UKCGE PG Student Experience Working Group

Pilot Study of PGT Programme Directors – June 2015

Dr Tina Barnes, University of Warwick, Prof Sharon Huttly, Lancaster University
and Dr Gale Macleod, University of Edinburgh
Rationale for the Study

The pilot study reported here formed part of a portfolio of work conducted by a sub-group of UKCGE’s PG Student Experience Working Group on the key issues and challenges of PGT study in UK HEIs. The PGT population is a diverse one, but there are some common issues evident around the provision of support (both pre-arrival and during their studies) and the overall level of engagement between PGTs and their institutions. The overall picture to emerge from the initial work of the sub-group is presented below, Figure 1.

---

**Figure 1 – Initial Analysis of the Challenges and Issues of PGT Study in UK HEIs**

In order to understand more about the kinds of support available to PGT students and whose responsibility it is to provide it, a pilot survey of PGT Programme Directors was conducted at three institutions represented on the Working Group (Edinburgh, Lancaster and Warwick). The management and operation of PG taught courses varies greatly across institutions, and accordingly the title *PGT Programme Director* is not universal. It was also recognised that responsibility for PG taught courses within individual departments may not be a dedicated role; instead forming one part of the overall portfolio of a senior academic or administrator. The survey therefore allowed for a wide range of equivalent roles and arrangements.

The survey was conducted online between 1st and 17th June 2015. The questions addressed the nature of engagement with and support for PGT students prior to arrival and at induction, and during the course of their studies, attempting to differentiate between academic support (e.g., study skills, writing assignments and English language) and non-academic support (e.g., financial, accommodation, visas and overall pastoral care), and the source of that support (e.g., at programme level or at university level). Respondents were also asked about PGT student representation within the
university (e.g., union representation and committee membership), the sense of community among PGTs and the involvement of alumni. In addition, in order to assess the priorities of PGT Programme Directors with respect to the distribution of resources and what they felt was important (and within their responsibility) in providing support to PGTs, respondents were asked an open question regarding how they would use additional resources, if such were to become available. The findings from the pilot survey are summarised below.

**The Overall Profile of Responses**

There were 79 responses to the survey, of which 52 were from Edinburgh, 11 from Lancaster, 13 from Warwick and three undeclared. Response rates to individual questions was generally very high – the lowest being 62 of a possible 79 responses, but with many questions achieving 100% or close to that.

75% described their programme as campus-based, with just 1% referring to overseas courses, 14% were online courses and 10% described as blended courses. Similarly, most of the sample were full-time courses (67%), with 22% part-time, and 11% mixed. Most courses had a mixed intake of overseas and home/EU (71%), with 14% of mainly overseas courses and 13% mainly home/EU.

The motivations for taking the course seem to be multiple across many courses, with respondents generally selecting more than one of the four options and therefore giving a broad spread of results. The most popular motivations were “attracts students hoping to move on to PGR” at 66% and “attracts students wanting to enhance their career prospects outside academia” 74%, but with 40% of the responses referring to attracting mid-career professionals, and 37% wanting a conversion programme. On the whole, the programmes represented have an intake of less than 50 students at any one time (82%).

**What PGT Directors would do with Additional Resources?**

This question was purely hypothetical since the reality is more often a question of how to maximise the value of limited or scarce resources, but was designed to understand the priorities of Programme Directors without the moderating effects of constrained finances, which tend to place emphasis on the essentials for successful student progression rather than the wider enhancement of the programme and enrichment of the student experience.

This data revealed that programme directors take the student experience seriously in considering what they would do with additional resources. Recruiting more students was the most frequent response (which may relate to the small programme sizes in many cases), but other frequent responses referred to spending additional resource on serving existing students better (through a variety of measures), providing more extra-curricula activities and better online facilities, and enhancing courses and course materials.

