

About PEP

The Postgraduate Experience Project was one of 20 projects funded through HEFCE’s £25m Phase 1 Postgraduate Support Scheme that was designed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England. PEP was the largest consortium funded by HEFCE and comprised of 11 universities (9 English [9E Group], 1 Welsh and 1 Scottish) which are geographically dispersed across the UK. The collaborative partners included the universities of: Brighton, Coventry, Edinburgh, Lincoln, Manchester Metropolitan, Portsmouth, Plymouth, South Wales, Teesside and Wolverhampton. Business and industry leaders and higher educational specialists were also involved. The project (entitled ‘*Investigating the expectations and attitudes towards postgraduate taught (PGT) Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) study, and post study outcomes from the perspective of students, universities and employers to support and sustain PGT growth in the UK: A collaborative project*’) started in January 2014 and reported the majority of its headline findings at a National Dialogical Conference at Kingston University on 14th and 15th July 2015. This briefing paper provides an overview of the project. The final report containing the detailed findings will be published late October 2015.

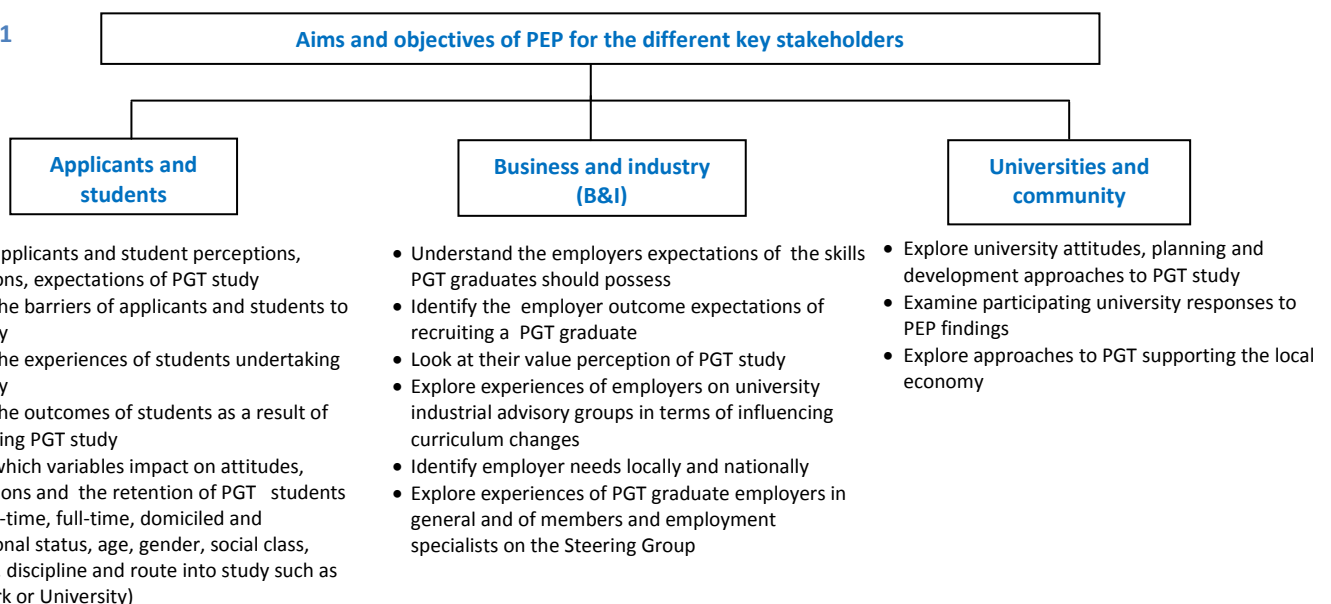
Aims and objectives

The project’s overarching aims and objectives were constructed to maximise the sector’s knowledge regarding the participation, progression and success of new PGT STEM students across the participating universities and the non-institutional stakeholders. It aimed to provide an understanding of issues within each institution, and across the 9E Group, as well as a UK perspective through the participation of the Scottish and Welsh universities. PEP wanted to produce baseline data that would provide immediate insights into applicant and student behaviour as well as creating a template for other institutions wishing to undertake their own comparative research. Ultimately, the aim was to undertake practical research to provide practical outcomes that could help sustain the PGT market. The aims and objectives were to:

