Executive Summary

Postgraduate Experience Project Report

for

Plymouth University

by

Nash, T., Cotton, D., Gresty, K. and Fuller, M.P.

PedRIO, Faculty of Science and Engineering and the Graduate School

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The Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP)

Investigating the expectations and attitudes towards postgraduate taught (PGT) STEM study, and post study outcomes from the perspective of students’, universities and employers to support and sustain PGT growth in the UK – A collaborative project led by Kingston University

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1. Rationale
The Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS) is a £25 million publicly-funded HEFCE initiative to support students progressing to postgraduate taught education. It focused on students who are under-represented at postgraduate level and in subjects aligned with the Government’s growth strategies. For the PSS Phase 1 (2014-15), HEFCE invited proposals for funded projects in the summer of 2013. The interim findings of the projects have informed guidance for the PSS Phase 2 (2015-16). Findings from those reports, along with the programme analyst’s report, will inform both Government funding policies and future funding opportunities.

The PSS Phase 1 scheme aimed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England and to ensure the continued success of taught postgraduate provision by working with universities and employers to stimulate participation by students who would not otherwise progress to this level of study. The 20 projects supported more than 2,800 students and involved a range of support activities including financial and pastoral support, mentoring and networking, curricula change, funded studentships, work placements and a variety of bursary and loan schemes.

The Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP) was one of 20 projects funded by HEFCE PSS Phase 1. PEP was the largest consortium that has been funded by HEFCE and comprises of 11 universities (9 English, 1 Welsh and 1 Scottish) geographically dispersed across the UK. The collaborative Partners include the Universities of Brighton, Coventry, Edinburgh, Lincoln, Manchester Metropolitan, Portsmouth, Plymouth, South Wales, Teesside, and Wolverhampton. Business and industry leaders and higher educational specialists were also involved in the project.

The project entitled “Investigating the expectations and attitudes towards postgraduate taught (PGT) STEM study, and post study outcomes from the perspective of students, universities and employers to support and sustain PGT growth in the UK: A collaborative project” started in January 2014 and reported the majority of its findings at a National Dialogical Conference at Kingston University on 14 and 15 July 2015.

2. Background
There has been a dramatic expansion in postgraduate taught study (PGT) in the UK in recent years, but this is now faltering especially amongst UK domiciled students and those undertaking part-time study. Although there is a growing body of evidence looking at the postgraduate student experience (e.g. HEA’s PTES survey), there is still a paucity of research exploring participation barriers, understanding student and employers expectations of PGT study, progression and retention, and post-study outcomes. It is hoped that this project will address the neglected research areas mentioned above by looking at the expectations and attitudes towards postgraduate taught (PGT) STEM study, and post study outcomes from the perspective of students’, universities and employers across a group of institutions diverse in student body and geography.
3. **Aims of the Project**
The aims and objectives were to:

- Identify the expectations and attitudes of new PGT students and ascertain motivations and drivers for undertaking PGT study;
- Identify employers perception of value, and expectations of the skills a PGT graduate can/should provide business and industry;
- Identify the outcome expectations of obtaining a PGT qualification for the student and employer;
- Identify the financial issues relating to participation and successful progression in PGT study;
- Explore which variables impact on attitudes, expectations the retention of PGT students (e.g. part-time, full-time, domiciled and generational status, age, gender, social class, ethnicity, discipline and route into study such as from work or University);
- Track the retention of the full-time cohort, and the PT and FT scholarship students to identify any barriers to achievement (e.g. level of fees/accrued debt, not coping with the workload or understanding the material);
- Offer a range of fee scholarships to determine if access to different levels of financial support impacts on participation. These students will be tracked 6 months after graduation to identify destinations, outcomes and benefits of their PGT course.

4. **Methodology**

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected from a number of surveys throughout the year long project as well as a series of focus groups. Firstly an online mainly quantitative Entry to Study survey was circulated during September/October 2014 firstly to the successful PEP scholarship students and then to those not in receipt of a scholarship. Student briefings included a face to face briefing at an induction session to all STEM postgraduate students. The responses in survey monkey were exported into SPSS for analysis by each university of their students responses. Appropriate tests were run on the dataset after initial examination of frequency distributions of responses on each question.