Fewer responses referred to enhancing skills training (both academic and non-academic, plus career enhancement), and additional technology/equipment resources and support. Responses to later survey questions suggest that quite a lot of resource is already expended on academic and non-academic support at programme level; thus this data may be an indication that most respondents feel that these resources are at least adequate. Just two stated that their programme was already sufficiently resourced. Table 1 below summarises the data.
Table 1 – PGT Programme Directors’ Priorities in the Deployment of (hypothetical) Additional Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where additional resources would be used</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment inc. advertising &amp; promotions, enhancing the application process &amp; scholarships/bursaries/fee-reductions</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricula activities (e.g., field trips, field work, conferences, travel, exchange programmes, company visits)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better serve existing students &amp; enhancing student experience (inc. more feedback, more one-to-one support &amp; interaction, spreading the project supervision load &amp; more tutorials) &amp; more small group learning</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing online resources to supplement courses &amp; better support Distance Learners</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More course specialisation (inc. specialist external speakers), diversify course options &amp; expand no. of courses</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidation/enhancement/updating/tailoring of course design/delivery &amp; course materials, better integration of course materials, more master classes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic skills training and dissertation support</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career dev/planning/training, &amp; work-based/transferable skills training, enhancing employability, providing internships</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, non-specific - more research time, review central university systems, additional training &amp; skills development, more resources, enhance student experience, more flexibility (part-time &amp; full-time options), more community building</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit more staff (teaching &amp; admin)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction &amp; additional (Summer Schools &amp; peer) support</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve technology &amp; IT support, more/better equipment &amp; consumables</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have sufficient resources</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-sessional and Initial Induction Support

Respondents indicated that contact with students prior to starting their courses was mostly dealing with general enquiries (95%), passing on information and preparatory material (90%) and dealing with matriculation and enrolment enquiries. Just 40% indicated arranging pre-sessional support. Some indicated giving additional study advice and use of Facebook groups to build links with students. Interestingly, whilst respondents indicated support at university and programme level for pre-sessional and induction, and academic support, university level support had a slightly higher response frequency (94% and 89% respectively) than programme level (77% and 73% respectively) across both
questions. The responses indicate that both levels are highly engaged in pre-sessional support, and the free-text comments suggest awareness of and/or co-ordination with libraries and Graduate Schools (or their equivalents) in providing it. Provision seems to be structured and organised, incorporating workshops and courses on study skills and essay/assignment writing, visits, introductory meetings and revision tutorials. Just one response indicated that there was no programme level induction support available.

**On-programme Support**

Again, respondents indicated support at both university and programme level, but for on-programme support, the emphasis shifts slightly to greater programme level support; 85% relative to 78% for university level support. The types and modes of academic support available indicated in the free text responses were:

- Briefings by tutors on specific assignments/modules throughout the programme
- Online research training
- Feedback on assignments
- Specific dissertation support
- Support classes on specific topics
- Advice available from mentors or personal tutors
- Formative essays/assignments

This suggests that most of the support is built into the programme of study, rather than additional to it.

In contrast, in-sessional English provision is overwhelmingly supported at university (85%) rather than programme level (9%), with 11% having no in-sessional English support at all. The free text responses indicate some discretionary support, and one respondent stated that low take-up was the reason for withdrawing such support.

Academic advice and support is provided through a range of staff, including the programme director/manager (often acting also as personal tutor), a team of staff, lecturers and module/course tutors, personal tutors, supervisors and course administrators.

**Employability**

This is supported equally at university and programme level according to respondents, with each receiving a 67% response, with 14% stating that such support is not provided. The free text responses highlighted the fact that some courses are part-time and therefore students are generally already in employment, providing an explanation for the lack of such provision in some cases. The type of support received included:

- Career talks/ events
- CV writing support
- Visits/talks by potential employers
- Personal tutor/programme director support
- Transferable skills courses
- Industrial involvement in the course itself
- Professional development courses that assess CPD plans

Some support is a combined effort between programmes and university-level service such as Careers and Skills departments.
Community Building and Sense of Belonging

68% of respondents indicated that they do provide social events for their students as a means of encouraging a sense of belonging, with 25% stating that they did not. The highest number of respondents believed that it was important that students feel they belong to their programme, rather than the university. High levels of responses were also indicated for a sense of belonging to a student community and the department, school or subject area.

A range of ways in which community building is facilitated was indicated:

- Good levels of interaction between students and staff
- Staff availability and willingness to engage with students
- Use of online facilities to support interaction, including online profiles, messaging boards and online discussion forums
- Good communications channels
- Early engagement with students
- Small cohorts or classes
- The Personal tutor system
- Group working in classes
- A social media community
- Collaborative social space provision

As can be expected, some of the challenges identified were the opposite of the facilitators:

- IT challenges
- Lack of staff time (too busy)
- Lack of contact
- Large cohorts/class sizes

But with other specific challenges identified:

- Lack of funds
- Distance – geographical and time zone related for Distance Learning students
- Language and cultural issues
- PT courses make contact difficult
- Students not wanting or needing a community, or prioritising study to achieve results over other activities
- Heavy workload and the short duration of PGT courses
- Lack of contact with PGRs
- Imposter syndrome
- Forming mono-lingual cliques
Student Representation and Alumni

Respondents indicated that students are mostly represented by their programmes and departments, and also through official student representatives, but with some representation also on university-level committees.

