Briefing Paper No.12: Challenges and moving forward
Postgraduate Experience Project

PEP
Understanding Today to Create Tomorrow

About PEP

The Postgraduate Experience Project was one of 20 projects funded through HEFCE's £25m Phase 1 Postgraduate Support Scheme that was designed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England. A description of PEP can be found in Briefing Paper 1. Some of the headline findings have been reported in the Project's Briefing Papers 2-11. PEP's research and its National Dialogical Conference have highlighted a range of key issues and generated suggestions to address them. They will all be covered in the final report due to be published in late October. Two of the critical key issues, which are future PGT markets and student finance, are covered in this briefing paper.

Decrease in participation

The main challenge for UK higher education is to create stability in the PG market and achieve sustainability. Between 2010/11 and 2013/14, the postgraduate market in the UK has seen a decline of 8.4% across in participation in all types of PG courses (HESA, 2015a). UK domiciled student enrolments have experienced the biggest decline with 10.6% (HESA 2015 b,c). Between 2000 and 2010, the European and overseas markets have been credited with sustaining growth as well as helping to avert even more of a decline than has occurred since 2011. However, both these markets are also in decline with decreases of 6.7% and 3.7% respectively (HESA 2015 b,c). The postgraduate 'taught' (PGT) market (e.g. Master's by coursework) experienced the greatest increase in enrolments between 2003 and 2010 and grew at the expense of 'other' PG courses (e.g. diplomas and certificates), but it has suffered the greatest decline of 12.5% between 2010/11 and 2013/14. The arts, humanities and social sciences have been particularly affected. 'Other' PG courses have only decreased by 0.6% and research degrees have experienced an increase in enrolments with 7.3% (HESA, 2015d). In terms of part-time mode, the PGT degree has faced the biggest decrease of 17.7% (HESA 2015d). Reasons offered for the decline include the state of the economy, a falling under 18 population and overseas competition. However, international competitors such as Australia, Canada and the United States face similar issues and their numbers continue to grow (Morgan 2015).

Challenges and moving forward

In order to move forward, difficult questions need to be asked by key stakeholders such as Government, higher education and business and industry leaders about the purpose of PGT study, reasons for the decrease in participation. Questions will also need to be asked about whether business and industry in fact require the level and type of skills or the high number of postgraduates the higher education sector produces. The PEP project, through its research, has given the sector greater insight into the issues and concerns of applicants and students and the needs of business and industry. The overriding view from NDC was that the PG sector grew quickly without proper attention being paid to its stakeholders needs (such as student expectations and employers' requirements) and processes (such as fit for purpose course delivery). It was felt that a multifaceted approach, with new thinking, needs to be adopted quickly in order to recover the UK's PGT market position. By understanding today, the sector can create what is required for tomorrow.

<u>Future PGT markets</u>

The NDC identified a range of issues facing the PGT market. Firstly, there is a decline in the 'under 18' population across many western countries which not only impacts on undergraduate (UG) recruitment, but also means that there is a diminished pool from which to recruit postgraduate (PGT and PGR) students, if an UG degree is a requirement for entry to PG study. Secondly, the UK PGT market may have reached a temporary saturation point as it has grown substantially in the past 10 years compared to other European and international markets. Thirdly, traditional international markets for the UK such as India, Pakistan and China are being lost as new international competitors take a share of UG and PG markets. Finally, part-time enrolments which are dominated by UK domiciled students (92% in 13/14) continue to decline nationally (HESA 2015c). Until 2010, part-time study at PGT level was the dominant mode in the UK, but in 2011 this changed and the full-time mode took its place. It is possible that PGT study in the UK is merely aligning itself with the PGT study mode behaviour of other similar international competitors such as Australia, Canada and the United States where the full-time mode has been dominant for many years. However, PEP gained some insight into the possible reasons for the UK part-time PG decline which include: the delivery of part-time study by institutions not being flexible enough to fit around life demands; courses not available in part-time mode; problems getting time off work especially when the delivery is during the day; part-time courses often being more expensive over the common 2 year period than a full time 1 year course and lastly, the lack of accessible financial support.

