

# Briefing Paper No.2: PEP Scholarships

## Postgraduate Experience Project

### About PEP

The Postgraduate Experience Project was one of 20 projects funded through HEFCE's £25m Phase 1 Postgraduate Support Scheme which was designed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England. A description of PEP can be found in Briefing Paper 1. The focus of this briefing paper is to explain the rationale for the PEP scholarships and the allocation method adopted. The final report containing the detailed findings will be published late October 2015.

### Context of the PEP scholarships

One strand of the project in understanding the expectations and experiences of PGT STEM applicants and students was to track a group who had received a PEP scholarship (Group G- see Briefing Paper 1) from the admissions stage right through to 6 months post study across 9 English universities (9E Group). The scholarships had three broad intentions:

- To obtain and analyse a significant dataset across the various applicant/student progression points in the student journey;
- To explore whether various levels of funding impacted on the decision making and enrolment processes;
- To increase participation amongst those applicants who ordinarily would not have been able to participate in PGT study immediately, or at all, and whether the provision of scholarships could help in the sustainability of a university's PGT market.

### Target Group

The PEP scholarships across the 9E Group were targeted at British citizens who were resident in the UK and lived or worked 'local' to the university to which they were applying. The rationale for this approach was as a result of the substantive decline of this group in PGT participation in recent years. Applicants who already held a Master's degree or doctorate were excluded. A clear legal rationale was provided as part of the guidance notes to applicants by the lead university's legal team. The scholarships would be randomly allocated amongst the eligible applicants for fairness and transparency. The scholarships would be equally targeted between alumni and non-alumni applicants. The applicants' expectations and experience of the application process were carefully managed.

### Type of scholarships

The PEP scholarships were for fee discounts, rather than living costs, so direct comparisons could be made more effectively between students in identifying *if* and *how* the fee element (and different levels of fee support) contributed to participation, progression and success at PGT level. Each 9E university was allocated 40 fee scholarships consisting of 15 x 100% and 15 x 60% to be divided equally between full and part-time modes of study. A further 10 x £1000 were available for full-time mode. For those universities who offered alumni discounts, this discount was added to the scholarship. Across the 9E Group, there were 360 fee scholarships available. The marketing for the PEP scholarships started across the 9E Group in April 2014 and continued through until September of the same year. Various methods were used by the 9E Group to advertise them including: the university website, PG admissions days, alumni newsletters, flyers and targeted emails.

### Allocation of scholarships

The project wanted to obtain from the scholarship recipients valid data that could be used to make positive and practical changes 'on the ground' as well as providing a robust and accurate snapshot of the postgraduate taught landscape within each university. To achieve this each English university identified 7 MSc courses they wished to target in accordance with PEP's guidelines. Courses at each of the 9E Group were selected on previous admissions figures. It was important to select courses that had recruited 'home' students in previous years in order to attract eligible applications. Each course was allocated a set of scholarships (1x full fee FT; 1x 60% fee FT; 1x full fee PT; 1x 60% PT; £1000 for FT) totalling 35. The remaining 5 scholarships would be randomly allocated across all 7 courses. By aiming a set of scholarships across a course, rather than the 40 scholarships randomly offered across the entire university's STEM offering, it was hoped valid and viable quantitative and qualitative data would be provided. Applicants had to hold an offer for one of the courses before applying for a scholarship. There was concern that as the scholarships were STEM based (excluding psychology) and traditionally male dominated, this could result in females not benefitting as greatly as males in the application and allocation process. In an attempt to reduce this concern and any impact gender domination could have on the research findings, the 9E Group were asked to select courses where a gender balance could be achieved as part of the process; although there was acknowledgement that this could be problematic. The 9E Group agreed that if after the allocation of scholarship sets there was gender domination then the non-set could be used to counter balance it.

### Applications

Only 3 of the 9E universities received enough applications to offer the £1000 scholarships. This was due to the 7 course approach. The six other universities collapsed the £1000 scholarships to create 1x full and 1x60% scholarship for allocation at either full or part-time mode resulting in 312 scholarships being available across the consortium (6x 32 scholarships + 3x40). The statistics relating to the applications are listed below; they highlight that the anticipated scholarship gender domination did not occur:

- 498 applications were received across 9 universities (203 female=40.8%;295 male= 59.2%)
- 124 of the applications (33 female=26.6%: 91 male=73.4 %) were ineligible because:
  - Applicants submitted a Residence Permit as proof of citizenship along with/without a foreign passport;
  - Applicants failing to submit proof of locality and British citizenship;
  - Applicants not having accepted a place by the deadline date;
  - Applicants applying for a scholarship but not a course or a course that was not designated;
  - Applicants already holding a masters or doctorate qualification.

