



Widening Access to Postgraduate Study and the Professions

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Abstract

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Six UK universities are co-operating to propose solutions for achieving fair access to postgraduate study and the professions. We are addressing concerns about the future of postgraduate study: the absence of postgraduate finance, declining registrations from UK/EU domiciled students and employers' concerns around fair access to the professions. Our project addresses student finance, using data to understand student demand, provision of advice, academic innovation and together we seek a better understanding of demand and barriers to entry. The project looks at the interactions between our research data, student demand, barriers reported and how this should influence the academic offer.

Presentation

Widening Access to Postgraduate Study and the Professions

In the absence of clear and effective national policy this multi-institution co-operative intervention aims to propose solutions to the postgraduate crisis being experienced in the UK. The number of UK domiciled and other EU applications for postgraduate taught study had risen year on year until 2009/10 and then applications fell in 2010/11 and again in 2011/12. The number of applications submitted by UK domiciled applicants decreased by 15% over the two years (BIS, 2013.) As UK domiciled and EU student demand for places faltered it was increasingly clear that only those students who could self-fund their academic ambitions could pursue higher level study (Milburn, 2012.) A consortium of six universities received £2.9M from the UK Government through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and along with matching funds provided by the participating institutions we have a total fund of over £5M. The majority of these funds (c70%) will directly benefit students. The project uses experimental interventions to propose solutions to important issues associated with postgraduate demand for places and fair access to postgraduate taught (PGT) study. Recent reports have voiced concerns about the state and long term future of PGT study: the impact of current finance routes, the additional impact of reforms to undergraduate funding, a documented decline in the market for UK/EU PGT students, employers' concerns around access to professions, general skills and social mobility constraints leading to access defined by affordability (1994 Group, 2012; British Academy, 2012; HEC, 2012; NUS, 2012).

Background

A report on 'The social composition and future earnings of postgraduates' (Sutton Trust, 2010) found that 30% of university students educated at private schools were in postgraduate education six months after graduating, compared with 23% of state educated pupils. The 'Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance' (Browne, 2010) by Lord Browne, recommended lifting the cap on undergraduate fees (then at £3,290 per year) leading the government to implement a new higher fee cap of £9000 per year and to introduce a government backed loan scheme for fees, offered to all students and to be repaid only when graduates were earning over £21,000. The Browne report advised that participation in higher education be monitored to discover whether the cost of undergraduate education had an impact on the proportion entering postgraduate study.

'One Step Beyond: making the most of postgraduate education' (BIS, 2010) by Adrian Smith, highlighted the importance of postgraduate study to UK economic growth and international competitiveness and recommended that access to postgraduate study be investigated further and that the impact of financial barriers to access be highlighted.

'Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge' (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2013) chaired by Alan Milburn, showed that postgraduate courses were increasingly common as a required entry route into the professions and that there was no system of financial support similar to that for undergraduate entry. We know from 'Transition to higher degrees across the UK: An analysis of national, international and individual differences' (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013) that there are inequalities in transition to postgraduate study. We also know through 'Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice' (Higher Education Academy/NUS, 2013) that clear, concise and accessible information and advice delivered in a range of contexts is key to decision making for prospective students.

'Exploring Student Demand for Postgraduate Study' (BIS, 2013) tells us the recent growth in postgraduates registering in the UK has been driven by large numbers of students from outside the European Union with over half of full time postgraduates coming from outside the UK/EU. Applications from UK domiciled students have substantially reduced. A perceived threat was noted to widening participation in postgraduate study for those from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

We don't yet have a detailed understanding of what motivates people to further study, what the underlying

demand or aspiration is, who applies vs. who is admitted, what advice and guidance works and why some institutions are more successful in recruiting than others, or how we can conceive widening participation indicators suitable for postgraduates.

The consortium

In December 2013, HEFCE announced the launch of the Postgraduate Support Scheme, a £25 million publicly-funded competitive programme, to assist postgraduate students. The scheme is testing ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education and aims, by working with universities and employers, to stimulate participation by students who would not otherwise progress to postgraduate level. There are currently twenty pilot projects being undertaken, covering a range of support activities including financial and pastoral support, mentoring and networking, curricula change, funded studentships, work placements and a variety of bursary and loan schemes.

The consortium of six research intensive English Russell Group institutions (Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Warwick and York) is the largest of these projects. The six participating institutions have distinct missions, visions and strategies. There are, however, common institutional, regional and economic interests and challenges which mean the success of this project is central to all our institutional strategies. We are committed to fairness and equity of access to education based on merit; regardless of background, characteristics or ability to self-fund, and to sustaining and growing our postgraduate taught student numbers.

