

# The taught postgraduate student experience

Overview of a Higher  
Education Academy survey

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Chris Park



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*Chris Park is a Senior Associate of the Higher Education Academy, and Director of the Lancaster University Graduate School.*

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## Introduction

Increasing attention is being paid to the student experience at higher education institutions across the UK, both by institutions themselves and by the agencies that fund them (such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Research Councils) and support them (such as the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)). This new focus is driven partly by growing interest in what students think about their experience, and a commitment to developing a more informed and nuanced understanding of what the student experience means and what factors shape it. The key underlying driver is enhancement of the student experience, both as an end in itself, and as a means to the end of gaining and maintaining competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining students. Such evidence-based strategic decision-making is now well embedded in UK higher education institutions. The National Student Survey has been developed for this very purpose in an undergraduate context, and this is complemented for research students by the development of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES).

### Developing the survey

The obvious gap in collecting feedback on student views was a survey of students who are studying on taught postgraduate programmes. To help address this, in 2006 the Higher Education Academy commissioned York Consulting to design and carry out a survey of the taught postgraduate student experience in the UK. Development of the survey was steered by an Advisory Group, which included representatives from the Academy and from higher education institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The York Survey report to the Academy, which this report summarises, can be accessed via the Academy website ([www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys)).

### Format

The survey used an online questionnaire with an agreed set of questions, which took most respondents no more than 15 minutes to complete. The format and questions were piloted in January 2007, on the basis of which the wording of some questions was revised. The questionnaire includes demographic variables to allow the overall responses to questions to be broken down in particular groups of students (for example, by discipline, gender, age, fee status and mode of funding).

The questions focused on the following nine themes:

1. Overall satisfaction
2. Teaching and learning
3. Assessment and feedback
4. Organisation and management
5. Student support
6. Information, advice and guidance
7. Motivation and choice of institution
8. The particular views of non-UK students
9. Support for particular groups of students (part-time; distance learners; students with disabilities).

York Consulting followed up the online survey with a series of focus groups (21 groups in 11 higher education institutions, involving a total of 107 students), to confirm that the overall pattern of responses was broadly representative and reliable.

## Participants

The survey was live between 29 January and 2 April 2007. A structured sample of 30 higher education institutions, chosen to be broadly representative of the range of higher education institutions across the UK, was invited to participate. Each participating institution was responsible for contacting each of its students registered on a postgraduate taught programme and inviting them to complete the online survey. A total of 6,763 students volunteered to take part, representing an overall response rate of 12% (institutional response rates varied between 5% and 71%).

Most of the students who completed the online survey were studying on MSc (47.1%) or MA (27.6%) programmes; almost all of the others were studying for an MBA (6.9%), Postgraduate Certificate (5.5%) or Postgraduate Diploma (4.7%). Participants were studying a wide range of disciplines; nearly half (47.1%) were studying three disciplines: social studies (19%); business and administrative studies (17.7%); and subjects allied to medicine (10.4%). Half (51.4%) of the students were registered as studying full-time, just over a quarter (27.9%) part-time and a fifth (20.9%) as distance learners. Two-thirds (66%) were studying at the university. Two out of five (40.3%) were employed full-time and one-fifth (20.4%) were employed part-time. Over half (57.2%) were paying for the programme themselves, or with family support.

Nearly two-thirds (60.2%) of the respondents were female; 3.9% of respondents declared themselves as having a disability. The sample included students aged from 21 and under to older than 65; the two largest groups

were aged 22 to 25 (33.5%) and 30 to 49 (37.7%). Nearly two-thirds (64.2%) of respondents were defined for fees purposes as UK residents; 10% were other EU, and 20.1% were overseas. Nearly a third (29.6%) of the students declared that English was not their first language. Most participants had relatively recent experience of higher education: 26.1% had been in higher education the previous year, and 83.7% had studied in higher education within the last ten years.

### **Reporting the findings**

In the sections below, unless it states otherwise, “agreed” includes both “agreed” and “strongly agreed” responses, and the percentage figures combine both those categories of answer. When reporting “most positive” and “least positive” groups, the convention +/-X% is used, which means by how many per cent a particular group exceeds (+) or falls below (-) the overall percentage for that particular question.

# 1. Overall satisfaction

Overall levels of satisfaction were high: 81% rated their experience as having *met or exceeded their expectations*. The three most positively rated dimensions of the student experience were:

- *employability*: 84% agreed that “the course would improve my employment prospects”
- *motivation*: 80% agreed that “I found the course motivating”
- *recommendation*: 73% agreed that “I would recommend the course to a friend/colleague”.