Very short online surveys were also sent to students in November 2014 who had ended up not enrolling on programmes after either enquiring or applying as for their reasons for not doing so. For this part of the project the responses across all universities were amalgamated as numbers were low. In February/March a number of separate focus groups were held for each of the scholarship award groups as well as for those students not in receipt of a scholarship (39 scholarship students and 16 non scholarship involved).

A short online survey was sent at the end of March 2015 to students who had enrolled but then withdrawn to try to determine their reasons for withdrawal. A short online survey was sent to all first year PGT students in June to assess attitudes to different ways of financing PGT programmes. The findings of these surveys are reported in the overall project report.

Finally the findings from both the initial Entry to Study survey and the focus groups were presented in various formats at the VC’s Teaching and Learning conference at the end of June 2015.

5. **Survey - Headline Results**

**Respondents profile**

135 surveys were returned (response rate 62.5%: 100% scholarship students, 53.9% other students)

- The majority of students were domiciled in the UK. Just over one half (52.6%) were first generation students. Significantly higher percentage of scholarship students (77%) were first generation students compared with non scholarship students (42.1%).

- Males made up 63.7% of returned surveys and females 36.3%. The scholarship group had a higher percentage of females (42.7%) but this was not significant. The majority of students were White British (67.2%) and another 19.4% were from another white background. English was the first language of 105 (77.8%) students, the remaining 30 (22.2%) did not consider
English their first language. However 123 (91.1%) felt they were fluent in English with only 12 not feeling fluent.

- The largest group (71.6%) of students were up to 25 years with 14.2% between 26-30 years and 14.2% over 30 years.
- Nearly three quarters of the respondents (90, 71.4%) had studied for their highest qualification in the UK with over half (54.4%) having previously studied at Plymouth.

**Entry route in to PGT study and motivations for PGT study**

- The highest number of students (47.4%) had come to their postgraduate course straight from a paid working life with 39.3% straight from University the year before.
- The most common motivations for undertaking postgraduate studies were an interest in the subject; to improve employment prospects; and to develop a more specialist set of skills and knowledge.

**Reason for choosing the university at which to study PGT qualification**

The top 4 reasons for studying at Plymouth were found to be:

- the reputation of PU in chosen subject area
- location of PU;
- the course content;
- had studied at Plymouth before.

**Fee levels**

- Fee levels were important or very important to nearly 75% of students in choosing their postgraduate course.

**Funding**

- The most common means of paying for their course fees and living costs were through savings, parents, a salary or personal income and loans. There were some significant findings across groups comparisons including generation status; entry route; age groups; and domiciled status.
- Nearly 60% of students were intending to undertake paid work while studying either for less than 20 hours per week or 21 hours or more per week although 20% were definitely not going to work and another 20% were unsure.
- Nearly three quarters of the students reported already having outstanding debts because of previous study with two thirds of these with debts amounting to £15,000 or more

**Expectations/quality of study**

- Two thirds of the students were looking forward to starting their new postgraduate course because they would be improving their knowledge/skills and be immersed in learning while nearly 40% spoke of looking forward to experiencing new course related activities such as the course content, field trips and placements.
- In terms of other expectations, students were expecting more independent study, more value for money and a more personalised experience from their postgraduate studies compared with their undergraduate ones. Two thirds of the students reported that they had expectations as to how to study at postgraduate level while the other third indicated that they did not.

**Academic Assessment and Feedback**

- In terms of assessment preferences for their postgraduate studies the most popular option was individual assessments (chosen by nearly half the students) but nearly the same number would have preferred a mixture of individual and group assessments. There were some significant differences between group comparisons including: domiciled status; and School
- The students mostly had a good understanding of what was meant by academic feedback from their previous studies although less so if English was not their first language.
- Regular academic feedback was seen as the most important aspect of academic feedback that students would like during their postgraduate studies; with feedback saying what had not done so well and how to improve next in importance.
The most helpful and important type of academic feedback wanted by students was comments on their written or assessed work. Ongoing informal conversations outside of class such as meetings with tutors would also be appreciated by several.

