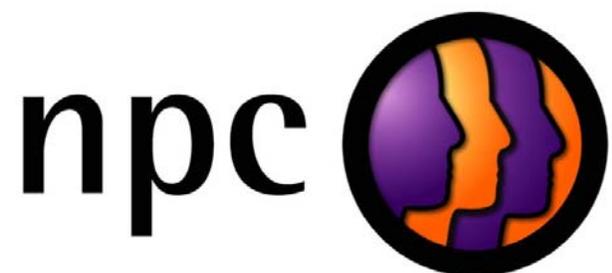


**Submission by the National  
Postgraduate Committee of  
the United Kingdom to the  
House of Commons Education  
and Skills Committee Inquiry  
into The Future Sustainability  
of the Higher Education  
Sector: purpose, funding and  
structures**

December 18th 2006



## **Executive Summary**

Higher Education offers a valuable opportunity to develop individuals, society and the economy. Postgraduates are best placed to ensure Higher Education provides these opportunities and it is crucial that the funding arrangements and future of institutions is secure to retain and develop the UK's excellence in research and development and that the holistic support for postgraduates facilitates such excellence.

## **The National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom**

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) represents over 500,000 postgraduate students. It is the principal representative body of postgraduate students in the UK. As a registered charity (no. SC033368), our aim is to promote, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK. We share best practice through publications and meetings, respond to consultations, address conferences and take on casework. In the furtherance of our aims, we co-operate with other like-minded democratic student bodies, professional associations and trades unions.

## **The role of universities over the next 5—10 years**

The National Postgraduate Committee has welcomed the governments recognition of research as a part of higher education to support the knowledge based economy (<http://www.npc.org.uk/media/postgraduatepolicyresponses/consultations2003/npc0304bdpartmentforeducationandskillsrsponsetothehighereducationstrategywhitepaper>). Furthermore the NPC recognise the world class reputation of our Higher Education and welcome its benefits to civil society, culture, personal fulfillment and economic development and wealth creation. The government must continue to develop Higher Education to enable these benefits but ensure that significant spending comes from the public sector in recognition of the linked role all stages of education play in the development of society and the economy.

Postgraduate students make a significant contribution to the research undertaken in UK universities and the UK. The skills and knowledge developed by postgraduate students benefits the economy and society when researchers use their skills in future employment. The success of the Roberts Skills Agenda highlights the value of public investment in research which enhances the strategic capacity of those groups employing postgraduate researchers and their wider benefit to society. Furthermore as the ageing academic labour force retires, postgraduate researchers are able to contribute fully to academic regeneration. Ensuring benefit to society and the economy can be further achieved through Higher Education thematic priorities such as SET to ensure postgraduate programmes are fully supported and recognized as part of key education funding priorities. Using thematic priorities and assessing research proposals on social and cultural benefit as well as economic and environmental benefit would emphasise that research is valued and considered to be integral to a national research strategy.

It is evident that concentration of research towards higher rated research units, and possibly research intensive institutions will enable not only the ability to recruit and retain researchers as well as research students but also to overcome the backlog of infrastructure and lack of resources that have accumulated over the years. However, the concentration of research funding does concern us in that better research funding of such research units will happen at the expense of losing research units with significant potential in other areas.

NPC strongly feel that high research quality does not have a bearing upon the quality of the research environment in which research students can be appropriately trained and supported. It could be the case that some research students will not find large, highly rated research units supportive and suitably geared in a way that will successfully take them as a student through a research programme. Smaller research units, that may otherwise not have as high a rating in their research quality, may offer a more suitable environment to allow their students to achieve research potential. Removal of such units may significantly reduce the options open to prospective postgraduates, which could bear a significant limit on widening participation in postgraduate education. We are concerned at present as to how the current plans to widen access at undergraduate level will extend to postgraduate qualifications for those who wish to continue. Retaining the choice and variety of institutions in order to make this possible is vital, under current proposals large research units will not be suitably geared to meet these interests.

### **Knowledge Transfer**

In our experience it is largely the case that taught master level degrees and of course research degrees will require access to academic research as a support to the teaching and the research that students will carry out. With the reduction and possibly removal of research in some institutions we are concerned that this will severely affect the availability of higher degrees and in turn the choice that prospective postgraduates will have. We envisage that there will be greater availability of higher degrees in large research intensive institutions rather than knowledge transfer institutions.

