

Widening Participation through Taught Postgraduate Scholarships

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Introduction

This paper reports on a project proposing solutions to falling Home demand for postgraduate taught (PGT) study and the disproportionate impact on social mobility. Recent reports (such as the Smith Review (2010) and Alan Milburn's Social Mobility Report (2013)) voiced concerns about the future of postgraduate study: the impact of current finance routes and reforms to undergraduate funding, employers' concerns around access to the professions and social mobility constraints leading to access defined by affordability. It is not known whether the loss of Home PGT numbers was due to lack of demand, lack of opportunity or an absence of programmes prospective students wanted to study. The first cohort of undergraduate students paying the higher fee levels will graduate in 2015 and so solving the fair progression issue to postgraduate study is urgent (1994 Group, 2012)

Hypothesis

With booming international demand for the postgraduate offer in the UK it is alarming that UK domiciled and EU registrations are falling. It is hypothesised that the aspiration to higher level study exists in equal measure but some UK/EU students face barriers to participation. It is important our professionals come from all walks of life and talented graduates who otherwise wouldn't have the option to proceed with their education are helped so society can benefit from their talents. It was contended that if Universities acted together to provide the opportunity for those Home/EU students with widening participation (WP) backgrounds the demand for higher study could be evidenced.

Method

Six Russell Group universities (York, Leeds, Sheffield, Warwick, Manchester and Newcastle) co-operated to pilot a large number of new PGT scholarships (350) targeted at WP groups. This tested the institutions' appetite to provide matching funding, develop criteria and offer scholarships and to test whether prospective applicants who were eligible and met the WP criteria would be sufficiently motivated to apply for 2014 entry. The consortium received £2.9M from HEFCE and, with matching funds, increased to a total of over £5M. This was an experimental multi-institution co-operative intervention to demonstrate demand and propose solutions to fair access to PGT study.

Many reports but no policy

The number of UK domiciled and EU applications for PGT study rose until 2009/10 but then fell in both 2010/11 and 2011/12. The number of applications submitted by UK domiciled applicants decreased by 15% over the two years (BIS Research Paper No.154, December 2013.) As demand for places faltered, it was increasingly clear only students who could self-fund their academic ambitions pursued higher level study.

A report on 'The social composition and future earnings of postgraduates' (Sutton Trust, 2010) found that 30% of university students educated at private schools were in postgraduate education six months after graduating ,

compared with 23% of state educated pupils. The ‘Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance’ (Browne, 2010) recommended that participation in higher education be monitored to discover whether the cost of undergraduate education had an impact on the proportion entering postgraduate study.

‘One Step Beyond: making the most of postgraduate education’ (BIS, 2010) by Adrian Smith, recommended that access to postgraduate study be investigated further and impact of financial barriers to access be highlighted. ‘Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge’ (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2013) showed that postgraduate courses were increasingly common as an entry route into the professions and that there was no system of financial support similar to that for undergraduate entry.

We know from ‘Transition to higher degrees across the UK: An analysis of national, international and individual differences’ (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013) that there are inequalities in transition to postgraduate study. ‘Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice’ Higher Education Academy/NUS 2013) also shows that clear, accessible information and advice is key to decision making for prospective students.

‘Exploring Student Demand for Postgraduate Study’ (BIS research paper 154, 2013) reports the recent growth in postgraduates registering in the UK has been driven by large numbers of students from outside the EU. Applications from UK domiciled students have substantially reduced. A perceived threat was noted to WP in postgraduate study for those from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

We don’t yet have a detailed understanding of what motivates people to further study, what the underlying demand or aspirations are, why some institutions are more successful in recruiting than others, or how we can conceive WP indicators suitable for postgraduates.

Absence of certainty over the meaning of fair access at postgraduate level

Initial eligibility had to be set by the institutions. Applicants had to intend to study at one of the six institutions on a one-year full-time or two-year part-time PGT programme beginning September 2014. They should be a UK or EU student. These awards were not open to those who already held a qualification at master’s or doctoral level or those being funded by another body. None of the institutions entertained a merit based criteria and did not set a lower contextual offer. Each institution who participated in the scholarship offer developed a set of WP criteria for defining eligibility. A common list of factors emerged, although no institution used the whole of the list. Where two institutions shared the same factor, the qualifying measure differed, showing that in the absence of further evidence no common view exists. Some of the measures that institutions wanted to use were not available to them or unverifiable. Factors used included financial criteria, deprivation data, socio-economic classification, care background or carer responsibilities, and will be described in detail.

Demand for Postgraduate Study from those who face the biggest barriers

The response was overwhelming (see Table 1.). Despite strict eligibility and WP criteria, the consortium received over four times the number of complete and eligible applications than it had WP scholarships to offer. The group which faces the greatest barriers to further study are absent because they lack the financial means, not because they lack the ability or ambition.

Partner:	Number of scholarships available	Number of applications submitted to 9th June 2014
A	60	334
B	50	325
C	40	159
D	90	302
E	50	165
F	60	380
G	350	1,665

Table 1: Demand for WP Scholarships

References

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