

npc  the national postgraduate committee

research proposal

impact on the postgraduate market failure

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Introduction

The current Higher Education Act 2004 [1] has legislated the incoming of undergraduate deferred variable tuition fees as well as the introduction of a limited maintenance grant for those from poorer income backgrounds. All fees and maintenance are covered by an income contingent student loan with a low interest rate, which will not apply to postgraduate courses. The main concerns of the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) are the potential impact on continuation to postgraduate education that will arise from the increased levels of debt that will have consequences as to whether postgraduate education can be pursued [2].

It is not only for those coming directly from an undergraduate degree where there is concern. Mature students returning to higher education to undertake a postgraduate course are also a vital aspect of the postgraduate market. Access to funding and suitability for their time schedule is of vital importance in this regard. Part time study is becoming increasingly attractive although it does not attract much funding even though it may be the only option where a professional wishes to develop their career. A further concern is where international postgraduate students will increasingly become the target to fill places and bring in the extra income to higher education institutions that the proposed undergraduate tuition fees will not provide.

The purpose of this research proposal is to gather evidence as to where postgraduate education is a market failure not only through funding availability but with regards to access arrangements to accommodate disability, gender, ethnic minorities and other non traditional groups. All aspects of participation should be considered in this regard.

Current Evidence

In 2002, NPC commissioned the University of Warwick Students' Union with the sponsorship of Graduate Prospects Ltd. to carry out a survey of postgraduates, both full time and part time regarding their financial situation [3]. A further aim of the survey was to ascertain the reasoning that postgraduates had to undertake their course and the value of such expenditure. This was the first survey of its kind taken from the postgraduate perspective. Key findings of the survey indicated students wished to go into postgraduate study to improve their career prospects as well as continuing study while part time students were more likely to do so for their personal development. Over 75% of postgraduates surveyed indicated financial reasons as the main obstacle while part time students had additional burdens of negotiating time and other commitments. 56% of full time students indicated that they undertook paid work although more than half of those felt that it took away time needed for study. Findings from this research have shown evidence of postgraduate study being of benefit to career development while at the same time there are limitations in terms of the effort required to meet the necessary costs.

Another aspect of the postgraduate market is the evidence of rising international numbers. Trends in postgraduate statistics, which include those from EU countries in figure 1 show clearly that the numbers have begun a more rapid rate of increase around 1999, while UK numbers also continue to increase. Further to this in figure 2 there is a continuing increase overall in full time and part time numbers, where part time postgraduates are consistently around 60% over the years. In terms of numbers, there has been a rapid rise since 1995 of around 50,000 more part time postgraduates. There is nothing to indicate from this information that undergraduate funding or other circumstances have in any way altered the proportional trends in part time and full time study or research. It is, however, questionable as to why postgraduates are choosing part time study and what potential there is for increased popularity.

With a continuing trend for increase in international postgraduates, there will be a difference in the marketing targets of higher education institutions, where the UK market in comparison may not be as significant a target, which could also change the trends of part time study with the option of further learning while working.

