

CRAC

The Career Development Organisation



Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study

Report to HEFCE by CRAC and iCeGS

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HEFCE is a non-departmental public body, which funds cost-effective teaching and research in England, for the benefit of students, the economy and broader society. For further information see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>

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The International Centre for Guidance Studies is a research centre at the University of Derby with expertise in careers and career development. The Centre conducts research, provides consultancy to the careers sectors, offers a range of training and delivers a number of accredited learning programmes up to and including doctoral level. For further information see <http://www.derby.ac.uk/icegs/>

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1 Executive summary

1.1 Aims

The Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) and International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby have conducted research on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and other funding bodies into the information needs of those considering postgraduate taught (PGT) study. This builds upon recent research into potential PGT student information needs (i-graduate, 2013) by examining more specifically the needs of those who consider returning to PGT study after some years 'away' from higher education (HE).

It had been considered that this group might have different or distinct information needs, and could find it harder to access the information they need, not having the benefit of being located within the HE setting. Research was designed and undertaken to investigate what was known about how this group makes decisions about PGT study, examining existing knowledge and through new research with this particular group. HEFCE also sought recommendations and identification of good practice by HE institutions (HEIs) in provision of information about PGT study.

The research informed development of a toolkit of advice with which HEFCE seeks to support those considering PGT study in the UK.

1.2 Literature review

A literature review was carried out to investigate what was already known about how people make decisions about postgraduate study, and how adults make decisions about education and training more widely. Over 120 items were studied and key findings synthesised.

This revealed the complexity of PG students and PG study and their decision-making were known but clear models were yet to emerge. On the other hand there was useful insight into motivations and the information adults find useful in decisions and what influences them.

While not all PGT study is career-related, this was expected to be a very important motivator for the majority, but there was evidence that little hard information about career outcomes from PGT study was available.

The literature suggested that there should be scepticism about the idea that simply increasing the amount of information about PGT study would lead to more rational decisions. It also highlighted the fact that PGT study decisions are adult career decisions and potentially unlike many undergraduate decisions which are made by young adults in transition.

The decisions of many prospective PGT students to return to HE are highly constrained, as they need to fit studying into existing commitments of job, life and family; decisions are likely to have a strong pragmatic element. These are very much the critical 'hygiene' factors

proposed by Herzberg (1966), thought to be key enablers for adult learning, and considering such constraints for PGT students in this way could help understand PGT decision-making.

1.3 Primary research

An online survey was designed and implemented to investigate the motivations, information needs and decision-making of those considering a return to HE for PGT study. These 'prospective returners' were defined as those who had been away from the HE sector for at least 3 years. Responses were also gathered from other relevant groups, including current and recent PGT students who had 'returned' to HE, for comparison. Over 1800 responses were obtained, across the types of respondent of interest, providing a dataset for analysis.

- Prospective returners are a diverse group but the key difference from others considering PGT study is their greater and more diverse age. The vast majority of prospective returners are in employment (mostly full-time); although some are already high earners, the majority are not earning at more than entry-level graduate salaries.
- Almost all prospective returners are motivated by both intrinsic factors (personal interest) and extrinsic factors (chiefly career-related), other than a small group of older prospective students who are entirely intrinsically motivated.
- Career-related motivations for prospective returners are more likely to be around progression or career change, while many 'continuers' (those who study PGT immediately or soon after prior degree) seek better prospects at entry to employment. This has implications for the type of employment outcomes data presented.
- Many prospective returners face very constrained choices and only consider one or two institutions in which they could practically study; only 5% make more than 3 applications.
- The enabling factors of funding and practicability of study need to be considered at the same time as more aspirational issues such as course content to interest them or evidence for career outcomes to motivate them; funding issues are considered from the very start of exploration. Only when funding and personal circumstances are assured do most progress to more detailed examination of options
- The types of information that prospective returners find important about possible PGT courses are very similar to those of others considering PGT study, with only minor variations. There is no significant element of additional information 'missing' which confirms previous research that prospective PGT students believe most of the information they need does exist somewhere (i-graduate, 2013).
- Some of the information needs of prospective returners vary strongly with the type of prospective returner, especially their nationality. Those of UK nationality are much less concerned about aspects of student life, personal safety/security and accommodation (and to some extent even HEI reputation), whereas these are very important to potential international applicants.
- Under half of those who sought different information types reported them easy to find, with a few exceptions; prospective returners found it relatively harder to find information about some key factors for them, including course or departmental reputation,

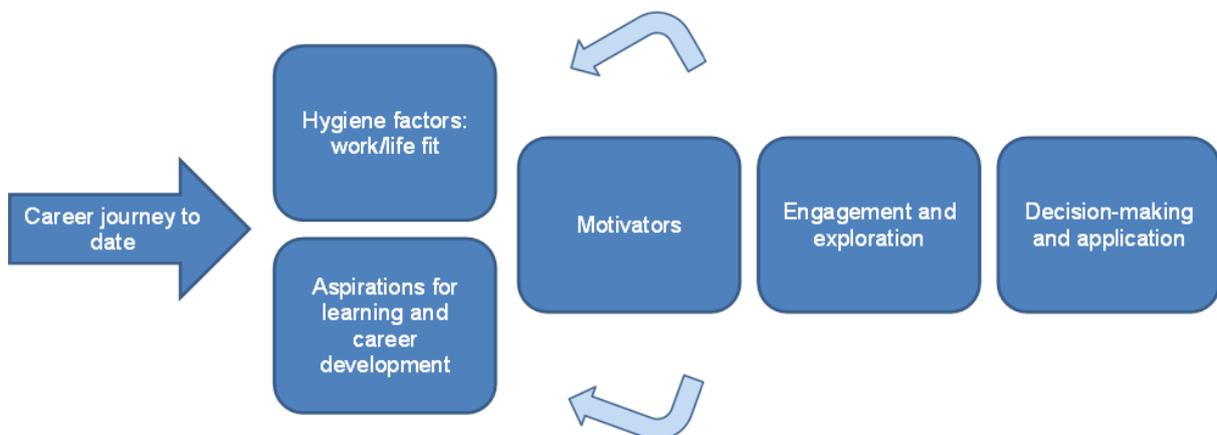
employment outcomes and course workloads, and safety/security for international students. There was some evidence to suggest that prospective returners find the information they seek somewhat harder to obtain than those already in the HE system or close to it.

- Prospective returners are heavily reliant on information provided by individual HE institutions. Few use existing portal or aggregation sites, however these are useful to the few that know about them.
- The type of informant that all prospective students wanted to talk to directly is course academic faculty. Where they are able to have these conversations they are very important to the decision-making process. However, many found it hard to make the contact they needed, particularly those outside the HE system.
- Fewer seek contact with current students or recent graduates but these informants could potentially provide much of the qualitative information they struggle to find from institutions directly.
- Recommendations for improvements to information provision included more consistency on HEI websites and the ability to access widely different information types at the same time, reflecting the deeply constrained choice-making of many prospective returners.

1.4 A potential model for PGT decision-making

Based on the literature review and the survey responses, a model for the decision-making process of prospective PGT students was proposed (Figure 1). It is hoped that this will prove useful to HEIs in considering how to improve their marketing and information provision.

Figure 1 Proposed model for postgraduate decision-making



1.5 HE case studies

A selection of case studies was generated to highlight current good practice in providing web information for those considering PGT study and enabling communications with them. These also highlighted some of the challenges and structural issues for HEIs.