As mentioned in the previous section, we strongly feel there that research quality does not bear any relation to the quality of teaching, support and development of individual students. Such factors are vital in developing the interests of graduates who have progressed significantly during their undergraduate degree. It may be that an undergraduate who has achieved well in a knowledge transfer institution wishes to continue to research and undertake a postgraduate qualification although the institution may not be able to provide this. Therefore this could provide an uncertain and uncomfortable future when moving to a larger research intensive institution with a significantly different environment. This could also have serious implications in terms of extending the widening participation agenda to encourage able students to progress towards higher degrees.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the need to enhance education at foundation level especially although we are concerned about the implications this could have on the future of postgraduate education, both taught and research. We therefore urge the government to ensure this will not be affected to enable all graduates to achieve as highly as possible

### **University-Industry research collaboration**

The National Postgraduate Committee welcomes opportunities for research collaboration between universities and industry. NPC believes that collaborative research between the private and higher education sectors can be mutually beneficial, but also recognises that unless institutional policy is developed to protect students from highly directed projects, this collaboration can be problematic.

NPC believes that institutions should ensure policy is established prior to the commencement of research that agrees issues such as intellectual property, timing and confidentiality of publications, responsibilities of supervisor/s, funding, academic freedom, and, reporting requirements to the private sector collaborator. NPC believes that regardless of whether postgraduate students undertake their research on a university campus, in a public research facility or in an industrial location, all students should have access to student support services and to their postgraduate student association.

## University funding

### **Teaching and Research**

The National Postgraduate Committee recognizes the dual importance and crucial link between Teaching and Research. Teaching should be recognized as having equal status, prestige and value as research.

The experience of all students, both research and taught is affected by the quality of university research, the quality of teaching informed by that research and the quality of the university research infrastructure. Research funding should continue through the research assessment exercise by using a single system that values peer review while using limited metrics within discipline specific modifications. A single overarching system would prevent unfair funding distribution and allow new cross-disciplinary research. Research funding however should not be used to prevent cutting edge research in less favourably rated departments from taking place. Research funding should not be directed solely at institutions that are research intensive with funding ringfenced to other institutions for developing or creating interdisciplinary or inter-institutional research. Research funding, particularly for less research intensive institutions, should not follow a one-size-fits-all approach and recognize the mission of the institution and its role in the research field while also protect areas where market failure is greatest.

The National Postgraduate Committee recognizes academic freedom and 'blue skies thinking' which should be protected and developed. Metrics based models are biased against new researchers as departments seek to build experienced researchers for metric output. We further feel that research funding focus should encompass training and development of researchers to ensure quality research is taking place and provide opportunities for new researchers and new research. Moves to increase equal opportunities must be maintained and any move by metrics to increase the attractiveness of a 'transfer market' must be prevented.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that benchmarking is positive tool and should be reflected in research funding but that benchmarking should be a separate function to the allocation of all research funding. Benchmarking takes place in the public sector to assess and evaluate performance but is rarely used as a sole determinant of funding. The opportunity for benchmarking is for capacity building to encourage funding as a tool alongside other criteria.

### **Should the cap be raised and what would the consequences be?**

The National Postgraduate Committee is opposed to the cap on fees being raised as it would challenge access and create a marketised Higher Education system where access is based on the ability to pay and not on individuals merit. NPC believes that education as a funded public service results in benefits for society, the economy, employers and the

learner. We are opposed to increased costs being passed to the learner and the opportunity for self and societal development to be prevented by fear of cost.

The National Postgraduate believe students should not pay tuition fees as they prevent access to higher education and prevent progress onto postgraduate courses. We are opposed to any increase in undergraduate tuition fees as this will create larger debts for undergraduates and pressure the market to raise postgraduate and particularly Masters fees.

Debt, particularly for those students seeking to develop themselves and wider society is unfair and will prevent those who might benefit most from access. The demographics of postgraduate programmes needs encouragement to attract women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups; increased undergraduate debt will deter non-traditional groups from accessing postgraduate opportunities.

NPC believes the consequences for raising the cap would be an increased burden on students through increasing levels of debt and the limiting of access and progression to postgraduate study.

### **Increasing Debt and its impact on postgraduate programmes**

Current levels of graduate debt are disputed but banks and other financial service providers usually consider the graduate debt figure above official government figures. An example of the increasing cost is the Barclays Bank Graduate Debt Survey which showed in 1994, the average graduate debt was £2,212. By 2005, this had increased to £13,501<sup>1</sup>. Former Education Secretary Charles Clarke estimated that students who attend universities that charge the full top-up fees will graduate with debts of £21,000<sup>2</sup>. Current Hobsons research on 5662 current undergraduates in years 1-3 considering postgraduate study showed that 28% students had £10,001 to £15,000 of current debt.