This project is developing, implementing and evaluating three sets of innovations to improve take-up of taught postgraduate programmes particularly among under-represented groups; such as those with recognised undergraduate Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds, mature students and people with caring responsibilities. Our consortium, (together representing 10% of Home UK PGT numbers) has been designing and piloting products in a project which launched from January 2014, including:

1. Exploring new financial support packages for postgraduates with banks, benefactors and employers.
2. New academic innovations in programme design and curriculum offer to encourage and enable graduates to enter postgraduate taught study, with a focus on higher-level skills and the professions.
3. Targeted interventions including information, advice and guidance (IAG) to promote these products and facilitate entry to postgraduate study.
4. Activity to inform and support evaluation of the above. Establishing an evidence-based understanding of which groups are under-represented in postgraduate study and why, drawing on sources of data which are not otherwise available for analysis. These findings will be used as a benchmark for evaluating the success of the interventions.

The economic benefits of postgraduate study are increasingly evident; postgraduates enjoy higher earning outcomes than those with a first degree only (BIS 2010), while a growing number of professions now expect applicants to hold a postgraduate qualification (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009).

Consequently, questions of how access to postgraduate study relates to issues of equity, social justice and social mobility have become politically prominent, with Alan Milburn, the government's adviser on social mobility, stating that 'lack of access postgraduate study is in danger of becoming a social mobility time bomb' (HEC 2012, p.6).

Collaboration between higher education providers in the UK is challenging in the marketised, competitive system of higher education in the UK. Brown with Cassaro (Brown & Cassaro, 2013, p. 1) note how the programme introduced by the Coalition Government in 2010 has been 'the most radical in the history of UK higher education and amongst the most radical anywhere.' They particularly note how these reforms have increased competition between institutions for students. Alongside consumer orientated market norms, the notion of collaboration between providers can appear anti-competitive. However, collaboration which harnesses the strength of the many to face common challenges remains a strong imperative.

Pathways beyond graduation

Recent research notes that most postgraduate students do not enrol immediately following their undergraduate degree (Wakeling, & Hampden-Thompson, 2013). However, we know relatively little about graduates' activities in the years between undergraduate and postgraduate study; and less still about those graduates who do not return to postgraduate study. The consortium has undertaken two surveys in order to gain new insights into those who might enter postgraduate study which are presently not well understood. The first survey, intended for 2009 and 2012 undergraduate alumni, intends to capture individuals' activities since graduating, including employment and participation in further study. Of particular value, this survey explores graduates' intentions to pursue and their perceptions of barriers to postgraduate study. The second survey, of current taught postgraduate students, intends to reveal the motivations and aspirations of current postgraduates, as well as the factors perceived to have enabled their transition to higher study.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the focus of policy attention in the UK and elsewhere directed toward undergraduate widening participation, there has been little research concerned with postgraduate populations (Knight, 1997; Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). This is the case across a range of areas, including the aspirations of graduates as they consider the place of postgraduate education for career entry and career progression; change of subject and institution at the graduate level and how family and work commitments and social background influence choice and possibilities.

Widening Participation through Taught Postgraduate Scholarships

It is not known whether the loss of Home PGT numbers was due to lack of demand, lack of opportunity or an absence of programmes prospective students wanted to study. The first cohort of undergraduate students paying the higher fee levels will graduate in 2015 and so solving the fair progression issue to postgraduate study is urgent (1994 Group, 2012).

The six institutions involved co-operated in offering between them 350 scholarships of between £10,000 and £15,000 based on widening participation criteria. Initial eligibility criteria had to be set by the institutions. Applicants had to intend to study at one of the six institutions on a one-year full-time or two-year part-time taught postgraduate programme beginning September 2014, leading to an MA, MBA, MEd, MMus, MPH, MRes, MSc or LLM qualification. They must if selected subsequently take up a place and remain on one of these eligible programmes. Further they should be a UK or EU student paying academic fees at the UK/ EU rate. These awards were not open to applicants applying for deferred entry given the short term nature of the funding, or to those intending to study for a PGCE, postgraduate research degree or an integrated Masters degree, or already held a qualification at master's or doctoral level or those being funded by an employer or another public body. None of the institutions entertained a merit based selection criteria and did not set a lower contextual offer; so sought applicants held a first or upper second class UK honours degree (or equivalent) by July 2014. It was these eligibility rules that permitted an application to be further considered against the widening participation criteria.

Each institution who participated in the scholarship offer developed their set of widening participation criteria for selection (see table 1). A common list of factors emerged, although no institution used the whole of the list. Even where two institutions shared the same factor the qualifying measure differed. This shows that in the absence of further evidence to institutions no common view exists on the best way to measure widening participation at postgraduate level. Some of the measures that institutions might have wanted to use were not available to them or unverifiable.

