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Title Managing and balancing the experience of applicants, students and employers at Masters level through understanding their expectations- the findings from an 11 University HEFCE funded project

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Managing and balancing the experience of applicants, students and employers at Masters level through understanding their expectations- the findings from an 11 University HEFCE funded project

150 word abstract

Since the mid-1990s, Masters level study has experienced massification in terms of participation in the UK. Although the Higher Education Academy undertakes valuable surveys examining the masters and research postgraduate student experience, they occur near the end of a student's study journey. Up until 2014, there had been very limited research undertaken on the expectations of applicants and students entering this level of study. This led to independent bodies such as the Higher Education Commission commenting that '*Postgraduate education is a forgotten part of the sector*' (Higher Education Commission, 2012:17). The Postgraduate Experience Project funded by HEFCE for the first time explored the expectations of applicants and students in, through and out of study and those of employers recruiting master's graduates. This session will report the findings from this groundbreaking research and demonstrate how through understanding the expectations of all stakeholders, their experience can be effectively managed and balanced.

1000 word blind paper

Setting the scene

There are two major issues facing Masters study (known as PGT hereafter) in the UK. Firstly, although the PGT market saw a dramatic expansion in the UK up until 2010, there has been a continuous decline in the overall PGT student numbers since 2011, most noticeably amongst UK and Overseas domiciled students (Millward and Creasey, 2013; HESA 2013a,b; Morgan 2013a; Morgan, 2014). The part-time study mode, traditionally dominated by UK domiciled students, and STEM disciplines have been greatly affected. Although intuitive reasons can be made to explain the decrease, including the lack of a viable funding scheme for UK students to fund their studies up until 2016 (Boorman et al., 2009; UUK, 2013), there has been limited research looking at applicant and student motivations for participating at PGT level and the barriers they face. Without this knowledge and understanding, it is challenging to develop practical strategies to reverse the decline.

Secondly, although the Higher Education Academy has undertaken valuable surveys for a number of years examining the masters and research postgraduate student experience, they occur near the end of a student's study journey. There has been limited research exploring the expectations of applicants, students in and through the student study journey. This led to the Higher Education

Commission commenting in 2012 that '*postgraduate education is a forgotten part of the sector*' (Higher Education Commission, 2012:17).

A number of organisations expressed concern about the future of postgraduate education in the UK including the Higher Education Commission, the 1994 Group, HEPI, the NUS and the Sutton Trust, and they called for further research to be undertaken. This led to the implementation of HEFCE's Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS) Phase 1 in November 2013 which funded 20 projects from a £25 million publicly-funded programme. The aim of Phase 1 was to test ways to support the progression into Master's education in England by working with universities and employers to stimulate the participation of applicants who would not have otherwise progressed to this level of study. The Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP) was one of the 20 projects funded and was the largest consortium comprising 11 universities (nine English [9E Group], one Welsh and one Scottish), which are geographically dispersed across the UK.

Aims and objectives

The overarching aims and objectives of PEP were constructed to maximise the sector's knowledge regarding the participation, progression and attainment of new PGT STEM students across the participating universities and employers. It aimed to provide an understanding of issues within each institution, and across the 9E Group, as well as giving a UK perspective through the participation of the Scottish and Welsh universities. PEP wanted to produce baseline data that would provide immediate insights into applicant and student behaviour and undertake practical research to provide practical outcomes that could help widen and increase the participation of all applicants and students in order to sustain the PGT market but especially UK domiciled.

Methodology

The research undertaken with applicants, students and employers comprised surveys (6 main surveys) and focus groups. Demographics variables were collected. All the questionnaires were designed to be created and undertaken using SurveyMonkey (online survey software). The surveys were executed using rigorous ethical procedures as laid down by the lead institution's ethics committee. All participating institutions were required to lodge the ethical approval for each survey with their relevant committee.

The surveys collected for the first time detailed information on:

- why applicants were considering postgraduate study;
- the barriers applicants and students faced entering, progressing and completing their studies;
- how and why different demographic groups chose their course and institutions;
- students concerns and anxiety levels regarding academic and non-academic issues;
- attitudes towards fee levels, level of prior study debt and the impact of a lack of access to funding;
- employers attitudes towards Masters level graduates and their opinion of the value of the skills obtained at this level.

The majority of the data collected was nominal. Descriptive statistics plus a range of appropriate statistical tests were undertaken (mainly frequencies and Chi Square tests) using the Statistical

Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare the difference in percentage between groups.

Key findings

The research highlighted that demographic variables such as domiciled status, social class, age and route into study were key factors in the participation, progression, and attainment at this level of study as were expected outcomes. For example, respondents from the top two social classes 1 and 2 were more likely to be second generation students, coming straight from university, funded by parents/guardians, studying full-time, knowing what to expect and less likely to work during their studies. Respondents in social classes 3 and below were more likely to be first generation, coming from work or another form of entry route, studying part-time, less likely to know what to expect and more likely to work alongside their studies. Added to this, UK domiciled respondents all reported substantially higher levels of previous study debt compared to their EU and OS counterparts.

PEP's data highlighted the complexity of the PGT student's life and their individual support requirements. It enabled each institution to obtain a better understanding of their student body therefore enabling them to provide targeted and inclusive support. It also enabled them to consider the employers perspective in the development of future course developments and importantly, help identify ways to effectively balance and manage the expectations and outcomes of all stakeholders.

Implications and impact

PEP made numerous recommendations about the sustainability of master's level study in the UK for different groups of participants and stakeholders. It also recommended further research on understanding applicant and student transition behaviours, financial issues and employability and product development especially amongst the newly graduate £9K a year English graduates who were not covered in the research. The Chair of the UK Council for Graduate Education described the work of PEP as '*Its legacy sits as one of the most comprehensive reviews of postgraduate taught student attitudes and ambitions and sits as a seminal study of this often overlooked sector of UK University's portfolios*'.

References

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