1.6 Recommendations and key questions

Information needs and provision

For HE institutions

- Institutions should aim to provide consistent, accurate and up-to-date course-specific content, and make it accessible or searchable by a range of means. *Course exploration is the heart of the information journey, once reassurance is available that study is possible and could be funded. In addition to A-Z lists of course titles, access to course information via course title clustering or broader subject group, by career sector or study mode are all useful entry routes.*
- Information about finance and funding needs to be accessible at all stages of the decision-making journey, generically and in relation to the course being considered. *Fees and extra course costs are only part of this and potentially less important than the question of whether funding might be possible. Searchable funding databases – including by course subject – are recommended where feasible.*
- Institutions should develop information about programmes that provides a greater level of detail about the programme workload and how it is distributed across the year. *This was revealed as one of the areas of information that prospective returners found hardest to obtain, but is critical to reassure them that study is feasible for them.*
- Institutions should develop a wider range of information (both quantitative and qualitative) about the career outcomes for graduates of their specific PGT programmes. *Since many returners to HE seek career progression or change, not entry to a first job, employment destination statistics may not give them the evidence they seek. Qualitative stories from graduates from the specific course sharing their experiences and career outcomes will also be effective. This could be linked to facilitation of contact with graduates to share experiences.*
- Institutions should review the way that they provide information in the light of the model of PGT decision-making proposed in this study. *The decision-making journey for many prospective applicants is not linear, so well-designed websites will enable users to migrate quickly between information reassuring them about hygiene factors they need to satisfy and the course-specific content that motivates and inspires them. This has implications for webpage design and layout.*
- Institutions should consider segmenting their marketing and provision of information further to recognise and reflect the diversity of the PGT market better. *This might be segmentation based on UK vs. international students, ‘continuers’ vs. ‘returners’ (although this is perhaps a continuum), by different career-driven motives (progression or change), or broadly by subject or career sector.*
- How could institutions make more use of the wide range of information and resources that exists online to support postgraduate decision-making? *Prospective students indicate that many of these are useful, but most prospective students are unaware of these resources.*

For the sector

- Should the sector collaborate to develop a central website for postgraduate courses? *In considering this question it is important to be mindful of (1) the fact that respondents are seeking programme-specific information and (2) that there are already a number of commercial sites occupying this space. Any new site would therefore need to find a distinctive place in the market that meets student needs (and would be unlikely simply to mirror Unistats for first degree students).*
- The sector should recommend that HEIs promote the 'Postgraduate Choices' toolkit as a basis for assistance for prospective students.
- Should there be any attempt by the sector to agree minimum types and levels of information that will be available about each postgraduate programme?
- Should the sector commission work to explore effective ways to present information about the career outcomes of postgraduate programmes? *At present institutions are comfortable with presenting quantitative information and able to marshal individual case studies but there is very little practice in between these two extremes.*

For policymakers

- Is the current approach to the collection and distribution of postgraduate information adequate to underpin growth in the PGT market?

Human contact and career informants

For HE institutions

- Institutions should develop careful strategies to facilitate the direct contact with academic faculty sought by prospective applicants, but underpin this with an enquiry-handling system to ensure timeliness of response and also to enable capture of key information for their CRM systems. *Substantial investment may be required for automated systems to do this but there may be more creative and pragmatic approaches.*
- Institutions should actively develop rich and social media resources to inform prospective students and to create dialogue between potential, current and future students. *Increasingly, people regard relevant personal narratives as important and potentially as reliable as corporate information; this could augment evidence for outcomes as well as sharing experiences to reassure returners that PGT study is for 'people like me'.*
- Institutions should consider using their current students in engagement and ambassadorial roles with enquirers, applicants and offer-holders. *Ongoing engagement will support prospective students' progress towards application and ultimately decision prior to enrolment; such effort by current students could be used as part of employability learning.*

- Can HE institutions develop systems that provide a greater level of access to career informants with direct experience of the programmes that applicants are interested in? *The case studies suggested that enabling such direct contact to be made is important but will work best if managed or tracked in a structured way to ensure consistency.*

For the sector

- Can stakeholders and participants in the sector develop an approach to the sharing of new and innovative practice in this area? *Providing prospective students with direct access to career informants will be a new area for most institutions and there would be value in dialogue as institutions develop approaches to this issue.*

For policymakers

- Should there be any imperative on institutions to provide access to student perspectives on PGT programmes?

Professional career support

For HE institutions

- Institutions should make use of good third party resources such as the Postgraduate Choices toolkit, promoting it to prospective students embarking on their information-seeking journey.
- Should HE institutions routinely provide career support to their graduates? *At present some but not all institutions provide this service to their alumni for a period after graduation, but not all graduates are aware of this opportunity.*
- Should HE institutions open up their careers services to prospective postgraduate students? *There may be substantial implications for both resourcing and for issues of impartiality if this approach is actively adopted.*

For the sector

- Should there be a stronger national agreement about the entitlement of graduates to access career support from the institutions where they undertook their first degree? *At present this entitlement is highly variable across institutions and not well understood by many graduates.*

For policymakers

- Should the National Careers Service be up-skilled to manage enquiries about postgraduate study? *At present the National Careers Service has a remit to cover all adults in England. However, in practice the focus of the service is likely to limit its*

expertise in relation to PGT.

Processes and policy issues

For HE institutions

- Admissions processes should be clearly explained including the timescales expected for communications and decisions.
- Institutions should consider opportunities to continue to engage with the prospective student after application. *This is partly to raise the chances of the student selecting the HEI and enrolling, but also reflecting that for many prospective returners the final decision to study a PGT programme may be very late indeed, i.e. up until enrolment.*

For the sector

- Could there be scope to share experiences and best practice as institutions grapple with the challenge of meeting students' information needs at the same time as operating in a business-like manner? *The issue of progressive centralisation of institutional processes, while detailed knowledge remained at a faculty level, was for example a consistent challenge across all the HEIs studied.*

For policymakers

- The lack of a centralised application process may be framing the way in which the PGT market is working and could reinforce the tendency for PGT applicants only to look to a very limited number of institutions. Is there a policy aspiration to develop the PGT arena into a more genuine market, and to reinforce the possibility of rational decision-making within it, in which case a centralised system or other market support mechanism might need to be considered?
- This report has highlighted the 'hygiene' factors that enable serious consideration of PGT study for many students, particularly those from the UK that return to HE after some years in the labour market. These are clearly strongly linked to issues of socio-economic position or advantage. Should there be further consideration of how widening participation strategies should be adopted at the postgraduate level?

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

The 2011 Government higher education (HE) White Paper “*Students at the Heart of the System*” sought to develop the UK HE system to become more responsive to students, as potential consumers of and beneficiaries from HE. The paper argued that prospective students should be supported to make informed decisions about choosing which HE course to take and where to study. The policy rationale for this was that informed decision-making underpins the effective functioning of the market and ultimately drives up quality. The main mechanism that it imagined would support informed decision-making is the provision of greater amounts of information about higher education in formats that make it easy to compare and utilise as part of a consumer decision.

HEFCE publishes data to support the choices of prospective undergraduate students on its Unistats website, including Key Information Set (KIS) data which is increasingly also acquired and used by other HE information providers. The KIS comprises a range of standardised and comparable information about undergraduate HE courses which has been selected as potentially useful to those making decisions about undergraduate courses and study (Davies *et al.*, 2010). Key elements of the KIS include information about student satisfaction with various aspects of their higher education experience and employment destinations (HEFCE, 2012). In parallel, the UK has a unified admissions system (UCAS) for undergraduate HE study.