## Factors that contribute to a positive student experience

Students were asked to list the factors that contribute to a positive experience, and a third mentioned good academic staff and a high standard of teaching and learning (mentioned by 34%), and the availability and approachability of academic staff and access to relevant support (mentioned by 31%). Other positive factors mentioned by students include: appropriate course content and structure; the mix of and opportunities to talk with other students; good quality study materials; access to and availability of appropriate resources; clarity of aims of the course and clear assessment criteria; lecturers with industrial and business experience, and/or guest lecturers who are experts in their field; relevance of the course to the student’s academic or professional future; and a good mix of theory and practical/business applications.

## Progression

Nine out of ten students (88%) who took part in the survey agreed that their *taught postgraduate studies were progressing well*. They were asked what factors they believed had the greatest influence on their progression, and the two most mentioned factors were an *ability to undertake independent study* (68%) and the *quality of teaching and learning* (65%).

## 2. Teaching and learning

Students were generally very positive about the teaching and learning on their taught postgraduate programmes. The survey sought their views on the quality of teaching and learning, methods of teaching and learning, and development of skills and knowledge.

### Quality of teaching and learning

Students were asked to respond to the statement: *'The quality of teaching and learning on my course is consistently high.'* Just over half (59%) agreed with it, and just under a quarter were neutral (20%) or disagreed (21%). The most positive views were given by students of history and philosophy (+14% on agreed), sciences (+14%) and law (+12%) and the least positive were given by students of architecture, building and planning (-8%); Middle Eastern, Asiatic, African, American and Australasian studies (-5%); and mass communications and documentation (-4%).

### Methods of teaching and learning

Three-quarters (73%) of the students agreed that the *teaching and learning methods were effective for the type of programme they were studying.* The most positive responses were from the oldest group (students aged over 65: +11% on agreed) and the youngest students (aged 21 and under: +7%), and students studying history and philosophy (+11%). Students studying technology gave the least positive responses (-16%) to this question.

Over half (58%) the students agreed that *there was sufficient contact time between staff and students to support effective learning.* The most positive responses were from students aged 21 and under (+9%) and the students aged over 65 (+19%), and students studying law (+9%). Overseas distance learners gave the least positive responses (-12%).

### Development of skills and knowledge

The vast majority (84%) of students agreed that their *course is effective in developing subject-specific skills and knowledge.*

Overall, students were slightly more positive about the *development of transferable skills* (74% agreed they were being effectively developed) than they were about the *development of research skills* (67%).



Within the development of transferable skills, the most positive responses were from students studying medicine and dentistry (+12%) and subjects allied to medicine (+10%), and the least positive were from students studying history and philosophy (-10%), European languages (-11%), linguistics and classics (-13%), and creative arts (-14%). Within the development of research skills, the least positive responses were from students studying linguistics and classics (-12%), education (-12%) and distance learners (-12%), and from students aged over 65 (-15%).

## 3. Assessment and feedback

Students generally had very positive views about assessment, but mixed views about the feedback they had received on their work.

### Assessment

Students were on the whole very positive about their understanding of what is required of them with regard to assessment; 69% agreed that *assessment criteria are clear and communicated to them*. The most positive group of students was the distance learners (+9%), and the least positive was those studying creative art and design (-16%).

### Feedback

Students had mixed views on the feedback they received during their taught postgraduate programmes: 44% agreed and 33% disagreed that they had *received continuous feedback on progress*. The groups who were most positive were those studying education (+11%) and distance learners (+10%); the least positive group was the part-time students (-6%).

Only 46% of respondents agreed and 33% disagreed that they had *received prompt feedback*. The most positive groups on promptness of feedback were the distance learners (+11%) and those who were studying education (+9%); the least positive were students studying physical sciences (49% disagreed), biological sciences (42% disagreed) and architecture (41% disagreed).

Those who did receive feedback generally had positive views about what they had received: 63% agreed that *feedback was clear*, although 23% disagreed. The student groups with the most positive views about clarity of feedback were distance learners (+10%), and those studying history and philosophy (+13%) and European languages (+10%).

Just under two-thirds (63%) of students also agreed that feedback was helpful. Those who were studying European languages (+11%) and history and philosophy (+8%), and distance learners (+8%), had the most positive views about the helpfulness of feedback received.

