The need to understand student choice in providing information, advice and guidance in making the most of Postgraduate Support Scheme

Vorley Tim[1], Banahene Louise[2], [1]*University of Sheffield, UK,* [2]*University of Leeds, UK*

Introduction

It is widely recognised that Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that is timely and good quality is vital in addressing the needs of a diverse range of learners. Whilst there is a great deal of research around the IAG needs of prospective undergraduate (UG) students, less is known about the needs of taught postgraduate (PGT) students. However, there is an understanding that as with the transformation of outreach and WP to support social mobility at UG level the same must take place for the PGT population.

IAG is crucial in forming student choice and has individual, organisational and societal benefits (Hutchinson and Jackson, 2007). The absence of a systematic approach to this could create barriers in access to learning and in turn social equity, and could also affect retention and student success. This paper will present initial findings and lessons from the IAG strand of the PSS project in the context of the UK WP agenda, with a view to distil findings and lessons that are relevant more broadly.

Contextual Review & Method

Information as a concept can be explored through several disciplines and applied in diverse ways. In particular, the field of information science provides a broad interdisciplinary basis which, beyond the storage and retrieval of information, also considers the subjectivity of information needs. This is closely related to decision-making which usually involves information-seeking to some degree. More recently, application of insights from psychology and behavioural economics have elucidated principles or effects (such as the "framing effect") that explain observed behavioural patterns (e.g. "loss aversion") that cannot be explained by traditional economic models. Behavioural economics offers a modification to the model of a purely rational decision-maker, by recognising that our capacity for rationality is bounded and that decision-making is in part characterised by non-rational behaviour.

Wilson (1997) categorises the influences on information behaviour into three spheres: personal (or psychological/behavioural), social, and environmental. The interplay between these spheres shapes information-seeking behaviour and decision making. For example, personal characteristics (whether a person is a satisficer or maximiser) may impact upon the thoroughness of information searches; social pressures may reduce opportunities (via issues relating to gender, wealth or family background); and environmental factors (such as proximity to home) also have a bearing on choices and decision-making.

In a recent advisory study for HEFCE, a conceptual framework was developed that summarises a behavioural approach to understanding information use and decision-making. This framework illustrates the ways in which

people access and process information and how preferences are formed and acted upon. Importantly, this framework recognises that the outcome of people's decisions constitutes a part of the social and institutional context, and that those decisions may therefore change that context.

Decision-making in relation to HE constitutes what may be described as a poorly structured problem, because typically it involves too much or too little information, non-specific goals, unclear measures of success, and a shortage of time or attention. It cannot be assumed that prospective HE students make rational judgements about the programmes at different institutions, since decisions are rarely the result of fully formed preferences. The nature of HE choice is complex and subjective, therefore a 'one size fits all' model is unlikely to be appropriate to the provision IAG.

Method

The IAG strand team started with a review of the HEFCE research and related articles around information sources used by PGT students.

The team then carried out interviews with practitioners in six institutions. The practitioners were all experienced professionals involved in IAG for PGT WP students. They included academic staff, staff in marketing, outreach and student education. The interviews reflected on the process and methods used to target IAG at PGT WP students, and captured prescriptive data on how it was delivered and the challenges of doing so. Interviews were transcribed and compared to identify commonalities, differences and examples of best practice.

Testing IAG interventions involved setting up a model with templates which could be adapted by the six universities. A single evaluation framework was employed to ensure that there is a sufficient evidence base to assess the impact.

Findings

This paper will focus on the following two areas:

1. Review trends in IAG amongst practitioners in delivery with particular reference to communication (messenger effects)
2. Assess the impact of successful IAG interventions for UG students when piloted with prospective PGT students

This paper will report trends in IAG for prospective PGT students from a practitioners' perspective. Initial findings showed that there was often an absence of a systematic approach to targeting UG WP students. In addition, staff understood that as with prospective UG students, IAG must be delivered by a range of messengers and be accompanied with work to develop confidence and cultural capital. The paper will argue that, in the context of HE, the real challenge is in the individualisation of IAG, in order to support prospective WP

PGT students to make better informed decisions, for the benefit of the individual, the university and the labour market.

References

HEFCE (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need?

Hutchinson and Jackson (2007) Cross-government Review of Information, Advice & Guidance Services for Adults, CeGS, University of Derby

Wilson, T. D. (1997). Information Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Perspective. Information Processing & Management, 33(4): 551–572.