In comparison, there is less publicly available information about postgraduate taught (PGT) courses in UK HE institutions. The Prospects website collects and presents PGT course and provider information systematically, via quality guidelines with which data compilers must adhere to ensure that the information is objective and accurate, but across a more limited range of information types than the KIS for undergraduate study. Several other websites offer PG course information on a commercial basis. There is no equivalent of UCAS for application to all UK PGT courses. This was recognised in the HE White Paper which gave priority to a desire to understand better and meet the information needs of prospective PGT students, to help inform choices.

Recent years have seen rapid expansion in the number of students enrolled on taught postgraduate programmes in UK HE institutions (HEIs), with growth of around 32% in the last decade (UUK, 2012). PGT students now comprise almost a fifth of all HE students in the UK. Taught postgraduate provision also forms a critical portion of UK education exports, as over half of PGT students are international (70% of full-time PGT students).

The range of PGT programmes is extremely diverse, with a wide variety of Masters degrees, diplomas and other PG study opportunities, which vary in both their intended outcome and operational mode of study, from full-time or part-time models through to distance learning and hybrid programmes. Growth in transnational education (TNE) programmes adds further complexity to the range of opportunities for prospective international students. The students who participate in PGT study in the UK are also extremely diverse, with different aspirations, motivations and learning needs, as well as very differing personal circumstances.

It is clear that PGT provision is a highly important part of the HE system in the UK and the HE market, so it is necessary to understand why prospective students consider studying at this level in the UK, how they make decisions about what and where to study, and their information needs in coming to these decisions. It will also be critical to understand how this varies for different types of prospective students, including both home and international students.

HE providers such as universities would also be able to use such enhanced understanding to improve their marketing, information provision, recruitment and selection efforts, as well as the student experience itself.

HEFCE has been undertaking a programme of work to understand the information needs of prospective PGT students better, with a view to supporting HE institutions to improve their provision of information and meet students' needs more effectively. The project reported here is a part of that programme of work, undertaken by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC), together with the International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby and supported by consultant Jane Penrose. HEFCE commissioned the work on behalf of the four funding bodies including the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DEL). It was overseen by the Postgraduate Information Steering Group (PGISG) which in turn reports to the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG). HEPISG is a UK-wide group, owned by the four HE funding councils, which oversees the development of policy regarding information about higher education in the UK.

2.2 The information needs of PGT students

As long ago as 1996, Martin Harris identified information needs as an issue in his review of postgraduate education, which led to the establishment of a national postgraduate database in the form of the Prospects Directory (and subsequent website run by Graduate Prospects), and also noted the increasing diversity within postgraduate HE provision (HEFCE, 1996). More recently, in his 2010 review of postgraduate education, Adrian Smith highlighted the need for accurate, transparent and easily accessible IAG¹ for those considering PG study, and recommended consideration of a single, comprehensive source of information, that would include student satisfaction rates and other information similar to that being made available at undergraduate level (Smith, 2010).

In response to the 2011 White Paper, HEFCE, on behalf of the UK's funding bodies, commissioned a study to investigate the information needs of taught postgraduate students and how these could be met (i-graduate, 2013). Findings from this work included:

- Current and potential PGT students believe most of the information they need to help them choose a PGT course is already available somewhere, but the sources are scattered and sometimes out-of-date.
- Current and potential students believe information derived from a new national survey of PGT students would not specifically meet the information needs of prospective students,

¹ Information, Advice and Guidance

as qualitative information at course-level is viewed as more important in choosing a PGT course than quantitative information.

- There was some interest from potential students in a central web portal that would collate information on PGT courses in one place, together with information about institutions, application processes, course costs and financial support, immigration regulations and processes, and accommodation. Ideally, such a web portal would incorporate feedback from current or past PGT students about the courses they took. The research showed that existing web portals may already be providing more functionality than students appeared to be asking for.
- HE providers could improve the way that information about PGT courses is provided on their websites and provide more opportunities for potential students to speak with people directly connected to the course in which they are interested – either a course director or a current or past student who could share their first-hand experiences.
- The report also noted that while students already within the HE system (such as current undergraduates) were able to access information about PGT courses from HE staff and careers advisers, prospective students who had taken time out and were considering a return to HE found this harder and could be at a disadvantage.

In parallel, NatCen and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) were commissioned to investigate the feasibility of conducting a national survey of PGT students similar to the National Student Survey (NSS) of undergraduates (Natcen, 2013), potentially enlarging on or in addition to the existing Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES, Bennett and Turner, 2012). This concluded that, due to the small cohort sizes of many PGT courses, data would not be publishable at course-level for the majority of PGT programmes. Thus a national survey of PGT students would not deliver data at the specific level that potential PGT students sought.

Instead, HEFCE's Higher Education Public Information Steering Group agreed that it should use some of the recommendations from i-graduate (2013) to steer further research work and the development of materials and recommendations that could help HE institutions to meet the information needs of prospective PGT students. That new R&D work is the subject of this report.

3 Aims and methodology

The aims of the project were to:

- Investigate what is already known about the decision-making process by which prospective PGT students choose courses and study options, and how they explore and interact with existing provision of information;
- Understand better the information needs of prospective PGT students currently outside the HE system (i.e. 'returners', defined with HEFCE at project inception as those who had been away from HE for 3 years or more). This reflected recent findings that different types of prospective applicants transition disproportionately into PGT study (Wakeling, 2013) and not only that they might have somewhat different information needs but that it might be easier for those currently within the HE system to access the information they seek than for those outside it (i-graduate, 2013). Prospective 'returners' had not been differentiated from other prospective students within the latter study.
- Present good practice and develop recommendations for HE providers in order to help them to meet the information needs of prospective PGT students better, both through understanding the information that prospective students are looking for and how best it might be provided;
- Create a 'toolkit' for prospective PGT students, to help them find, understand and use the information available to them to support their decision-making about PGT study in the UK.

The conceptual approach taken to this programme of work could be summarised as a sequence of steps:

1. Start from the position that both PGT provision and also its market of prospective PGT students are very diverse, and that the market may not currently be served in an optimal manner by current information or application processes;
2. Understand more about educational decision-making, especially in the context of considering and applying for PGT courses, and the extent to which this might be 'rational' behaviour;
3. Develop a model of how prospective PGT students come to decisions about PGT study and use information to support that process and their decisions;
4. Segment the range of potential users of PGT information to ensure that there is understanding of how those different groups access, interpret and use information about PGT study;
5. Use the segmentation when developing both materials and recommendations about provision of information, so that they remain appropriate to the diverse needs of the range of potential information users;

6. Map the model of decision-making and information use, and materials, to the main processes undertaken by universities and other HE providers (marketing, communications, recruitment, admissions), so that they are practicable and have the potential to be useful.

3.1 Key research questions

The questions that the research phases of the project sought to answer were a combination of 'why' prospective students consider PGT study and 'how' they go about it, including how well they are served by current information provision and arrangements. For many of these questions, how the answers vary between some key different groups, particularly those 'returning' to HE and, for example, UK or international students, would be investigated where possible:

- What are the key motivations behind prospective students' choice to study a PGT course or qualification?
- What is the journey they take in their decision-making process, and how or why do they 'progress' within that journey?
- How do they decide where to study and which course to take?
- What information do or would they find most useful in this decision-making process?
- What types of information are easy to obtain and what is not easily available or not available at all?
- What information websites do they use and how useful are they?
- At what point do financial matters come into their decision-making process, and where do they find this information?
- Do they prefer to interact with people directly, rather than using online information, and in which case with whom and for what types of information?
- Are there differences in the information needs of different groups of students, such as international students or potential 'returners', and if so do they result in different perceptions of the information available and its usefulness?
- Are there good examples within current practice by HE institutions of particular provision of information, or facilitation of direct human contact, from which lessons can be learned?

