

About PEP

The Postgraduate Experience Project was one of 20 projects funded through HEFCE’s £25m Phase 1 Postgraduate Support Scheme designed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England. A description of PEP can be found in Briefing Paper 1. This briefing paper reports the findings of employers’ perception of value of a Master’s qualification and their expectations of the skills a PGT graduate does/should provide business and industry. The Leitch Review highlighted the importance of postgraduates in driving innovation, entrepreneurship, management and leadership in business (Leitch 2006), but it is unclear whether the growth in PGT education has been as a direct result of employer demand or whether employers are merely taking the opportunity to recruit from a pool of higher qualified graduates. The Employer’s Surveys aimed to explore this area.

The Employers’ Surveys

The survey aimed to identify whether companies in STEM areas employ postgraduate and Master’s students and if so, then why. A request was sent to 3500 small to large companies across all the sectors, using data supplied by Dunn and Bradstreet. The survey was completed online during June 2015. It was problematic engaging employers and as a result, the sample size for the main survey was small with only 10 respondents. However, their detailed answers have been used to create case studies. A further short survey consisting of only 8 questions was sent to small to medium companies (10-250 employees) and this obtained 66 responses. The findings for both surveys are reported below.

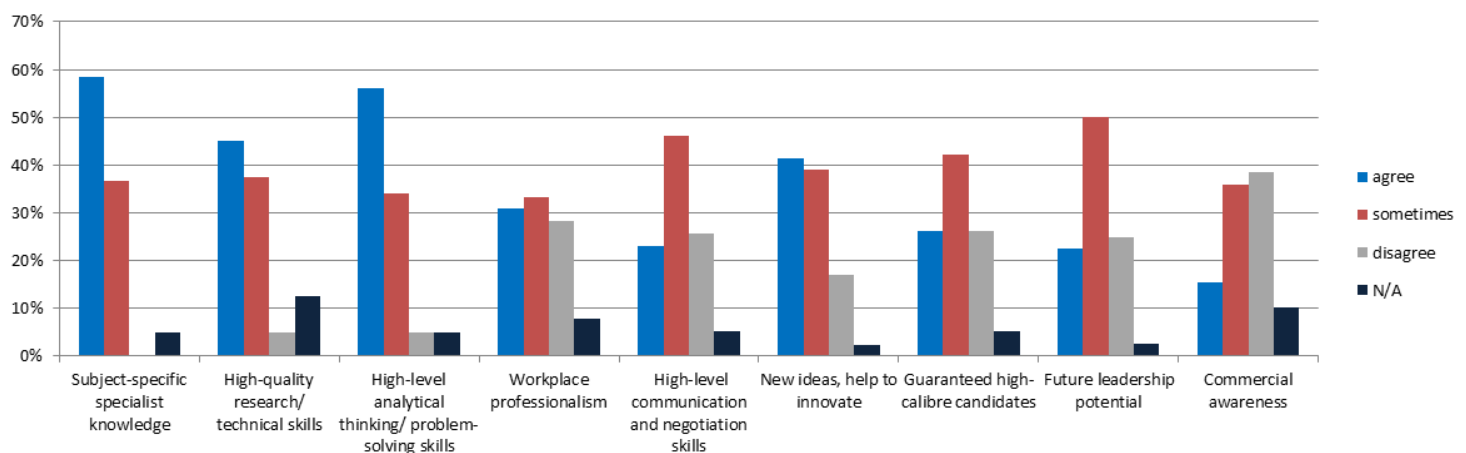
The short survey

Of the 66 small and medium companies from across the different sectors who participated in the survey, approximately 80% were UK owned commercial organisations. Of all the companies, 65.6% stated that they did employ Master’s qualified graduates however, 34.4% did not.

Small to medium companies that did employ Masters level qualified graduates

The companies that did employ Master’s qualified employees stated that they did this in order to obtain specific skills such as ‘subject-specific specialist knowledge’, ‘high-level analytical thinking/problem-solving skills’, ‘high-quality research/technical skills’, and ‘new ideas, help to innovate’. The responses are listed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Do you employ Master Graduates for the following skills?



