

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. A description of PEP can be found in Briefing Paper 1. This briefing paper reports the headline findings of the non-enrolment results of applicants. The final report containing the detailed findings will be published late October 2015.

Groups A-D

A key objective of the project was to understand the motivations of enquirers and applicants in applying for STEM postgraduate Master’s level study, what was important when choosing a course/university and what barriers they experienced in fulfilling that ambition. The target groups were:

- A: Enquirers only;
- B: Applicants who receive an offer, but decline the place;
- C: Applicants who receive an offer, accept the place, but notify the university of non-attendance pre-enrolment;
- D: Applicants who receive an offer, accept the place, but do not notify the university of non-attendance pre-enrolment.

There were a number of issues relating to the collection of data across Groups A-D amongst the 9 English universities participating in this activity. Firstly, the majority of universities did not collect and keep enquiry data on individuals (either centrally or across the different units) within an institution that received such enquiries such as faculties and departments, central marketing and the international office. Secondly, information on Groups B-D is recorded differently by each university so making direct comparisons against each group’s definition proved problematic. Thirdly, as the universities within the project do not operate customer relation management systems (which enable an application to be tracked from first contact and beyond) the effective analysis of applicant and student admissions and progression behaviour could not be undertaken.

Survey

Each target group was sent a short survey that was tailored to reflect their position in the admissions process. Each group was asked how they had intended funding their studies, what was important to them when choosing a university and why they did not progress their application. The reasons cited by the respondents are reported below.

Anticipated funding method

For all target groups, *savings* and *parents/guardians* were the most commonly cited methods of funding PGT STEM study (see Table 1). This reflects the findings found in the Entry to Study Survey (Briefing Paper 4). Of those in Group D who intended funding PGT study by a *scholarship* (28.4%), 93.8% were overseas applicants.

Table 1

Survey A n=64 Enquire but do not apply	Survey B n=440 Apply, offer, decline	Survey C n=90 Apply, offer, accept, notify non-attendance pre-enrolment	Survey D = n131 Apply, offer, accept, no-notification pre-enrolment
47.8% UK: 5.8% EU: 46.4% OS	14.9% UK: 14.9% EU: 70.1% OS	26.0% UK: 19.2% EU: 54.8% OS	7.8% UK: 1.0% EU: 91.2% OS
Savings (28.13%) Parents/guardians (25%) Salary/personal Income (23.4%)	Parents/guardians (35.7%) Scholarship/studentship (22.9%) Savings (21%)	Savings (35.8%) Parents/guardians (30%) Scholarship (13.3%)	Scholarship (28%) Parents/guardians (25.4%) OS Government Sponsorship (22.3%)

Factors considered when choosing a course

For all target groups, similar factors influenced the choice of institution at which to study (see Table 2). The reputation of the institution, department or subject was cited as the primary reason by all groups, followed by course content. The *location of the institution* was an important consideration for Group A, but not Groups B-D. A possible reason may be that once the enquirer has decided on the type of university location, other factors come to the fore. In the Entry to Study Survey that was completed by ‘enrolled’ students, *location of the institution* was cited as the second main reason for attending their university of study (see Briefing Paper 3).

Table 2

Survey A n=64 Enquire but do not apply	Survey B n=440 Apply, offer, decline	Survey C n=90 Apply, offer, accept, notify non-attendance pre-enrolment	Survey D = n131 Apply, offer, accept, no-notification pre-enrolment
47.8% UK: 5.8% EU: 46.4% OS	14.9% UK: 14.9% EU: 70.1% OS	26.0% UK: 19.2% EU: 54.8% OS	7.8% UK: 1.0% EU: 91.2% OS
Instit/dept/subject reputation (31.9%) Course content (21.7%) Location (11.6%) Cost of fees (7.2%)	Instit/dept/subject reputation (32.5%) Course content (20.9%) Career prospects (13.4%) Cost of the fees (6.3%)	Instit/dept/subject reputation (34.2%) Course content (27.4%) Career prospects (9.6%) Cost of the fees (5.5%)	Instit/dept/subject reputation (39.23%) Course content (19.8%) Cost of the fees (14.9%) Career prospects (14.9%)

The factors that were cited as insignificant across all groups were: *university league tables; reputation for research; positive experience at open days and reputation for a good social life*. No demographic variables impacted on the findings.