3.2 Project methods

To investigate what was already known about the information-seeking and decision-making behaviours of potential PGT students, a literature review was carried out by the International Centre for Guidance Studies, reviewing research articles, reports and policy documents and

other grey literature. This had the objective of investigating the extent of available knowledge concerned with:

- What is known about the information-seeking journey by a user in relation to an education application choice;
- What is known about the influences on prospective students considering higher education and the role of information in this;
- What is known about different approaches to the presentation and communication of information aimed to support education decision-making;
- To what extent this applies to decision-making about PGT study in the UK; and
- How this varies with contextual factors, such as social background and capital of the potential student, their location, whether they are already in HE or not, and so on, and especially in relation to those students applying several years after graduation and from different career trajectories outside HE (i.e. potential 'returners').

Just over 120 individual items of literature were identified and reviewed. A synthesis of the findings is presented in Chapter 4. Contact was made with researchers undertaking a wider literature review for HEFCE on decision-making and information in relation to participation in higher education, in order to avoid duplication of effort.

An online survey was conducted in order to investigate the information needs of prospective returners to HE for PGT study. The focus on this particular group was chosen partly because they might have different needs from those who consider PGT study from a position already within or close to HE, due to their different circumstances, and partly because this group was not well represented in recent research which explored some similar issues (i-graduate, 2013). It was recognised that this was likely to be a relatively difficult group to reach as they had 'left' the HE system and could now be almost anywhere in the labour market.

In order to maximise the chances of obtaining sufficient responses, the survey was designed to record responses from those who were now considering return to HE study after several years away, and also those who had applied from that position and were either undertaking or had recently completed PGT study. Expecting that a wide attraction strategy would be necessary to invite sufficient responses, questions were included to differentiate prospective applicants, current students and recent graduates. Questions were also included to differentiate between those who were 'returning' to PGT and those who 'continued' more directly from prior HE study. Internal logic within the questionnaire was used to provide pathways containing questions appropriate to the key different types of respondent, and to screen others out. Almost all the questions were quantitative, but a few questions invited open-ended responses to certain key topics. The survey was open for responses from mid-September to the end of October 2013.

The survey attraction strategy utilised was entirely by e-mail. Direct e-mail invitations to participate (with a link to the survey) were sent to a variety of lists of contacts which were thought to contain appropriate respondents. In addition, requests were sent into a selection

of networks within HE asking for them to forward the e-mail invitations to any groups of appropriate people to which they had access, including current and recent PGT students.

Over 1900 responses were received, of which 1817 were within the eligible sub-groups sought and were used as the sample for analysis. Due to the attraction strategy, it is not possible to state a response rate or know how accurately the response sample reflects the populations of interest. However, significant numbers of responses were received for several of the key groups, with significant diversity within each sub-group. The proportions of different types of respondents, in relation to PGT study, are shown in Figure 2. These could be grouped into the four key sub-categories of interest shown in Table 1. Since they had been strongly sampled in previous research (i-graduate, 2013), current first degree HE students were not a target for the survey, so the group of ‘prospective continuers’ was those who had left HE but less than 3 years ago. The ‘continuers’ were PGT students or recent PGT graduates who had undertaken PGT study immediately after first degree and up to 3 years later. These could potentially provide useful comparator groups with the key sub-group of interest, the ‘prospective returners’ who had been outside HE for 3 years or more.

Figure 2 Proportions of different groups of respondents within the online survey (N=1817)

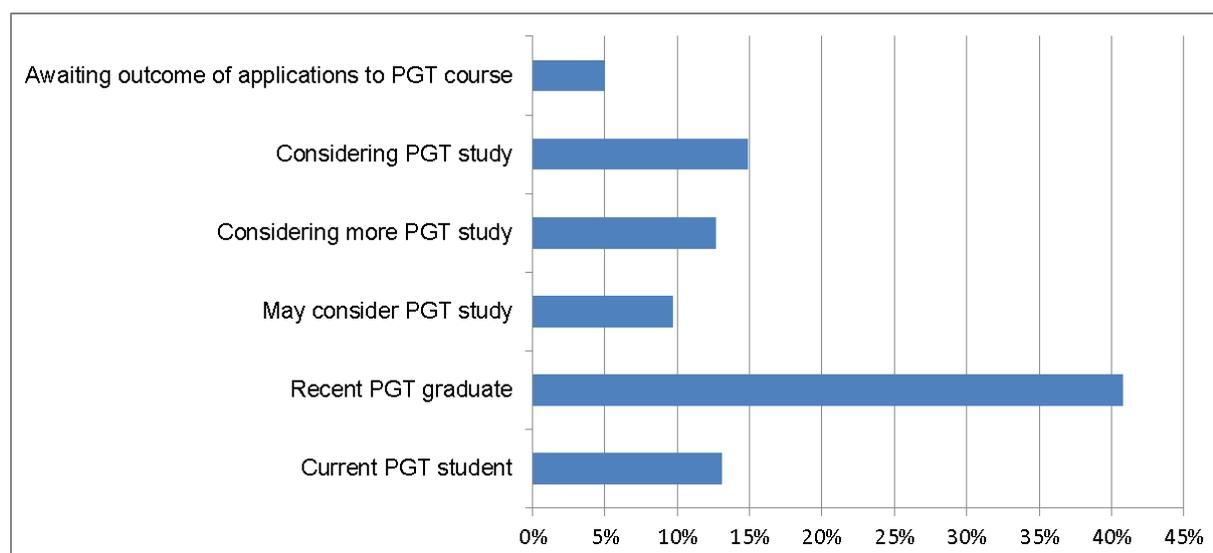


Table 1 Sub-groups of respondents, with numbers of responses

	Now considering PGT study (or again)	Currently or recently studied PGT course
3+ years since first degree graduation, or before starting PGT	<i>'Prospective returners'</i> 488	<i>'Returners'</i> 463
< 3 years since first degree graduation, or before starting PGT	<i>'Prospective continuers'</i> 240	<i>'Continuers'</i> 508

It should also be remembered, when making comparisons between the different sub-groups, that another key difference between prospective PGT students and current or recent PGT students/graduates is that the latter had made a positive decision (to study a PGT course) and had enrolled. They were therefore only a subset of those who had considered PGT.

In order to identify examples of good practice in current provision of online information by UK HE institutions, the websites of 36 institutions were reviewed systematically. The institutions were selected in order to provide a sample which reflected the range of types of institution in the UK, including 'type' (mission group), size, and whether they had a specialist focus on PG study and/or a particular discipline or study mode. HE institutions from all UK nations were included at this stage. Each was reviewed against a check-list of potential items and types of information that were believed to be of interest or required by prospective PGT applicants based on prior research studies (e.g. i-graduate, 2013). The range of information assessed included opportunities for direct (human) contact with HE staff, students or graduates.

This review work identified a short list of 8 institutions whose websites appeared to demonstrate clear and distinctive approaches or contain aspects of particular interest. Seven of these institutions were studied in more detail through the construction of a brief case study, in most cases developed through a face-to-face interview with relevant staff in the institution, but bringing in additional broader information as needed in order to illustrate particular themes. The intention of each case study was to illustrate what we believed to be good or innovative practice, and contextualise it – which demonstrates some of the challenges faced by HEIs in information provision and how they are facing them. These case studies provided the basis for some of the recommendations for HE institutions about provision of information on PGT study.