These debts are particularly offputting for students who must take longer courses such as medical students with the BMA stating in research before top-up fees were introduced that a fifth of medical students owe more than £30,000 in their final year<sup>3</sup>. For engineering courses the EPSRC noted that the potential impact of debt on entry into postgraduate programmes would be high due to the impact of accumulating 'undergraduate debt in engineering which it estimates to be 20% higher than the average and substantially higher than the arts' presumably reflecting the length of programmes (Ackers, 2006, p.31).

---

<sup>1</sup> Barclays Graduate Debt Survey 2005

<sup>2</sup> Breakfast with Frost, 20th Jan 2003

<sup>3</sup> BMA Survey of Medical Students' Finances, 2005

Although too early to see the impact of debt on postgraduate applications it is clear from interviews that carrying forward debt might deter students from pursuing further study (Ackers, 2006, p.31).

"Yes we do find it difficult to obtain applications from high quality UK PhD students and the reason for that's fairly obvious - if you're a bright young graduate with a first class degree and a big overdraft the last thing you want to do is be a student for 3 more years in a city with a high cost of living" [HoS, EPSRC cited in Ackers, 2006, p.31]

### **Debt affects the demographic**

The impact of increased debt will further challenge the demographics of those able to participate in postgraduate education as debt does not affect all members of society equally. DfES' research shows that those students in the lowest groups predicted average debts of £9,842 in 2004/05, compared to £7,733 among the middle groups and £6,905 for those from the highest<sup>4</sup>. In National Postgraduate Committee commissioned research from 2006

(<http://www.npc.org.uk/postgraduatefactsandissues/postgraduatepublications/marketfailureofpostgraduateeducationssurveyreport2006.pdf>) respondents from social class D were substantially more likely to report that financial concerns had a very strong influence on their choice of study mode. Furthermore the majority of those not intending to study (58%) reasoned that they were unable to afford it or it was too expensive. Almost three quarters said planned tuition fee and 62% debt from previous study was reason not to consider postgraduate study

The commitment to widening participation and promoting equality of opportunity at undergraduate may present problems of recruitment to postgraduate programmes as high quality students are forced to exit after their undergraduate programmes to provide for themselves financially (Ackers, 2006, p.39). Students from lower socio-economic groups are also more likely to seek financial income from part-time work and this will affect those who consider postgraduate study/

While undergraduate fees are deferred, postgraduate fees are not and these together with student living and other costs must be met as they arise and the burden of meeting basic living costs will act as a deterrent for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will work longer hours than students who enjoy greater levels of family financial support. The poorest students are far more likely to have to work during term-time. In a UNITE/Mori survey, 51% of C2DE students compared to 35% of AB students reported they worked during term-time. They also worked longer, on average 14.3 hours per week, compared to just 12.2 hours for AB

---

<sup>4</sup> DfES, Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2004/05, RR725

students, and for less money £5.94 per hour on average for C2DE students compared to £7.21 per hour for AB students.

Research in the UK shows that students from groups at a disadvantage tend to enrol in lower level, shorter or more vocational courses, and closer to home. (Callender, 2003 and 2002; M Farr 'Home or Away'? 2001 quoted in Callender, 2003)

In Australia, which has a system similar to that in England, the introduction of fees and income-contingent loans has contributed to an increase in the proportion of young people living in the parental home after graduation. The median age of first homebuyers has also risen<sup>5</sup>.

Research on student debt has also meant that Australians are delaying having their first child, and choosing to have fewer children. The median age of Australian mothers at the birth of their first child rose from 24 in 1975 to 29 in 2000. Furthermore the indebtedness of graduates will have an impact on their ability to make the next steps in their lives, such as buying property and has the potential to widen the gap between rich and poor.

### **Debt is a deterrent**

Research conducted by UUK and the National Union of Students shows that reluctance to take on debt, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds is a factor affecting access to higher education and which will impact on the ability to continue onto postgraduate education. Universities UK (UUK) Student Debt Project shows that the groups the government is trying to attract into HE are likely to be the most debt averse and the most concerned about the costs of HE (ie low-income groups, lone parents, students from certain minority ethnic groups)<sup>6</sup>, finding which were repeated in the NUS' Funding the Future research<sup>7</sup>.

