

Response to the BIS consultation on the White Paper
Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System

RESPONSE 1
THE WHITE PAPER AND POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

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1 Preamble

- 1.1 I would like to offer two sets of responses to the consultation. The first, contained in this document, is written in my capacity as an expert on patterns of participation in postgraduate education in the UK and relates specifically to the discussion of postgraduate education and the implications for changes proposed in other parts of the document for postgraduate education. The second set of responses provides a more general comment on the plans contained in the White Paper and on some specific details of the proposals. Although the two sets of responses are to some extent complementary, my comments on the White Paper as it relates to postgraduate education can be taken separately.

2 The White Paper and postgraduate education

- 2.1 Postgraduate education is an integral and critically important element of English higher education. It is important for supporting the development of skilled individuals for a range of knowledge-based industries, professions and occupations, for sustaining the intellectual and cultural life of the nation and, not least, for providing future higher education teachers and researchers to support a world-class higher education system and push back the frontiers of knowledge. Moreover English postgraduate education enjoys an excellent reputation at home and abroad, as shown by its continued and rapid growth over the past twenty years or so.
- 2.2 It is pleasing therefore to see discussion of postgraduate education in the White Paper, some of which builds on the Government's response to Sir Adrian Smith's Postgraduate Review. It is disappointing however that the

¹ This response to the BIS consultation is made in a personal capacity and does not represent the views of the Department of Education or the University of York.

Government has chosen not to publish Sir Adrian's further advice following the reconvening of the committee which had written the original report.²

- 2.3 Worryingly, there is a lack of clarity about the funding situation for 'home' postgraduate students from 2012/13. The White Paper defers decisions on this to a HEFCE consultation during Winter 2011. The funding arrangements for postgraduate students are at present somewhat opaque, with many fees being unregulated, although institutions have tended to operate under a presumption of some public funding. The White Paper follows the Browne Review in presenting no analysis of the current level of public funding for either research or taught postgraduates. The implications of the phrase "The total funding available will reduce from 2012/13 onwards, in line with our reforms to funding for undergraduate" (paragraph. 1.31, p. 21) are unclear. This will make it difficult for institutions to plan their postgraduate intakes for future years.
- 2.4 Faced with a removal of public funding for taught postgraduate study, institutions are likely substantially to increase their tuition fees in line with increases to undergraduate fees. It is unlikely that institutions will be happy to accept postgraduates paying tuition fees of £5,000 per annum for a 12-month full-time 180 credit programme when they are charging £9,000 for a 30-week full-time 120 credit programme.³ Additionally, the fees to be charged for PGCE programmes should be clarified. Conventionally this has mirrored undergraduate fees; however at the increased level of fee, this may well dissuade excellent potential teachers from entering high-quality programmes.
- 2.5 For research programmes, tuition fees have generally been set according to the maximum level of support provided by the Research Councils for their funded students. As with taught postgraduates, fee levels of around £4,000 are unlikely to appear financially sustainable to institutions given the known cost of research student supervision, especially in the high-cost clinical and STEM subjects. There is an obvious risk to institutions' continued commitment to maintaining healthy research student numbers which potentially has extremely serious consequences for the future supply of talented individuals from all backgrounds to careers in research and higher education teaching.

² I asked BIS directly on 11 July 2011, via the HE Reform website (<http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/all-documents/>) whether this advice would be published, but at the time of writing there has been no response to this request.

³ At the modal undergraduate rate of £9,000, fees for a one-year masters degree would be £13,500 pro rata which is at or above the rate typically charged to overseas students for a classroom-based subject.

- 2.6 Unlike at undergraduate level, a large majority of postgraduate programmes are not eligible for any kind of public support for individual student funding. Most home postgraduate students are required to find tuition fee funding upfront rather than taking advantage of a tuition fee loan to be repaid once earning. The decision to participate or not in postgraduate study will therefore become more acutely determined by financial considerations than hitherto.
- 2.7 The effect of the substantial increase in undergraduate tuition fees on participation in postgraduate study is unknown. *Indeed, the effect of the increase in fees in 2004 (to £3,000) is unknown.* My research suggests that prior to that, under the Dearing student support arrangements, there were socio-economic inequalities in access to postgraduate education. However finance was not the critical factor in postgraduate participation.⁴ That said, having to find up-front fees plus living costs, with no subsidised loans available on top of substantially increased undergraduate debt will almost certainly dissuade many, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 2.8 The commitment in the White Paper (paragraph 5.38) to monitor and review postgraduate access and participation is welcome. *However there will not be any data on the effect of new system until 2015 at the earliest.* Since many do not immediately enter postgraduate study after graduation, it may be 2018 before the effects of the new regime can be evaluated. HEFCE should be asked to undertake or commission an immediate review of the effect of the changes in 2004 on postgraduate participation as an indication of what may happen in future.
- 2.9 The proposal to improve the quality of postgraduate data through the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group is welcome. However no implementation plan to achieve this is apparent. There is also plenty of data which HEFCE (and institutions) could make better use of. The Equality Impact Assessment which accompanies the white paper does not look at access to postgraduate study for ethnic minority students or for women, but this data is readily available and my research has shown both groups to be at a disadvantage, particularly in access to research degrees.
- 2.10 Paragraph 5.20 of the White Paper mentions the work universities do in targeting and attracting applicants from underrepresented and disadvantaged

⁴ Wakeling, P. (2009) *Social class and access to postgraduate education in the UK: a sociological analysis.* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester; Wakeling, P. and Kyriacou, C. (2010) *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees: a Research Synthesis.* Swindon: NCCPE and ESRC.

backgrounds. Such work barely exists at postgraduate level however. The government should encourage institutions to examine the composition of their postgraduate student body, identify underrepresented groups and engage in outreach activities to attract such students to higher study.

Summary

- English postgraduate education has been a highly-performing national asset.
- Although the discussion of postgraduate education in the White Paper is welcome, policy at postgraduate level is being made 'in the dark', without consideration or procurement of research evidence.
- Clarity on postgraduate funding for taught, research and ITT postgraduates is urgently needed to enable institutions and students to plan for 2012/13.
- Further research is needed urgently on the effect of tuition fees on postgraduate participation, beginning with an analysis of the effect of 'top-up' fees introduced in 2004 on entry to postgraduate study.
- HEPISG should be asked to publish an implementation plan for improving the quality of postgraduate data.
- There is an opportunity for 'reach out' work to encourage first-degree graduates from underrepresented groups to pursue postgraduate study.