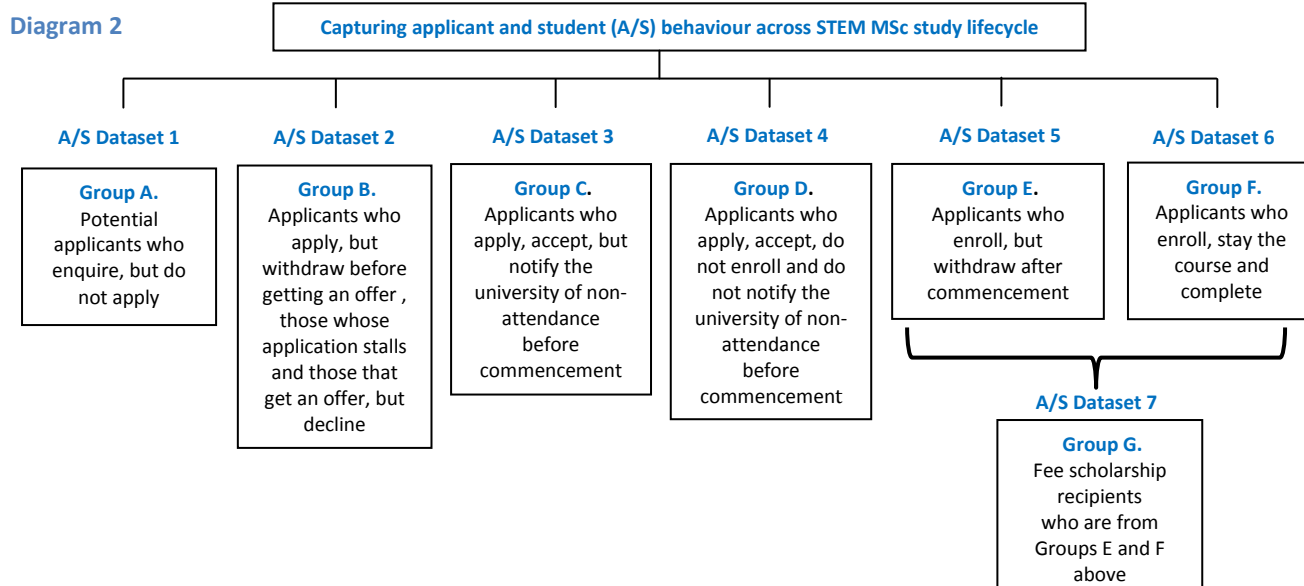
- Identify the expectations and attitudes of applicants and new PGT students and ascertain motivations and drivers for undertaking PGT study;
- Identify employers’ perception of value and expectations of the skills a PGT graduate can/should provide business and industry;
- Identify the outcome expectations of obtaining a PGT qualification for the student and employer;
- Identify the financial issues relating to participation and successful progression in PGT study;
- Explore which variables impact upon attitudes, expectations and the retention of PGT students (e.g. part-time, full-time, domiciled and generational status, age, gender, social class, ethnicity, discipline and route into study such as from work or university);
- Offer a range of PEP fee scholarships to determine if access to different levels of financial support impacts on participation;
- Track the retention of the PEP scholarship students (both FT and PT) to identify any barriers to achievement (e.g. level of fees/accrued debt, difficulties in coping with the workload or understanding the material);
- Explore the destinations, outcomes and benefits of PEP scholarship students 6 months on from graduating.

Diagram 1 below highlights PEP’s aims and objectives for each key stakeholder.

Diagram 1



Applicant and student behaviour on STEM MSc courses was collected via the datasets highlighted in diagram 2. The activities undertaken in order to achieve this are listed under Diagram 2.



Data collection activities for applicants and students

Fee scholarship recipients were required to participate in activities 1-7 as part of their scholarship acceptance conditions in order to obtain a continuous dataset from a set group. To encourage the engagement of all other students in the data collection activities 1-5, a set number of Amazon vouchers were assigned to each 9E university. Vouchers were then randomly allocated to completers. All non-scholarship respondents participating in the focus groups received an Amazon voucher.

- 1) **Non-Enrolment Survey for Groups A-D:** Each group was sent a short survey that listed a wide ranging number of reasons for not pursuing an application or taking the application to the enrolment stage.
- 2) **Entry to Study Survey for Groups E and F:** This was circulated for completion in late September and early October. The survey asked questions about prior education, motivations for undertaking a PGT course, previous and current learning expectations, any study issues and post study expectations. This is the only activity the Scottish and Welsh universities participated in.
- 3) **Withdrawal Survey Post Enrolment for Group F:** The group was sent a short survey that listed a wide ranging number of reasons for withdrawing post enrolment.
- 4) **Focus Groups for Groups F and G:** The semi-structured questionnaire for the focus groups was constructed using the findings from the Entry to Study Survey.
- 5) **Finance Survey for Groups F and G:** This survey was circulated late May/early June and asked questions regarding levels of prior and current study debt, attitudes towards debt and its impact on study and viable funding options.
- 6) **End of course survey for Groups F and G:** The 2015 Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey responses of STEM students (completed by these groups from the participating PEP institutions) have been used for analysis to avoid yet another survey having to be completed by these groups.
- 7) **DHLE data and interview for Group G:** Completion of the DHLE data will be analysed and an interview undertaken 6 months after completion (Feb 2016).
- 8) **Integrated Survey for UG students:** This survey was an addition to ascertain motivations for doing an UG Master's degree.

Data collection activities for business/industry and universities

- 9) **Employer's Survey:** Small to large employers' opinions were collected via a short survey and case studies.
- 10) **University and Community:** The findings were discussed at each university via their Institutional Working Group which was set up as part of the project to coordinate the research and respond to the findings. Each university held its own Dialogical Conference to discuss the findings at an institutional level and to provide relevant responses through the development of practical initiatives.

Briefing Papers

A series of briefing papers have been produced to provide the headline findings from the activities listed above. They are available at: <http://www.postgradexperience.org/>

Briefing Paper 1: Introduction to PEP

Briefing Paper 2: PEP scholarships

Briefing Paper 3: Motivations for undertaking STEM PGT study

Briefing Paper 4: Funding of STEM PGT study

Briefing Paper 5: Reasons for non-enrolment into PGT study

Briefing Paper 6: Study debt and future funding

Briefing paper 7: Support requirements

Briefing paper 8: Learning and teaching

Briefing paper 9: Integrated degrees

Briefing Paper 10: Employer's attitudes

Briefing paper 12: UK GrADS initiative

Briefing paper 12: Future challenges

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