



BRITISH ACADEMY

A submission from the British Academy to the Higher Education Commission Postgraduate Education Inquiry Call for Evidence – April 2012

Introduction

The British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Higher Education Commissions' Postgraduate Education Inquiry. Much of the debate about higher education in recent years has focused on the challenges in undergraduate education; the issues facing the postgraduate sector had been largely marginalised in recent debates. Postgraduate education is extremely valuable to the UK economy and society, and not solely accruing benefits to the individual. Postgraduate education prepares individuals to enter a wide variety of careers, supports the global competitiveness of the UK economy and ensures the renewal of our academic research base with the very best people.

As suggested in the Inquiry's Call for Evidence, we have not answered every question but instead focused on particular areas where we can offer insight and evidence.

Meeting the needs of an innovation-led economy

Q1: How well does the current postgraduate system meet the needs of businesses? How can the system become more responsive?

Postgraduate education makes a significant contribution to the economy and society. As the Smith Review, *One Step Beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education*, said: "[the] skills of postgraduates, especially researchers, are critical for tackling major business challenges and driving innovation and growth". Analysis published by Vitae shows that UK domiciled postgraduate students (both masters and PhD) have employment rates at around 80%, compared to 70% for students with a first degree only.¹

The growth in postgraduate education in the UK has outstripped that of undergraduate education (the former increasing by approximately 25% over the last 10 years; the latter by only 18%)². More and more employers are looking postgraduate skills; universities have ably expanded provision to meet this need, whether through more postgraduate programmes or via undergraduate programmes that lead to masters degrees.

In developing the current postgraduate system to meet the needs of businesses, we need to be conscious that we maintain high-quality PhD provision. There is a delicate balance to be struck between keeping the UK doctoral programmes short by international standards,

¹ *What do PhDs do?* and *What do PhDs do?* – Trends, both published by Vitae in 2004 and 2007 respectively - <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>

² Figures based on data published by HESA - www.hesa.ac.uk

which can enhance competitiveness³, and falling off the international pace if UK programmes do not allow the time to complete full doctoral projects. For example, the EPSRC report in 2011 on Mathematics specifically warned that Mathematics PhDs in UK universities were too short and were in danger of not matching up to international standards of excellence in the discipline⁴.

A useful yardstick here is the paper *Doctoral degrees beyond 2010*⁵ published in the same month as *One step beyond* by the League of European Research Universities⁶. This emphasised that groundbreaking research must constitute the core of any doctoral programme, but that such programmes also need to include advanced training and professional skills. A similar conclusion is reached for another field in the Orpheus position paper *Towards Standards for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences* (May 2009)⁷ prepared by a group of for the most part Scandinavian and East European universities.

Many of the other leading institutions represented in LERU and beyond take five years, which when added to a three year undergraduate programme, yields a total of eight years from leaving school to the conferral of the title doctor.

The ability of UK HEI's to train graduates in a shorter timescale than HEIs abroad has long been the envy of foreign academics. That ability depends upon UK HEIs being able to maintain quality of training, and that means that training must be properly funded.

International competitiveness

Q2a: What is required for the UK to maintain its ability to attract and retain high-quality international students and international researchers?

The current immigration policy as it applies to higher education and research has a negative impact on the UK's ability to maintain and attract international students and researchers. We believe that current immigration policy is having a damaging impact on the UK HE sector as well as impeding and undermining the free flow of academic interchange that is vital for the UK's academic strength and its R&D capacity. In particular, we are deeply concerned by an increasingly widespread perception, borne out of current policy, that Britain is 'not open for business'. The higher education sector has been one of the most

³ *One step beyond: making the most of postgraduate education*, March 2010, Executive Summary, paragraph 47

⁴ EPSRC Action Plan in response to the International Review of Mathematics, November 2011 update, available at <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2011/Pages/irmactionplan.aspx> [accessed 03/04/12]

⁵ *Doctoral degrees beyond 2010: Training talented researcher for society*, March 2010, available at http://www.leru.org/files/publications/LERU_Doctoral_degrees_beyond_2010.pdf [accessed 03/04/12]

⁶ The LERU is a group of 21 institutions; UK members are Edinburgh, Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, UCL

⁷ Orpheus position paper *Towards Standards for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences* (May 2009), available at http://www.jfmed.uniba.sk/fileadmin/user_upload/editors/Andrisova_Files/Microsoft_Word_-_Setting_standards-PhD_study_Orpheus-12-05-2009-final_version.pdf [accessed 03/04/12]

successful sectors for the UK economy in recent decades, in part because of its ability to attract leading scholars and students from around the world. The imposition of quotas, difficulties in obtaining visas (including for short visits by academic visitors), counting students in net migration figures, and restrictions on the period of time academic and professional migrants have leave to remain – all this has the effect of seriously damaging the UK's extremely successful record in this area.

