

Briefing Paper No: 7 – Support requirements

Postgraduate Experience Project

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 highlighting the concerns and anxieties of PGT STEM students in the Entry to Study Survey (September/October 2014) and the Finance Survey (June 2015) and the support they felt would have been helpful. Where appropriate it draws on findings from other research activities within PEP.

Concerns and anxieties about starting PGT study

Respondents who completed the Entry to Study Survey (1,235) were asked what they felt confident about in starting their studies and whether they had any concerns or anxieties. Table 1 below lists what they reported they were confident about, which included coping with *travel to university*; *looking after their health and welfare* and *making friends*. Table 2 highlights the concerns they had which included *coping with the level of study required*; *difficulties fitting the course around work commitments* and *lack of confidence around their ability to study and finances*.

Table 1

| LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE (very confident + confident) (tick all that apply) |
|--|
| 81.7% Coping with the travelling to university |
| 81.6% Looking after my health and welfare |
| 78.6% Making friends |
| 73.3% Getting involved in university life |
| 71.4% Coping with the standard of work |
| 66.8% Managing money |
| 60.7% Coping with balancing life demands and study |

Table 2

| CONCERNS (tick all that apply) |
|--|
| 44.2% Coping with the level of study required at this level |
| 24.1% Difficulties fitting the course around my work commitments |
| 24.0% Lack of confidence about my ability to study |
| 23.7% Lack of sufficient funding |
| 23.2% Concerns about committing more time to study |
| 20.5% Concerns about getting into debt |
| 17.3% Concerns about increasing my existing levels of debt |

Although the Entry to Study Survey suggested that respondents were confident about coping with travel to university, the Focus Groups undertaken in March 2015 with scholarship and non-scholarship students highlighted that anxiety levels caused by the challenges of commuting to university in time for classes and the relatively high cost of travel. Coping with the commute was also cited by the respondents in the Withdrawal Survey (Group E) as a key factor in withdrawing from their studies. When the Entry to Study Survey asked respondents to state what support might help reduce their anxiety levels in this area, a range of suggestions were provided. These are listed in themes in Table 3.

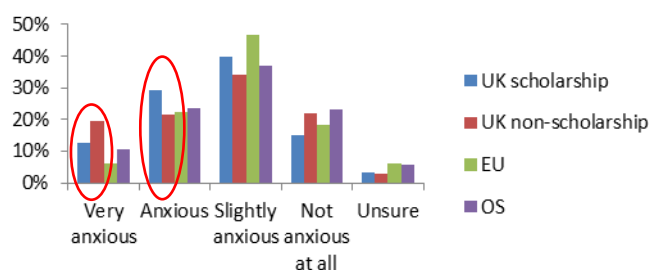
Table 3

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Finance/Funding | Knowledge of funding availability; more time to pay the tuition fees; budget management skills; affordable accommodation |
| Learning and Teaching | Support in getting back into learning; adaptation to postgraduate life; managing how to cope with the level of study; face to face meetings with tutors and more support from lecturers; getting clear feedback; timetables well in advance; learning better time management skills; opportunities for placements. |
| Communication | Expectations about studying at a postgraduate level to reduce lack of uncertainty; information about coursework and exams; good induction periods; clarity of information; good communication and interpersonal skills by lecturers |
| Support | Access to study support; use of peer-support; current employers support; counselling and childcare facilities |
| Travel/Transportation | Commuting difficulties; more parking spaces; efficient bus routes |
| Sports and exercise | Affordable and accessible sports facilities |

Finance concerns and anxieties during PGT study

Financial concerns and anxieties were followed up in Finance Survey. Of the aggregate sample (933), 75.7% reported that they were experiencing some kind of anxiety with 38.4% reporting that they were *very anxious/anxious*. When the anxiety levels were examined by student characteristics, UK domiciled students reported higher levels of financial anxiety compared to those who were EU and OS and UK non-scholarship respondents were significantly more *very anxious* in comparison to EU/OS respondents (see Figure 1). There was a direct correlation with financial anxiety and higher study debt levels (see Briefing Paper 6).

Figure 1



Expenses and payment of bills

When asked about the expenses incurred whilst undertaking Master's level study (excluding the fees) unsurprisingly cost of accommodation, transport and meals were cited as the 3 main expenses, followed by text books, print costs and the purchase of IT related software and equipment. When asked whether they had experienced any issues relating to the payment of bills, the primary ones cited by respondents were that they were late in paying or being unable to pay accommodation, transport and food costs (see Table 4). There were no significant domiciled differences although more OS respondents reported difficulties in paying their rent and UK domiciled being unable to pay existing debt.

