

Collaborative Innovations for Widening Participation in Post Graduate Taught Programmes: Addressing the Needs of those 'Least Likely'

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Overview

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 and 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 influence choice and possibilities.

The specific focus of our paper is that of collaborative innovations in the design and delivery of postgraduate taught study. Hannan and Silver (2000: 10) note how the term innovation in higher education has generally been understood as 'a planned or deliberate process of introducing change, directed towards (but not necessarily achieving) improvements or solving or alleviating some perceived problem'. Such change may, for example, be associated with outcomes such as student satisfaction or in the case of this study, the participation rates of those least likely to progress to postgraduate study. Yet despite this definition, innovation is rather an opaque concept. Synonyms for innovation include novelty, invention and revolution yet many innovations are actually the transfer of practice from one setting to another. In such cases, innovation may be new practice in one discipline or institution and yet seen as outdated in another. Further, one cannot presume that any improvements desired from innovation are not going to create an inferior or poorer outcome in other areas. The desire to improve participation rates for certain categories of student may for example, lead to compromises in other areas of provision. Further, as Hannan and Silver (2000) note, when the term innovation is used it is now frequently associated with the use of new technologies. This is perhaps even more the case with developments across the past decade creating a highly interactive digital world (see for example, Sharples et al., 2013).

When we turn to the concept of collaboration, we similarly face a set of conundrums that require disentangling particularly in the marketised, competitive individualism of higher education. Brown with Cassaro (2013: 1) note how the reform 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 for student recruitment. Alongside competition, the notion of collaboration can appear to be an anachronism designed to create a false amelioration to a dominant trend. However, collaboration, both as an ethic and, more prosaically, a survival mechanism arising from the strength of the many remains a strong imperative. The evidence for this is, again, less researched but is highlighted both in respect of working practices across this consortium and more broadly in polls such as that conducted by the Guardian newspaper (February 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education->

network/poll/2013/feb/27/universities-competition-collaboration-communicating-value). This indicated that, through the pooling of ideas, 71% of respondents believed that collaboration would enable universities to thrive in the current environment.

Our paper focuses on how we are developing collaborative innovations in specific ways. Our approach was conceived as a response to research data that highlights how participation in postgraduate taught programmes is strongly impacted by the following factors:

- ◆ In the year after graduation 21 per cent of graduates from three year courses were engaged in some form of further study (Purcell et al, 2013).
- ◆ In terms of the graduates' social and educational background, social class appears to have little influence, whereas whether or not both parents hold a degree does associate with further study on Masters' degree courses or a PhD by Futuretrack graduates (Purcell et al, 2013).
- ◆ For all types of PG study, rates of transition are correlated to high and low average HEI tariff scores and differences based on sex and POLAR quintiles were most evident in terms of transition to PG research and other PG (HEFCE, 2013)
- ◆ Most students begin postgraduate study after a long gap and are themselves in employment. This means that many students are both at career building and also family and life-building stages with associated commitments on time and finances (HEFC, 2013).
- ◆ On the employer side, size of business affects an employer's ability to support and release staff for further training and development, with SMEs particularly concerned about these issues.
- ◆ There has been a decline in part-time study, particularly for UK-domiciled taught postgraduates (HEFCE, 2013).
- ◆ Mature students are more likely to stay in the same subject area for taught masters and indeed more generally young transition rates were higher than mature rates for all PG types and degree classifications (except for those with First Class degrees) (HEFCE, 2013).

As we detail, the development of innovation in respect of the diversity of those who are 'least likely' requires correlation with discipline and institutional markets, as well as creative engagement with some of the radical pedagogies that have informed undergraduate access programmes.

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