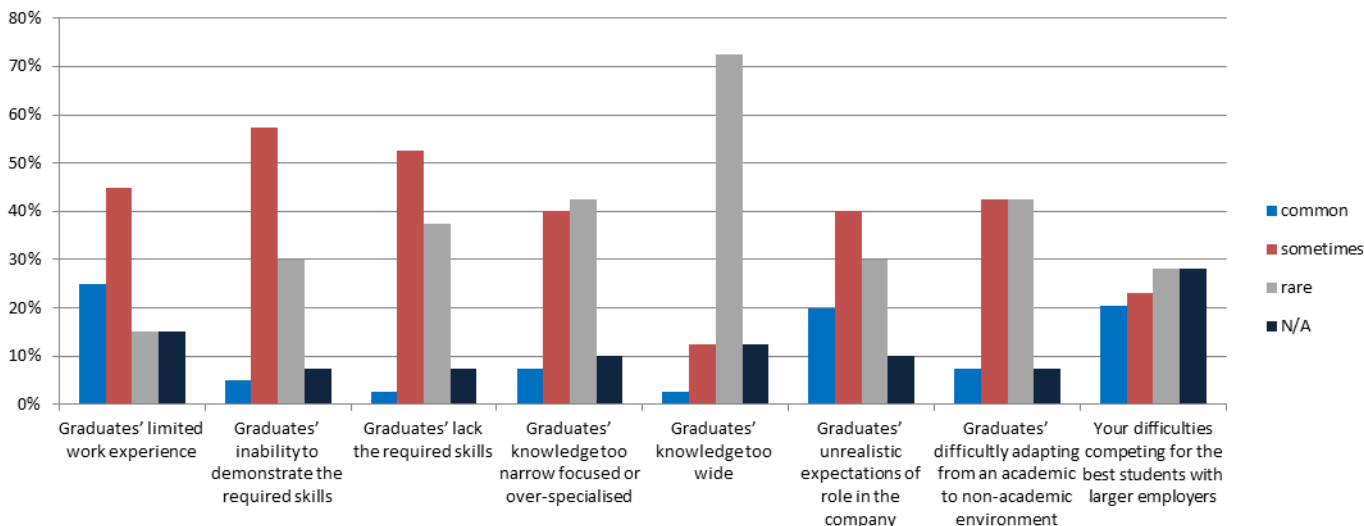
Commercial awareness, leadership potential and workplace professionalism were not considered essential attributes. Interestingly, a study by Connor et.al on behalf of the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) for the Department of Business Innovation and Skills highlighted that although employers did value the analytical and problem solving skills with which a Master’s degree provided students, it was no indicator of leadership potential or work-wisdom, which were two of the key skills they were looking for in Master and Doctorate graduates (Connor et.al. 2010).

Companies were also asked if they had experienced any issues employing postgraduates The most common issues were ‘limited work experience’ and ‘unrealistic expectations of their role in the company’ (see Figure 2). The Entry to Study Survey which was completed by 1,235 PGT STEM entrants across 11 UK universities found that for many respondents, a major motivation for embarking on a Master’s level course was to obtain work experience and develop the specialist skills that employers needed (see Briefing Paper 3).

‘I looked for work after my bachelors but there was a lot of competition and they have really high requirements, they want experience, and this and that, so I thought having a master would equip me with those skills.....give me something extra’.

However, what came out of the focus groups across 9E Group universities was a frustration by some respondents that there had not been as much practical work experience and networking opportunities as originally hoped or they felt had been promised.

Figure 2 Have you experienced any issues with masters' graduates as an employer?



Companies that did not employ Master's level qualified employees

The most cited reason for the 34.4% of the small to medium companies for not employing Master's qualified employees was 'it is not relevant for our business'.

Large survey Case studies

The responses of the 10 large, medium and small companies who completed the large survey were analysed and compared. Within each company grouping size, the responses were very similar. The responses from a company from each grouping are reported immediately below. In the last year, the number of employees increased in the large company, decreased in the medium company, and broadly remained the same in the small company. For the **large company**, the higher level of a qualification **did not** equate with a higher skills base. Having people with a Master's qualification was **not important**; 'Working experience is a priority, not their education'. For the **medium company**, the higher level of a qualification **did** equate with a higher skills base. Having people with a Master's qualification was deemed **essential**; 'To ensure the key people have required skills and are keen on continuous development'. For the **small company**, the higher level of a qualification **did** equate with a higher skills base. Having people with a Master's qualification was **not important**; 'Creativity is key for most roles (only 2 senior managers, including me, have MAs)'.

Besides the three employers' specific perspectives on the postgraduate value for their businesses, some common findings were found across all 10 companies who completed the survey regarding their attitudes towards recruitment practices, company collaboration and engagement with universities. For all the companies, previous work experience was the most important factor in their shortlisting criteria. They stated that work-based experience as part of a qualification (at either undergraduate or postgraduate level) was important or very important. Seven of the companies stated that they felt it was very important for business and industry input into the curriculum design of university courses in order to keep them up to date and shape work-ready students. The other three companies felt that it was sometimes important. However, none of them were involved in this activity. They felt that the priorities of higher education institutions, when educating students in a subject field, should be to design and deliver courses that meet industry needs. None of the companies sat on industrial advisory groups or were involved in knowledge partnership transfer or supervised dissertation students. When asked how they intended achieving future skills requirements for their company, five said they intended offering apprenticeships and training with an external provider and three would undertake in-house training. Only one company said that that they would recruit postgraduates to meet their skill requirements.

Issues for further consideration

This briefing paper has highlighted a number of areas that universities could develop to enhance their undergraduate and PGT courses. They include providing more opportunities for the student to obtain relevant course-based work experience and working with business and industry more closely to develop course content that is current and applicable.

Reference

Connor, H., Forbes, P. and Docherty, D. (2010) *Talent Fishing- what businesses want from postgraduates*, London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

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