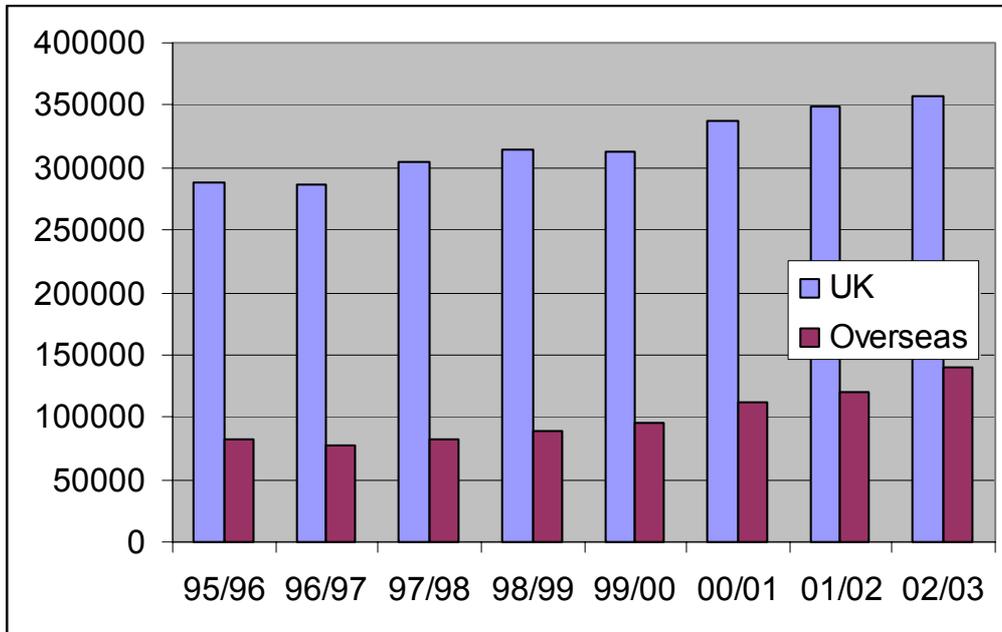


Figure 1 - Bar chart indicating the postgraduate trends for UK and overseas students — source Higher Education Statistics Agency

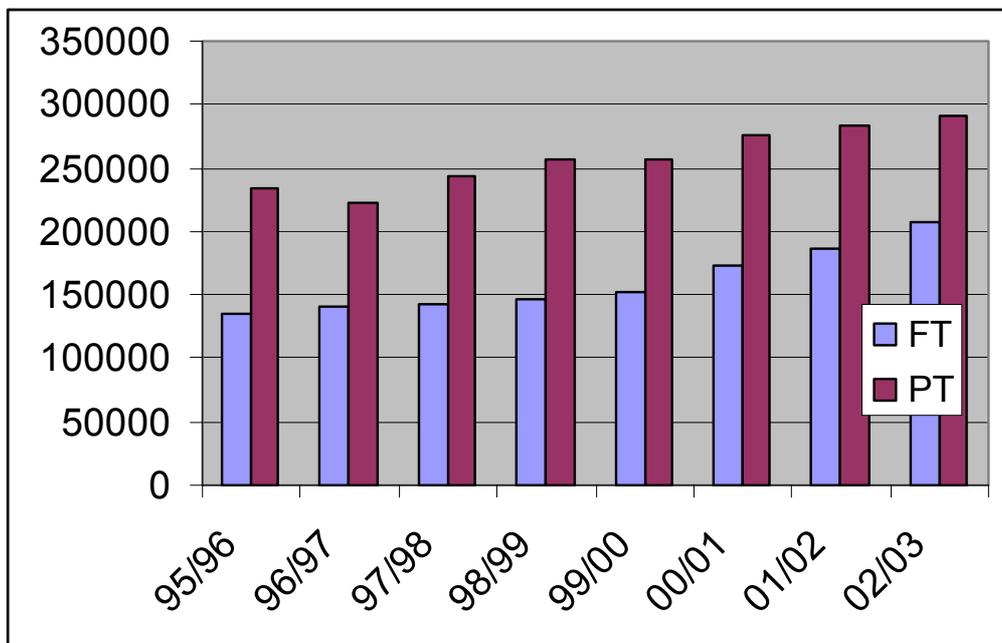


Figure 2 - Chart showing trends in UK full time and part time postgraduate numbers — source Higher Education Statistics Agency

Influencing factors on postgraduate education being a market failure will involve the limited funding options or potential risks of further debt from undergraduate study. The feasibility of career development loans has already been investigated by NPC [4] to show that there is a problem with regard to the lack of compatibility in repaying the undergraduate student loan along with the added risks of such a loan. An important factor here is how such limitations will hinder the opportunity for many prospective postgraduates. In any instance, career development loans are limited to a select set of courses with vocational application and are given to students on a means tested basis. Therefore only those who are financially deprived undertaking a postgraduate course to develop their career will take out the full loan. Once the loan is taken out, there is a significant level of risk, with no certainty of deferral or repayment arrangements being made following their course to suit their financial situation.

