

Gender and access to postgraduate study in the UK – evidence from a multi-institutional study (0272)

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Context of the study

This paper will report on findings from a cross-institutional study undertaken between 2014-15, supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Six UK universities cooperated to advance solutions for achieving fair access to postgraduate study and the professions.

The economic and social value of postgraduate study is well recognised by a number of stakeholders in the UK, not least by successive governments and business leaders. The individual benefits of obtaining a postgraduate qualification are also increasingly evident; postgraduates typically enjoy higher earnings than those with a first degree only (BIS 2010), and a growing number of professions now expect applicants to hold a postgraduate qualification (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009). Access to postgraduate study is therefore an important consideration for the UK's ongoing social mobility debate, but current understanding of pathways to postgraduate study is relatively limited. In light of this, a number of organisations have called for more research about postgraduate education (e.g. 1994 Group 2012; British Academy 2012; HEC 2012; Milburn 2012; NUS 2012; Lindley and Machin 2013).

This paper will develop understanding on access to postgraduate study in the UK, focusing specifically on the issue of gender. Over the past decade, the extensive research into gender at the levels of compulsory and undergraduate education has tended to signal a female success: girls now outperform boys in both school and degree-level attainment (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2009), and higher education participation rates for women have increased globally. In the UK, female undergraduates now outnumber males. Such quantitative change has led some scholars to speak of the 'feminisation of higher education'; while others, somewhat more negatively, suggest that gender inequalities are simply in 'reverse', and that

those concerned with equal opportunities must re-focus their attention on men, who are the newly underrepresented group (Vincent-Lancrin 2008).

At the postgraduate level, however, the feminisation thesis appears to lose traction. Recent research notes that women have lower rates of progression to postgraduate study, especially for research degrees (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013). Furthermore, women remain underrepresented in certain subject areas, including science and technology and 'high status' disciplines (Bebbington 2002); in prestigious institutions (Dyhouse 2003); and, in senior academic positions (Blackmore and Sachs 2001). Some scholars suggest that far from changing the culture of the contemporary academy, women are merely expected to conform to its increasingly 'capitalist' norms (Morley 2008), and that women tend to perform less well against the particular performative criteria of this environment (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011; Morley 2014).

Method

Existing research into postgraduate education in the UK shows that a minority of postgraduate students enter their course immediately following an undergraduate degree (House 2010; Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013; HEFCE 2013a, 2013b). This finding calls into question the validity of many commonly cited surveys of graduates, which report graduate activity soon after the completion of an undergraduate degree (e.g. the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey [DLHE], which takes place six months after graduation). As a result, we know relatively little about graduates' activities over later years, and universities remain largely uninformed as to the prior activities of returning postgraduates.

With the aim of creating a better understanding of individual pathways to postgraduate education, including motivations for, and barriers to, undertaking postgraduate study, this project consisted of a series of targeted quantitative research activities over a twelve month period. The research explored potential links with socio-economic and background characteristics of individuals, with the aim of producing evidence-based widening participation characteristics at postgraduate level.

Three novel datasets were created for the project, as follows:

1. *The Pathways Beyond Graduation survey*: a large-scale online survey of first-degree alumni from the six consortium institutions who graduated in 2009 or 2012 (n=2849; response rate 8.3%)
2. *The Pathways to Postgraduate Study survey*: a large-scale online survey of first-year taught postgraduates students at the six consortium institutions who commenced their studies in 2013/14 and 2014/15 (n=3334; response rate 18.5%)
3. *The Admissions Study*: a quantitative analysis of UK domiciled applicants for postgraduate taught study for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 application cycles (42,888 applications recorded)

Preliminary findings and issues for discussion

A gender analysis of the three datasets indicates important differences in men's and women's access to and experience of postgraduate study. The survey of alumni indicates that while, overall, female graduates progress to postgraduate study at a higher rate than their male counterparts, they are less likely to progress to certain postgraduate courses, including research degrees and Masters of Business Administration courses, even when prior undergraduate attainment is taken into account. Furthermore, there is an indication that the decision to undertake postgraduate study may feature differently in the trajectories of men and women, since the post-graduation salaries reported by female alumni are lower than those reported by male participants.

Initial analysis of the postgraduate survey points to the different disciplinary choices of men and women who do progress, with higher proportions of women studying vocationally-focused subjects such as education and nursing, and higher proportions of men opting for science and technology or academically-focused subjects such as historical and philosophical studies. While these two datasets therefore point to continued gender 'pipeline' issues for certain postgraduate subjects and courses, an initial odds ratio analysis of the application dataset shows that men and women have varying chances of receiving an offer on particular courses, suggesting that a more thorough investigation of admission processes is also needed.

This paper will also address how gender intersects with other widening participation indicators recorded in our datasets, such as ethnicity, social class, disability, first in family and individuals from low participation neighbourhoods. Implications for policy and future research will be considered.

937 words

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