3.3 Introduction to the Postgraduate Choices toolkit

One of the agreed aims of the project was to produce a 'toolkit' which could help those considering PGT study. The study leading to this project (i-graduate, 2013) reported interest from potential students in more collated provision of information about PGT courses, and more practical information about application processes and deadlines, course costs and possible financial support, immigration issues and processes, accommodation and also opportunities for part-time working. It was recognised in that study that most of this information already existed somewhere, but that it was not necessarily easily found. It was also clear that different groups of prospective applicants had different needs for information. For example, international students had particularly strong requirements in relation to practical issues about immigration, accommodation and in some cases opportunities to work and earn during the course.

To address this, the project developed a toolkit to help guide prospective applicants to PGT. This toolkit helps prospective applicants to define a series of questions that they should consider whilst making a choice about PGT. The toolkit also provides signposts for prospective applicants to information and resources that might support their PGT decision-making. It is hoped that the toolkit will serve as a, prompting applicants' thinking and helping them to identify useful information and contextualise it as well as to think about where other forms of help could be accessed.

4 What we know already: a review of the literature

4.1 Introduction

Postgraduate study is an increasingly key aspect of the HE landscape. However, in comparison to the attention given to the process of making choices about undergraduate courses, the process of seeking information and making choices about postgraduate study is poorly understood. This literature review draws together what is known about postgraduate decision-making and supplements it with relevant findings about broader educational choice-making.

It focuses particularly on how individuals who are no longer students within the HE system make decisions about PG study. Although the literature does not demonstrate this conclusively, it could be hypothesised that students/graduates who determine to carry straight on into PG study approach the process of decision-making in a different way from those who seek to re-enter the HE system after a period in the labour market. The former group will have relatively easy access to valuable career informants in the form of the HE professionals who have taught and supported them through their first degree. They also have access, should they choose to make use of it, to HE careers services and through them advice and guidance professionals who understand HE and PG opportunities. However, for the individual who has left HE and may have entered the labour market, it may be far more difficult to access either useful career informants or professional career guidance. Partly because of these differences, it is important to increase our understanding of how such PG decision-making works.

The review begins by looking at how the process of education decision-making. However, as will be seen, much of that literature is essentially about the process that an 18 year-old undertakes while thinking about undergraduate (UG) study. One of the key arguments that will be made throughout this review is that the decision-making process that a working professional might undertake when thinking about returning to PG study is likely to be considerably different. While potential undergraduates are often assumed to be at the start of their careers and to be highly flexible about the discipline and location of their degree, this cannot be a working assumption when thinking about postgraduates.

Many potential postgraduates are typically less mobile and more enmeshed in networks around their careers and family and friendship groups than most prospective undergraduates. Postgraduate decision-making is therefore considerably more constrained. The very different financial support arrangements that exist for UG and PG study also provide further constraints which intersect with the greater likelihood that potential postgraduates will have higher levels of financial commitment. Furthermore, PG decision-making is more likely to be purposeful (with the purpose generally being career-related), in pursuit of a particular short- or medium-term career or life goal. All of these factors mean that a new theorisation of PGT educational decision-making is needed. Findings from the literature review and the analysis of the survey have been used a basis for such theorisation, with a new model of PGT decision-making outlined in Chapter 6.

4.2 How educational choices are framed and made

There is an extensive literature looking at how educational choices are made, which was reviewed from the perspective of PG study. Much of that existing literature on educational decision-making assumes that most decisions are made by young people whilst they are at school. It is possible, indeed likely, that postgraduates, particularly those who are accessing PG study from the labour market, approach educational decision-making in a very different way from those at school. However, if interpreted critically, such research still provides a useful starting point.

Al-Fattal (2010) drew on Kotler (1999) to describe the process of educational choice-making as comprising five steps:

- 1) needs and motives
- 2) information gathering
- 3) evaluating alternatives
- 4) decision
- 5) post-choice evaluation.

Al-Fattal and Kotler therefore conceptualise educational decision-making as a rational and linear process. This perspective is common and is well summarised in Padlee *et al.*'s (2010) literature review on international students' UG decision-making. That review highlights a variety of rational factors which research has shown potential students take into account such as employment and career prospects, reputation/quality of institution or course, location, facilities, cost of education and ease of application process.

Information plays a central role in rational choice-based models of educational decision-making. Consequently considerable energy has been invested in identifying the types and sources of information that people use in making educational decisions. Most of this literature relates strongly to UG decisions and, as already argued, the information needs of postgraduates may be quite different, although no research exists to clarify how they might be different. For example, Moogan and Baron (2003) found that prospective undergraduates typically spend three months gathering information, but no comparable estimate exists as to the length of information-gathering or choice-making processes when considering PG study.

4.2.1 Types of information

A number of studies have looked at the types of information undergraduates like to consult (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Davies *et al.*, 2010; Diamond *et al.*, 2012; Slack *et al.*, 2012). Moogan *et al.* (1999) focussed on the initial information-gathering phase and identified course content, locations of and reputations of universities, and specific grade requirements as being most relevant to students' initial information requirements. More recently Davies *et al.* (2010) identified 51 potential types of information that prospective students may wish to consult, from which they identified 16 types of information considered 'very useful'. They concluded that satisfaction with teaching/institution, actual employment outcomes and costs were the most important types of information required by students. This and other research can be summarised into a list of information requirements for students. In Table 2 we have chosen to sub-divide this list into input factors ("what information do I need

to know in order to access the course?”), throughput factors (“what will I experience whilst I am there?”) and output factors (“what will I get out of going there?”).

Table 2 Sub-division of types of information proposed

Input	Throughput	Output
Entry requirements (Davies <i>et al.</i> , 2002)	Standard of teaching (Davies <i>et al.</i> , 2010; Diamond <i>et al.</i> 2012)	Actual employment outcomes/ graduate employment statistics (Briggs and Wilson 2007; Davies <i>et al.</i> , 2010; Diamond <i>et al.</i> , 2012)
Cost (Davies <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	Satisfaction with course (Diamond <i>et al.</i> 2012)	
Location (Moogan <i>et al.</i> , 1999)	Satisfaction with institution/course (Davies <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	Recognition of course by professional bodies (Diamond <i>et al.</i> , 2012)
	Satisfaction with support and guidance (Diamond <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	Skills outcomes (Briggs and Wilson 2007)
	Information’ on course content (Moogan <i>et al.</i> , 1999; Briggs and Wilson 2007)	

In addition, there is also research (e.g. Moogan *et al.*, 1999) that highlights the importance of university reputation to decision-making. It is conceivably possible to locate this factor in each of the three columns above (e.g. is it for someone like me?; does it provide a high quality education?; will it leave me with greater educational and cultural capital than another institution?).

Recent policy changes have particularly focused attention on the issue of cost. The decision to transfer the full cost of higher education to the student (albeit backed with a state-supported loan) has raised concerns about how far prospective students utilise information about programme cost in their decisions about HE. Research by Usher *et al.* (2010) with applicants, parents, staff and students found that across all socio-economic groups the fee level was not considered an important factor in institution or subject choice; however, non-traditional applicants did have a preference for institutions near their home and initially had reservations about choosing the most expensive institutions or courses. So the overall cost of spending three or more years in HE (e.g. fees + accommodation + living costs) may be more important than the fees themselves.

Students in Usher *et al.*’s study were almost unanimous in seeing HE as an investment in career and earnings potential. This mirrors the findings of Pollard *et al.* (2010) who found that variable fees and bursaries had little or no impact on level, mode and subject of study or numbers of students. Similarly Mangan *et al.* (2010) found that students’ information decision-making journey was almost completely ignorant of grants, loans and bursaries.