**Contact Hours and Independent Study**

- A wide range of contact hours with academic staff was expected by the students with nearly as many expecting 0-4 hours as those expecting 11-20 hours. Students mostly had these expectations because they had seen the course timetable or based them on previous study experiences.
- A wide range of independent study hours were expected with 11-20 hours the most common expectation followed closely by 21 hours and over. Over half the students based these expectations on previous study experiences.
- A mixture of both independent and group study was preferred for nearly half the students as the way to study on their postgraduate course although just over a quarter preferred independent study only. Under a fifth preferred work based learning and under a tenth just group study.

**Anxiety Levels**

- The main concerns for students about their forthcoming course were: Coping with study at this level; the lack of sufficient funding; increasing debt levels; and getting into debt. Three quarters of the students admitted to some level of anxiety about starting the course as a result. Most students thought they would use at least some of the PU support services while studying on their postgraduate course particularly academic support of some kind and careers and employability support.

**Perceived study strengths.**

- Most students indicated that they had adequate, strong or very strong learning skills although there were over 10% who felt they were weak in literacy skills or in their ability to organise independent study.

**Value of a PGT qualification**

- The great majority of the students thought employers valued a postgraduate qualification more highly than an undergraduate one.
- Most of the students expected their postgraduate course to develop various skills from research related skills; networking opportunities; presentation, communication and professional development skills; to greater employability. Some students were less sure about some of these however such as presentation, communication and professional development skills.
- The most important skill that postgraduates wanted to develop during their postgraduate course was subject knowledge followed by: communication skills; getting work experience; and problem solving. The least important skills were business awareness; team working and leadership.
- When the students had completed their course nearly three quarters wanted to find a job appropriate to their new level of skills and knowledge. The rest would mainly either be progressing to further study; or continue in their previous employment.
- Three quarters of the students wanted a professional career relevant to their postgraduate studies while nearly a tenth wanted a research career in academe or industry.
- Nearly 60% of students would be going into or returning to a career in some kind of Science field including conservation and the environment with fewer in information software/ IT and building and construction. Even less would be going into business services; utilities, agriculture; armed forces or manufacturing and 5 were still unsure.
- Nearly half the students thought that the main impact of their new qualification would have on their future employment would be to be able to enter a specialist role while over a quarter felt it would mean they could earn more money.
Cross comparisons between comparison groups
Some of the main findings were similar to the national findings although significantly a much higher percentage (71.6%) of Plymouth students have existing debt compared with the pooled national findings (48.1%).

An advice sheet was produced in December 2014 for the new postgraduates with some of the findings and where to go for advice and support if concerns such as financial or academic concerns. Across all sections of the survey from Motivations and Expectations to Attitudes to Postgraduate study, there were significant differences across a number of background factors which should be taken into to consideration when planning and providing postgraduate STEM courses such as generational status; pre entry circumstances; age groups; domiciled status; gender; mode of study; and discipline. Several of these contributed also to differences between the scholarship and non-scholarship students’ responses such as age, domiciled status and discipline.

These findings emphasise the need for consideration of the support and provision available for students throughout their postgraduate journey from enquiry, application, enrolment, induction and actual course attendance and study.

6. Focus groups – Headline results
Reasons for Undertaking a Postgraduate Qualification
➢ As with many of the survey respondents all the four groups of students reported similar reasons for undertaking a postgraduate qualification with all of them intent on improving their employment and career prospects or progression.
➢ Several had found they could not get employment without a Masters level qualification as either this or experience in the field was a requirement for jobs advertised or at interview they had missed out to those with postgraduate qualifications no matter how well they interviewed.

Reason for Choosing Plymouth
➢ Each group had several students who had previously studied at Plymouth, the main factor for choosing to study there again because of their familiarity with the campus, its staff and the city as well as having friends and being happy as an undergraduate there. The reputation of the chosen course at the university was another less often mentioned factor.
➢ The possibility of a scholarship had been an attraction for some but less often for those in the £1000 group and non scholarship group although several in the latter were not eligible anyway
➢ The alumni discount was also a factor for choosing Plymouth but was not so important as the scholarship possibility.

Managing Studies and Perceived Support
➢ All four groups of students were managing their studies to a greater or lesser degree with some reporting difficulties (4 in the scholarship groups and 6 in the non scholarship group). In the latter group 3 students from the same intensive course were struggling.
➢ Those that were managing were doing so despite their intense or heavy workload, often with several coursework deadlines close together and with some also undertaking paid work leading to pressure of priorities.
➢ The main ways of managing reported were good time management and planning; strict study routines; less free time; and studying part time. Peer support and support from academic staff were also important. Occasional poor support from university support services was reported.

