



UK Council for
Graduate Education

NATIONAL SURVEY OF PGT PROGRAMME DIRECTORS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Dr T.A. Barnes, Dr G. Macleod and
Prof S. Huttly



FOREWORD

When the UKCGE Postgraduate Student Experience Working Group first met in September 2014 we set ourselves the goal of, over three years, carrying out some work that: a) would be complementary to the work that others were planning or pursuing, and b) would be of value to the wider UK HE sector.

That three-year period is now up, and as the working group nears its conclusion, I am very pleased that we are in a position to share the outcomes of our work with the wider sector through this report and other outputs. It will be up to the sector, in due course, to decide on the value we have added.

One of the areas of focus was to improve our understanding of the role of those responsible for overseeing taught postgraduate programmes. Across UK HE there has been much focus on capturing information regarding the student experience, including that of taught postgraduate students, but much less focus on capturing the views and experiences of those responsible for teaching and managing the programmes these students undertake. If we wish to fully understand how well our higher education processes are working and identify how we can improve them, we need to ensure we understand all elements.

I hope that the content of this report will enhance your understanding of the challenges that programme directors face and of their views on the challenges that their students face.

Finally, I hope that this report will encourage others to dig deeper into this area, creating a better understanding of these complex issues, resulting in improvements in our postgraduate education that benefit both the students and the staff involved.

DR ROB DALEY
CHAIR OF THE UKCGE
POSTGRADUATE
STUDENT WORKING GROUP

ABSTRACT

UK postgraduate taught (PGT) education has experienced considerable growth since the mid-1990s, but this may prove unsustainable if HEIs fail to address the needs of this diverse population.

Although the complexity and challenges are clear, there has been little attention paid to the voice of the PGT Programme Directors and Administrators who deal with the day-to-day realities. The purpose of this national level study was to understand how much of the support needed for PGT students is generally located at programme level, versus school/faculty/college/institution level. However, in capturing the experience of Programme Directors and staff, this report was able to address the key concern for PGT – how to ensure that students, regardless of their background and mode of study, are properly supported. This study further highlights the need to focus support in key areas, and to question the traditional assumption of student readiness for Master's level study. Indeed, we identify some common problems that inhibit independent learning. Whilst these common problems do not necessarily have common solutions, institutional inflexibilities and limited resources constrain efforts to enhance learning and the overall student experience. Furthermore, universities need to empower and equip staff to engage in enhancement initiatives, and recognise and value the important role that they play in the postgraduate student experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors would like to thank the HEIs who contributed to the survey on which this report is based, and in particular, to those individual respondents who took the time to provide such rich, qualitative data.

THE UKCGE WORKING GROUP ON THE POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

The UKCGE Working Group on the Postgraduate Student Experience is one of four themed Working Groups launched by UKCGE in 2014, bringing together volunteers from UKCGE member institutions and representatives from HEA and AGCAS under the chairmanship of Dr Rob Daley, Heriot-Watt University. The Group identified three major themes related to the postgraduate student experience, where a significant contribution could be made by combining the resources of UKCGE and the institutions and organisations represented. Two of the themes related to PGR (*the final stage in the PGR lifecycle and PDP and career planning*) whilst the third focused on *PGT identity and expectations*. A sub-group of Working Group members was formed around each theme. This report and the national survey on which it is based, was the work of the *PGT Identity and Expectations* sub-group: Prof. Sharon Huttly (Lead), Lancaster University, Dr. Tina Barnes, University of Warwick and UKCGE Executive Committee member, and Dr Gale Macleod, University of Edinburgh.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A report by the Higher Education Commission in 2012 highlighted the importance of a healthy postgraduate education system to the UK's academic and economic success, whilst at the same time noting that it has for too long been *“the forgotten part of the sector [.....] stranded midway between undergraduate-centred education policy and policy on research and development”*.

HESA data shows that the number of postgraduate taught (PGT) qualifications obtained in the UK rose steadily from 62,600 in 1994/95 to a peak of 239,975 in 2011/2012 (HESA, 2000-2016), but then declined for 2012/13 and 2013/14 (HESA, 2016). Though the numbers showed modest signs of recovery in 2014/15 (HESA, 2016), concerns have been raised about sustaining this important “revenue-earner” for UK HEIs (Morgan, 2015). Whilst much of the political concern around the sector is rightly focused on “upskilling” the domestic workforce, and producing the innovators and researchers needed to sustain the UK economy into the future (HEC, 2012), competitive and financial pressures are also important drivers for HEIs (Morgan, 2015, van der Velden, 2012).

Whilst understandable attention is given to postgraduate research as a major source of innovators and researchers for the future, postgraduate taught (PGT) degrees accounted for 29% of the qualifications obtained in UK higher education in 2014/15, compared to 4% for postgraduate research (PGR) degrees (HESA, 2016). The growing prominence of the PGT sector, intensifying competition and greater interest in student experience surveys by the fee-paying public, has prompted UK HEIs to pay greater attention to understanding the PGT landscape, keen to prevent recent declines in enrolments becoming a longer term trend (Morgan, 2015, van der Velden, 2012).

1.1 THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY IN PGT

A striking feature of the PGT sector is the diversity of the student population. Most significant is the contribution that international students have made to the sector's growth – in 2014/15, 36% of all PGT students came from outside the UK, of which 7% were from other EU countries and 29% came from outside the EU (HESA, 2016). The population is also almost equally split regarding part-time and full-time study – in 2013/14 and 2014/15, the proportion studying part-time was 48% of total PGT enrolments, though set alongside earlier data there is a decreasing trend in part-time enrolments, down from 53% of the total in 2009/10 (HESA 2016, HESA, 2011). HESA data also provides an overview of the population of full-time versus part-time PGTs by origin. In 2014/15, 50% of all full-time postgraduate enrolments were non-EU students, compared to 11% from the EU and 39% from the UK. In contrast, 89% of the part-time PGT population for the same period were from the UK, with just 7% non-EU enrolments and 4% EU (HESA, 2016). The diversity of students in terms of origin and preferred mode of study has meant that parts of the PGT sector have embraced distance learning, wholly online programmes and blended delivery (Rovai and Jordan, 2004), but whilst the flexibility and convenience of these study modes makes PGT study a more realistic possibility for some, a heavy reliance on e-learning is not suitable for all types of student and subjects (Rovai and Jordan, 2004, Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke, 2013).

Thus, the start point in understanding the PGT experience and how to improve it, is understanding the motivations and expectations of this diverse body of students, and the equally diverse challenges they face. Work on this has already begun. For example, PTES data (HEA, 2015) and individual studies (Morgan, 2015, Morgan, 2014, UUK, 2014, Gibson, 2013) have already started to map the range of motivations for PGT study, including but not limited to: a means of advancing along a chosen career path, to qualify for a particular profession, to differentiate themselves in the employment market, to develop more specialist skills and knowledge, making the transition to a new subject discipline, or progression to further postgraduate study. Likewise, the challenges and constraints on UK HEIs with regard to PGT are fairly well known – most notably, growing acknowledgement of the risks inherent in over-reliance on fee-paying international students as UK demand declines (HEC, 2012, UUK, 2014), and related to this, the tension between constrained resources and the need to increase the flexibility of provision in PGT programme delivery and support, especially for distance or work-based learners (Morgan, 2014, HEC, 2012). There is also increasing concern at a mismatch in the expectations of universities and the capabilities/preparedness of students with respect to the demands of postgraduate study (Murray, Connelly

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and Panesar, 2013, Coates and Dickinson, 2012, Nelson, Kift, Humphreys and Harper, 2006, Wingate, 2006, Bamber and Tett, 2000), of “transition shock” (Murray, *et al.*, 2013, Coates and Dickinson, 2012, O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009) and the considerable support needed to help students toward “Mastersness” (Gibson, 2013), whilst at the same time attempting to alleviate the stress and anxiety that the PGT experience can bring (Morgan, 2015).

1.2 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

But as the complexity of the PGT landscape becomes ever clearer, as the challenges at institution level are debated and policies are shaped to address the realities for students and HEIs, there has been little attention paid to PGT at programme level, to the voice of the PGT Programme Directors and Administrators who deal with the day to day realities. The limited range of studies specifically on PGT already

62,600



1994/95

239,975



2011/12

PGT QUALIFICATIONS OBTAINED IN THE UK

available, generally focus on one or a small number of programmes, highlighting specific issues and their solutions, generally implemented at local level, though often with potential for wider adoption (e.g., models for learning/study support, engaging mature distance learning or non-traditional students, socialisation into a foreign university and engagement with digital technologies). Such studies (discussed in Section 3) are extremely valuable, and encouraged/sponsored by national organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Nevertheless, the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) felt that a national survey of PGT Directors and Administrators would provide some much needed richness regarding the overall PGT landscape, identifying the most common and/or most significant challenges as well as

the strategies being adopted to address them. In particular, we were keen to understand how much of the support needed for PGT students (academic and non-academic) falls within the responsibility of Programme Directors and their equivalents and thus generally located at programme level, versus the extent and nature of support offered at school/faculty/college/institution level. This work was undertaken by a sub-group of UKCGE's Working Group on the Postgraduate Experience, whose specific focus was on the identity and experience of PGT students. Following an initial pilot study involving the authors' home institutions in June 2015, the national survey of PGT Programme Directors and Administrators was conducted from December 2015 to the end of March 2016 and involved 60 UK institutions (approximately half of UKCGE's membership) with a total of 382 survey respondents. Our sincere thanks go to all those who responded on behalf of their programmes and their institutions for taking the time, not just to participate, but in providing such richness and detail in their responses.

2 BACKGROUND CONTEXT AND EXISTING RESEARCH

2.1 UNDERSTANDING PGT EXPECTATIONS, MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

PTES survey results, alongside independent studies and surveys provide an insight into the expectations and motivations of, and challenges facing, PGT students, and further highlight the extent of the challenge for HEIs with respect to meeting the needs of a diverse cohort of students.



A QUARTER OR MORE OF ALL MASTER'S STUDENTS STRUGGLE WITH THEIR PROGRAMME WORKLOAD

(PTES, 2015)

The motivations that lead to taught PG study can generally be categorised as career-orientated (*improve my employment prospects, improve my chances of getting a graduate job, required for chosen career/profession, to meet the requirements of my current job, progress my current career and to change my current career*) and personal interest-orientated (*for personal interest, improve my knowledge of the subject, to develop a more specialist set of skills and knowledge, or to enable me to progress to a higher level qualification*), with distinct differences depending on the age of the student and whether or not they are studying part-time (PTES, 2015, Morgan, 2016, Morgan, 2015).