On widening participation for postgraduates, there is only one piece of work known to NPC carried out by Paul Wakeling at the University of York. The work carried out here analyses the statistics of graduates

progressing to postgraduate education directly after their first degree. This research was further able to analyse the social class of those continuing to postgraduate education. In an article, Wakeling states [5]:

Looked at crudely, there appears little difference in the destinations of students from different social classes: there were only slight increases in the proportions of graduates from the top social classes who took further study, with a correspondingly small dip in the lower social classes. Scratch beneath the surface, however, and some interesting patterns arise. "Further study" represents a very broad category of activity, covering professional certificates of various types (secretarial qualifications, law courses, PGCEs) through to higher degrees such as taught masters and PhDs. Separating out higher degrees by research, the data showed that a graduate from social class I (professional) was almost three times as likely to proceed to such a course than a peer from social class V (unskilled).

In this instance there is evidence that there is a tendency for those from higher social class backgrounds to continue to higher degrees. This is only one instance, however, in terms of widening access to postgraduate education. There are many further dimensions to widening participation in terms of bringing back experienced professionals, mature students, those with disabilities, women and other non traditional groups who have reasons to continue their education at a later stage or who have not been able to do so due to other limitations.

One other move to widen the number of postgraduate research students is through the increased funding stipends as recommended by Roberts [6]. A further note to this is the forthcoming introduction of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, where emphasis and support for research in that subject area will be better supported. It is not only an issue of funding, but also allowing research degrees to show transparency in the way they are providing training and support to postgraduate research students in developing their career. The main difficulty in this regard is that although there is depth in the research they carry out, there is lack of breadth in their wider skills and application of their achievements. While extra funding is welcomed to address these issues, an unanswered question is whether the issue of debt will counteract the increase in funding and whether the limits in financial benefit following a research degree will enable graduates to see a research degree as worthwhile.

The latest research produced on trends in postgraduate education was released by the Higher Education Policy Institute in November 2004 [7]. This report gives further clear evidence of trends in the postgraduate market to date although it is clear that there is no concrete evidence on widening participation in postgraduate education as well as no evidence that can yet be drawn on what effect undergraduate tuition fees will have on the postgraduate education market. This therefore further confirms the need to undertake research presented in this proposal, which will assist in forecasting such results.

Research Objectives

The current project proposes to seek evidence on the impact of funding available to students in a number of instances:

- The view of undergraduate students when considering continuation to postgraduate education.
- The view of part time postgraduates and their reasoning for choosing part time postgraduate study.
- The opinion of international postgraduates choosing the UK in preference to competing countries, thus seeking the potential risks involved with institutions moving to international postgraduates as their primary income.
- To seek views of current UK postgraduates as to why they have pursued postgraduate education and their views on the financial implications.
- To seek the views of women, students with disabilities and non traditional groups.

Methodology

The intention is to devise appropriate questionnaires for undergraduates, international postgraduates, part time postgraduates and current UK postgraduates. These questionnaires will be made available online and publicised through NPC's own electronic communication to reach a wide postgraduate audience. NPC will also seek support from the National Union of Students and other bodies, to encourage student representative

bodies to promote the surveys through their student online message boards, posters and other communication media.

The approach of the questionnaires will be drawn from objectives of evidence required, which will be discussed with a wider audience within parliament, NPC delegates and other relevant persons with whom NPC has consultation. Current considerations in terms of evidence to gather for the different groups will include:

Prospective UK Postgraduate Students

1. To seek their current impressions of postgraduate study and whether they would consider it.
2. Motives for applying to undertake postgraduate study.
3. Concerns of undergraduates over financial implications.
4. To consider whether current undergraduates would pursue postgraduate study with increased levels of debt.

Current UK Postgraduate Students

1. To investigate their financial situation in terms of current debt, expected increased debt and means by which they finance their postgraduate study.
2. To seek their reasoning for undertaking postgraduate study.
3. To investigate whether increased debt at undergraduate level would have taken them away from postgraduate study.

Part Time Postgraduates

1. To investigate why part time postgraduates choose part time study as opposed to full time study and if it compliments their career.
2. To investigate how they finance their study and whether such financing has made part time study the only option.
3. To investigate whether they would consider full time study should there be the time and funding required.

International Postgraduates

1. To seek international postgraduates' views on why they choose the UK for their study.
2. To seek opinion in terms of competitiveness, long term benefits of UK postgraduate education.
3. To ascertain whether international postgraduate education will be sustained.

Other aspects of Access

1. To add an appendix to all questionnaires asking questions of whether they have felt limits in access due to their gender, disability, race, religion, sexuality or any other aspect of being from a non traditional group.

References

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