Differences between postgraduate and undergraduate study
➢ A number of differences between postgraduate and undergraduate courses were reported which sometimes differed depending on the course taken at both levels. These included
postgraduate courses often having heavier and more intense workloads such as more group coursework with lots of close deadlines; but better relationships with academic staff; more contact time; better feedback on assessed work; more independent study; and enjoying the course more as more interested and focussed.

- It was felt that previously taken undergraduate courses allowed for more free time for a social life and extracurricular activities than the Masters programme.

Non Academic Issues Experienced

- The most often non-academic issue reported was a difficult work/life balance with heavy and intense course workloads often alongside hours of paid work to cover living costs. This meant little free time for other activities such as a social life or hobbies and other extracurricular activities which had led to raised stress levels impacting on students’ studies and well being. Some students made suggestions as to what would improve their life/work balance such as postgraduate social events and social spaces; better access to student support services; better support from the students’ union; and less coursework deadlines crammed together.

- The second most common concern of financial difficulties was obviously contributing to this main concern for several students, both those with scholarships and those without. This could mean hours of paid work or taking out high interest loans leading to raised stress levels. The non scholarship students surprisingly reported financial difficulties less often than was expected because either they had savings or family support while others only studied part time or/and were sponsored by their employer. Other issues reported much less often were accommodation, travel and language difficulties; mental health issues; and juggling family life with study and paid work.

Impact of the Scholarship on Ability to Study

- All but 3 of the £1000 scholarship students felt that their scholarship had made a difference to their ability to study their postgraduate course including a number who felt they could not have undertaken the course in the first place. Students reported that they would have had to borrow money from their family; taken out expensive high interest loans; switched to part time study; or taken on paid work or even more paid work to cover their costs without the scholarship. Amongst the sixteen students without scholarships, some had not been eligible for one as they were not home students or the scholarships were not available for their particular course while other students who were eligible had applied unsuccessfully for one. Nine of the sixteen reported that they thought a scholarship would have made a big difference. They named similar reasons for this as the scholarship students had in fact experienced such as: doing less or no paid work including being able to study full time instead of part time; and less need to take out expensive loans with their consequences.

Students’ Opinion of Postgraduate Student Loans

- The students were positive about the future availability of PG loans although only if they had the terms and conditions similar to undergraduate loans rather than like the career development loans with their almost instant need to start repaying upon graduation. There was dissatisfaction with the proposed age limit (30 yrs) being imposed and also the amount of money (£10K) that could be provided.

Preparation for Employment/Career

- Across all the groups most of the students were satisfied that their courses were preparing them for their future careers whatever they might be; while those students who were perhaps less clear about what they wished to end up doing, felt that their courses were helping them to make decisions about their future.

- The courses were reported to be either preparing the students through the course content, the course, the course fieldwork, the course placement or a combination of these.
Several students whose courses did not have a placement would have liked a work placement or work experience of some kind on their courses as they felt this would improve their employment prospects.

The academic staff, particularly on some courses were helpful in students’ employment preparation either through suggesting potential placement possibilities; letting them know about employment vacancies; through several external links introducing key industry contacts and guest speakers. The reputation of some of the academic staff and their courses were often enough to help students gain employment in their chosen field.

Those students who were less satisfied on their courses preparation for their future careers either thought the course content was not relevant or the staff did not take a particular interest in helping students with their job prospects.

**Course Expectations Met or Not**

- The course experience had been as expected at least in some way for about a quarter of the students especially those who had been undergraduates at Plymouth. Nearly a third had found the experience better than expected in at least some respect either because of unexpectedly enjoying the challenge of an intense workload, finding the workload easier or finding the academic staff better than expected in terms of their approachability, enthusiasm and the quality of their feedback. The five students who did not know what to expect all found their experience satisfying whilst acknowledging the hard work involved.

- A quarter of students however had found their courses different to what they expected in some way and so were disappointed to a greater or lesser extent. Areas of challenge or dissatisfaction included an unexpected poor work life balance; little support from student services; poor social provision for postgraduate students; and various limitations to the teaching and content of some of the courses. Some of these responses seem to suggest that there is a need for clearer information prior to the course/at induction re modules’ content and attendance/placement requirements.