The reasons provided above were the ones commonly cited by the 9E Group for non-eligibility. There were 374 eligible applications and the applicants held either a conditional or unconditional offer. When calculated by sex, of all the females 170 (83.7%) submitted eligible applications compared to 204 (69.1%) of all males. Each of the 9E Group struggled to allocate the part-time scholarships due to poor application numbers. However, although this was anticipated, as part-time study has been decreasing year on year over the past 2 years, the continuing decline in part-time applications this academic year has been a cause for concern. Only one university managed to come close to allocating the project's target of PT full and PT 60% fee scholarships. It does not appear that the choice of courses chosen for the scholarships was the issue, but the general health of the part-time market in the UK. Originally, 135 100% and 60% scholarships were targeted at part-time applicants, but only 71 were filled. The unallocated PT scholarships were redirected at the fulltime applicants in order to support as many applicants as possible. Three universities each received one complaint about the scholarship process: one questioned the definition of 'local' and two questioned the fairness of the random allocation process. The Key Links at the universities in question expressed the feeling that the applicants had complained in hope that they would be selected 'for fear' of the complaint being escalated.

### Offers and acceptances of scholarships

Across the 9E Group, 331 offers were made and 301 accepted. Of all acceptances, this breaks down to 131 acceptances by females (43.5%) and 170 by males (56.5%). When examined by sex (of all female applicants) 65% were offered and accepted a scholarship compared to 57.6% of all male applicants. Proportionally, females fared much better in obtaining a PEP scholarship than males due to submitting more eligible applications. A high level of male ineligibility due to non-engagement (e.g. not reading or following the application process) raises the concern about engagement levels in other areas of study once enrolled (e.g. learning and teaching, accessing support).

### Decline of PEP scholarships

Of the 331 applicants who were offered a scholarship, 31 (9.3%) declined them across the 9E Group. Reasons provided included:

- Deferral to January 2015 or September 2015 due to not meeting academic conditions or for personal reasons;
- Withdrawal or deferral due to being unable to get time off work;
- Withdrawal or deferral due to being unable fund the extra costs associated with study;
- Withdrawal or deferral due to being unable to combine work and travel to the university with the academic timetable.

A small number of recipients did not respond to the award offer, which was sent via email and post, so the offer was withdrawn and reallocated.

#### **Decline by a full time, full scholarship recipient**

*"It is with a sad and heavy heart that I have to decline this amazing offer. I was hoping to have secured a part-time job, which would have enabled me to attend university, but unfortunately I have not been successful in finding employment. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity and I am gutted that I am unable to continue in my university training."*

#### **Part time, full scholarship**

*I am writing to advise you that regrettably I will not be in a position to start the course that has been offered to me. I would like to thank you both for helping me, but having made several dummy runs to access the university, I have come to the conclusion that the reality of the travel distance, expectancy of the course workload and the fact I still have a day job will in reality be too much, and I would rather that the sponsorship opportunity be afforded to someone else at the earliest opportunity.*

#### **Decline by a part time, full scholarship recipient**

*"Unfortunately I am unable to accept my place on the PEP scholarship as I was unsuccessful in getting a student loan this year to cover living costs. As a result of this, I will be deferring my place on the Sports Performance Master's course for one year."*

### Applications by Alumni students

It was hoped that the scheme would receive a substantial number of applications from applicants who were 'local' and alumni of more than 3 years as well as non-alumni as these are two groups that could help sustain the PGT market. The aim was to distribute the scholarships equally between alumni and non-alumni, but whether as a result of the timeline and/or advertising strategy, many of the 9E Group were unsuccessful in receiving applications from this target group. Across the consortium, 142 non-alumni and 189 alumni were allocated scholarships. Of the 189 (57%) alumni who were randomly allocated a scholarship, 147 graduated in 2014. Thus only 33.3% of alumni recipients across the consortium were alumni of more than 2 years.

### Issues for further consideration

The Anthology of MSc Scholarship Stories demonstrates that PEP's scholarships did enable applicants who would not have been able to consider PGT study (immediately or at all) to participate in this level of study. The application and allocation process highlighted the types of applicants who applied and reasons why successful recipients of scholarships declined them. Suggested areas of further investigation include:

- Identifying and creating viable target groups and determining the impact that non-engagement behaviour (as highlighted in the application and allocation process) has on learning engagement and thus on retention, progression and success;
- Institutions exploring their structures and processes which act as barriers to applicants, such as teaching timetable schedules and conditions attached to applications.

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