Q2b: What are the long-term implications for the postgraduate sector's dependence on international students?

Unlike the UK undergraduate system, there are no across-the-board quotas or caps on postgraduate places so UK universities are able to expand supply as demand requires. However, as higher education systems in overseas countries develop (and other countries are investing more in HE than the UK is currently), then students may well see less reason to study in the UK. In 2010/11, over half of all full-time postgraduate students (57.4%) were from outside the UK.⁸ It is not clear that there would be sufficient demand from UK domiciled students to make up any future shortfall, especially given the current changes to funding that require students to pay higher fees for undergraduate study (albeit with repayments on an income-contingent basis after graduation).

Q2c: How might UK-domiciled students be encouraged to engage in doctoral study?

Doctoral study drives UK research and economic growth, and as such should receive significant public investment.

The UK needs to move in the following three directions:

- A new postgraduate loan scheme, to address access issues in relation to postgraduate study
- More PhD studentships to attract bright students into postgraduate research
- More postdoctoral fellowships to hold the best young scholars within higher education.

Especially as regards the last two points, some initiatives may come from universities themselves, and also from philanthropic donations. However, government needs to give a clear lead in addressing these three suggested directions.

Q2d: In what areas can UK postgraduate provision be considered outstanding internationally?

The postgraduate sector has grown rapidly – far more rapidly than the undergraduate sector. The number of full-time postgraduate students in the period from 2000/1 to 2010/11 increased by nearly 80%. In the same period, the number of full time undergraduates increased by just over 30%.

UK universities have significant success in demonstrating their ability to attract excellent students from overseas. Over half of all full-time postgraduate students (57.4%) were from outside the UK. Important factors in the UK's success in recruiting international students will be the reputation of good individual supervision of graduate students and the attraction of working with teachers who are active researchers with a strong international record.

⁸ Based on data published by HESA at www.hesa.ac.uk

Progression

Q3: How well does current practice support smooth transitions from postgraduate education into industry and academia?

There should be an examination of the development paths undertaken by early career researchers. With an increasing number of short-term research contracts, academics will be required to move around more than in the past. Career mobility can be a positive thing, but the resulting lack of stability may also have a negative impact on academics trying to build a career and profile.

Ensuring fair access to postgraduate education

Q4: How can postgraduate provision in the UK be made more accessible for students from less advantaged backgrounds?

This is an area where we require far more knowledge and data than we currently have. We need to understand in much more detail issues like who is participating in postgraduate education, from where they come (in terms of undergraduate institution), and whether suitable candidates are dropping out because of access barriers.

Our suggestion in the answer to Q2c of a new postgraduate loan scheme would make it easier for all students.

Impact of the planned HE reforms

Q5: What impact will the changes to undergraduate provision outlined in the recent Higher Education White Paper have on the postgraduate sector?

While there is much support for students undertaking undergraduate programmes – including financial support to fund tuition fees and maintenance, and multiple sources of information to improve decision-making – there should be serious consideration to provide similar levels of support to students undertaking postgraduate programmes, in particular to help them with the costs of tuition and maintenance. In light of increased tuition fees from September 2012 (mainly in England, but also for some students in the other parts of the UK), we have concerns that students will be discouraged from embarking on postgraduate courses because of the additional burden of debt this would require.

Given the market and fees, it is vital that the government – through the relevant higher education funding agencies in each part of the UK – continues to support vulnerable areas of undergraduate provision. From a humanities and social sciences perspective, this includes languages, area studies and quantitative skills. Languages face particular problems because of the decline of language learning in schools, and because many involve 4-year course and hence a greater debt burden.

Cross-cutting issues

(i) Funding

Q6: How should postgraduate education be funded?

(ii) Institutional structures

Q7: Are you aware of any distinctive models of delivering postgraduate education which have been deployed with success in other countries?

(iii) Quality assurance and student satisfaction

Q8: How effective are quality assurance and student feedback mechanisms for postgraduate provision?

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