However, recent research has suggested that financial factors and information about fees are more important to PG students (i-graduate, 2013). This was further highlighted by Moore *et al.* (2013) who argued from a widening participation perspective that an increase in UG debt could deter students from continuing to PG study. They also highlighted earlier

research by Taylor and Littleton (2008) and NUS and HSBC (2010) that cost is a particular barrier to PG study.

4.2.2 Sources of information

In addition to the types of information that people utilise, there has also been considerable discussion of the sources of information. Most research in this area notes that prospective students typically utilise a range of different sources of information to support their decisions (Johnston, 2010).

A number of studies have found that students rely heavily on the marketing materials produced by universities themselves (Davies *et al.*, 2010) either in the form of prospectuses (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Usher *et al.*, 2010) or university websites (Schimmel *et al.*, 2010). Conversely Armstrong and Lumsden (2000) looked at promotional leaflets and found that students were highly sceptical of what they learnt about higher education from these sources. How effective these institutionally produced sources are in facilitating “rational” decision-making is questionable, particularly if, as Moogan and Baron found, students are particularly attracted to colourful and visually interesting information rather than the material that offers the most, or the most reliable, information. The importance of such material for PG decision-making is also challenged by Schimmel *et al.* who found some evidence that older students and those seeking PG study valued institutional websites less highly than younger students and those seeking UG programmes.

Johnston (2010) ranked these kinds of sources as far less important than direct contact with institutions or recommendations from personal and social networks. Direct engagement with the prospective institution either in the form of university visits (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Usher *et al.*, 2010) or conversations with university staff (Johnston, 2010) or students (Davies *et al.*, 2010) has also been highlighted by some research.

Other research suggests that prospective undergraduates rely heavily on UCAS as a source of information about higher education (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Davies *et al.*, 2010; Hooley *et al.*, 2013). There is less research to suggest that other forms of national aggregation of HE information such as league tables or comparison websites are critical in HE decision-making. Such ‘league table’ type approaches to information aggregation have been extensively criticised (Bowden, 2000; Coates, 2007), although there is considerable evidence to suggest that HE providers view such league tables as business-critical and consequently adjust their behaviour to improve their rankings in them (Hazelkorn, 2007; Salmi and Saroyan, 2007). However, despite the sector’s belief in the importance of league tables, research (Cremonini *et al.*, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2010) has found that this type information is not as important as personalised information from sources trusted by UG students. In contrast however, i-graduate (2013) found that 40% of prospective PG students valued league tables as an important source of information, which could highlight an area in which UG and PG decision-making are different.

Undergraduate decision-making is also influenced by prospective students’ access to a range of professional support within the school or college system. In particular research highlights the roles that both teachers and career professionals play in supporting educational decision-making (Davies *et al.*, 2010).

Other research has highlighted the role that a range of social and personal networks play in providing information to support HE choices. In particular research has shown the important role that family plays (Johnston, 2010). The involvement of family and particularly of parents in HE decision-making is one area that is likely to be different between UG and PG study. Whereas often parents play a central role in the educational and career decision-making of transitioning young adults (Young, 1994; Loberman and Tziner, 2011; Dietrich and Salmela-Aro, 2013), it is likely that their influence declines once into adulthood. Of course, family still continues to provide an important context and it may be that parents, spouses and even children do exert considerable influence on PG decision-making. However, this has yet to be fully explored in the literature.

The role of peers, particularly those with experience of HE, has also been noted (Johnston, 2010). In recent years this has led to a considerable interest by institutions in how to use online social tools (which potentially enhance and extend the influence of social networks) to market to prospective learners (Mattson and Barnes, 2009) although there is little evidence to suggest that prospective students themselves are consciously seeking out HE information via social media (Dyke *et al.*, 2012).

Slack *et al.* (2012) drew on Davies *et al.* (2010) to explore the way in which information is combined with the source of that information. They concluded that students prefer information from what they define as 'hot' data which is largely based on their social networks (friends and family and other students they know) and mistrust and tend to ignore 'cold' data such as guides, prospectuses and websites, as they believe it is open to manipulation. They also identify a third category of information – 'warm' data – that is people they have met through casual acquaintanceship such as knowledge from students at open days. This could suggest there is a need to personalise information to students.

4.2.3 Utilising information

As this discussion on the types and sources of information demonstrates, there is considerable disagreement about the most important sources and types of information that undergraduates value and utilise. This could be related to the complexity of the information and the decision-making process. There are some common findings in the research, for example the importance of information about student satisfaction and graduate salaries, and the influences exerted by parents and direct contact with institutions. However there is no simple answer to the question as to how educational decisions are made and nor is it clear that the lessons learnt with respect to undergraduates are clearly applicable to the case of PG decision-making. Some people utilise a wide range of types and sources of information whilst others use very few. It is also important to recognise that more information does not necessarily mean better decisions or demarcate that a rational decision-making process is underway. It is clearly possible that prospective students are utilising questionable sources of information and that they are highly dependent on assumptions and prejudices as part of their decision-making (Diamond *et al.*, 2012; Gloster *et al.*, 2013; Mowjee, 2013).

A key question is therefore how the types and sources of information that prospective students access are actually used of as part of a decision-making process. The rational model assumes that in making decisions people collect as much information as possible and

weigh the evidence to decide which of all available alternatives will provide them with the maximum benefit. However, Usher *et al.* (2010) argue that there are actually a range of ways in which people might make decisions. They identify a typology in which decision-makers can be described as cruisers (decide on HE choice early and don't do much information-gathering), perusers (the largest group – who decide on HE choice early and peruse a large amount of information as they continue on their journey towards HE), snoozers (the smallest group, who make decisions late and don't consult information) and choosers (who take a great deal of time to make the decision and consult a large amount of information).

More recently the idea that educational decision-making is a rational process of weighing up a variety of factors has been criticised. Diamond *et al.* (2012) reviewed university decision-making from a behavioural economics perspective. They found that the influences on students' participation were complex and multifaceted and that they involved both conscious and unconscious decision-making. In addition they found that undergraduates struggled to organise all the information available to them in a coherent manner and had a tendency to choose institutions based ultimately on what felt right. They also argued that students will often weight information based on the familiarity of the source of information rather than its veracity.

The rational and behavioural approaches therefore represent two ways of framing educational choice-making. However, there is also a strong strand of research which frames the process of educational choice-making in terms of both the social and economic status of the individual and the social and community context that they inhabit. This work highlights the influence that family and peers (Brooks, 2002; Dryler, 1998; Stuart, 2006), social networks (Greenbank, 2011; Johnston, 2010), teachers (Wasmer *et al.*, 1997; Foskett *et al.* 2004) and careers advisers (Foskett *et al.*, 2004; Foskett, 2011) all have on the choices that people make. This influence is not simply about the provision of information but a longer-term and more subtle process of shaping identity and aspirations. Whilst the importance of the social context is likely to continue to exert influence at the PG level it might be expected to see different kinds of influences at play at this point. For example, for prospective postgraduates, occupational cultures and professional networks may well exert powerful influences on PG decision-making as well as providing individuals with considerable resources to draw on in making that decision.

Given the diversity of sources of information and the wide range of potential influencers, a key research question is how these social and cultural influences impact on the decision-making process. One way that this process has been seen by researchers who have focused on social and economic structures, such as Ryrie (1981), Roberts (1984) and Gambetta (1996), is to question how relevant the idea of "choice" actually is. They argue that decision-making is largely outside the individual's control and is extensively shaped by institutional, economic or cultural factors. Others, such as Hodkinson and Hodkinson (1996), have built on this to provide a greater role for agency without denying the importance of social and economic structures. They identified that the HE choice process involves a complex process of filtering of information which is influenced and complicated by various social factors such as personal priorities, family background, culture and subjective judgement. Similar combinations of structure and agency can also be found in Payne (2003) and Vrontis *et al.* (2007).

