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Marketing postgraduate courses: education or employability? (0142)

Programme number: E12

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Research into students' motivations for undertaking postgraduate (PG) study presents mixed findings. Surveys dating from 1975 suggest interest in the subject as primary motivation (Ho et al 2012; Hesketh and Knight 1991). More recent research suggests enhancing employability is the key motivating factor (Daymon and Durkin 2013; Jepsen and Vehegyi 2011; Pratt et al 1999). The focus on employability is reflected in the increasing demand for courses providing direct employment benefits (Smith and Preece 2009). In the UK, the numbers of students enrolled on courses allied to subjects such as medicine, business and education have all increased. Marginson notes that in Australia too 'students show a preference for vocationally tagged courses in generalist vocational fields' (2009: 19).

This move towards the vocational represents a shift in the perception of the purpose of PG education by students, universities and employers. It is uncertain whether universities are creating, or responding, to a demand for vocationalism. This paper considers the role of HE institutions in promoting PG programmes to prospective students in order to ascertain if such marketing may construct a particular dominant discourse about the purpose of PG education. I apply a thematic analysis to publicly available information provided by a sample of a broad geographical and historical range of thirty UK HE institutions in relation to their PG programmes. The resulting analysis is contextualised alongside relevant UK government policy documents and an internationally-focused selection of academic literature. From this, the UK acts as a case study: parallels can be drawn between experiences here and in other countries, most notably Australia and the USA.

UK government policy documents portray PG education as primarily a private good. The review of PG education, *One Step Beyond* (2010) explains: 'Postgraduates are highly employable and on average earn more than individuals whose highest qualification is an undergraduate degree.' The '*Browne Report*' (2010) links the payment of PG tuition fees to students' future employment prospects: 'private benefits to individuals would be sufficient to generate investment'. Many universities market their courses in similar terms with a focus on 'short-term graduate employability' (Marginson 2009: 18). DeMontfort University advises potential students to 'join the 97% of our UK postgraduate students who are in further education or employment within six months of completing

their course, earning an average starting salary of over £33k.' Swansea University claims 'The skills and qualities you develop during your postgraduate degree will enhance your cv and help you stand out in a highly competitive graduate employment job market.' However, Marginson warns: 'It would be misleading to imply that the focus on short-term utilitarian outcomes has been imposed on unwilling universities,' (2009: 30).

A notable change this paper focuses upon is the institutional promotion of employment for all current students and not just those on Work Based Learning (WBL) programmes which maintain a focus upon the students' work role (Smith and Preece 2009). The University of Hull acknowledges 'Many full-time students also work part-time' and Loughborough University advises potential PG students 'One way of supplementing your income is to take a part-time or temporary job while studying' and provides a link to employment opportunities on campus. Institutions recognise financial pressures mean many PG students combine full-time study with part-time work. A 2007 study suggests 62% of students work part-time while on full-time Master's courses (Martin and McCabe 2007).

This promotion of combining work and study may represent a degree of institutional pragmatism; it also supports the construction of PG education as vocationally focused. Being in employment is promoted as a way for students to fund their studies; and also to gain relevant skills and experience. Durham University tells prospective PG students 'Part-time work while you're at university isn't only a good way to help pay for your studies, it's also a very valuable aspect to add to a cv and a great way to gain the skills future employers are looking for.' In a study of Chinese students studying abroad Zhen notes respondents were aware of demonstrating the accomplishment of 'soft' and 'hard' skills when marketing themselves to employers; one student notes: 'If you just go back with an overseas qualification but no working experience, I don't think that'll give you any advantage' (Zhen 2012: 11). The importance of gaining skills through employment is recognised in the classroom: WBL programmes are reported as having influenced traditional learning and teaching approaches (Smith and Preece 2009).

There is a blurring of the boundaries between work and education as the taught content on many traditional academic PG courses moves away from a particular body of knowledge towards general employment skills. Students taking a Master's degree in Chemistry from the University of Glasgow can develop transferable skills in project management and team working; preparing and presenting oral and poster presentations; and problem solving. At the University of Manchester, students studying for a MSc in the School of Earth, Atmospheric and Environmental Science will be taught a wide range of transferable skills 'including numeracy, communication skills, work load and

research planning, problem solving...'. This arguably illustrates 'the dissolution of the boundaries between academic rigour and corporate relevance' which may cause tension as 'academic problems may differ considerably from those in the workplace,' (Daymon and Durkin 2013: 598).

In marketing material, the emphasis on practical skills is often promoted because it is considered more immediately valuable to student-customers (Daymon and Durkin 2013: 605) and reflects 'the vocational and professional demands of [students'] current or future roles' (Pratt et al 1999: 595). Academic skills such as criticality are down-played and students who become solely concerned with skills acquisition can lose a capacity for criticism (Marginson 2009). Ironically, as Daymon and Durkin note: 'critical thinking ... appears as the nexus of higher education, industry and the knowledge economy,' (2013: 598). Academics may lose professional autonomy if their role is reduced to 'passive trainer' (Smith and Preece 2009: 181) and the role of universities in the formation of knowledge maybe negated (Marginson 2009: 30). Promoting rather than challenging a discourse of employability reinforces students' instrumental motivations.

## References

### Academic literature

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Zhen, L. (2012) 'A critical account of employability construction through the eyes of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK', in *Journal of Education and Work*, iFirst Article.

### **University websites**

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate/careers/opportunities/>

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-study/postgraduate-study.aspx>

<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/postgraduate/careers/>

<http://www2.hull.ac.uk/student/money.aspx>

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/financing/>

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduate/taughtdegrees/courses/atoz/course/?code=09162&pg=2>

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/chemistry/>

### **Policy Documents**

BIS (2010) *One Step Beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education*

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/corporate/docs/P/10-704-one-step-beyond-postgraduate-education.pdf>

Browne, J. (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/>