Such limited access to Higher Education by groups the government is trying to attract will limit the pool of prospective postgraduate students and will challenge the demographic of postgraduate students and the benefit research can bring to society and the economy.

Due to part time students, particularly at PhD level being less likely to complete their degrees than full time candidates and the large numbers of part-time students. there is a need for equity to support these students. Part time study is an option for a number of

---

<sup>5</sup> The social and economic impact of student debt, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Claire Callender et al., 2003, Student Debt Project UUK. In this research, 84% of sixth formers and college students believed student debt deterred entry into HE and 88% of those questioned from the lower income groups believed that more people would go to university if grants were available.

<sup>7</sup> Watson and Church, 2003, Funding their Future: the attitudes of year 10 pupils to the HE, NUS

students due to caring responsibilities, disability, dependents employment and with a majority of students being aged 30 or over it is more likely that postgraduate students will need to accommodate these competing commitments than undergraduate students.

### **Internationalisation and the demographics of the Student Body**

The current demographics of postgraduate students reflects great diversity that would be threatened by increased levels of personal debt and unaffordability of postgraduate education. Most entrants to all types of postgraduate course are older than 22 with more older than 30 than below the age of 25 (Sastry, 2004). Part time students tend to be older, most being over 30, with almost a quarter of UK doctorate registered on a part-time basis. However the current postgraduate demographic masks the decline in domicile students which combined with the effect of increasing debt and increasing international students threatens the future UK knowledge based economy.

Research student numbers have shown a slight fall with UK domiciled entrants to research degree programmes having fallen by 17% but being partially offset by an increase in non-EU overseas students, whose numbers increased from a low base of 28 per cent between 1995-96 to 39 per cent of doctorates awarded in 2002-03. Although the actual numbers of doctoral awards are increasing, the proportions that are being awarded to UK domiciled students are similar to a decade ago. In 1994/95, 58% of fulltime doctorates and 68% of part-time doctorates were awarded to UK domiciled students, in 2002-03 59% fulltime and 72% part-time doctorates were obtained by UK domiciled students (HESA Student Records, 2002/03).

The declining recruitment pool of 'home grown' researchers is mitigated by this ability to recruit researchers from abroad. In many fields international researchers now constitute the majority of contract research staff and doctoral candidates (Sastry, 2004, p.6).

International students make a valuable contribution to the internationalisation of the postgraduate community with some 36% of postgraduate research students in the UK being international students (Universities UK, 2005). However increasing overseas recruitment is seen as a means of increasing income generation for institutions through fees and explains low levels of recruitment of postgraduates from the EU and accession countries.

Overseas students are also highly concentrated in full time taught masters courses - a segment which they increasingly dominate. Almost half (48 per cent) of full-time taught masters students are from countries outside the EU, rising to 63 per cent if full-time taught masters students from other EU countries are included. This reflects the extent to which overseas postgraduates are concentrated in full-time taught masters study: 68% of all overseas postgraduates are studying full time for taught masters qualifications (the figure for UK students is 18%).

To ensure that postgraduate programmes are attractive there needs to be selective enhancement with an awareness that pay as a dimension shapes the relative attractiveness of academic research careers and would encourage researchers to progress and remain within the UK academic sector.

### **Conclusion**

The continued funding of Higher Education is necessary and for postgraduate education fundamental to the attainment of a knowledge economy and the wider benefits of social development and economic potential. The government must fund education over other areas of policy due to the social, economic and individual transformation it enables.

Postgraduate research enables the UK to be competitive in the global research and knowledge economy and develops the economic potential of individuals and organisations employing postgraduates. The government must ensure public sector funding continues for Higher Education and particularly at ensuring researchers and postgraduates can complete their programmes without financial obstacle or burden.

### **References**

Ackers, H. L. and Bryony, G. (2005) Attracting and Retaining 'Early Career' Researchers: Is There a Problem? *CSLPE Working Paper 2005-2*. Leeds: University of Leeds.

CAPA, 2003, The social and economic impact of student debt, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations.

J. Darwen, E. Bell, S. Goodlad, National Survey of Postgraduate Funding and Priorities, <http://www.npc.org.uk/page/1042481249.pdf>, Produced University of Warwick Students' Union, Sponsored by CSU Prospects Ltd. Published by National Postgraduate Committee, Summer 2002.

Sastry, T. (2004) Postgraduate Education in the UK, HEPI

Watson and Church, 2003, Funding their future: the attitudes of year 10 pupils to the HE, NUS