On this basis, the PTES report highlights the need for flexibility in PGT programmes to accommodate these quite different motivations. But the impact of diversity is evidenced in other key areas of the survey results, most significantly in how students perceive their programme workload and the level of academic challenge, intellectual stimulation and academic development. Whilst there was significant variation across disciplines, the proportion of students who felt that their workload was manageable was in the range 67-79% for full-time Master's students in the 2015 PTES survey, signifying that a quarter or more of all Master's students struggle with their programme workload. The PTES report for 2016 provided statistics on fewer disciplines than its predecessor, but it shows a continued decline in this area, most notably a drop in the physical sciences from 74% of respondents stating that their workload was manageable in 2014 to 67% in 2016 (HEA, 2016). With regard to academic challenge, intellectual stimulation and academic development, perceptions among respondents to the 2015 PTES report (PTES 2016 did not include an update on this) varied from those overwhelmed by the demands of their programmes and those who were frustrated by content repeated from their undergraduate studies. There was again variation across disciplines in this respect, but also by country

of origin - African and Asian students were more positive than UK students, but students from North America and the EU were generally less positive than their African and Asia counterparts. Prior experience and expectations also had a marked impact on these results - students returning to study after a gap of 10 years or more were more positive than students progressing immediately from undergraduate study (PTES, 2015). In addition, a study by Morgan (2015) at a single UK post-92 institution indicated a marked difference in expectations regarding independent learning by country of origin - more UK-domiciled PGT students expected to learn *in a more independent way* than EU-domiciled, followed by non-EU domiciled students.

Regarding what is most important to students, *the quality of teaching and learning and skills development* had the greatest impact on their overall satisfaction with their studies (PTES, 2015). This contrasts sharply with the statistics on managing workload, and the PTES report warns that the development of academic skills could be harmed by a tendency toward "surface" or "strategic learning" just to "get by". Recent studies identify a number of challenges that face PGT students, some of which may partially explain or be exacerbating the issue of workload management. For example, Murray *et al.*, (2013) point out that HEI expectations that an undergraduate degree prepares students for postgraduate study, overlooks the challenge facing students returning to study (and a greatly changed academic environment) after some years away, or that facing students whose chosen postgraduate programme is in a different discipline (possibly with a distinctly different culture and unfamiliar practices) to that of their undergraduate degree (Murray, *et al.*, 2013, O'Donnell, *et al.*, 2009). The compressed timescales of a one-year PG taught programme also requires students to "get up to speed" academically in a very short time (Coates and Dickinson, 2012). For some overseas students, for example those from Asia, a significant challenge lies in understanding Western conceptions of critical thinking skills, not helped by often abstract and confusing explanations of what this means and how it is assessed (Brown, 2014, Turner, 2006).

More generally, such students must quickly grasp UK learning culture, and with it, the greater expectation of independent learning at Master's level (QAA, 2010). When a programme is delivered in distance learning mode, the often more extensive requirements for self-regulated and independent learning can further exacerbate all too common feelings among PGT students of anxiety, confusion and isolation, whilst presenting additional challenges in adapting to unfamiliar online programme structures and e-learning technology (particularly for mature students) (Brown, 2014, Kahu, *et al.*, 2013). However, varying degrees of information and digital literacy among students more generally (young and mature) presents difficulties across all study modes in an academic environment that has increasingly embraced learning technologies and electronic information sources (Brown, 2014, Kahu, *et al.*, 2013, Masterman and Shuyska, 2011, Rovai and Jordan, 2004).

2.2 UNDERSTANDING THE PGT STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The challenges identified above offer some insight into the PGT student experience that will be expanded on further here. Studies at postgraduate level, though relatively few so far, reveal issues of what Nelson *et al.* (2006) termed "transition shock", a lack of attention to the needs of PGT students (relative to undergraduates and research (PGR) students) and incompatibilities between the diverse needs of the students and the traditional approaches to teaching and learning still operating in some UK HEIs. O'Donnell *et al.* (2009) for example, highlight the inaccurate assumption in higher education that postgraduates arrive "equipped" for the transition to postgraduate study, a view shared by others such as Brown (2014), Murray, *et al.* (2013) and Coates and Dickinson (2012). Indeed,

research by O'Donnell, *et al.* (2009) found that the primary concerns of postgraduates was not with the content of the learning materials, but in achieving mastery of the skills and academic practices needed to succeed. Traditional models of learning place responsibility for learning with the individual learner (O'Donnell, *et al.*, 2009), but as Brown (2014) points out, some postgraduate students arrive as "experts" whilst others need "coaching to achieve the required standard".

Signs of positive change are however now starting to emerge. For example, there is a decisive shift in attention toward issues of learner-focused study support and enhancing academic literacy (Hallett, 2010) which will be addressed more fully in Section 2.4. But challenges to the postgraduate experience go beyond simply teaching students the "mechanics" of academic literacy. Most notably, Turner (2006), Brown (2014) and Wharton (2003) highlight confusion among students regarding assessment standards at postgraduate level, and emphasise the key role that assessment criteria play in developing a clearer understanding of what needs to be achieved and how to achieve it, in conjunction with formative feedback.

Taking a broader perspective on the learning opportunities offered by postgraduate study, work-based learners studying part-time alongside a job/profession, place great value on group work activities - the opportunity to look beyond their usual work context, share experiences, and be exposed to different perspectives and alternative solutions to work-based problems. Such activities deepening their learning by enabling them to apply and validate theory in entirely different contexts (Siebert *et al.*, 2009). But for part-time and distance learners, and those studying through wholly online programmes, group work also has an important function in creating a community of learners. Such communities offer students the opportunity to engage in discussion about the nature, demands and challenges of postgraduate study, particularly the problems experienced by those returning to education after a gap of some years. Thus, these communities provide a level of peer support (motivating students to continue their studies), and a sense of identity as a part of a learning group that, importantly, seems unaffected by changes in their individual workplaces (Siebert *et al.*, 2009).

The issue of PGT student identity, and how this student population is represented in institutions, also naturally impacts on the student experience. In a report commissioned by the QAA, Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson (2010) acknowledge the often passive nature of the student voice (such as their limited roles on university committees) and the inherent dangers of treating students increasingly like consumers, before advocating a more partnership based approach to engagement. This view is echoed by Cahill, Turner and Barefoot (2010) who also raise the issue of how to ensure that student representatives (usually volunteered or nominated rather than elected) genuinely represent the views of the whole student group, and similarly advocate viewing students as partners in a learning community.

Taking a slightly different perspective, van der Velden (2012) points out that the manner in which an institution engages with the student voice can be influenced by its organisational culture. An increased tendency for students to see themselves as consumers, and a corresponding concern with student satisfaction surveys, have seen some leaning of universities toward corporate style behaviour (the emergence of new institutional roles with responsibility for the "student experience" is cited as an example of this). Van der Velden (2012) notes however, that a culture based on corporate values locates decision-making powers away from the classroom toward senior managers and committees. Indeed, Cahill *et al.* (2010) emphasise the need for engagement between the students and the staff specifically involved in teaching, supporting and guiding them, in shaping improvements. They also stress the importance of creating a good physical environment that facilitates and encourages engagement and enhances learning, i.e., appropriate teaching facilities, achieving a good balance of formal and informal workspace, as well as social spaces (Cahill *et al.*, 2010). Encouragingly, whilst van der Velden's study (referred to above) is limited to just two universities, it offers evidence that more collegial and enterprising cultures, far more conducive to meaningful engagement with students, are emerging, as reflected also in the work of Kay *et al.* (2010) and Cahill *et al.* (2010).

2.3 "MASTERSNESS" – WHAT CONSTITUTES MASTER'S LEVEL AND STUDENT PREPAREDNESS

Master's study has been described as a journey, with the attributes of "mastersness" being acquired along the way (SHEEC, 2013). As has already been noted, the diversity of backgrounds, ability levels and familiarity with the skills needed to succeed, necessarily mean that some students begin their programmes with a greater level of preparedness than others. It is therefore important to acknowledge that each student will acquire those skills and attributes "at their own pace", and the role of the tutor is to ensure that all students achieve them by the end of the programme (SHEEC, 2013). The SHEEC's 2013 discussion paper, "What is Mastersness?", sets out a useful framework of seven facets of "Mastersness" that include recognising and dealing with complexity and unpredictability, the ability to understand and apply abstraction, achieving a certain depth of learning and achieving learner autonomy, concepts that may be quite alien and daunting to some new students, depending on their background and prior experience. Part of the skill and challenge for tutors is in guiding students toward understanding and acquiring

MASTER'S STUDY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A JOURNEY; WITH THE ATTRIBUTES OF "MASTERSNESS" BEING ACQUIRED ALONG THE WAY

(SHEEC, 2013)

these attributes in a highly pressurised one-year programme (with little room for reflection) without undermining students' confidence, demotivating them or creating/exacerbating feelings of anxiety, worthlessness and isolation (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). This is no easy task when new postgraduate students find that they are struggling with the fundamental skills of academic writing, critical evaluation skills, and use of the library – an increasingly virtual, digital environment (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009). And whilst the lack of such skills has often been considered a problem that affects only "non-traditional" students and a few weak "traditional" students, Wingate (2006) cites a report by the National Audit Office which suggests that the problems are far more widespread than this, the report indicates weaknesses in the teaching of academic writing and independent learning in UK secondary schools that leave students unprepared for undergraduate study, let alone postgraduate level.

Whilst it is not unreasonable to expect that such students will attain some competence at these fundamental skills in their undergraduate programmes, Morgan (2015) cites evidence from Richardson (2003) that entering undergraduate study with a low skill base can increase difficulties with transitioning to postgraduate level. And O'Donnell *et al.* (2009) provide

evidence, including direct quotations from students, indicating that postgraduate students struggle with the fundamental skills of essay writing and searching for relevant information, as well as the higher level skills of critical evaluation of the material they find and independent study generally. Furthermore, whilst mature students, often returning to study after a gap of some years, quite understandably find that their skills have diminished with time and are challenged by new learning technology and navigating electronic library resources (Brown, 2014), Rowlands *et al.* (2008) found that the so-called “Google Generation” (those born after 1993) have very poor information searching skills, tending to rely on shallow, simplistic searches of a limited range of resources. In some ways therefore, despite the diversity of the PGT student population, the most common issues are quite similar. For example, the need for support to become independent learners, lack of experience of written assignments and e-learning, and a lack of understanding regarding the concept of critical thinking (Coates and Dickinson, 2012, Turner 2006), are all issues that have been observed across the spectrum of postgraduate students (UK students included). Add to this the specific difficulties experienced by some international students, i.e., those studying and writing in a foreign language whilst also having to adapt to a quite different learning culture, and being remote from family and friends, and is not difficult to appreciate why such students can experience considerable anxiety if not adequately supported (Morgan, 2015).

These issues set challenges for achieving the expectations of “Masterness” within programmes whilst maintaining academic standards and further consideration needs to be given to how best to develop the necessary skills and attributes in today’s PGT students. Wingate (2006), for example, advocates integrating learning skills into the study programme itself, rather than offering it as a standalone “bolt-on” that divorces learning and research skills from subject content. Whilst such an approach may meet with resistance from staff concerned about time constraints in the curriculum or detracting from their research pursuits (Wingate, 2006, Rovai and Jordan,

2004), the integrated approach enables subject-specific examples to be used, and makes the relevance of such skills more immediately explicit, for example, in the way in which the tutors themselves discuss and critically evaluate subject knowledge (Wingate, 2006). Thus, there is some evidence emerging of welcome developments in understanding the diverse needs of postgraduate students and more effective ways in which to address them. However, academic development is just one part of the overall support needed for successful postgraduate study and a positive student experience, as will be outlined in the next section.

