

Pathways beyond graduation: exploring the characteristics of those who progress to postgraduate study, and the barriers perceived by those who don't

Hancock Sally, Wakeling Paul, Hampden-Thompson Gillian, *University of York, UK*

## **Background to the study**

The economic, social and cultural value of postgraduate study is increasingly recognised by a growing and varied group of stakeholders, including students, industry and policy-makers. Individual pathways to postgraduate study in the UK are, however, poorly understood. A number of organisations have called for more research about postgraduate education to be conducted (e.g. 1994 Group 2012; British Academy 2012; HEC 2012; Milburn 2012; NUS 2012; Lindley and Machin 2013).

We know that a minority of postgraduate students begin their course immediately following their undergraduate degree (House 2010; Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013; HEFCE 2013a, 2013b). The tendency of graduate surveys to collect data soon after completion of the undergraduate degree (e.g. the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE), which takes place six months after graduation) means that we know comparatively little about graduates' activities over subsequent years. As a result, the prior activities of current postgraduate students are largely unknown by universities, while the trajectories of graduates who don't return to postgraduate study are even more difficult to trace.

The poor quality of data on both pathways beyond graduation, and pathways to postgraduate study, is of particular pertinence to debates around widening participation at the postgraduate level. Recent research by Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson (2013) demonstrated that even after academic attainment is controlled for, concerning inequalities in the transition to postgraduate study remain. The following observations are of particular note:

- ◆ men are more likely than women to progress to both postgraduate taught and research courses;
- ◆ certain ethnic groups are less likely to progress (notably Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi groups);
- ◆ graduates of more selective universities typically have higher rates of progression;
- ◆ graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain underrepresented in the postgraduate population

(Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013)

The surveys commissioned for this project were therefore intended to address the current deficit of data, and generate a better understanding of *who* progresses to postgraduate, and *why*.

## **Method**

Two surveys, intended for distinct populations, are being conducted.

### ***The Alumni survey***

The Alumni survey, known also as the 'Pathways beyond Graduation' survey, targeted all UK-domiciled alumni from the six institutions, graduating in 2009 and 2012. Both cohorts were subject to the £3,000 annual undergraduate tuition fee (with the 2009 group being the first students to pay these fees). The contrasting labour market experience of the two groups was also of interest. The 2009 group were approximately four years post-graduation at the time of the survey; a recent study by HEFCE found that 75% of those who progress to postgraduate study do so within four years of completing their undergraduate degree (HEFCE 2013a). The 2012 cohort graduated approximately 18 months prior. We hypothesised that these students would be comparatively less established in a career, and thus likely to be considering the benefits of postgraduate study.

The survey was administered online for 4 weeks, and alumni were incentivised to participate with guaranteed low-value rewards for the first 150 returns per institution, and a close-of-survey 'star prize' draw per institution. The survey attracted an overall response rate of 9.2% (n = 3136).

The survey collected data on: personal characteristics; academic background; activities since graduation, including applications to, offers for, and participation in postgraduate study; recent employment history; and, future plans. These data are presently being analysed, and will allow us to investigate a number of issues associated with access to postgraduate study, as identified earlier. Of note, we will be able to consider the relationship between the Widening Participation Performance Indicators employed at the undergraduate level, and postgraduate access.

### ***The Taught Postgraduates survey***

The Taught Postgraduates - or, 'Pathways to Postgraduate Study'- survey will run twice: for UK-domiciled taught postgraduate (PGT) students in 2013/14 and 2014/15 across the six institutions.

This survey will provide an in-depth understanding of current PGT students, with sections covering: personal characteristics; academic background; current postgraduate course; activities since graduation; recent employment history; and, future plans.

Contrasting the two PGT cohorts, we will be able to observe, in particular, any evidence of financial and other barriers - including work and family commitments - being lessened for 2014/15 students, some of whom will have benefited directly from the Postgraduate Support Scheme. In addition, we will pay close attention to evidence of differences in motivations, levels of information, and concern for employability across the two cohorts.

This survey will be hosted online for 4 weeks, and follows a similar, but slightly reduced, incentive system as the alumni survey to encourage participation.

### **Issues for discussion**

We will share preliminary findings from the two surveys, with a discussion to consider findings on the following themes:

- ◆ the activities of alumni, including intentions to study at postgraduate level and the perceived facilitating factors and barriers underlying the realisation of this intention
- ◆ the factors associated with immediate or delayed entry to postgraduate study
- ◆ the characteristics of current PGT students, including recent employment history
- ◆ the expectations, motivations and information-sets of current PGT students
- ◆ the factors perceived by current PGT students to have enabled progression to postgraduate study, and, how perceived barriers were overcome

Implications for policy and future research will be addressed.

## References

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