Table 4

| Bill | Late paying | Unable to pay | Total |
|--|-------------|---------------|-------|
| Rent or mortgage | 84.4% | 15.6% | 250 |
| Utility bills (e.g. electricity, gas, water) | 86.2% | 13.8% | 254 |
| Food | 69.8% | 30.2% | 192 |
| Going out/entertainment | 21.7% | 78.3% | 364 |
| Mobile phone costs | 67.5% | 32.5% | 197 |
| Travel costs (including car ins, petrol) | 46.1% | 53.9% | 254 |
| Other insurance costs | 48.7% | 51.3% | 158 |
| Existing debt | 47.9% | 52.1% | 217 |

When asked if any financial concerns had impacted on the completion of their studies:

- 77.8% (723) had managed financially
- 7.3% (73) had considered withdrawing
- 5.6% (52) had considered intermitting/taking time out due to financial pressures
- 1.8% (16) had moved from FT to PT (8) and PT to FT (8) to financially cope
- 0.8% (8) had withdrawn (6) or intermitted (2) due to financial issues.

Financial difficulties relating to living expenses and the payment of fees were cited in the top 3 reasons for dropping out of study by Group E in the Withdrawal Survey (see Briefing Paper 4).

Support required

When asked what support would have been helpful, the respondents were considered and circumspect in their answers. Help with accommodation, transport costs and meals were common replies (see Table 5). A discount on fees was highlighted by 22.6% of the aggregate sample as a positive means of support. Some of the PEP partner universities do give alumni discounts, but for those students who have chosen their local university to undertake study and are not alumni, this is a benefit that they cannot access. When asked what level of fee discount would be an incentive to undertake study, 10% was the figure cited as making a difference.

Table 5

| Reponses for all options | % | N= |
|--|-------|-----|
| Cash via a bursary/grant | 47.1% | 439 |
| Help with transport costs | 31.6% | 295 |
| Discounted or contribution to university accommodation or contribution | 30.1% | 281 |
| Discount on fees | 28.3% | 264 |
| Vouchers for textbooks | 23% | 215 |
| Help with printer costs | 23.5% | 219 |
| Subsidised meals | 22.6% | 211 |
| Prepaid cards for university goods or services | 17.4% | 162 |
| Help with the purchase of IT or course related equipment | 17.5% | 163 |
| Subsidised field trips | 9.4% | 88 |
| Cost with childcare | 6.3% | 59 |
| Help with lab costs | 5.6% | 52 |
| Funding via disability assistance (did not collect disability data) | 2.1% | 20 |
| None of these | 4.2% | 39 |

For 73.3%, a discount for being a UK graduate with at least a 2:1 classification would have been an enticement (see Table 6). Graduates do not stay at the university where they did their undergraduate degree for a number of reasons including: it does not offer the course they require; they have been out of study for a few years or do not live in the area anymore. This type of discount could help re-energise and sustain the market through providing viable financial incentives for a potential student or an employer looking to upskill their workforce.

Table 6

| Type of discount | Yes | No | N= |
|---|-------|-------|-----|
| 10% alumni fee discount | 57.6% | 42.4% | 611 |
| 25% alumni fee discount | 64.7% | 35.3% | 620 |
| 50% alumni fee discount | 73.3% | 26.7% | 639 |
| A discount from another UK university for getting a first or 2:1* | 73.3% | 26.7% | 640 |

* See PEP's UKGrADS Initiative handout

Support received

The support which respondents reported that they had received from their university included: 29.6% obtaining a fee discount of some kind; 7.6% getting subsidised field trips; 5% receiving a bursary/grant and 4.1% obtaining help with transport costs.

Issues for further consideration

Anxiety impacts on the ability of a student to succeed. PGT STEM respondents within PEP report that they have to contend with high levels of anxiety in relation to their study. Unfortunately, as PSS Phase 1 is coming to an end, PEP will not be able to continue to ascertain the level of anxiety of students who have graduated under the undergraduate £9K a year scheme and how it impacts on their ability to engage with, progress and succeed in their studies. This briefing paper suggests the type of support which could potentially make a difference to the experience of students. However, this may not reflect the attitudes and opinions of future cohorts with higher levels of debt and therefore consideration of various financial support mechanisms, such as fee discounts and help with other study costs need further exploration. The final report containing the detailed findings will be published late October 2015.

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