2.4 “SUPPORT FOR TRANSITION, STUDY AND CONNECTEDNESS

As has already been indicated, transition to postgraduate study can be challenging for a number of reasons that relate to the personal backgrounds of the students themselves. But this is not the only source of frustration and problems. Inflexibilities in university practice can also have a profound impact, particularly on mature (often part-time) students with families and responsibilities that complicate their lives (Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit, 2010). University structures are not always set with the student in mind, or are based predominantly on the undergraduate system. Thus, when mature students face, for example, multiple assignment deadlines at much the same time, work/life/study conflicts are inevitable and cause considerable stress (Tobbell *et al.*, 2010). Interestingly, Tobbell *et al.*’s (2010) study also frames institutional expectations of independent learning as another example of inflexible university practice, stating that students interpret independence as meaning lack of support, and yet find their concerns largely ignored. Indeed, the persistent assumption that all postgraduate students are well versed in academic practice suggests that institutional policies need to take greater account of the diversity of student needs (Hallett, 2010). Such assumptions can lead to study support that largely focuses on process and is viewed as remedial, rather than being learner-focused and aimed at inducting students into the academic community of practice (Hallett, 2010).

There is however, already some evidence of more learner-centred approaches emerging. For example, the PG Learning Model reported on by Coates and Dickinson (2012) incorporates an enhanced and extended induction, specific support on dissertation and academic skills more generally, and support with respect to the blended learning environment of the programme. The authors stress the importance of integrating learning support into the taught modules and embedding it throughout the programme structure, as



STUDENTS INTERPRET INDEPENDENCE AS MEANING LACK OF SUPPORT

has also been advocated by Wingate (2006). The model developed by Murray *et al.* (2013) adopts a similar approach but also, importantly, incorporates support for staff through the provision of staff networks and a community of practice based around their online distance learning programme. Similar models have been implemented in Australia. For example, that reported by Nelson *et al.* (2006), with particular emphasis on ameliorating the effects of “transition shock” and on-going learning engagement throughout the year, thus suggesting some degree of convergence of understanding and enhanced practice across national academic systems. A notable commonality in such models, and related projects such as the re-development of assessment criteria reported by Wharton (2003), is that each is an example of a “bottom up” rather than a “top down” approach, new models / processes / practices conceived, designed and implemented by academic and administrative staff with direct responsibility for postgraduate student programmes, rather than the result of policies and initiatives formulated and imposed by senior management and high level committees. This would seem to constitute further evidence therefore of the *enterprise* and *collegium* cultures defined by van der Velden (2012), gaining ground in higher education.

Many studies of postgraduate as well as undergraduate education emphasise the need for active student engagement, not just in enabling them to learn and maximise the benefits from their study programmes, but also in the enhancement of the programmes themselves and in improving the student experience more generally (for example, Kay *et al.* (2010) and Taylor and Wilding (2009)). There has however also been some concern in recent years that engagement with students has tended to be at the surface level, i.e., treating students as consumers (Kay *et al.*, 2010, van der Velden, 2012). In contrast, Cahill *et al.* (2010) emphasise that connections need to be formed that last from admission to graduation, whilst Tobbell *et al.* (2010) stress that supporting transition should take account of the whole student experience, not limited to just the curriculum. Such studies also point to some of

the challenges to achieving meaningful connection, such as the size of the cohort and the impact that the design of the learning environment and social spaces can have on pastoral and academic support, as well as building a sense of community.

Whilst some studies have shown that students value building relationships with staff in order to properly benefit from their knowledge and for the development of skills to take place (Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2013), others indicate students turn, in the first instance, to fellow students for both academic and pastoral support rather than to staff acting as Personal Tutors (Cahill *et al.*, 2014). Whilst Cahill *et al.*’s (2014) study is based on undergraduate students, the results are equally applicable to any level of student and agree with similar surveys involving postgraduates. For example, both the above studies are in agreement that the key to building such relationships is that staff are not only knowledgeable experts but are also present, with time to spend with students needing their help and advice (Cahill *et al.*, 2014, Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2013). In particular, it has been shown that students with a more vocational than academic background can demand more time and support from academic staff (Cahill *et al.*, 2014), as can international students from highly relational cultures such as Asia (Menziez and Baron, 2014).

Notwithstanding the findings of Cahill *et al.* (2014) that call into to question the effectiveness of the Personal Tutor system, Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) emphasise the role it can play in helping students “negotiate their study”, offering emotional as much as academic support and advice. But in order for any academic and pastoral support to be effective, it must be personalised as far as possible to individual needs, and this can be challenging if cohort sizes are large or students are engaged in work-based learning (Cahill *et al.*, 2014). Resources can be efficiently deployed if an appropriate balance can be achieved between localised (more programme or subject specific) support and central (institutional level) specialist services, such as welfare, careers advice and generic study skills (Cahill *et al.*, 2014). Efficient use of resources

does not however necessarily translate into effective student support, as asserted by Wingate (2006).

Nevertheless, there is growing evidence of the value placed by students on peer support and some are turning their attention to understanding the role of “communities of practice” and how to create an environment at university conducive to peer-to-peer interaction and support, as well as a sense of belonging or connectedness. Cahill *et al.* (2014) for example, found that peer support enhances a sense of cohort identity and belonging, as well as social integration, confidence and motivation, whereas Masterman and Shuyska (2012) suggest that induction and acclimatisation to a new academic and social community can be eased for international students by engaging in student Facebook groups prior to arrival. Indeed, social networks (whether online or face-to-face) seem to be a significant positive influence on successful transition and forming friendships, particularly where they incorporate informal, fun, non-study activities (Menziez and Baron, 2014). However, networks formed around a particular nationality of student or a common religion can hinder adaptation to their new academic and social environment. Such networks can form in response to difficulties interacting and forming friendship with students from the host nation and students from significantly different cultures. Such difficulties have been evidenced in the UK and Australia (Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson, 2007, Schartner, 2015) but is not entirely the result of international students finding comfort in forming friendships with co-nationals. Indeed, students report being frustrated in their attempts to connect with host nationals, especially amongst those who sought overseas study explicitly as an opportunity to learn about other cultures. Furthermore, Kenway and Bullen (2003) point to the complexities inherent in a sense of belonging, of student identities being multiple, depending on needs/interests. However, there is also positive evidence that international students from widely different cultures do, after some initial reluctance, mix and form lasting relationships, quite independently of host nationals (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2007, Schartner, 2015).

Developing a sense of connectedness and cohort identity can be a particular challenge with online programmes, but the work of Rovai and Jordan (2004) demonstrates that this is not just a simple matter of limited or complete lack of face-to-face contact. Their comparison of fully online, blended and traditional postgraduate programmes found significant variability in students’ sense of connectedness and community which they rationalise as being, at least in part, due to the characteristics and learning preferences of the students themselves, e.g., their degree of self-motivation and independence, the support they have from family, and personality traits such as how introverted/extroverted they are. Thus, they concluded that the better than expected results for the blended programme students may reflect the fact that the programme offered the best of both worlds whilst to some extent, also moderating the worst attributes of both. Specifically, some online students can become frustrated by the relatively lower access to a visible tutor for direction and support, whilst in contrast students on a traditional face-to-face programme can find classroom discussion superficial, limited and dominated by a small number of particularly vocal students. There is also some evidence to suggest that learning technology, primarily designed to provide remote access to programme materials and access to a tutor for specific advice/feedback on assignments, can be successfully adapted to facilitate peer to peer interaction and thus help build a sense of connectedness for distance learners. Thurston (2005) for example, found that careful design of virtual learning environments (VLEs) could not only enhance connectedness, but also that completion rates were higher for distance learners using the system than the control group. This was offered as tentative evidence that connectedness enhanced academic success by reducing demotivating feelings of insecurity and isolation among distance learners. Advances in social networking as well as VLE and related technology has no doubt enabled significant further progress to be made in this regard.

Support for postgraduate students is hence as complex, diverse and multi-faceted as the students themselves, and suggests that solutions will not be straightforward in design or implementation. Indeed, one, global solution is more than likely wholly unrealistic. The “bottom up” developments evidenced here are no doubt mere indicators of significant and innumerable efforts across the UK and beyond of on-going and highly promising work aimed at easing the transition into postgraduate study and making the whole experience a positive, life-changing and productive one. Whilst “bottom up” solutions will undoubtedly result in the most effective and practical solutions (developed as they are by the staff best placed to understand the issues and challenges and also to engage the students in the whole enhancement process), their effects will remain localised unless universities find ways to harness university structures and committees in such a way as to facilitate communication of good practice and new models and processes between departments and across faculties. An effective feedback mechanism is therefore needed that brings together “bottom up” with “top down”.

2.5 PGT – THE “BIG PICTURE”

Recognition is growing in the higher education sector that greater flexibility is needed in PGT education to cope with the diversity of students, their varied motivations for study and the significant diversity of need and capability, particularly in light of concerns in some disciplines about workload and student preparedness for postgraduate study. PGT students are rightly concerned about teaching quality and learning and skills development, and yet difficulties managing workload within highly compressed timescales, inflexible university structures/practices and assumptions on the part of universities regarding students’ understanding of academic practice, have led to concerns that many may be resorting to “surface” or “strategic” learning just to “get by”.

“Transition shock” has many aspects to it and is the result of the diverse backgrounds and capabilities of the students (including their earlier education) and inflexible university systems and practices on one hand and a rapidly evolving academic environment on the other. Different modes of study and developing learning technology have been readily embraced in recent years, and yet the structures, policies and practices underlying some aspects of university life have scarcely changed and continue to be designed primarily with the undergraduate population in mind. This is not helped by the largely passive voice of postgraduate student representation, though there are now moves by some to engage students (undergraduate and postgraduate) as partners in the learning community, helping to shape it rather than being mere passive consumers of it.

Some have warned of the corporatisation of universities in the face of creeping marketization of the education sector and re-positioning of students as consumers, but it is clear from the research and creative work emerging in the sector that staff responsible for the day to day operation of PGT programmes and the development and well-being of the students are the ones best placed to engage in effective enhancement activities and to engage the students in that endeavour. There are therefore, signs that the *enterprise* and *collegium* cultures highlighted by van der Velden (2012) may be starting to assert themselves. Clearly, no one single solution or improvement initiative will re-model the PGT student experience – local solutions will remain local without the help of the wider institutional machinery to communicate and promote them across departments, schools and faculties – but the start point is the students and the staff working closest with them on their postgraduate journey. A growing number of studies and national surveys have collected and analysed the views of students, and as this report has shown, there is excellent research and development work taking place in individual programmes and departments, and at the institutional level across the UK and beyond. But so far, few



GREATER FLEXIBILITY IS NEEDED IN PGT EDUCATION TO COPE WITH THE DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS... YET SOME ASPECTS OF UNIVERSITY LIFE HAVE SCARCELY CHANGED

studies have focused on understanding the bigger picture in terms of providing support for postgraduate students. Studies and developments reported in the literature are isolated examples, offering a limited snapshot of often quite specific aspects of the overall landscape. This study therefore set out to understand that wider landscape, and address the key question of who takes responsibility for the provision of academic and non-academic support for PGT students, how the students are represented within the academic community and how the resources designed to support them are organised and where they are located. UKCGE’s UK-wide membership, spanning universities of all sizes and mission groups provided an appropriate opportunity to uncover and analyse that bigger picture.