Criterion	Measures	Number of institutions
Financial Status	The Institutions either looked at the applicants previous undergraduate status: the applicant was in receipt of a full fee waiver as an undergraduate, OR was in receipt of a maintenance grant from the Student Loan Company OR was in receipt of a means tested bursary as an undergraduate OR depending on the institution they looked at the applicants current financial status; for example, in receipt of income support (Job Seekers Allowance, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Universal Credit etc.)	6
Deprivation	Measured either by the Index of Multiple Deprivation OR POLAR3 OR living in a low participation neighbourhood based on postcode.	5
School achievement	The institutions agreed the applicants had to have the prerequisite qualification for the academic programme to which they were applying, so contextual offers to PGT study were not considered. School achievement data for the year in which the applicant sat their GCSEs or equivalent, compared with the national average for that year was used by one of the institutions in combination with deprivation data (i.e. IMD postcode data).	1
First generation applicant	First member of the family to go to University.	2
Socio-economic classification	UK National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories for parent/guardian one or parent/guardian two, at the point when the applicant was aged 14.	1
Local Authority Care background	In most cases was an automatic qualifier for the scholarship being awarded, for example, applicant to have been in local authority care for at least 13 weeks and under the age of 25 on the course start date.	6
Out of HE	Students who have been out of HE study for more than two years	1
Disability	Receipt of DSA (Disabled Students' Allowances) as an undergraduate student OR currently receiving DLA (Disability Living Allowance), Attendance Allowance or a PIP (Personal Independence Payment).	5
Under-representation	Including for example women in science or engineering or ethnic minorities in arts and humanities. These factors caused debate about the line, if indeed one exists, between widening participation, fair access and broader equality goals.	3
Carer	Carer for an ill or disabled family member	1

Table 1: Widening Participation Criteria

All institutions considered the necessity for tie breakers. In some cases priority was given to students who could demonstrate that they satisfied more than one of the criteria outlined, in others to students with the highest academic qualifications or the most relevant experience in their field and in others to those judged by a panel to benefit the most given their circumstances based on textual statements provided with the application.

The choice of value of the award varied. £10,000 cash paid in instalments over the duration of a one-year full-time or two-year part-time eligible qualification was typical, to be used for fees or living costs.

The response was overwhelming (see Table 2). Despite strict eligibility and WP criteria, the consortium received over five times the number of complete and eligible applications than it had WP scholarships to offer. Successful applicants had to qualify under multiple headings. The group which faces the greatest barriers to further study are absent because they lack the financial means, not because they lack the ability or ambition.

Institution	Number of scholarships available	Number of eligible applications submitted to 9th June 2014
A	60	334
B	50	325
C	40	159
D	90	302
E	50	165
F	60	380
Total	350	1,665

Table 2: Demand for Widening Participation Scholarships (Institutions are represented with letters A-F)

The needs to understand student choice in providing information, advice and guidance in making the most of Postgraduate Support Scheme

It is widely recognised that Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that is timely and good quality is vital in addressing the needs of a diverse range of learners. Whilst there is a great deal of research around the IAG needs of prospective undergraduate (UG) students, less is known about the needs of taught postgraduate (PGT) students. However, there is an understanding that as with the transformation of outreach and WP to support social mobility at UG level the same must take place for the PGT population.

IAG is crucial in forming student choice and has individual, organisational and societal benefits (Hutchinson and Jackson, 2007). The absence of a systematic approach to this could create barriers in access to learning and in turn social equity, and could also affect retention and student success. We will draw on the experiences of current PGT students and the successful scholarship holders to find out what works. We will also look at differences in transition rates by institution and discipline (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013) within the consortium to find and share examples of good practice.

Conclusions

Early results suggest that with appropriate access to funding the demand for postgraduate funding remains strong despite falling numbers. Individuals do not make applications or do not register due to identifiable barriers, which benefactors and employers are motivated to engage in helping to solve and that universities can innovate the academic offer in a way which influences demand.

As the interventions progress and are evaluated we intend to provide:

1. Evaluated models of promoting PGT through new financial and academic models that can be used by stakeholders.
2. Evaluation of the information, advice and guidance interventions which are most effective when targeted at widening participation at postgraduate taught level
3. Increased visibility of the importance of postgraduate taught programmes in providing life chances and skills for the economy, from within corporate and donor communities as well as employers.
4. A more detailed understanding of characteristics, aspirations and barriers for postgraduate students and those who do not progress to postgraduate taught programmes

Australia and the US have postgraduate loan schemes, but comparable systems are not available in the UK. It is not yet clear whether the higher education sector or the UK government should support a state backed loan scheme as the evidence on demand and widening participation is not yet available and alternatives have not yet been sufficiently explored. Early indications from our project suggest that, in the absence of a state loan scheme, benefactors and employers are interested in engaging with universities in relation to

securing higher level skills and ensuring fair access to the professions. Universities are themselves innovating their offer, to sustain or increase demand, by thinking about the attractiveness and accessibility of their postgraduate taught programmes. The first cohort of undergraduate students paying the higher fee levels will graduate in 2015 and so solving the issue of sustained and fair progression to postgraduate study is now urgent.

With booming international demand for the excellent postgraduate offer in the UK it is alarming that UK domiciled and EU student registrations are falling. It is contended here that the aspiration to higher level study exists in equal measure but the opportunities are not the same, and UK/EU students face barriers to participation. It is important our professionals come from all walks of life and we should all hope that talented postgraduates who otherwise would not have the option to proceed with their education are helped to find a way so we can all benefit from their talents and commitment.

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