There were similar responses across all groups but more negative responses from three of the courses (names withheld).

### 7. Case Studies

As a result of the survey and focus groups findings, three initiatives for supporting students were considered and are being explored/implemented.

- **i.** The first was a small credit sized card with a list of university support services numbers on it to be given to all new PGT Stem students (this to be widened to all PGT and PGR students (and possibly UG) in the future). These have been produced and distributed and have received much praise. The Graduate School is reproducing some for their new PGRs and some undergraduate programmes are considering doing so for their new undergraduates.

- **ii.** The second initiative was to provide a social space for STEM postgraduates and at the present time a couple of possibilities are being considered.

- **iii.** The third initiative has come from the Students’ Union who are considering providing tea and biscuit sessions at induction for new postgraduates to ascertain how the Student’s Union can support them in their studies.

### 8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Plymouth conducted research concluded the following:

- **A.** That the main reason motivating STEM students to study at PGT level was an interest in the subject and a belief that obtaining a Masters qualification would improve employment prospects upon graduation.

- **B.** The main concern expressed by students considering a PGT course is financial and this persists into the course with most students having to either rely on family funding or part-
time paid employment. These create increased anxiety levels and part-time employment presents conflicts of interest when students are faced with class-times clashing with employer expectations and “shifts”.

C. Students undertaking PGT courses at Plymouth in the main found them challenging academically and praised their tutors/lecturers for both their knowledge of the subject(s) and in their support for learning. A significant minority however (25%) were disappointed with the academic level of the PGT course. Some recurrent themes that emerge as student-led recommendations for improvement were:

a. More dedicated social space
b. Better planning of assessment scheduling to avoid bunching
c. Better timetabling to support part-time working
d. Better signposting of student support services and recognition by the support services of the needs of PGT students.
e. Better support from the Student’s Union
f. Internships/placements for all courses

D. Internal Operational recommendations

- Provide applicants (and enrolled students) with more information about their chosen course, expected contact hours and anticipated independent study to manage expectations
- Take care to ensure that all students – especially those transitioning from an undergraduate course at Plymouth – understand the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study prior to starting their course and once it commences
- Ensure all PGT students are aware of the support available for academic and pastoral issues from induction onwards, as a significant number enrol after formal employment and have been away from University for a few years
- Work with University support services and the Student Union to increase the profile and accessibility of services for all PGT students
- Give specific information and guidance about working in groups; explain to students how such group work mirrors their likely experiences in the workplace; ensure that marking of group work is fair
- Build time for group work activities into the formal timetable to facilitate group meetings, as many students will be juggling work and study to fund their course
- Review strategy for personal tutoring to ensure opportunities for informal conversations
- Encourage students to consider working regular 9-5 hours where possible, in anticipation of workplace needs and also to reduce stress at weekends for a work/life balance
- Help students to understand how the course material will be relevant in future careers
- Look carefully at coursework deadlines across the programme and try to avoid or reduce the ‘bunching’ which is often seen
- Recognise that students have different experiences and expectations of academic feedback, with a need to clarify at the start of the course how and when feedback will be provided

E. Internal Development recommendations

- Increase links with employers and market PGT courses based on their vocational aspects since this is a major recruitment driver
- Include placements in the course wherever possible, and provide additional support for placement applications
- Where scholarships are available, target at those students on a very low income as these are the cohort who are least likely to be able to attend without such support
• Market extensively to Plymouth alumni since these are often motivated to continue at the same institution
• Develop more social spaces for postgraduate students and organise social activities, especially at the start of the course, to enable students to build cohort relationships and associated support networks
• Develop formalised or semi-formal peer support structures (like PALS) for PGT students
• Provide networking opportunities and assist students to engage with potential employers
• Think about developing a wide range of graduate skills and attributes throughout the PGT course – ensure that students can give examples which demonstrate these skills

F. External Lobbying recommendations
• Campaign for the new government PG loans to be available for the over 30s
• Campaign for social mobility to be a feature of PG loans to encourage the most disadvantaged sectors of society to aspire to undertake PG study

G. Other issues
• Develop a robust model for costing PGT courses
• In the event of the loss of HEFCE funding support for STEM subjects, consider differentiating fees to reflect the cost of courses