In practice this means that the way that different kinds of students make decisions may well vary. For example, Galotti (1995) found that more affluent students used more complex 'decision maps' than less affluent students. Similarly, Moogan and Baron (2003) found that students from independent schools consulted more sources of information than children from state schools. With respect to PG decision-making, the intersection between demographics and the decision-making approach is likely to be important, not least given the older age of PGT students than undergraduates; in the 2011/12 cohorts for example, 58% of PGT students were aged over 25 whereas this was 33% of first degree students (ECU, 2013).

4.3 Understanding participation and choice-making in the PG market

The range of postgraduate study options on offer for prospective students is highly complex, with diverse programmes, levels of study, modes of delivery (including various forms of distance, online and blended learning) and institutions participating in this market. PG students therefore face complex decisions about courses and institutions, while institutions compete for their money and attention with a range of marketing tools and types of information.

If PG decision-making is seen as the sorting of a vast number of courses utilising a near infinite range of relevant information, it becomes difficult to see how choices ever get made. How can an individual possibly be expected to sort through thousands of courses and weigh up a MBA at Harvard against a Masters in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths? What information would even make this sort of comparison possible? The complexity of individuals and courses makes direct comparison difficult. Of course, most individuals are not in the process of weighing up all of the possible PG study options against all the others. In fact it seems likely that most potential PG students are likely to approach the PG markets with objectives, preconceptions and conditions within which their choices are made. Their interests, career aspirations, financial resources and capacity to travel or relocate all go some way towards constraining the framework within which choices are made. However, there has only been limited empirical work which has demonstrated how these different structural and personal factors actually operate in the context of PG choice-making.

If these assumptions are correct, this goes some way towards reframing the kind of thinking that has been done with respect to information provision at UG level. Whereas potential undergraduates may be weighing up a large number of options, potential postgraduates are likely to be weighing up fewer, due to the ways in which their choices have already been constrained. This is likely to mean that they want fairly specific information about the courses that they are considering (i-graduate, 2013). However, in practice such information might be challenging for institutions to produce in ways that are easily comparable (Natcen, 2013).

4.3.1 Whether to study at postgraduate level

A key element of understanding the process of decision-making around PG study is to understand why individuals seek to pursue PG study at all. Stuart *et al.* (2008) have mapped out a range of factors that influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in postgraduate study. Their model included:

- whether they were UK or overseas students – with overseas students being much more likely to go into PG study;
- their undergraduate subject – with applied/vocational subjects being less likely to be studied at PG level;
- their ethnicity – with ethnic minority students more likely to study at PG level;
- their family experience of higher education – with those who are a first generation HE student less likely to go onto further study;
- whether they were required to self-finance their PG study – with those who had to self-finance less likely to engage;
- whether they were worried about debt;
- whether they had dependent children – with this having a negative impact on their likelihood of engaging with PG study.

They also identified factors that did not appear to influence choice, which included age, occupational class and actual debt levels. Stuart *et al.*'s research therefore suggests that a mix of demographic, occupational and financial factors influence an individual's decisions about PG study. These findings are supported by much of the other research in the area.

The importance of both occupational/career factors and financial factors is unsurprising given that for those who pursue it, PG study represents a considerable investment of time and money. Given that the majority of PG students are self-funding (HEFCE, 2013) this is an investment that an individual has to make and therefore is one which is likely to be impacted upon by both their access to financial capital and their belief that this investment will pay off in career terms. Bennett and Turner's (2012) discussion of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) survey suggests that career development is an important motivator for postgraduate study. That survey reported motivations to study a PGT course to be:

- to improve employment prospects (59.5% of respondents);
- to progress in current career path (58.7%);
- personal interest (50.2%);
- to progress to a higher level qualification (37.7%);
- to change career (20.6%);
- as a requirement for a specific profession (19.6%);
- to meet requirements of current job (10%);
- other (3.7%).

The strong career-centric flavour to this list is worthy of note and possibly provides a framework within which much PG choice-making takes place. It is also a factor which distinguishes it from UG decision-making, where although career is important, it is less sharply defined as the main motivator.

Bennett and Turner's (2012) work suggests that a key area of concern for potential postgraduates is how PG study will fit with, and enhance, their working lives. Other work by i-graduate (2013), Stuart *et al.* (2008) and Donaldson and McNicholas (2004) also finds that career plays a central motivating factor for students to seek out PG programmes. Of course, this does not mean that all postgraduates are only pursuing career objectives, a fact highlighted by Morgan (2013). All of the aforementioned research also found that personal and subject interest was also a key motivator for PG study, although in practice this motivation is often, but not always, closely tied to professional interests. Pires (2009) draws on Carré (1998, 2001) to trace the interplay of intrinsic motives (the desire for new knowledge, experiences and relationships) and extrinsic motives (the desire to increase earning power or status) amongst Portuguese postgraduates. In practice it is often difficult to separate individuals' personal interests from their professional ones and both are clearly at play in motivating people towards PG study. However, the research suggests that it is relatively rare for an individual to undertake PG level study in an area completely distinct from their career, other than for people who are retired and who often study areas of interest with no relation to their former career.

Decisions about career development are more than simply rational calculations about how to maximise lifetime earnings. The decision to invest in career development can be about increasing quality of life or status, as well as earnings, and can relate to career change rather than more linear progression (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless there is clearly an element of cost-benefit analysis that goes into PG decisions with individuals considering whether the investment is worth the return. Given this it is unsurprising that i-graduate (2013) found that finance was an important factor in students' decision to study, the main financial issues being:

- course fees and fee structure, including comparability of fees to other HE providers in the UK and overseas;
- the financial support and funding available;
- living and accommodation costs;
- additional course costs including textbooks and course materials;
- payment plans and terms including whether instalment payments are available.

The evidence suggests that for many decisions to return to PG study are strongly bound up with an individual's desire for career development. Given this, key considerations are whether it is possible to combine the course with the individual's life and career, whether the course is affordable and offers the desired return on investment, and whether it will be both interesting and beneficial to their career development.

4.3.2 Choosing courses and providers

For those individuals who have determined that they wish to return to PG study, the next stage is to decide which course and where to study it. In reality these two stages may not happen in a neatly sequential fashion and individuals may investigate both whether to study and where and what to study at the same time. Nonetheless, it is clear that choices about whether to study conceptually precede those about what and where, although there is little

research that demonstrates how this choice-making process happens in reality. What researchers have explored is what information and influences inform PG decision-making. So, for example, Kallio (1995) identifies six categories of factors that students use when selecting a PG course. These include the characteristics of the academic environment of the institution and its programmes, the availability of financial aid, residency status, spousal considerations, the social environment of campus life, and work-related concerns.

Relatively little is known about how postgraduates choose the subjects that they study, beyond a recognition that many seek to pursue subject areas that support their career development. Many students continue along a PG subject trajectory that is essentially defined by their choice of first degree (Bialoszewski and Gotlib, 2013). This issue about subject choice is clearly an area where further research is required.

The question of how postgraduates choose the institution at which to study is a key one. Hesketh and Knight (1999) found that students did not behave rationally and that they often ignored directories of graduate study opportunities. Instead they found that many prospective postgraduates began their process of making choices with strong preconceptions about which course and institution they were likely to choose.

