of identifying applications with potential for PG study."**
	Cambridge is fortunate because they have more PG applicants than they have space for. There is a belief that increasing numbers will affect the administrative burden and require more work when places are already filled every year. Additionally, this myth relates to the concern of 'lowering' standards by taking on extra students that need additional support that can't be provided.
	In many cases, current admissions practices focus on prior attainment and not potential. Grades, transcripts, references, and institutions are assessed. This comes from a risk-advert approach and is perceived as safer. Supervisors at PhD level are concerned about finding someone that they can support and work with and get to the end of the programme so the above criteria are reassuring.
	But this is fixed and rigid criteria with no flexibility or consideration for life trajectory, life experiences and how other points outside academia can indicate potential for study. This is not the best approach for WP students. The team are working with departments to change this and look at different skills and how this can come not just from studying at university.
	6. **"Everyone is treated equally throughout the admissions process"**
	Systemic inequality is baked into our cultures, systems and processes. These are painful conversations to have but examples on inequality are the informality of the application process, the entry requirements and the lack of consistency.
Scenarios/Roundtable discussions:	**What are some of the myths (and truths) about access to postgraduate study in your institution?**
	What barriers are faced by applicants to your institution?
	• Supervisors have the final say in who they supervise and can prioritise existing connections. • You can't always ask for contextual information in the PG application as this may be perceived as excluding groups. • Is part-time study really part-time? If the applicant needs to work, do they have time to study in their own time? • Applicants on scholarship may have had additional

	support to apply for UG, but don't have this support for PG applications. ● PG is not seen as an option for applicants who are the first in their family to attend University. UG is already seen as a huge step that leads to a career. ● No weekend options means that it's harder for applicants to fit university around other responsibilities in the weekdays.
Questions and Answers:	**Q:** How can we change the academics' culture and view regarding the myths about PG? **A:** Support comes from unlikely places, academics listen to other academics so it is good to build up these relationships. **Q:** How can we help people to believe that they are good enough to apply for PG opportunities? **A:** The value of current students shouldn't be underestimated. Sometimes staff members are not the most suited to share messages about PG.
Summary Key takeaways:	**Lessons along the way:** ● Finding the right supporters. This might not be in the expected places – administrators and departments can have an influence on academics and getting things on their agenda ● Empowering colleagues and persevering with projects and challenges ● Trusting our judgement ● Feeling discomfort is part of the process **Key takeaways:** ● It's important to listen to students' experiences regarding the challenges in applying, getting through their studies and what attitudes and ideas exist about studying at the University. ● There are clear differences in offer and progression rates according to the previous institution the applicant attended because not all degrees are viewed and valued in the same way ● Contextual Information is still significant at PG-level and should be taken into consideration. ○ Cambridge collects qualitative data on UG study and circumstances that had an impact on the allocated time for study. This is shared with relevant assessors and has received positive feedback. ● WP students will be disadvantaged by informal processes in the application journey. ● A student may be more suited to delivering certain information, so it's important to take this into consideration when building programmes.

	• Current admissions practices focus on prior attainment and not potential. Life trajectory, life experiences and how other points outside academia can indicate potential for study should be considered. • The systemic inequality is baked into our cultures, systems and processes and needs to be addressed.