COVID-19 and the impact on postgraduate expectations

Dr Mark Bennett, FindAUniversity
Directories of postgraduate projects and programmes, established 2001 / 2004

Work with all UK universities

Big focus on IAG for prospective Masters and PhD students
Our COVID survey:

- Measuring the impact of coronavirus on prospective PG students
- Running in two phases: March-April and May-June
- Here focussing on data for prospective UK PGT

Three questions for this session:

1) Will there be a ‘swing to PG’ for 2020/21?
   • Reduction in graduate prospects = PGT becomes more attractive (as per 2008)
   • ...but does this actually make employability *more* important for next year’s Masters students?

2) How do students feel about a Masters next year?
   • Attitudes and expectations around online / blended learning
   • ...concerns about the same

3) What do we need to do to help and support this cohort?
   • IAG at speed!
   • Articulating skills and employability during provision
Will there be a ‘swing to PG’?

Traffic to FindAMasters in May:

- **Overall** traffic up 22%
- Visits from **18-24 year olds** up 33%
- Views for **advice content** up 44%

...definite evidence of a surge in interest, which looks like a swing to PG study amongst younger graduates
Will there be a ‘swing to PG’?

...any swing to PG may also be undertaken with a view to employability
What about students who are *already* considering PG in 2020/21?

...interest in PG seems relatively resilient: the majority aren’t planning to ‘defer’ a Masters
Conclusions?

We are seeing robust and increased interest in PG study for 2020/21.

But we can already see that this interest will be at least partially shaped by expectations of present and future employability:

- Expectations of reduced current employability
- Expectations of increased future employability as a result of postgraduate study
How do students feel about a Masters next year?

FindAMasters overall traffic trends for pages related to ‘distance learning’ (search categories, courses, advice content):

- FindAMasters on-site searches for **Online/Distance learning up 76%** in May

...a prospective cohort who are actively considering and exploring different modes of delivery
Feelings about online study

Recalling that 52% of UK students are reconsidering their Masters study plans
Feelings about online study

Of these, only a third are now actively considering an online Masters

...awareness and exploration of alternative delivery at PGT doesn’t mean that students favour these options
…broad preference for a traditional on-campus experience, even if that means a delay
Perceptions of online

...clear concern around employer perceptions if PGT moves online

...also a concern around value for money (needs articulating)
Conclusions?

Rising interest in online learning / alternative delivery is easy to evidence but, on its own, that doesn’t tell us much.

It’s trivially true that students will seek to inform themselves about alternative delivery options in the present circumstances.

We also need to recognise prospective students’ concerns around this provision:

- Lack of clarity (and consensus) over delivery modes
- Perception of inferior value for money
- Perception of inferior employability
What do we need to do to help and support this cohort?

IAG at speed:

- Explaining eligibility and application requirements / steps
- PGL about to launch: this system does not make immediate sense to students
- Broader funding and affordability questions

Explaining the offer:

- Be clear about what provision is available and what it means
- Make the case for value for money (it’s not just another year at university)
- Articulate employability to students and prepare them to articulate it to employers
Our next steps:

- Ongoing coronavirus impact research
- Second year of full PGR ‘Future PhD Student Survey’

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/doctoral-loans-have-not-radically-changed-phd-recruitment/

- Full PGT survey: pathways, expectations (including employability), roadblocks

mbennett@findauniversity.com
@postsgradually