3 METHODOLOGY

The national survey was conducted using Smart Survey and made available to respondents via an online link from press releases, UKCGE's online publication - *The Postgraduate* - and the UKCGE site. The survey was launched in December 2015, with an initial end date of end of February 2016.

Given the many PGT programmes that run across departments in institutions, and the lack of a definitive source of PGT-specific contacts within UKCGE and elsewhere, a variety of strategies were adopted to recruit survey participants. Initial invitations to participate were publicised through both general UKCGE press releases and a promotion through a PGT-specific UKCGE event, in addition to requests to UKCGE Link members to forward the survey link on to PGT contacts within their home institutions. Other approaches included tweets via the HEA, utilising contacts within the national PSS scheme, and a specific search of the websites of UKCGE member institutions for contacts with PGT-related role titles. Despite these efforts, the number of responses remained fairly low at 225 by February 2016, and post-92 institutions were markedly under-represented. As a result, the survey deadline was extended to end of March 2016, a reminder was issued in the February edition of *The Postgraduate*, a request to participate was distributed through the HEA's PVC network, and post-92 institutions were particularly targeted in both UKCGE's general and PGT-specific communications. These efforts yielded a final total of 382 responses, across 60 UK HEIs,

approximately half of UKCGE's total HEI membership. Of these responses, 30 were partially completed but still usable – non-responses to questions were counted as “undisclosed” in the statistical analysis of the dataset. The demographics of the sample are detailed in Section 4.1.

Where survey respondents were responsible for more than one PGT programme, they were asked to provide data on just one of them, i.e., the largest in terms of student numbers. The survey questionnaire explored a number of key themes related to the type and location of support for PGT students, plus other themes known to be important to the student experience. After collecting some basic demographic data about the programmes themselves (e.g., cohort size, full-time or part-time, mode of study and what they believe attracts students to their programme), there were separate sections addressing pre-arrival and induction support, and on-programme support, through which the nature (academic, pastoral/non-academic) and location of support (within the institution) were explored. There were also specific questions asked about the common challenges for PGT students, what facilitates/challenges students' sense of belonging, student representation, employability and engagement of alumni to support new/prospective students. In addition, a hypothetical question was asked regarding what PGT Directors/Administrators would use additional resources on, if such were to be made available to them - the intention being to assess priority areas and those where provision was considered lacking. A copy of the survey questionnaire is included in Appendix 1. Whilst closed responses

were provided for the majority of the survey questions, participants were given the opportunity to add their own category, and/or provide a more detailed response in free text (i.e. open responses). Many respondents took the opportunity to provide free text responses across a number of the questions regarding PGT support, in detail in some cases, and this significantly enhanced the richness of the survey data.

Whilst 382 responses across 60 HEIs was considered a useful survey response, it is nonetheless a small proportion of potential respondents. To put this into perspective, the home institutions of two of the authors alone have +200 PGT programmes. However, the sample size is considered sufficiently large to limit the influence of random error to modest/low levels. Equally important however, is consideration of potential bias (systematic error) in the sample due to the reliance on self-selection of respondents. Accurate

assessment of this however, relies on a good understanding of the sample population, in this case, the population of UK PGT programmes in terms of their size, discipline areas, the make-up of the student body on those programmes, and characteristics of the institutions hosting the programmes (such as how many pre-versus post-92 institutions participated). A lack of available national level data on PGT programmes however, meant that there was no reliable baseline with which to compare the survey sample and thereby determine its likely representativeness. Nevertheless, information about the sample is provided in Section 4.1, to provide the reader with an overall sense of the group under study.

4 ANALYSIS OF SURVEY DATA

The survey explored a number of relevant themes identified by prior studies, but at a more national level (through the UKCGE membership) rather than through specific programmes/institutions, or through a focus on specific aspects of PGT. Furthermore, this survey focused on the views of the university staff best placed to understand the PGT student experience, with its associated challenges and complexities, PGT Directors and Administrators.

The demographic data below shows that the survey obtained a good spread across disciplines and programme sizes, but with greater relative numbers of full-time programmes and pre-92 institutions. However, as indicated above, this does not necessarily suggest bias in the sample, since national level data on PGT programmes are not available to judge this.

4.1 DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE DATA

Respondents were given the option to indicate for the survey their job roles, their institution and the discipline within which their programme is taught. The vast majority of the survey respondents were in academic roles - just 3.9% gave their title as *Administrator*. The range of academic roles represented ranged from *Research Fellow/Assistant* (1%) to *Professor* (12.6%), with the majority giving the title *Senior Lecturer* (36%). Job title was not disclosed by 12% of the respondents.

382 PGT PROGRAMMES REPRESENTED FROM **60** HEIs

APPROXIMATELY HALF OF UKCGE'S TOTAL HEI MEMBERSHIP

TABLE 1
SURVEY SAMPLE BREAKDOWN ACCORDING TO MISSION GROUP

MISSION GROUP	FREQUENCY	%
Russell Group*	154	37.9
GW 4*	32	7.9
University Alliance	43	10.6
Million+	17	4.2
Specialist HEIs	13	3.2
Unaffiliated	124	30.5
Not disclosed	23	5.7
TOTAL	406*	100.0

* 24 of the respondents represent institutions that hold membership of both the Russell Group and GW4 mission groups, hence numbers across the sample total 406 instead of 382.

TABLE 2
SURVEY SAMPLE BREAKDOWN BY DISCIPLINE/SUBJECT AREA

DISCIPLINE/SUBJECT AREA	FREQUENCY	%
Social Science	138	38.1
STEM	94	26.0
Art & Humanities	77	21.3
Health & Social Care	53	14.6
<i>Respondents skipped the question</i>	20	-
TOTAL	382	100

All survey respondents are current UKCGE member institutions, with 382 PGT programmes represented from 60 HEIs (approximately half of UKCGE's total HEI membership). The sample consists predominantly of pre-92 institutions, and this is reflected in the breakdown according to mission group (Table 1) - all members

TABLE 3
SURVEY SAMPLE BREAKDOWN ACCORDING TO PROGRAMME SIZE

SIZE OF PROGRAMME	FREQUENCY	%
Fewer than 15 students	104	27.2
15-30 students	106	27.7
More than 30 but less than 50 students	60	15.7
50-100 students	54	14.1
More than 100 students	38	9.9
More than 150	2	0.5
Not disclosed	15	3.9
Variable between 10-20	2	0.5
30-60 students	1	0.3
TOTAL	382	100.0

TABLE 4
DISCIPLINE/SUBJECT AREA RELATIVE TO PROGRAMME SIZE

% OF TOTAL NUMBER OF PROGRAMMES PER DISCIPLINE IN EACH SIZE RANGE	STUDENT NUMBERS				
	<15	15-30	31-49	50-100	>100
Arts & Humanities	41.9	33.8	13.5	6.8	4.1
Health & Social Care	24.5	32.1	17.0	20.8	5.7
STEM	33.3	26.9	17.2	14.0	8.6
Social Science	19.6	27.5	15.9	18.1	18.8
Undisclosed	33.3	16.7	50.0	-	-

of the Russell Group and GW4 are pre-92 HEIs, whilst HEI members of Million+ and University Alliance (with the exception of the Open University) are post-92 institutions, with a mix of the two among the unaffiliated and specialist HEIs.

However, the survey sample achieves a good spread across the main discipline/subject areas of PGT programmes, Table 2. The survey provided four fixed discipline/subject areas, but respondents were given the opportunity to qualify this if appropriate. One respondent classifying their programme as *Arts and Humanities* stated that the programme was in fact cross-disciplinary (linguistics and computer science). It was also noted that law programmes were classified by some respondents as *Arts and Humanities* and by others as *Social Science*, and management PGT programmes as either *STEM* or *Social Science*, depending on the field of management, e.g., project management in *STEM*, business management in *Social Science*.

With respect to the size of the programmes represented in the survey sample, there is a considerable spread from programmes of fewer than 15 students to those with more than 100, with two respondents specifying that their programmes had 180 and approximately 200 students. As Table 3 shows, the majority (55%) of the PGT programmes represented have 30 students or less.

In correlating size of programme with discipline/subject area (Table 4), the data reveals that the prevalence of small programmes is evident across all four classifications. *Arts and Humanities* has the highest proportion of small programmes (76% of them have 30 students or less) whilst *Social Sciences* has the most even spread of programme sizes across the range.

4.1.1 REPRESENTATION BY PROGRAMME / STUDENT TYPE

In terms of mode of study, the survey sample consists of 74% programmes delivered on-campus, with 7% delivered entirely online, and 18.5% operating a blended delivery programme, Table 5. Just two respondents reported on programmes delivered off-campus or overseas.

Regarding the type of student, the majority of the survey sample (54%) is made up of respondents reporting on programmes populated entirely, or almost entirely with full-time students, with 18% reporting on programmes entirely, or almost entirely populated with part-time students, and 28% reporting on mixed programmes, Table 6a. With respect to the origin of the students, a much more mixed picture emerges from the survey data – 56% of the programmes reported on by respondents attract a mix of home/EU and overseas students, with a further 22% attracting mainly home/EU students, and 21% attracting mainly overseas students, Table 6b.

Taken together, this suggests that PGT programmes across the sample are managing a diverse population of students (particularly in the mix of home/EU and overseas students). Further, the predominance of full-time students in the programmes represented and the high proportion of overseas students (the majority of whom study full-time), suggests that the survey will reveal less detail about support for part-time students.

TABLE 5
DELIVERY MODES OF PROGRAMMES IN THE SURVEY SAMPLE

PROGRAMME DELIVERY MODE	FREQUENCY	%
Delivered on-campus	271	73.9
Delivered through a blended approach	68	18.5
Delivered entirely online	26	7.1
Delivered entirely off-campus / overseas	2	0.5
<i>Respondents skipped the question</i>	15	-
TOTAL	382	100.0

TABLE 6A
TYPE OF STUDENT (BY ENROLMENT) ON PROGRAMMES IN THE SURVEY SAMPLE

STUDENT ENROLMENT	FREQUENCY	%
Entirely or almost entirely full-time	198	54.1
There is a mix of full-time and part-time	103	28.1
Entirely or almost entirely part-time	65	17.8
<i>Respondents skipped the question</i>	16	-
TOTAL	382	100.0

TABLE 6B
TYPE OF STUDENT (BY ORIGIN) ON PROGRAMMES IN THE SURVEY SAMPLES

STUDENT ORIGIN	FREQUENCY	%
Students are a mix of Home / EU and Overseas	206	56.1
Students are mainly Home / EU	82	22.3
Students are mainly Overseas	79	21.6
<i>Respondents skipped the question</i>	15	-
TOTAL	382	100.0

TABLE 7
WHAT ATTRACTS STUDENTS TO THEIR CHOSEN PGT PROGRAMME

THE PROGRAMME ATTRACTS	FREQUENCY	%
Students wanting to enhance their career prospects outside academia	264	72.3
Students hoping to move on to PGR	193	52.9
Mid-career professionals	175	48.0
Recent graduates wanting a conversion programme	134	36.7
Other	30	8.2
<i>Respondents skipped the question</i>	17	-

Note: 365 respondents answered this question.