The overarching questions that delegates attending NDC felt the sector needed to consider and provide strategic responses to regarding the future of the UK's PGT market include: Are there too many providers delivering PGT courses? Has PGT study reached saturation point and has the credential inflation of qualifications in the UK been driven by the sector rather than the need of business and industry? If yes, does it need to contract in order to be sustainable? Should the UG degree be reinstated as the main qualification needed for the workplace rather than a PGT qualification? And can new markets be created by changing traditional recruitment and delivery practices? Whilst many of these questions require robust analysis and debate, some of the suggestions about how new markets can be created are reported below. There was the recognition by NDC that the sector has tended to focus on recruiting young postgraduates into PGT and PGR study and it has neglected other potential markets that could help sustain the sector if the cost and delivery were modelled to meet student and employer requirements. Example 1: with an increasing 'grey' population, universities could design PGT courses for retired baby boomers who had professional careers, but did not obtain a university degree and who now have a disposable income for activities such as learning. Example 2: *courses*, not modules, tend to be accredited. Respondents in PEP, who were over the age of 30 and established in a career, stated that they had embarked on PGT study because they felt compelled to upskill in certain areas in order to maintain their current position due to increasing competition from externally qualified candidates or get promotion. However, not all course modules were applicable and for those studying part-time, where teaching occurred during the day, getting time off work to attend lessons sometimes proved problematic. Where appropriate, if modules were accredited instead of courses, students could learn and achieve in a more affordable and flexible manner. It would also help entrants who have extensive work experience, but limited university level study experience, to start engaging in PGT study. A 'pick and mix' module approach, developed with the input of employers and which allowed the student and employers to more appropriately select specific areas they require, is already in existence in some innovative areas of the sector. This approach could reenergise PGT study, especially in the part-time market. Example 3: PGR could be supported more proactively through PGT courses if the taught courses provided the opportunity to deviate onto a research route if deemed more appropriate after enrolment. Some universities in the UK successfully run MSc/MRes courses allowing students to transfer to a research route once they have started a taught course, but this is not common place. It was recognised that the examples above would require a change in delivery practice (as well as change in attitude by HE staff and professional bodies), but it was felt that it was time to remodel PGT structures and processes so that HE institutions fitted around the needs of the PGT student and employer, rather than fitting around the traditional structures and processes of the provider. These included delivering modules in the evening and ensuring support services were available to these students.

<u>Study debt and fee levels</u>

PEP has highlighted that there are a number of financial challenges for individuals in enabling them to participate in PGT study. Firstly, level of study debt can be a barrier to successful participation. PEP has shown that the 'Total' study debt and anxiety levels for UK domiciled students under the previous funding regime are much higher compared to their EU and overseas counterparts (who are often able to obtain funding from their governments to help their study in the UK). Although the UK government have in the past provided bursaries for disadvantaged students at UG level, this support was removed in the last Budget with the consequence that debt levels for certain groups of students (who do not have access to other means of support such as parental assistance) will increase. The UK UG fees are now the highest in Europe and amongst the highest internationally. The debt levels of £9K a year fee for the first cohort of UK/EU graduates will be substantially higher than previous cohorts and those who were monitored in the PEP project. Although there is the supposition that it will impact on progression to PG study, it is currently unclear as to what the extent might be. If the debt levels for UK UG domiciled students continue to be higher than for EU and overseas students as PEP found, this could put them at a disadvantage in participating in the PGT global market.

HEFCE's PSS Phase 2 (where UK and EU students graduating under the £9K a year regime are being offered a £10K grant to undertake PGT study) may hold off further decline in enrolments in 2015, but as the scheme is for one year it will only function as a holding mechanism. The National Student Survey IAG survey reports that final year students under the previous funding regime who stated they were certain to go onto further study has declined from 17% in 2013 to 14% in 2014, in part due to debt levels (HEFCE 2015). PEP found that amongst the majority of its respondents, the proposed Government funding model was not considered a viable funding option and that their preference was a mix of funding sources in order to keep 'PGT' and 'Total' study debt levels low. Some higher education institutions are not waiting for the outcome of the Government consultation and are working with funding providers, such as *StudentFunder* and *Future Finance*, who offer mixed funding options that they argue are sustainable, provide students with choice and are accessible. Concerns were expressed by NDC delegates whether a Government loan scheme was viable for the UK economy and whether loans that increased an individual's study debt enabled them to be active citizens and engage in adult life (e.g. afford a home, contribute to a pension scheme, have children, etc.).

Secondly PGT fee levels, as a result of the increase at UG level, have come under scrutiny and are being examined by the sector. Some institutions have already raised their PGT fees in anticipation of a Government backed loan scheme being introduced, whilst others cautiously await the proposal before taking any action. The National Student Survey IAG survey asked students who were 'likely' to enter PG study what would affect their decision. In 2014, course fees were a factor for 65% of respondents. Amongst students who said they were 'unlikely' to study at PG level in the future, 61% said that course fees were one of the factors putting them off (HEFCE 2015). In line with this, PEP respondents stated that fee levels were very important in the decision making process. It was suggested that a new approach to the current pricing regime, which generally charges similar prices for Master's degrees across all disciplines, could help. For example, an MA in English literature does not have the same delivery costs as an MSc in Biomedical Science and if this was reflected in the fee level for certain arts, humanities and social science courses, they could attract more applicants. The argument that STEM courses having higher fee levels would dissuade applicants from undertaking STEM courses was not considered a valid argument because there are already wide fee variations in existence in some medical and business related disciplines. There needs to be a break from the thinking that 'level of fee' equates with 'value' of degree.

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