Reasons for non-application/enrolment

The most common reason cited by enquirers and applicants for non-enrolment was that they had *applied to another university* (see Table 3). Due to the lack of an effective national admissions process being in place at PGT level, it is impossible for an institution to track the destination of applicants who do not enrol with them. For 37.7% of enquirers in Group A, the confusing application process had halted their application. Comments received included:

'An application was sent, but a reply back saying I was missing certain evidence, which I knew I had already sent, annoyed me'

'I applied but didn't receive an acknowledgment or offer'

I applied and was offered a place, but had to decline as I have done study at Master's level already so due to UKBA new rules I can't study again an MSc in the UK'

For applicants in target Groups B-D, *applying to another university* accounted for a significant percentage not enrolling and for those who stated that they had *given up the idea of study*, lack of access to finance as a barrier was a main driver.

'I applied for a part-time MSc to help spread the costs of living, whilst undertaking a part-time job. However, due to lack of applicants the part time course was stopped, and there was no way I could afford the fees and living expenses, whilst doing my best academically and working part time. It was disappointing, but I have found a job and hope to return to full time education in the future'

In target Groups C and D, approximately two fifths of applicants stated that they had deferred their place to the following year. Deferrals are problematic for universities. Firstly, they are a hard group of applicants to keep 'active' due to the reasons for deferral which can include lack of funding and meeting any offer conditions. Secondly, for some of the universities who participated in PEP, it is hard to track applicants who defer because of the way the information is stored. For example, once a deferral has been granted, they are recorded on the system like a new student for the next intake. This problem is exacerbated if there is more than one opportunity within the academic year to start a course. PEP also found that some applicants were just seeking an offer so they could put it on their CV and the application process stopped once this had happened. Some universities do apply a processing cost to an application, but it is unclear how effective it is in preventing applicants who are only seeking an offer.

Table 3

Survey A n=64 Enquire but do not apply	Survey B n=440 Apply, offer, decline	Survey C n=90 Apply, offer, accept, notify non-attendance pre-enrolment	Survey D = n131 Apply, offer, accept, no-notification pre-enrolment
47.8% UK: 5.8% EU: 46.4% OS	14.9% UK: 14.9% EU: 70.1% OS	26.0% UK: 19.2% EU: 54.8% OS	7.8% UK: 1.0% EU: 91.2% OS
<p>Why didn't apply: Confusing application process (37.7%)</p> <p>Gave up the idea of studying for a MSc (29%) [of which 42.9% said the course didn't fit in with life demands]</p> <p>Applied for a place at another university (29.2%)</p>	<p>Why declined the offer: Applied for other university (37.7%)</p> <p>Felt course would not deliver its promises (28.6%)</p> <p>Gave up the idea of studying for a MSc (22.2%) [of which 77.4% could not obtain funding]</p> <p>Limited Information prevented informed decision (7.5%)</p>	<p>Why didn't enroll: Applied for other university (38%)</p> <p>Deferred place until next year (29.6%)</p> <p>Felt the course would not deliver its promises (21.59%)</p> <p>Gave up the idea of studying for an MSc (7%) [of which no funding, no time off work, couldn't afford other costs each cited by 33.3%]</p>	<p>Why didn't enroll: Deferred place until next year (42.3%)</p> <p>Felt the course would not deliver its promises (18.6%)</p> <p>Applied for other university (15.5%)</p>

The processing of applications that do not lead to enrolments is costly for an institution and the sector. At the lead university in one STEM faculty, of all applications received in 2013/14 only 14% led to enrolment and the conservative cost of processing non-enrolment applications was approximately £55,000. This figure does not take into account other cost factors such as being unable to structure the teaching timetable, effectively allocating teaching resources, estimating the demand for catering and library resources and effectively managing and forecasting budgets.

Issues for further consideration

This briefing paper has highlighted a number of areas that could benefit from further research to improve the admissions process. They include:

- Consideration of a more effective sector-wide admissions system for PGT applications;
- Sector-wide data review to identify useful data and standardisation of data collection;
- Introduction of CRM systems to enable applicant behaviour to be effectively analysed;
- Analysis of data produced by existing CRM systems already in use.

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