4.1.2 WHAT ATTRACTS STUDENTS TO THEIR CHOSEN PGT PROGRAMMES

The challenges of managing such a diverse student population becomes even more clear when considering what attracts students to their chosen PGT programmes. Survey respondents were given a range of fixed options from which to select as many as applied, with the option to contribute others where appropriate. 53% of respondents indicated that their programmes attract students hoping to move on to PGR, whilst 48% indicated that their programme attracted mid-career professionals (less likely to be considering moving on to PGR) and 72% indicated a motivation among their students to enhance their career prospects outside of academia, Table 7.

These themes align well with PTES data indicating that enhancing employment prospects, progressing their current career path and progressing to further postgraduate study are common motivations for PGT study (HEA, 2015). The free-text responses (classified as “other”) also indicated that some students undertook their programmes purely because of an interest in the subject (also noted in PTES). There was also some elaboration of the attraction for mid-career professionals, i.e., working towards a particular specialisation or career path, or upskilling in response to changes in their industry/profession. Such varied motivations for study, combined with a diverse student population, suggests potential challenges in meeting the wide range of needs that arise. PGT programmes (especially those that run in a number of modes) may therefore be simultaneously managing the needs of full-time and part-time, home/EU and overseas students, mid-career professionals and aspiring researchers.

4.2 PRE-ARRIVAL AND INDUCTION SUPPORT

It is generally recognised that successful transition into PGT needs to start with engagement and support, not just from the very beginning of their study programmes, but before they start, and even before they arrive in the UK (Section 2.4). The survey therefore incorporated questions designed to find out what level of support is available to PGT students pre-arrival and during the induction period, and where that support is located.

First, respondents were asked whether members of academic/administrative programme staff have any direct contact with students before they start on the programme, and if so, what the nature of that contact is. Of the 362 responses (20 chose to skip this question) only eight reported no direct contact between incoming students and the programme team. Respondents were presented with a number of fixed options and asked to select as many as applied. Across the five suggested options there were 1153 selections, indicating an average of three per respondent.

Among the 28 respondents who gave details within the “other” category, interviews and open days were the most commonly mentioned forms of contact, some noted that central admissions or administrative staff carried out most of this pre-arrival contact. However, overall these data suggest that programme teams, in addition to providing programme specific information, are doing a lot of responding to general enquiries and those not specifically relating to the programme of study.

When asked at what levels *non-academic* pre-arrival and induction support (e.g. general information, registration, visas, finance, accommodation) is organised for new students on their programme, 1% (4) said it is not provided, 89% (321) said it is provided at

TABLE 8
THE NATURE OF CONTACT WITH PGT STUDENTS PRIOR TO ENROLMENT

NATURE OF CONTACT	FREQUENCY	%
Dealing with general enquiries	321	89
Sending information and preparatory material	307	85
Dealing with enquiries regarding registration / matriculation / enrollment	266	73
Dealing with practical enquiries such as accommodation	144	40
Arranging pre-sessional support	115	32
Other	28	8
No contact	8	2

university level, with 72% (260) reporting programme-level provision. Whether this dual approach results in a degree of duplication would be worth investigating in the 226 cases in which both levels were indicated.

The provision of *academic* support pre-arrival and during induction followed a similar pattern to that for non-academic support, with the university carrying the biggest share of this activity, although there is less of this kind of support offered overall - 4%(15) indicated no support of this kind, with 82% (298) and 61% (221) indicating university and programme level respectively. Once again this suggests a high degree of overlap with 173 responses indicating both university and programme level.

A HIGH DEGREE OF SUPPORT IS INDICATED AT PROGRAMME AND INSTITUTION LEVEL

Sixty-six of those who indicated programme level support provided further information in the free-text section for this question. Almost half of these mentioned some kind of induction event. These ranged from a ‘meeting’, to a ‘party’, ‘half-day’ to a comprehensive week of programme level induction activities, including social events, that included orientation to staff, university systems and to the local area. Two respondents mentioned ‘residential’ or field trips being used in induction week to help promote a sense of cohort identity, whilst almost a third of respondents mentioned orientation to the library. A small number highlighted ‘bespoke’ or programme-specific library induction that had been negotiated with a librarian, and offered to their students. General academic literacy such as essay writing skills, referencing, critical reading and avoiding plagiarism were mentioned by 23 respondents. Less frequent, but nonetheless interesting responses, include five that referred to a perceived need for introductions for students to the virtual learning environments in use and to studying online. Two Programme Directors also mentioned offering students the opportunity to complete a voluntary assignment as a means of obtaining formative feedback (also raised in Section 4.3). In one programme the kinds of activity described above form part of a credit-bearing course in the first semester. Two responses also indicated that much of their induction is available as an online resource which students can access pre-arrival.

4.3 ON-PROGRAMME SUPPORT

With respect to on-programme support for academic literacy, out of 355 who answered this question, 79% (280) indicated that it is offered at university level, with 83% (296) noting it is offered at programme level. Again, this suggests that there is a degree of overlap between programme and central support with almost two thirds (65%) of responses indicating both programme and university level support.

Respondents were asked to give details of any on-programme support offered. The comments (111 in total) fell into three main types:

- Academic literacy and research skills are embedded in core programmes/modules (32)
- Support provided through formative feedback (or feed-forward) on coursework and/or on extra optional assignments (22)
- Workshops/ lectures/ sessions in addition to core programmes set up to address specific topics (30)

Given the concerns that we know PGT students have with workload (PTES results as reported in HEA, 2015), there may be merit in

“
WE SHOULDN'T
HAVE TO TEACH
PEOPLE HOW
TO WRITE

incorporating academic literacy into core credit bearing programmes (aligning with some views expressed in Section 2.3). The use of formative feedback seems to be a well-established practice at this level, but where there is feedback offered on additional optional assignments this must inevitably lead to an increase in workload, especially for those students who are already finding things difficult. There were nine mentions of students receiving individual support (this was in addition to those comments relating to individual feedback from a dissertation supervisor), which although not a high proportion of the total responses, does suggest that supporting Master’s students is work that goes well beyond the contact time in taught classes. A small number of responses hinted at frustration with the need for programmes/input of this type at Master’s level. For example:

“We shouldn’t have to teach people how to write”

The survey also asked respondents to comment on how general academic advice and support for students is organized on their programmes, i.e., support for issues other than academic literacy. Of the 354 responses (28 skipped the question), three-quarters (264) replied that this was their responsibility as Programme Director, and half (176) that a member of academic staff was allocated as Personal Tutor. Given these figures, there is some suggestion of overlap at programme level between the responsibilities of the Programme

Director and (where one is allocated) the Personal Tutor, the implication being that some students have both the Programme Director and a Personal Tutor to support them, or that some Programme Directors also act as Personal Tutors, but it is not possible to know from our data. Fourteen respondents indicated that a non-academic member of staff is given this role, whilst the free-text comments for eight respondents suggest that the Programme Director doubles as the Personal Tutor (which may explain some of the overlap noted above), and seven indicated simply that this support is provided at programme/module/unit level. Finally, 17 of the 39 free-text comments mention that there is a range of people that students know they can go and speak with about any concerns. This suggests a reactive approach where a student with concerns can raise them with whomever they feel most appropriate. In contrast, the more formal Personal Tutor role may allow for more active support in which the tutor is identifying where there may be difficulties, rather than waiting for the student to approach them. These different approaches do imply therefore different conceptualisations of the independence and autonomy of the students.

The role of Personal Tutor is often a mix of providing general academic and pastoral support, but the survey findings suggest that the system for PG students is under-developed. For example, whilst on some programmes there are systems in place to ensure each tutor does not have too many tutees (there are mentions of limits of 20 or 25), in other places this role appears to have academic staff over-stretched. One respondent noted that while the Personal Tutor role is established at undergraduate level, it is not recognised in workloads at PGT level, despite the time-consuming nature of this kind of support. Another indicated that they had 1.1FTE staff providing support to 90 part-time students. This suggests that there is a very wide range of institutional views about the need for pastoral and general academic support at PGT level, who ought to be delivering it, and how much time it can reasonably be expected to take.

4.3.1 COMMON CHALLENGES FOR PGTS

Despite the survey's primary focus on provision of support and where support is located, respondents were also asked about any common problems that they were aware of that hold PGTs back in their academic studies. This question was designed to provide some additional context regarding student needs and how this is matched with support, or challenges to the support that is available.

Of the 382 total, 213 of the respondents took the time to leave free-text comments here, suggesting that this is an area on which Programme Directors have strong views. The open comments were coded and four broad categories were identified, with lack of preparedness for Master's level study, financial concerns and the complexity of PGT students' lives being by far the dominant issues mentioned:

- Lack of preparedness for M level study
- Financial issues
- Complexity of students' lives
- Institutional factors

Other issues, each identified by fewer than 10 respondents included student mental health, academic misconduct, and the engagement of distance learning students.

Finally, two respondents specifically mentioned changes in visa regulations as causing significant problems, in terms of what happens when a student on a visa becomes unwell and needs to interrupt their studies, and also visa delays causing some students to arrive at the last minute, sometimes after term has started. Whilst universities have been criticized for their lack of flexibility with regard to policies, systems and structures as applied to PGT students (Section 2.1), this is an example of regulation beyond any universities' power to control. The impact on the student however, can be significant.

Lack of Preparedness for M level study

In total 110 comments were made which fall into this category. This number splits almost evenly between those which were primarily concerned with issues relating to non-native speakers (56), including academic culture shock, and those which highlighted more general concerns (54) such as: lack of academic (particularly writing) skills, lack of criticality (in analysis, reading, thinking), unrealistic expectations of the demands of PGT level study, inability to make the leap to postgraduate study, and, low levels of student confidence.

(i) Issues relating to overseas students and non-native speakers

Fifty-six respondents identified the English language skills of non-native speakers as a significant issue. Around half of those who

mentioned English language as a problem also commented that the existing entrance requirements tests for English were problematic. It was observed that in some cases students who had passed the tests did not appear to have the level of skills this would suggest when they arrived on programme, while others suggested that the levels at which the tests are set are too low:

"Poor language (English) skills. In some cases, even when students reach the required levels on proficiency tests (e.g. TOEFL and IELTS), they don't understand many things said by lecturers, they avoid speaking (e.g. ask questions in public) because they are not confident about their English knowledge and they don't write good essays."

