

One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education

Professor Adrian Smith

Director General, Science and Research

St Anne's College, July 8th 2010

One Step Beyond

- A report **to** Government, produced with the help of a panel of external advisers. (No BIS branding, no party affiliation.)
- New government looking at the recommendations, to take forward in the coming months.



Headline messages

- This area has expanded greatly in recent years, with relatively little attention being paid to it.
- Postgraduate education is a great asset to the UK, world-leading in many areas.
- Going forward we need to ensure that we build on and promote UK strengths as competitors invest more in their own provision.
- We do need to start collecting more information, to address current gaps in the evidence base.

Value of postgraduate education

- Postgrad students are a diverse group. Some are training for research careers, some are undertaking professional or vocational qualifications, some are just studying for its own sake.
- Some of these form the engine that drives and replenishes the research base. The UK research base ranks 2nd in the world (on balance of quality and quantity), with numerous benefits to the economy and society.
- Contributors to the Report had differing views on the need for a UK “brand”. HEIs do of course do their own branding very effectively, but there is some need for a central one-stop resource on the costs and benefits of UK PG study.

Getting best value for students

- Evidence shows a good return on postgraduate study, in terms of increased lifetime earnings.
- As a skilled workforce benefits the nation, should the Government do more to encourage individuals to consider postgraduate study?
- Satisfaction with the postgraduate experience is generally high but we need better, more widely available information. The Report suggests that the NSS and PRES student surveys should be extended.
- In previous surveys, the two commonly mentioned issues of concern are a) isolation, especially in PhD study, and b) quality and quantity of feedback.

Postgraduate Skills

- Many employers deliberately seek out postgraduates: either as specialists or as generally high-skilled workers.
- Some employers report difficulty finding the specialists they need, or finding them with strong employability skills (communication, numeracy, team-working).
- To what extent skills training should be a compulsory part of PG study is a debatable issue, but the report recommends that it should.

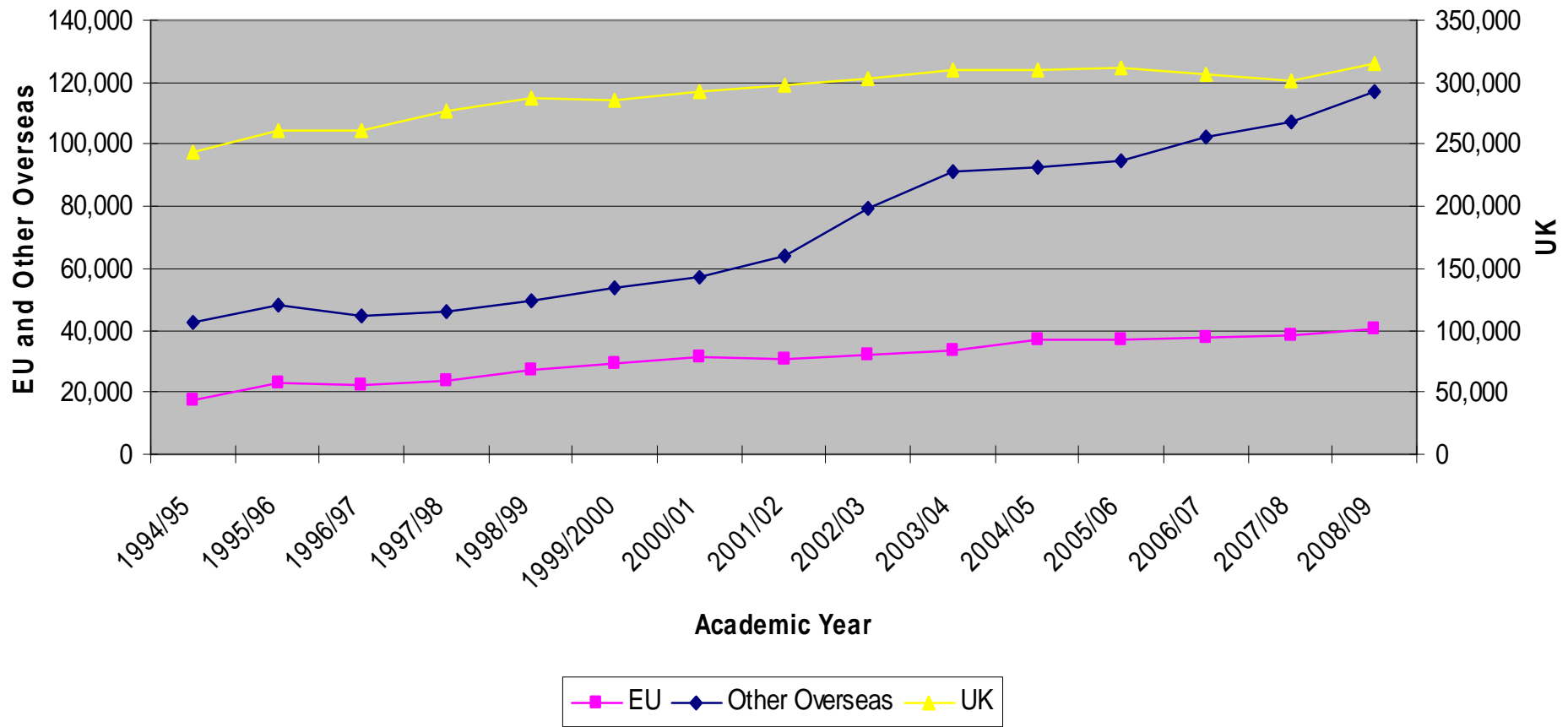
Access to postgraduate study

- Access at the postgraduate level has not been much discussed until recently. There is some diversity data, but as application processes are run by individual HEIs, there is very little available on social background.
- Only around 20% postgrads have gone straight on from undergrad study, so social data is not always available.
- However, as a postgraduate degree is becoming an entry barrier to an increasing number of professions, the Report recommend a working group be set up by the Government to advise on this data deficit.
- Flexible modes of study will become increasingly important – many postgrads already study part-time.

International students

- 1997-2008, numbers of non-EU postgrads increased by 155%, UK postgrads 14%.
- Fees for overseas students are on average 2.5x higher than for UK/EU students in arts courses, 3x higher in science courses.
- Overseas students in general bring further benefits – cultural exchange, contributions to other sectors of the economy – but most importantly a top research base needs to attract the brightest and best from around the world.
- But there are dangers – for national capability and financial stability – in becoming over-reliant on the overseas market.

**Postgraduate Enrolments by Domicile
UK Higher Education Institutions
Academic Years 1994/95 to 2008/09**



The international market

- The UK is currently very successful in attracting international postgraduates, but competition is increasing. China and India are building their own HE infrastructures, while European countries increasingly offer courses in English.
- Agencies across HMG need to work together to ensure our offer to the brightest and best – funding, visas etc. – remains competitive.
- There was no consensus of opinion over the Bologna process. UK master's and PhD courses are shorter than Continental equivalents, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

Incentivising excellence

- There were varying opinions on how concentrated public PGR funding should be, an increasing issue as total public funding declines. In lab-based subjects, there are arguments for critical mass, which the Research Councils are incentivising through Doctoral Training Centres.
- The Report recommends that HEFCE supervision funding should be based on quality rather than volume.

Student Finance

- 30% of PGRs and over 60% PGTs receive no public or employer funding. Many contributors to the Report raised the issue of lack of finance and fear of debt acting as barriers to PG study, but as yet there is no hard evidence to prove this.
- The Browne Review is likely to lead to major changes in the whole landscape of HE funding. What is almost certain is that the overall contribution of Government will reduce over time. An open question is whether that proportional balance might shift from UG to PG.