57% of respondents indicated that they kept alumni records, stating that they used such contacts to:

- Keep in touch and send updates and new course information
- Collect graduate destinations data
- Encourage future collaboration
- Promote conferences and other events
- Professional networking
- Enlist alumni in offering advice to new/current/potential students
- Hire new staff
- Find jobs for recent graduates
- Provide visiting speakers
- Collect evidence of employability of graduates

It is noted that seven of the 34 responses in total to this question indicated that alumni had a role in supporting/advising current and potential PGTs.

Conclusions

The pilot survey findings suggest a significant effort, at programme and university level to support students at all stages of PGT study, beginning prior to arrival and in some cases extending beyond their graduation in attempting to assess employability, for example. Whilst responsibility for the provision of support is shared, it is clear that the survey respondents believed it was important students feel they belong to their programme, rather than the university. This suggests that PGT programmes need to consider carefully how they maximise the value from often limited resources; to make use, where available, of university-level support and invest in efficient systems and processes that would free up staff time for activities that enrich student learning and their overall experience of PG study. However, it should also be recognised that the diversity of the PGT population is such that there is no single, universal approach – the welfare of part-time students may not rely nearly so heavily on a sense of belonging and community as a full-time, overseas student, but a part-time student may require just as much academic support with, for example, writing an assignment as their full-time, overseas counterparts albeit for different reasons (i.e., coming back into education later in life as opposed to being unfamiliar with UK learning and education culture).

This pilot study was clearly limited in its size and scope, with only three HEIs participating and only small numbers of PGT Programme Directors participating. As such, the findings are not representative of PGT education and support across the wider sector. The work will however, inform a wider survey of Programme Directors, attempting to enhance the overall picture across disciplines and the different constituencies of the PGT population.

Infographic (on next page)
Profile of Responses

79
Responses to the survey of which
52 were from Edinburgh, 11 from
Lancaster, 13 from Warwick and 3
undecided.

Student Motivations

PGT programme directors noted the most
popular motivations for their students are:

- 66% move on to PGR
- 74% career outside academia
- 40% mid-career professionals
- 37% conversion programme

82%
of programmes
represented had an
intake of less than 50
students at any one
time.

Hypothetical question: What PGT Directors would do with Additional Resources?

Most Popular
Recruiting more students
Extra-curricula activities
Better serve existing students to enhance student experience
Additional technology/equipment resources and support

Least Popular
Skills training
We have sufficient resources

Pre-sessional and Initial Induction Support

PGT Programme Director contact with students prior to starting their courses was concerned with:
General Enquiries (95%)
Matriculation/ information (90%)
Enrolment enquiries (90%)
Pre-sessional support (40%)

On Programme Support

3 key findings:

1. On programme support is delivered at programme level (85%) rather than university level (78%).

   The types and modes of academic support available indicated were:
   - Tutor Briefings on modules
   - Online research training
   - Feedback on assignments
   - Specific dissertation support
   - Support classes on specific topics
   - Advice available from mentors/tutors

2. Most on programme support is built into the programme of study, rather than additional to it.
UKCGE Student Experience WG: Pilot study of PGT Programme Directors  

**English Provision**

In-sessional English provision is overwhelmingly supported at university level rather than programme level:

- University level support: 85%
- Programme level support: 9%
- No English Support: 11%

**Employability**

Employability activities (below) are supported equally at university (careers and skills departments) and programme level (67%).

- Visits/talks by potential employers
- CV writing support
- Career talks/events
- Transferable skills courses

**Community Building and Sense of Belonging**

68% of respondents indicated that they do provide social events for their students as a means of encouraging a sense of belonging.

PGT programme directors believed it was important that students feel they belong to their programme, rather than the university.

10 ways PGT Programme Director's have built 'community':

1. Consistent staff/student interaction
2. Staff availability and willingness to engage
3. Use of online facilities e.g. forums
4. Good communications channels
5. Early engagement with students
6. Small cohorts or classes
7. The Personal tutor system
8. Group working in classes
9. A social media community
10. Collaborative social space provision

**Student Representation and Alumni**

Students are mostly represented by their programmes and departments, and also through official student representatives.

57% of PGT Directors kept Alumni records and used such contacts to:

- Keep in touch and send updates
- Collect graduate destinations data
- Encourage future collaboration
- Promote conferences and other events
- Professional networking
- Enlist alumni in offering advice
- Hire new staff
- Find jobs for recent graduates
- Provide visiting speakers
- Evidence of employability of graduates

7 out of 34 PGT programme directors indicated that alumni had a role in supporting/advising current and potential PGTs.