## 4. Organisation and management

Students were generally very positive about the ways in which their programmes were organised and managed, except for a perceived lack of flexibility with regard to choosing modules.

Views about balance within programmes were on the whole very positive: 67% of respondents agreed that *the balance was about right between core modules and options*, particularly in medicine and dentistry (+10%), but much less so in technology (-17%).

The same proportion (68%) agreed that the *balance was about right between directed learning and independent study*, and here again students studying technology had the lowest level of agreement (-14%).

Views were generally also very positive about timetables and workloads: 76% students agreed that their *timetable was appropriate*. The most positive group of students was those aged over 65 (+11%), and the least positive were overseas students (-14%) and those studying architecture (-15%).

Over two-thirds (68%) of students agreed that their *overall workload was manageable*. The most positive groups were the students aged over 65 (+19%), and students studying creative art and design (+16%), European languages (+15%), history and philosophy (+14%), and veterinary sciences (+13%). The least positive group was the students studying medicine and dentistry (-10%).

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of students agreed that they *could manage their learning alongside other demands on their time*; again, medicine and dentistry students agreed the least (-18%).

The area of organisation and management about which students had the least positive views was the perceived degree of flexibility in choosing modules. Only 52% agreed that they had *sufficient flexibility on their course to choose specific subjects that were of interest*. The lowest level of agreement about flexibility (-18%) was from veterinary science students; the most positive students were those studying European languages (+16%), law (+12%), and linguistics and classics (+12%).

## 5. Student support, advice and resources

Students were on the whole positive about the resources they had access to, had mixed views about the advice (particularly academic advice) they received, and were generally very negative about student support.

### Resources

Most respondents (70%) agreed that *library resources were appropriate for their studies*, although views varied a great deal between different groups. The least positive were students aged 65 and over (81% of whom disagreed that they were appropriate), distance learners (61% disagreed) and overseas distance students (53% disagreed), and those studying veterinary science (59% disagreed).

Three-quarters (74%) of the students agreed that *IT facilities were appropriate*, and here again the distance learners (-14%) and overseas distance students (-20%) were least positive. Half (51%) of the respondents agreed that they were able to access specialised resources (such as labs, rooms and equipment); the most positive group was the overseas students (+18%), and the least positive was the distance learners (-28%).

### Advice

Some aspects of advice were very positively rated. The vast majority (83%) of students agreed that they *knew who to turn to if they needed advice or guidance in their studies*. The groups with the most positive responses to this question were the students aged over 65 (+11%) and students studying history and philosophy (+9%).

Most (79%) students also agreed that *staff were open and willing to provide advice if needed*. Once again, students aged over 65 (+11%) gave particularly positive responses, as did students of history and philosophy (+9%). Technology students (-10%) had the least positive views.

Students had more mixed views about some other aspects of advice: only 62% agreed that *advice they received in relation to study skills had been effective*.

Just over half (53%) agreed that they had *received good advice about their study choices*. The most positive groups in this sense were the students aged 21 or under (+12%), and those studying European languages (+13%), veterinary science (+12%), and linguistics and classics (+11%). Distance learners (-7%) had the least positive views.

Half (52%) of the respondents agreed that they *had participated in an effective induction process*. The groups with the most positive responses about induction were students aged 21 and under (+13%) and those aged 22 to 25 (+7%), full-time students (+7%) and those studying law (+7%). The least positive responses were from students aged over 65 (-23%), distance learners (-19%) and overseas students (-14%), and those studying linguistics and classics (-12%).

Two areas of advice were rated very poorly by students: careers advice and financial advice. Only a third (33%) agreed that *academic advice and guidance regarding their next career step had been appropriate*; 25% disagreed. The groups of students with the most positive views about career development advice were respondents aged 21 and under (+13%) and those aged 22 to 25 (+10%), overseas students (+10%), and students on architecture (+11%), law (+12%) and education (+10%) programmes. The least positive groups were respondents aged over 65 (-20%) and aged 50 to 64 (-15%), distance learners (-13%) and part-time students (-10%).

Just 30% of students agreed that they *had been able to access good financial advice*. The most positive group was the overseas students (+10%), and the least positive group was the part-time students (-11%).

## Support

This was the area of the student experience with which taught postgraduates were least satisfied: 36% agreed that *student support services were effective in addressing their study needs*. Overseas students had more positive views (+11%), and students aged 50 to 64 had much more negative views (-27%).

Fewer than a third (31%) of respondents agreed that *university-based careers support was appropriate*.

