

How do master's students transition from UK higher education into the global labour market?

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Background

Higher education (HE) is widely considered to be the principal vehicle to attain skilled employment among individuals, universities, and policymakers.

Issues such as underemployment, over-qualification and skills mismatches have been reported concerning HE and workplace outcomes.

However, few studies investigate the transition process from university to work and even fewer are specifically focused on master's students despite the rapid expansion of master's education worldwide.

In the UK master's students tripled in the past 20 years.⁽¹⁾

566k	60%	920k	30%
master's students	non-UK domiciled	qualifications granted	master's degrees

Research questions

1. Why do students pursue a master's degree?
2. How do master's students approach and manage their HE-to-work transition and what resources and support do they access?
3. What are their career outcomes?
4. What is the relationship between their master's studies and their career outcomes?
5. In what ways do master's students' (later graduates') experiences help to explain the career outcomes captured by the Graduate Outcome survey?



Research design

Mixed methods by collecting, analysing, and integrating longitudinal qualitative data with population survey data.



9 universities, employability policy and strategy documents, semi-structured interviews with 12 career staff



62 master's student participants, 3 rounds of semi-structured interviews, at the **start** and **end** of their course, and **15 months** after graduation



Graduate Outcome survey data: **2021/22 cohort** of master's students

Key preliminary findings

1. Why do students pursue a master's degree?

All participants chose to study for a master's degree for multiple reasons and push factors were more dominant.



Push factors included: labour market pressure and career advancement; unsure of what they wanted to do next; and societal pressure and family expectations.

Jack: "I couldn't get a single job. I couldn't get interviews. And I was applying to loads of places... I just thought I actually have to do a master's in order to get into the job market. I think that was definitely the most important part of doing it."⁽²⁾

Stephen: "So currently I work inside this industry and in order for me to progress... I need to go on a master's course to get that qualification to show I have a certain level of competence."

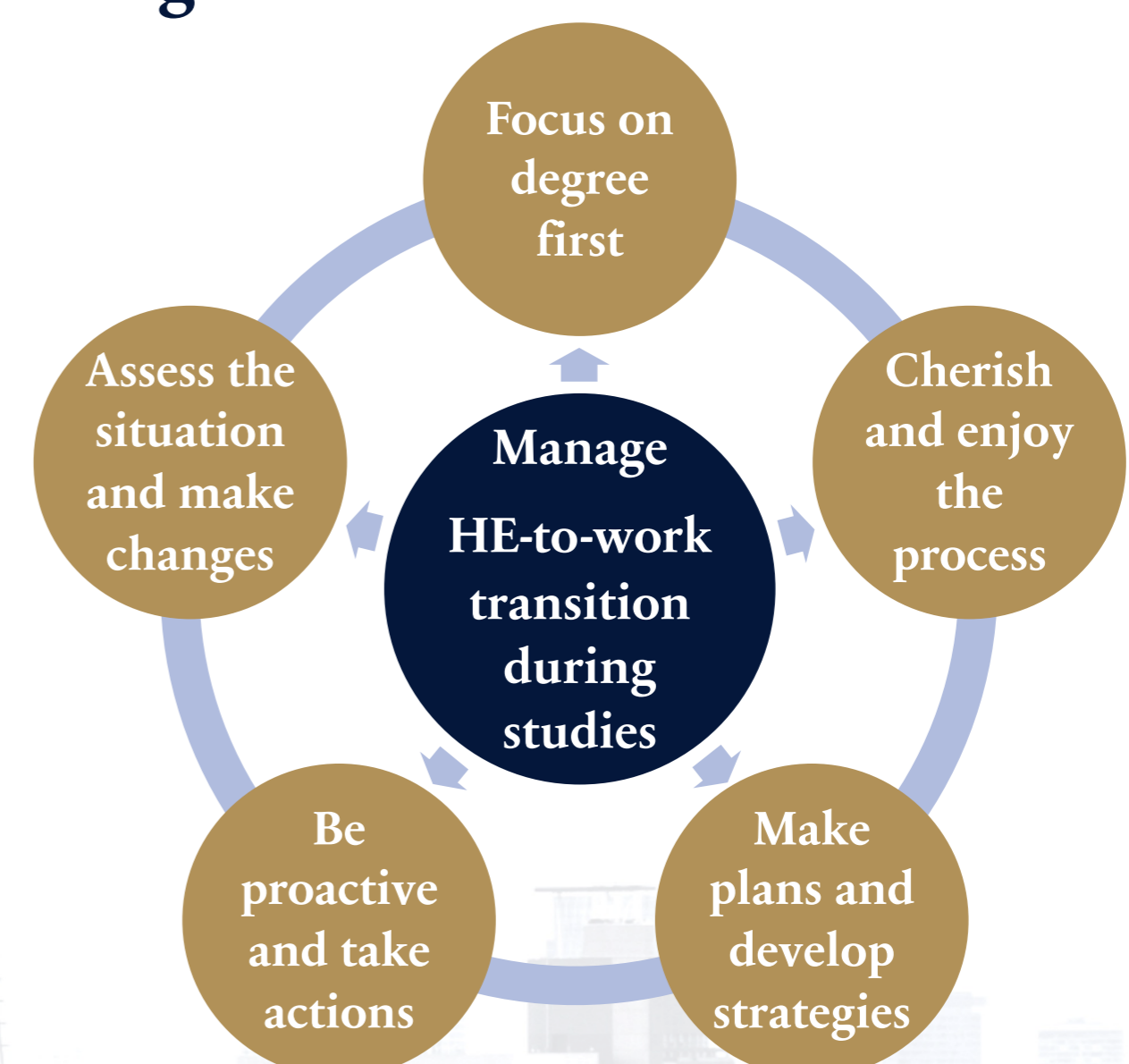
Ella: "If I'm being totally honest, it's through lack of not knowing what I wanted to do next. I needed more direction."

Pull factors included: personal fulfilment; a steppingstone to a PhD; and financial incentives and support.

Lotta: "I really liked the topic and I really care about it, and I wanted to deepen my knowledge... there are loads of work opportunities out there... but to have this opportunity to learn... it doesn't come about often."

Simon: "I'm actually the first person from my direct family to go and do a degree or anything, so going on to do a master's afterwards, it's quite an achievement... I suppose I am really proud of myself for doing that."

2. How do master's students manage their HE-to-work transition during their studies?



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(1) All data in this section have been taken or calculated from HESA open data 2023.
(2) All names are participants' pseudonyms.

Further data and findings are expected to address research questions 2 to 5.

For further interest, please reach me at xiujuan.wang@education.ox.ac.uk, thank you!