A second theme here (in 22 responses) was challenges encountered in acclimatising to the British academic culture. With East Asian students in particular, the inevitable cultural differences create additional difficulties, in the styles of interaction with academic staff and other students, a lack of familiarity with the expectations of a foreign university (e.g. in terms of contribution to classes), and an associated lack of independence. These findings fit with those indicated by other studies regarding overseas students (Sections 2.1 and 2.3). Furthermore, five respondents stated that they had seen an increase in academic misconduct/plagiarism and that this was a particular issue for non-native speakers. Three respondents observed that some overseas students can lack in confidence and be overly focused on the final mark rather than on the learning that will under-pin the mark. This was felt to be associated with an overseas Master's being seen as 'high stakes', presumably as families had made a big investment to allow the student to enrol. This adds an additional dimension to the arguments in previous studies that suggest a tendency toward "surface" or "strategic" learning (Section 2.1), in that this behavior may be motivated by familial pressure as well as being a coping strategy to "keep up" with a programme that they are finding difficult for a variety of reasons.

(ii) General lack of preparedness

Fifty-four comments referred to students' lack of readiness to study at Master's level, but did not refer specifically to students who are non-native speakers. Ten noted inappropriate student expectations in relation to the time commitment required (particularly amongst distance/ online learners) and level of difficulty, and 14 respondents identified poor academic writing skills as a significant problem. A further 14 respondents highlighted difficulties with critical analysis. This was seen as a challenge for students coming from practice-based environments:

"For those who are coming from the world of work we have to work very hard to ensure they are introduced or re-introduced to academic writing skills e.g. critical analysis, referencing"

but also generally:

"In addition, many students arrive with surprisingly weak generic academic skills (e.g. academic writing, critical thinking, etc.) which detrimentally affects their capacity to achieve high marks at PG level."

For seven respondents the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate was seen as too large with students unable to make the transition, often after a break in studies. The key challenges of PGT compared with undergraduate study were said to be the level of critical analysis required, as well as the additional focus on independent study. These are all issues that align with prior studies (Section 2.3) and suggest significant challenges not just for the students concerned, but also for the staff whose role it is to help them achieve success in their studies. A lack of confidence was also identified as an issue for some PGT students, especially those who have been away from study for a number of years, and new learning technology was seen by some as a particular challenge for this group.

Finance

Fifty-three comments highlighted the challenges PGT students face in funding their studies and living expenses whilst studying. Half of those (27) highlighting financial pressures as a key issue, linked this with students having to work part-time to support themselves. Other issues arising were lack of scholarships available for PGT, the impact of undergraduate students graduating with loans to repay, and financial barriers to moving on to PGR.

The complexity of students' lives

As has already been suggested under the Finance theme, PGT students are often working alongside their studies because of financial pressure. Other responses highlighted the challenges faced by students on part-time programmes, designed to be studied alongside full-time work. Overall, different types of complexity were identified by a total of 53 respondents. Balancing work, study and home life was seen as a significant challenge for students

by 26 of our respondents. PGT students are more likely than undergraduates to have caring responsibilities, and a number of respondents noted that the inflexibility of the university system in terms of regulations and time-tabling, was not supportive of students facing the challenges of juggling work/study and home.

Institutional factors

For a smaller number of respondents (23), it is institutional factors that cause the most difficulties. There were eight comments directly relating to the ethos of the university as being one in which research takes priority:

“Teaching for the convenience of research focuses staff who see teaching often as a secondary activity that is of lower value”

and, where teaching is not adequately resourced:

“... the only activity that seems to matter to the university is research so funds from teaching are used to subsidise research rather than to fund teaching resources and equipment.”

The priority given to research is a particular issue for dissertation supervision:

“Dissertation supervision in research areas is challenging when these projects tend to take place when many academics are away during the summer months resulting in some students finding it difficult to access regular and detailed feedback and guidance.”

There was little indication of this particular tension in UK HEIs in previous studies, but it could perhaps be considered another manifestation of the inflexibility of university policies and structures (Section 2.4), and of a tendency to focus on those aspects of university life that are measured by government and funding bodies (e.g., the REF), or highlighted through national surveys and politically sensitive issues, e.g., undergraduate student fees. As was suggested in the Introduction, the PGT population is often forgotten, despite the much needed revenues that it brings to the higher education sector.

4.3.2 ENGAGING ALUMNI

Given the resource constraints of many PGT programmes, and evidence from prior studies to suggest that students rely at least as much on peer support as they do on programme staff and Personal Tutors (Section 2.4), one of the survey questions sought to explore whether and to what extent PGT Programme Directors engage alumni in student support. Whilst alumni clearly do not classify as peers to current students, they bring their recent experience of postgraduate study to their interactions with them. Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they engaged alumni in helping new or prospective students. The range of activities was diverse and included mentoring, careers advice, study choices, programme experience, induction, open days, and guest lectures. Comments by respondents suggested that for many, this was a growing area of provision and one where they would like to see more occur.

4.3.3 EMPLOYABILITY AND FURTHER STUDY

Attention to employability has been increasing in recent years and therefore the survey included a question on this, designed to find out how Programme Directors think support for employability is best handled. Given that some PGTs undertake their programmes as an intermediate step toward PGR study, the question asked about both employability and further study. Of the 347 responses to this question, 72% (251) indicated that employability and further study should be built into the programme of study, whilst 55% felt that these were best handled by a central university service. The reasons for this mixed and overlapping response becomes clearer when considering the additional information provided by 90 respondents in the free text sections.

Of the free-text responses, 29 respondents indicated that a combination of both a central service and built-in provision at programme level was important, some programmes already have provision built in whilst also directing students to a central career service where appropriate, whilst others were working toward or aspired to a mixed approach. A number of respondents made the point that often programmes are quite specific and therefore a central career service is useful for advice on developing a CV and handling interviews, but lack the knowledge to advise on the particulars of their field or relevant industries. Others point out that academics often lack sufficient knowledge of careers and the jobs market to advise students, and that overseas students tend to seek jobs in their home countries after study. Some programmes offer tailored support for employability via a number of means - utilising career specialists and contacts with industry, industrial placements/internships or engaging large employers in careers events, as well as offering practical support with CV writing and interview skills. In addition, 19 responses indicated what appeared to be dedicated support built into the programme, with no

indication of the involvement of a central university service – this may however suggest a lack of collaboration with a central service rather than that their students do not have access to one.

Small numbers of respondents indicated that employability is irrelevant for their programmes, either because their students are generally already in employment, or the programme is explicitly intended to prepare students for PGR study, the latter respondents indicated therefore that support for further study (rather than employability) is built into their programmes. Just three respondents indicated that employability is not a consideration at all, but for different reasons – one stated that employability “has nothing whatever to do with us”, a second suggested that it simply is not possible to accommodate employability within an already intensive programme, and a third stated that the workload of the staff meant that they did not have the time to invest in it.

Overall, this would suggest that a central university career service is likely to be helpful for generic practical help and advice, but that beyond this, Programme Directors determine the degree and nature of support for employability and further study based on the specifics of

their programme and the needs of their students. Where some tailored support is needed however, it is worth collaborating with the central service, if only to ensure a complementary fit and to avoid unnecessary overlap, given pressure on resources at both programme and university level.

4.4 SENSE OF BELONGING

Respondents were asked their views on the extent to which they believed that PGT students feel they belong to their programme, a student community, their school/subject area/department and the university. The following table summarises these responses.

TABLE 9
PGT STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING ACCORDING TO HOW THE PROGRAMME IS DELIVERED

SENSE OF BELONGING TO	PROGRAMME DELIVERED ENTIRELY ONLINE	PROGRAMME DELIVERED THROUGH A BLENDED APPROACH	PROGRAMME DELIVERED ON CAMPUS
Programme	N=24	N=65	N=258
Not at all	0%	0%	0%
Somewhat	8%	6%	6%
Very	92%	94%	94%
Student community	N=24	N=65	N=256
Not at all	4%	0%	<1%
Somewhat	17%	26%	32%
Very	79%	74%	68%
School / subject area / department	N=25	N=63	N=258
Not at all	4%	2%	0%
Somewhat	40%	32%	24%
Very	56%	67%	76%
University	N=25	N=65	N=257
Not at all	4%	3%	1%
Somewhat	52%	36%	44%
Very	44%	61%	52%

The table shows that the respondents perceived students' greatest sense of belonging to be their programme, irrespective of where the programme is delivered. However, differences were perceived with respect to student community (greater for online or blended programmes), the school/subject area/department (greater for campus programmes) and university (lowest among online programmes).

Respondents were asked what they thought facilitated students' sense of belonging to their programme. An extensive range of responses were offered covering activities pre-enrolment, induction, activities early on in the programme (academic and extra-curricular), student engagement in programme design and running, opportunities to engage with staff, opportunities, activities and facilities specifically for PGT students, and, for campus-based programmes, physical space identified for the programme (teaching and/or social). A paramount facilitating factor was the Programme Director's and other staff's contact and nurturing of the group:

"Close contact between staff (especially myself and the programme administrator) and the students throughout the programme. I think that students most appreciate the feeling that someone is listening to them and making changes to the programme if needed in response to their comments and feedback"

In terms of challenges to students' sense of belonging to their programme, a range of issues were identified, including converse factors to the facilitators above – for example, lack of a dedicated physical space, or combining undergraduate and postgraduate facilities and teaching (teaching both together on the same programme):

"The tendencies of university to share facilities for UG and PG teaching. In my experience, PG students don't like this and rather prefer to have a space of their own"

Other major themes included the challenges of handling cultural differences, programme



I THINK THAT STUDENTS MOST APPRECIATE THE FEELING THAT **SOMEONE IS LISTENING TO THEM AND MAKING CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME IF NEEDED IN RESPONSE TO THEIR COMMENTS AND FEEDBACK**

structures which lead to students often being in modules with students from other programmes, lack of resources for input beyond 'the core programme', and the intensity of Master's level study leaving little time for other activities. Specific constraints around building a sense of belonging for part-time students were widely noted:

"All my students have full-time jobs, university is only a part of their life"

All of these facilitators and challenges are represented in earlier studies, as discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.4. One way in which sense of belonging can be achieved, according to prior studies, is through student representation (Section 2.2). Information on student representation was sought and 89% of respondents indicated that staff-student committees at programme level were in place. This compared to committees at subject area/department/faculty/college level (58%) and at university level (42%). Approximately 55% of respondents believed that there were PG representatives on the university's students' union or other student representative body. Some respondents indicated that student representation posed particular challenges for programmes delivered online or by a blended approach, in part due to these students often being in full-time employment. This would seem to reflect, in part, the difficulties of achieving meaningful student engagement discussed in Section 2.2.