## 6. Information, advice and guidance

Overall, students were very positive about the information, advice and guidance they received before the start of their programme. Four out of five (79%) agreed the *information, advice and guidance they had received had been accurate*. Two-thirds agreed that the *volume of work* (67%) and the *level and demands of the programme* (68%) were as they had expected, and that the *information provided before they started was an accurate reflection of the actual choice of options available to them* (70%). Three-quarters (77%) agreed that *on balance their skills and knowledge were at the right level for their programme of study*, and 58% agreed that *their experience of the additional support they were able to access was in line with what they had expected*.

Distance learning students were more positive (+12%) on all questions in this section. Few significant differences related to age were found, except that students aged 65 and over were generally more positive on information about content (+8%), level and demand (+16%), and about their skills and knowledge matching the demands of the programme (+10%).

Three-quarters (76%) of the students agreed that they had *been given a realistic view of the financial costs before their programme began*. The groups of students with the most positive responses about funding were those studying history and philosophy (+9%), distance learners (+9%), and those who had funded themselves or were funded by their families (+5%). The least positive responses were given by those studying veterinary science (-10%) and technology (-9%), and those who were fully funded by their employer (-11%) or by other sponsors (-8%).

## 7. Motivation and choice of institution

Students were asked to specify what (from given lists) was their main motivation for studying a taught postgraduate programme, and why they had chosen to study at the institution they did.

### Motivation for studying a taught postgraduate programme

The responses are listed below, in decreasing overall percentage of respondents.

1. *To improve my employment prospects* was most frequently rated (by 28% of the students) as the most important motivation. It was rated most frequently as most important by students aged 21 and under (+10%), and those aged 22 to 25 (+7%).
2. *To progress in my chosen career path* was rated most important by 26% of students. It was rated most frequently as most important by part-time students (+13%), students aged 30 to 49 (+9%) and distance learners (+8%).
3. *Personal interest* was rated most important by 16% of students, most frequently by those aged 50 to 64 (+30%) and those aged 65 and over (+64%).
4. *A requirement to enter a particular profession* was rated as most important by 13% of students. The groups who most frequently rated this as most important were students who were studying full-time (+7%), and students aged 22 to 25 (+4%) and 21 and under (+3%).
5. *To enable progress to a higher qualification* was rated as most important by 11% of students, particularly those aged 21 and under (+3%), those aged 22 to 25 (+3%) and full-time students (+3%).

### Choice of institution

The responses, in decreasing overall percentage of respondents, were as follows:

1. *Location* (38%). This was important particularly for the part-time (55%) and UK (47%), students, and least so for the distance learners (7%).
2. *Reputation of the institution within the subject area* (35%). This was important particularly for the students aged 22 to 25 (45%), full-time students (43%), and overseas (41%) students.

3. *Overall reputation of the institution* (34%). This was important particularly for the students aged 21 and under (54%), and for the distance learners (43%) and overseas (41%) students.
4. *Subject is only available at a few institutions* (28%).
5. *Mode of study* (28%). While this factor ranks relatively low in the overall list, it is clearly very important to particular groups of students, such as distance learners (64%) and overseas distance students (57%), those who are employed full-time (43%), and those studying in block mode or by modular delivery (39%). It is also a very important factor for the more mature student: those aged 65 and over (58%), 50 to 64 (42%), and 30 to 49 (38%).
6. *Previously studied at the institution* (21%). Just under half (42%) of the students aged 21 and under were taking a taught postgraduate programme straight after their first degree at the same institution. Half (48%) of the students aged 65 and over, and a third (35%) of students aged 50 to 64, had returned to a previous institution to study at postgraduate level.
7. *Cost of the programme* (13%). This factor was singled out as most important mainly by overseas distance learners (21%) and students defined for fees purposes as EU (20%).



## 8. The particular views of non-UK students

EU and international students were asked to specify (from given lists) why they had chosen to take a taught postgraduate programme at the specific UK institution. They were also asked about their perceptions of studying in the UK.

### Choice of institution

Nearly half (46%) of the non-UK respondents agreed that the *reputation of the institution within their subject area* had determined their choice of where to study. A third (36%) *wanted to have a UK degree*, and for a quarter of students the most important factors were a *desire to improve their English* (28%) and the *shortness of courses in UK* (28%). Just 21% wanted to work in the UK after graduation. A few *chose their institution for personal or family reasons* (16%), because they *had studied in the UK as an undergraduate* (16%), or because *the programme represented good value for money* (16%).

### Perceptions of the UK

Non-UK students' views on their experiences of studying a taught postgraduate programme in the UK were on the whole positive: 74% agreed that they *would recommend studying in the UK to a friend or colleague*, and 66% agreed that they *had found it easy to adapt to the teaching and learning culture in the UK*.

At least half agreed that they *had been effectively supported to integrate with other students* (58%), their *experience of studying in the UK was more positive than they had expected* (57%), they *had felt valued by their institution* (56%), and they had *felt that they had integrated into UK culture* (49%).

## 9. Support for particular groups of students

### Part-time students

Students studying their taught postgraduate programmes on a part-time basis were generally positive about their experience. Two-thirds agreed that they *had been able to balance academic work with other responsibilities* (65%), and nearly as many agreed that *their needs had been taken into account* (61%).

Students were asked to suggest ways in which their institution could support their study. Responses clustered in three areas:

- better timetabling and communication (deadlines for examinations and assessment; scheduling of modules; early notice of changes to timetable/examinations)
- better support and access (better understanding of problems of balancing study and other commitments; more support and/or guidance)
- better staff-student interaction (more face-to-face contact with tutors in seminars and one-to-one sessions).

### Distance learners

The vast majority of distance learning students were very positive about their experience: 85% agreed that *distance learning had been the right choice for them*, and 83% were *satisfied with the quality of study materials*. Three-quarters agreed that their *needs had been taken into account* (75%), and that they *had been able to balance academic work with other responsibilities* (75%).

Students were asked what they felt to be the main challenges facing distance-learning students. The most common answers were *balancing study workload with other commitments* (36%), *self-motivation and self-discipline* (32%), *the risk of feeling isolated* (22%), and *time management* (22%).

### Students with disabilities

A majority (57%) of respondents with disabilities agreed that their *institution had been effective in supporting them in their studies*, although views varied on the extent to which the information they had received pre-course was sufficient and accurate (48% agreed that it had been, but 21% disagreed).

Students were asked which one thing would improve disability support at their institution, although few responded. The most commonly mentioned improvements were to *disseminate more information about what support is*

*available (10%), increase lecturers' awareness of disabilities and their effects (8%), make it easier for students to access personal support (7%), and improve physical access to lectures and seminars (5%).*

### **Language support for non-native speakers**

Of the students whose first language was not English, 29% confirmed that they had *needed extra language support*. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those who received support agreed that it had been appropriate to their needs, and a similar proportion (68%) agreed that it had been good for general language skills, but they had needed more help with the academic language related to their programme. Half (51%) agreed the *support they received was appropriate for the technical language related to their programme*.

## Conclusions

This survey provides the first UK-wide snapshot of what students taking taught postgraduate programmes in the UK think about their experiences. The findings have implications for policy and practice, both within individual institutions and across the sector.

Respondents generally had very positive views about their experiences on their taught postgraduate programmes. More than 80% rated their experience as having met or exceeded their expectations, and nearly 90% agreed that their studies were progressing well.

The highest rated areas of the student experience were:

- teaching and learning
- assessment
- balance within programmes
- timetabling and workloads
- access to resources
- overall access to advice
- accuracy of information, advice and guidance received before programmes start.

Students rated some areas of their experience much less positively, and these are areas where enhancement initiatives should logically be directed. This applies particularly to:

- feedback
- degree of flexibility in choosing options
- advice about study choices
- induction
- careers advice and financial advice
- student support.

The survey throws light on the factors that contribute to a positive student experience, including good academic staff, a high standard of teaching and learning, the availability and approachability of academic staff, and access to relevant support. It also reveals why students chose to study a taught postgraduate programme – including to improve their employment prospects, to progress in their chosen career path and out of personal interest. The survey also indicates what factors informed their choice of where to study – including location, reputation of the institution within their subject area and the overall reputation of the institution.

The Higher Education Academy has decided to build upon this initial one-off survey by developing an online taught postgraduate survey (along the lines of PRES) for those institutions who wish to use it. Like PRES, the survey will be designed to inform enhancement of the student experience, it will allow participating institutions to benchmark themselves against others, and results will be confidential to the institution. The survey will be developed and piloted during 2008, with a view to launching it mid-2009. Details will be posted on the Academy website ([www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys)).





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### Overview of a Higher Education Academy survey

Published by:  
The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
York  
YO10 5BR  
United Kingdom

**Tel:** +44 (0)1904 717500  
**Fax:** +44 (0)1904 717505  
**enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk**  
**www.heacademy.ac.uk**

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