TABLE 10

RANKED PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSE TO SUGGESTED USAGE OF ADDITIONAL (HYPOTHETICAL) RESOURCE

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL PROVISION	FREQUENCY (FROM TOTAL OF 368)	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SAMPLE
Recruit more students (promotions, enhancing the application process, scholarships / bursaries / fee reductions)	200	54.4
Recruit more staff (teaching and admin)	185	50.3
Extra-curricula activities (field trips, conferences, exchange programmes, company visits)	161	43.8
Better serve existing students and enhancing the student experience	161	43.8
Enhance programme materials (including updating, tailoring course design and delivery, master classes)	133	36.1
Academic skills training and dissertation support	129	35.1
Develop online resources to supplement programmes and better support distance learners	121	32.9
Career development / planning / training, work-based / transferable skills training, and enhancing employability	120	32.6
More course specialisation (including specialist external speakers), diversify options and expand number of programmes	119	32.3
Improve technology and IT support, more / better equipment and consumables	102	27.7
Induction and additional (Summer Schools and peer) support	72	19.6
We have sufficient resources	22	6.0

4.5 WHERE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES COULD ENHANCE PROVISION

Before focusing attention on the details of PGT support, respondents were asked what they would use additional resources on, if such were to be made available to them – *"If you had more resources (e.g. academic or administrative staff time, or additional funding) to support PGT students how would you use those resources?"*. Although an entirely hypothetical question, the intention was to determine where respondents regarded provision and support as lacking and/or what their aspirations were for enhanced PGT provision. Respondents were offered a range of fixed responses from which to select as many as applied, plus the opportunity to add additional items and comment on additional provision. For the purposes of providing a brief overview, the percentage of the total sample responding "yes" to each of the fixed options have been ranked in Table 10 opposite, respondents were asked to select as many as applied.

Interestingly, 6% (22 "yes" responses) indicated that their programmes had sufficient resource, possibly a reflection of the relatively small size of some of the programmes represented. In contrast, the second highest ranking item in Table 10 is *recruit more staff*, with free text comments indicating issues with workload and not having enough time for activities that would enhance the student experience. The middle ranking of *academic skills training and dissertation support* and *developing online resources* is also noteworthy. This reflects the need to support students in transitioning to postgraduate study and the aspiration to develop a more diverse range of support for learning, but given the concerns expressed in prior studies (Section 2.3) regarding students' academic capabilities, a higher ranking for academic skills training might have been expected. This may either suggest that Programme Directors feel that there is already sufficient provision for this aspect of student support, or the issue of academic literacy is acute in certain areas, rather

than widespread, it was not possible to determine which from the data. However, it is possibly also an artefact of the survey, that is, respondents had already raised these issues with respect to any earlier question and therefore did not repeat the point.

The additional suggestions and comments regarding usage of extra resource largely elaborated on the fixed choices presented in Table 10, including generating more specialist material, recruiting academic staff with specialist

knowledge, the development of online resources to enhance the student experience and developing a more diverse range of delivery modes. Furthermore, the comments reflect the uncertain PGT landscape, with indications that there is a need to adapt programmes in a changing environment and enhance recruitment, not just of more students, but also a wider diversity of students. Specific measures to improve employability were also indicated, including enhanced/increased industrial placement opportunities, whilst others were designed to encourage recruitment onto PGR programmes (such as offering studentships to the best student(s) in the cohort).

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to explore challenges and good practice in postgraduate taught provision from the perspective of those responsible for delivering PGT programmes. We believe that this is the first such national survey in the UK, complementing data from students on their experience, captured through means such as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES).

Almost 400 responses were obtained from across 60 different HEIs. We recognise that respondents were not randomly selected, nor are there data available to assess the representativeness of the sample obtained. Nevertheless the responses covered a wide range of disciplines, programme type and size, delivery mode and type of HEI, and yielded some strong common themes. We therefore believe we have captured issues that would be recognised across the PGT sector. The

responses also reflected diversity among students on these programmes (by origin and full/part time enrolment). Diversity in the make-up of the PGT student population is a well-documented reality and the pertinent issue for those responsible for PGT programmes is how this diversity affects the PGT student experience. As previously indicated, differences in student motivations for study, and their expectations and preparedness with respect to independent study, workload, academic challenge and intellectual stimulation vary (sometimes markedly), depending on the backgrounds and prior experience of the students themselves.

Increasing emphasis on student satisfaction is driving greater attention to the quality of teaching and learning (PTES, 2015), but this survey and previous studies underline the importance of focusing on specific areas where support is needed. Most notably, the survey findings reveal a strong emphasis on providing support in the development of academic literacy and research skills both at university and programme level, whilst also highlighting a perceived mismatch between students' capabilities and the academic requirements of their programmes. This lends support to the findings by Brown (2014), Murray *et al.* (2013), Coates and Dickinson (2012) and O'Donnell *et al.* (2009) that it cannot be assumed that postgraduate students arrive already equipped with the skills needed to succeed at Master's level.

Interestingly, despite the diversity of the student population, and notwithstanding the range of expectations and capability levels among them, there are a number of common problems perceived to be experienced by students at Master's level, albeit for different reasons. Issues with managing workload were highlighted by PTES in 2015, and this is evident indirectly in the survey data in issues raised concerning students needing to fund their studies through part-time work, part-time students struggling to achieve a work/life/study balance, non-native students struggling with the English language, and inappropriate expectations concerning the time commitment required for postgraduate study. Respondents revealed that some programmes also provide additional workshops and seminars (beyond the core programme content) and additional (optional) assignments, which whilst designed to support students, inevitably also add to the workload and could actually further undermine already weak or over-burdened students (Wingate, 2006). Weaknesses in academic writing, critical thinking and independent learning are also indicated as common problems by survey respondents, and are not confined to a specific sub-set of the student population or mode of programme delivery. Related to this is the observation by some respondents that students lack confidence, in some cases because of their background and unfamiliarity with the learning culture, and in others as a result of returning to study after a long period of time. Such issues are not helped by perceived inflexibilities in institutional policies and systems, and advances in learning technology, designed to enhance learning and improve access, but nonetheless an obstacle to some. All of these issues have been raised before, the findings themselves are not new, but this national-level survey indicates that such issues are ubiquitous, rather than a concern only with overseas students, for example, or part-time or distance learners. This survey has confirmed the issues highlighted in previous, small-scale, specific/limited studies, on a much larger scale.

The implications of this are that whilst there will inevitably be issues that are specific to certain sub-sets of the PGT student population, or the discipline, or mode of programme delivery, a focus on the common problems and finding innovative solutions to them (in

FURTHER WORK IS NEEDED ON CREATING PRODUCTIVE AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE / LEARNING

whatever part of the sector) would be potentially beneficial to all. That is not to say that there are necessarily common solutions to these common problems, but there is potential for synergies from the sharing of experiences of what works in what contexts, and innovative ideas, frameworks and practices. Such frameworks and practices are already starting to emerge, as indicated in Section 2.3 and 2.4, and the HEA have been active in encouraging and inspiring innovation, the sector should continue to build on this, and develop effective mechanisms for sharing and collaboration across the sector.

A particularly promising area for further exploration is that of building communities of practice and/or learning, encouraging peer-to-peer support and meaningful engagement with staff beyond classroom contact, and enhancing a sense of belonging. Survey respondents perceived that students' sense of belonging is rooted most in their programmes, followed by student communities, and this reflects the findings of studies elsewhere (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2007, Schartner, 2015, Rovai and Jordan, 2004, Kenway and Bullen, 2003). However, such studies also suggest that communities based

around, for example, gender, religion, culture or nationality, can be meaningless, unhelpful and even counter-productive, and importantly that student identities can be multiple (depending on needs/interests). Thus, further work is needed to establish how productive and supportive communities can be established. However, another strong theme in the data (and previous studies) regarding student sense of belonging was that of staff availability, that student support relies on staff being present, and having the time to actively support students. This is not just an issue of staff workload, but also of the institutional systems, structures and practices that underpin postgraduate study.

Previous studies have stressed the importance of meaningful engagement between students and programme staff, and staff having the time to spend with students (Cahill, *et. al.*, 2014, Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013), whilst others - most notably Hallett (2010) and Wingate (2006) - emphasise the need for effective and more learner-centred study skills support, embedded into the core, subject-specific teaching rather than standalone, "bolt-on" courses, divorced from the context in which students are required to apply them. In addition, Brown (2014),

Turner (2006) and Wharton (2003) advocate setting clearer assessment criteria and providing formative feedback as effective support mechanisms. All of these measures require, at least the co-operation of, and ideally the deep engagement of programme and teaching staff (those closest to the students themselves) to develop and implement them. And yet, some of the survey findings indicate frustration amongst programme staff that such endeavours are not valued/recognised by universities (relative to research activities) and are under-resourced. The numbers of such responses were small, but their implications are serious. The forthcoming TEF, expected to come into force for postgraduate teaching in the short- to medium-term future, is intended to bring about improvements in teaching and learning, but if not carefully conceived, could continue to drive the "top-down" approach observed by Van der Velden (2012) at the expense of the more "bottom up", collegial and enterprising cultures that tend to emerge at the staff-student interface.

However, whilst "bottom-up" could be the logical approach to enhancing student learning and the overall student experience, clearly there is potential for considerable overlap and inefficient and time-consuming reinvention if pockets of good practice and innovative ideas are not shared and co-ordinated. Indeed, the survey data reveals a high degree of apparent overlap in the provision of both academic and non-academic support being provided at programme and institution level. Further investigation, beyond the scope of this report, is needed to determine whether such overlap is deliberate and delivers complementary services and support, rather than unnecessary duplication. Some responses were explicit enough to indicate a co-ordinated approach between programme management and a central university facility, such as Career Services, to provide both generic and more discipline/industry-specific support to students. In other areas such as academic literacy, for example, the data were much less clear on the extent of any co-ordination between different levels within the institutions. Thus, the challenge for universities is to develop efficient and effective mechanisms for sharing and co-ordinating innovations in practice and process as they emerge, whether this is through communities of practice and informal but organised networks, or through more conventional committee structures, but with attention to avoiding the development of unhelpful levels of hierarchy and bureaucracy.

This survey set out to establish how much of the support needed for PGT students lay within the responsibility of Programme Directors and Co-ordinators, but the findings imply a need to address a more fundamental issue. Some in the sector advocate empowering students, giving them a voice and making them change agents in their own learning environments (Kay *et. al.*, 2010, Cahill *et. al.*, 2010). This work suggests that it is similarly important to encourage and empower programme and teaching staff, providing them with the mechanisms, resources and recognition needed to bring about meaningful change.

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IT IS UNCLEAR
WHETHER THE
DEGREE OF
OVERLAP IN
SUPPORT IS
COMPLEMENTARY,
OR UNNECESSARY
DUPLICATION

6 CONCLUSIONS

Postgraduate education in the UK has for too long been “the forgotten part of the sector”, but the overall growth of PGT in recent years may prove unsustainable if HEIs fail to properly address the needs of this diverse population.

This national level study has captured the key issues and themes for UK PGT, as perceived by the staff working closest with the students - the Programme Directors and Administrators - and confirms and elaborates on the findings of previous, smaller-scale studies. The survey sample, whilst making no claims at representativeness given the lack of national level programme data, captures the diversity of the PGT population. This report is therefore able to address the key concern for PGT - how to ensure that students, regardless of their background and mode of study, are properly supported.

The growing prominence of the PGT sector has prompted greater attention to understanding the PGT landscape and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. This is a welcome development, but this study and others highlight the need to focus on certain key areas of need, and to question the traditional assumption of student readiness for Master's level study. Indeed, this study has found that there are some essentially common problems that impact students across the spectrum of diversity, regardless of background or mode of study. These are: managing workload, weaknesses in academic writing, research skills and critical thinking, and a lack of confidence among students that acts as a barrier to independent learning. Whilst these common problems do not necessarily have a common solution, this report also highlights that institutional historical practices and limited resources can constrain the ability of programme staff to enhance learning and the overall student experience.

This and previous studies, emphasise the importance of staff availability to the PGT student experience, that student support relies on staff having the time and the flexibility (within institutional

systems, structures and practices) to actively support students. Developments in learning technology have enhanced access to postgraduate study and increased the flexibility of the learning environment, but careful use of the technology is needed to ensure effective staff-student interactions. Moreover, the more learner-centred study skills support advocated by previous studies and reflected, to some extent in our data, require the co-operation, and indeed, the deep engagement of programme and teaching staff to develop and implement them. In addition, previous studies advocate innovations such as the building of communities of practice and/or learning, to encourage peer-to-peer support and a sense of belonging, but also to enhance meaningful engagement with staff beyond classroom contact. In parallel, universities need to develop the means for institutional sharing and collaboration that will ensure the spread of innovative ideas and practices that emerge from the “bottom up”, whilst also minimising inefficient overlap and reinvention that would otherwise unnecessarily consume already limited resources. Above all, this implies a need for universities to, not just empower and equip staff to engage in such initiatives, but also to recognise and value the important role that they play in the overall postgraduate student experience.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In conducting this study, the emergence of work in the sector on the building of communities of practice / learning was particularly noteworthy. Studies such as those of Rosenthal et al. (2007), Schartner (2015), Rovai and Jordan (2004) and Thurston (2005) have already highlighted the potential of community building as a means of enhancing student learning and sense of belonging.

The work of Thurston (2005) for example, suggests potential benefits not just in enhancing connectedness, but also that well designed VLEs that support the creation of online communities can improve completion rates among distance learners. Programme Directors and Administrators responding to our survey perceived that students' sense of belonging is rooted most in their programmes, further highlighting the potential in building communities for student support. However, establishing productive and supportive communities is no simple matter, communities need to be built on the needs/interests of the students concerned, and not on the grounds of specific characteristics such as gender, religion, culture or nationality (Kenway and Bullen, 2003). Such work was beyond the scope of this study, but ongoing research in this area, in our

view, has considerable potential to further enhance the student experience, particularly in light of the technologies now available to support online as well as face-to-face community building. In addition, whilst our study included in its remit consideration of support for employability as a student enhancement activity, this study only went as far as establishing where that support tends to be located, i.e. at programme or institutional level. The findings were useful in themselves in that they reveal that this is an area of student support that varies considerably, depending on, for example, the subject/discipline, the size of the programme/department, and a range of factors including academics' knowledge of careers and the jobs market, and the expected destinations of graduates. However, a small number of respondents indicated that employability was irrelevant or that support was not provided. A number of reasons were given for this, as highlighted in Section 4.3.3. Whilst the numbers were small, such responses are worthy of further exploration, in case there are further underlying issues that need to be addressed.

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APPENDIX 1

NATIONAL SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DIRECTORS OF POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT PROGRAMMES

WELCOME

This questionnaire has been developed by the UK Council for Graduate Education's (UKCGE) Postgraduate Student Experience Working Group, and is for Directors of Postgraduate Taught programmes. We are interested in finding out about the responsibilities that come with the role in different places of work and in your experiences of supporting PGT students. If you are programme director for more than one programme please answer the questions for the programme on which you spend the most time. If there are any questions to which you don't know the answer or don't want to give the answer please feel free to miss them out.

A ABOUT YOUR PROGRAMME

1. PLEASE INDICATE WHICH OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS FITS YOUR PROGRAMME BEST:

- The programme is delivered on campus
- The programme is delivered entirely online
- The programme is delivered through a blended approach
- The programme is delivered entirely off-campus/overseas

2. PLEASE INDICATE WHICH OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS FITS YOUR PROGRAMME BEST:

- The students are entirely or almost entirely full-time
- The students are entirely or almost entirely part-time
- There is a mix of full-time and part-time students

3. PLEASE INDICATE WHICH OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS FITS YOUR PROGRAMME BEST:

- The programme attracts mainly overseas students
- The programme attracts mainly Home / EU students
- The programme attracts a mix of Home / EU and OS students
- Other (please specify):

COMMENTS

4. PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY:

- The programme attracts students hoping to move on to PGR
- The programme attracts mid-career professionals
- The programme attracts recent graduates wanting a conversion programme
- The programme attracts students wanting to enhance their career prospects outside academia
- Other (please specify):

COMMENTS

INSTITUTION

BROAD SUBJECT AREA OR DISCIPLINE

- Arts and Humanities
- Social Sciences
- Health and Social Care
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

COMMENTS

JOB TITLE *

- Research Fellow/Research Assistant
- Professor
- Principal Lecturer
- Lecturer
- Associate Professor
- Administrator
- Senior Lecturer
- Reader

OTHER

5. ROUGHLY HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE ON THE PROGRAMME AT ANY ONE TIME?

- Fewer than 15 students on programme
- Between 15 and 30 students on programme
- More than 30 and fewer than 50
- Between 50 and 100
- More than 100
- Other (please specify):

COMMENTS

6. IF YOU HAD MORE RESOURCES (E.G. ACADEMIC OR ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF TIME, OR ADDITIONAL FUNDING) TO SUPPORT PGT STUDENTS HOW WOULD YOU USE THOSE RESOURCES?

- Academic skills training and dissertation support
- Developing online resources to supplement courses & better support Distance Learners
- Recruit more staff (teaching & admin)
- We have sufficient resources
- Career dev / planning / training, & work-based / transferable skills training, enhancing employability, providing internships
- Improve technology & IT support, more/better equipment & consumables
- Better serve existing students & enhancing student experience (inc. more feedback, more one-to-one support & interaction, spreading the project supervision load & more tutorials) & more small group learning
- Induction & additional (Summer Schools & peer) support
- More course specialisation (inc. specialist external speakers), diversify course options & expand no. of courses
- Recruitment inc. advertising & promotions, enhancing the application process & scholarships / bursaries / fee-reductions
- Other, non-specific - more research time, review central university systems, additional training & skills development, more resources, enhance student experience, more flexibility (part-time & full-time options), more community building
- Extra-curricula activities (e.g., field trips, field work, conferences, travel, exchange programmes, company visits)
- Consolidation / enhancement / updating / tailoring of course design / delivery & course materials, better integration of course materials, more master classes
- Other (please specify):

COMMENTS

B PRE-ARRIVAL AND INITIAL INDUCTION SUPPORT

The questions refer to the support offered before PGTs start their programme of study

7. DO YOU OR MEMBERS OF YOUR ACADEMIC/ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRAMME TEAM HAVE ANY DIRECT CONTACT WITH STUDENTS BEFORE THEY START ON THE PROGRAMME? IF SO, WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THAT CONTACT? PLEASE TICK AS MANY AS APPLIES:

- Sending information and preparatory material
- Dealing with practical enquiries such as accommodation
- Dealing with enquiries regarding registration / matriculation / enrolment
- Arranging pre-sessional support
- Dealing with general enquiries
- No contact
- Other (please specify):

8. PLEASE INDICATE ALL LEVELS AT WHICH NON ACADEMIC PRE-ARRIVAL AND INDUCTION SUPPORT (E.G. GENERAL INFORMATION, REGISTRATION, VISAS, FINANCE, ACCOMMODATION), IS ORGANIZED FOR NEW STUDENTS ON YOUR PROGRAMME. PLEASE TICK AS MANY AS APPLIES:

- University
- Programme
- Not provided

9. A) PLEASE INDICATE ALL LEVELS AT WHICH ACADEMIC SUPPORT (E.G. ENGLISH LANGUAGE SUPPORT, INTRODUCTION TO STUDY SKILLS, INTRODUCTION TO LIBRARY, WRITING ASSIGNMENTS) IS OFFERED PRE-ARRIVAL AND / OR DURING INDUCTION FOR NEW STUDENTS ON YOUR PROGRAMME. PLEASE TICK AS MANY AS APPLIES:

- University
- Programme
- Not provided

B) IF YOU INDICATED PROGRAMME LEVEL ABOVE PLEASE GIVE BRIEF DETAILS OF ACTIVITIES ORGANIZED:

C ON PROGRAMME SUPPORT

These questions refer to support offered after PGTs start their programme of study

10. A) PLEASE INDICATE ALL LEVELS AT WHICH STUDENTS ON YOUR PROGRAMME GET SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY (E.G. ACADEMIC WRITING, WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, INFORMATION SEARCHING SKILLS, HOW TO REFERENCE, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS, WRITING A DISSERTATION, NOTE-TAKING SKILLS). PLEASE TICK AS MANY AS APPLIES:

- University
 Programme
 Not provided

B) IF YOU INDICATED PROGRAMME LEVEL SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC LITERACY PLEASE GIVE BRIEF DETAILS:

11. A) IN YOUR VIEW, HOW IS SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYABILITY (E.G. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR GAINING EMPLOYMENT) OR MOVING ON TO FURTHER STUDY BEST HANDLED?:

- By building it into the programme of study
 By a central university service, i.e., a careers and skills team
 Other (Please specify):

B) COMMENTS

12. A) HOW IS GENERAL ACADEMIC (RATHER THAN PASTORAL) ADVICE AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS ON YOUR PROGRAMME ORGANISED?:

- It is my responsibility as programme director
 A member of academic staff is allocated as personal tutor
 A non academic member of staff is allocated this responsibility
 Other (please specify):

B) DETAILS:

13. ARE YOU AWARE OF ANY COMMON PROBLEMS THAT HOLD PGTS BACK IN THEIR ACADEMIC STUDIES? IF SO, PLEASE INDICATE WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW SERIOUS YOU THINK SUCH PROBLEMS ARE:

D STUDENT COMMUNITY AND REPRESENTATION

14. IN YOUR OPINION HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR PGT STUDENTS TO FEEL THAT THEY BELONG TO:

	Not at all	Somewhat	Very
Their programme	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A student community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The university	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Their school / subject area / department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. THINKING ABOUT STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE PROGRAMME, WHAT, IN YOUR OPINION CAN HELP FACILITATE THIS?

16. THINKING ABOUT STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE PROGRAMME, IS THERE ANYTHING WHICH YOU THINK MAKES THIS CHALLENGING?

17. HOW ARE PGT STUDENTS REPRESENTED WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY? PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY

- Course and / or Programme level staff student committees
 Represented on subject area / department / faculty / college level committees
 Represented on university level committees
 PG representatives in the student union or association
 Other (please specify):

18. A) DOES YOUR PROGRAMME KEEP A RECORD OF ALUMNI FROM YOUR PROGRAMME?

- Yes
 No

B) IF YES, PLEASE TELL US WHAT YOU USE YOUR ALUMNI CONTACTS FOR



UK Council for
Graduate Education

 **UK COUNCIL FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION**
Lichfield Centre
The Friary
Lichfield
Staffordshire
WS13 6QG
UK

 +44 01543 308602

 ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk

 ukcge.ac.uk