Both Bennett and Turner (2012) and Donaldson and McNicholas (2004) also looked at the process of choosing an institution. When asked, postgraduates typically cite one or more of three main reasons for their institutional choice:

- 1) The reputation of the institution. Postgraduates say that they like to pursue their course at prestigious or well-regarded institutions.
- 2) The availability of the subject and the institution's reputation within that subject. Graduates usually approach postgraduate study with a particularly subject or subject area in mind. Institutional choice is therefore constrained by the availability of that subject and shaped by the institutions particular reputation within that.
- 3) The location of the institution. As already suggested, postgraduates need to find ways to fit study around existing life and work commitments. Geographical proximity clearly plays a role in supporting this.

Clearly, while these kinds of findings are useful they only tell part of the story. In particular they shed little light on questions about how an individual understands notions of "prestige" or reputation nor on how reputations are discovered and passed on. However, research by i-graduate (2013) suggests that national league tables are one tool which prospective postgraduates do use in making judgements between institutions along with seeking personal experience or recommendation of an institution. Prospective postgraduates claim that they are not swayed by institutional marketing (e.g. prospectuses) and that these sources are not important in them making judgements about institutions (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Davies *et al.*, 2010). i-graduate (2013) found that some postgraduates they spoke to reported that prospectuses were frequently out of date and uninformative. It is also clear that prospective postgraduates rarely seek professional career advice to support their decision making, although Hesketh and Knight found that those that did so rated it highly.

4.3.3 How are decisions actually made?

The previous section has described various pieces of information that prospective postgraduates seek to in order to support their decision-making. However, this in and of itself does not explain PG decision-making. There is a need to develop models that show how different factors are combined with pre-existing personal experience and assumptions to bring about decisions. There are a number of existing models that have sought to do this. These include Donaldson and McNicholas' (2004) model which describes the decision-making process of students and how this relates to the marketing of PG courses. The model contains five stages:

- need recognition;
- information search;
- evaluation of alternatives;
- purchase; and then
- post-purchase evaluation.

During the need recognition phase, students explore their motivations to study, make initial choices of institution and identify information sources, while the second phase involves finding the information and selecting the relative importance of each source. The third phase involves evaluating the alternatives and selecting an institution, which leads to the purchase phase, while the last involves evaluating the choice once already taking the course. Their model identifies a role for a higher education marketing strategy throughout the first three phases and in the post-purchase evaluation phase.

Donaldson and McNicholas' model is useful as a tool for conceptualising the marketing of postgraduate courses. However, it assumes neatly sequential decisions and relies on the kind of rational model set out by Al-Fattal (2010) and Kotler (1999). Donaldson and McNicholas' approach therefore ignores much of what is known about educational decision-making from behavioural or social perspectives. Rillo and Ribes-Giner (2013) built on this kind of rational decision-making approach with a model that recognises the importance of the environment within which choices are made, the role of significant influencers, the individual's demography and financial position. In addition to the kinds of factors that might be highlighted with respect to UG decision-making they also highlight the importance of the employer and of the individual's employment situation. In highlighting the complex and contextualised nature of PG decision-making Rillo and Ribes-Giner echo Cremonini *et al.*'s (2008) work on UG decision-making which in turns draws on Hanson and Litten (1982) and Vossensteyn (2005).

So, while in general work around PG decision-making is under-developed, there are a number of strands upon which we can draw. Notably, there is some empirical basis in relation to the kinds of information that postgraduates want and what motivates them to study. The work of Rillo and Ribes-Giner (2013) suggests that we will need to build more complex models that recognise the inter-relationship between the rational decision-making process (as much as this can be observed to take place) and the range of psychological, social, cultural and economic factors that act on this. This task of model building will be returned to later in Chapter 6.

4.3.4 International students

Recent growth in postgraduate study in the UK has been driven to a considerable extent by growth in the number of international students coming to the UK, to the extent that they now make up over half of all PGT students in the UK and 70% of full-time PGT students (HEFCE, 2013). It is therefore valuable to explore briefly how some of the decision-making issues play out with respect to international students. There is a limited but growing evidence base about the decision-making process experienced by this group. It is typically viewed as more complex than for home students and is usually described in terms of both push factors (why leave your home country) and pull factors (why choose to study in the UK in particular) (McMahon, 1992; Wilkins *et al.*, 2012).

Wilkins *et al.* (2012) summarise push factors as a lack of capacity and opportunities in students' home countries, lower educational quality and unavailability of particular subjects locally, employers' preferences for overseas education, and political and economic problems in home countries. Pull factors are typically quality of the education and reputation of the country's HE system and/or institution, high institution rankings, improved employment prospects, opportunity to improve English language skills, and opportunity to experience a different culture. Davey (2005) and i-graduate (2013) have found that international students in the UK frequently cite the value of studying and living in the UK as an important motivator. i-graduate also highlighted the following factors as being important to international students during decision-making (in order of importance): reputation of the education system, course fees, cost of living, opportunity for employment and opportunity for further study.

There is also a small body of research looking at the information-seeking journey of UK students considering overseas study. For example the British Council (2013) identified that 54% of UK prospective students (the survey respondents were evenly split between prospective undergraduates and postgraduates) considering studying abroad identified the internet as their primary information resource for overseas study, followed by college lectures (19%), the study abroad office (11%) and friends (8%). The main barrier to overseas study was seen as a lack of language skills.

4.4 Why adults engage in post-compulsory formal learning and professional development

As this review demonstrates, specific research into the motivations and decision-making process of prospective PG learners is limited, particularly in relation to those who are thinking about returning to HE after some years away. However, there is a richer tradition that examines why adults choose to return to formal learning or to engage in professional development activity. It is arguable that this body of literature could have at least as much to contribute to the understanding of adult decisions around PG study as the literature relating to UG choice-making.

Houle (1961) identified three categories of adult learner:

- goal-oriented (pursuing identified objectives);
- learning-oriented (learning for the love of it);
- activity-oriented (learning for reasons unconnected with programme or content).

The model has been regularly reworked and more recent models tend to understand motivation based on extrinsic or intrinsic motivations, with the extrinsic motives concentrating (similar to Houle) on goals such as economic benefit and the intrinsic motives being centred around the love of engaging with learning. However, all explanations reflect that the decision-making process is complex, contains multiple elements and is likely to change over time (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Sabetes (2007) highlighted that there are a large number of factors that impact on whether adults will participate in learning including age, gender, ethnicity, and region of residence, family background characteristics, staying in education after compulsory schooling and their socio-economic circumstances in adulthood. He also pointed out using the example of Jenkins *et al.* (2003) that learning is likely to lead to more learning. The Scottish Executive (2006) drew on Hertzberg (1966) and Maslow (1954) to identify two kinds of factors that need to be in place for adult learning to occur, firstly 'hygienes' (referring to factors that have to be present to allow for a particular behaviour to occur) and secondly 'motivators' (referring to factors that make that behaviour more likely when they are present). In the context of adult learning, it was found that the main 'hygiene' factors that needed to be in place were the availability of childcare, affordability of programmes, time available, accessibility to learning (time and space), positive attitude to learning and confidence in learning. The main 'motivators' for learning were a potential benefit to individual and family, interest, work demands (current or future), positive experience of learning and maintenance of learning identity.

Some research has found that the process of educational decision-making changes as people get older, with young people being heavily influenced by others, whereas older adults are less influenced by others and more likely to make rational decisions (Adshead and Jamieson, 2008). This supports the argument made earlier that PG decision-making is different to UG decision-making and that it is typically more purposeful and less likely to be influenced by things like university marketing materials. Whether this different approach can genuinely be called "more rational" is questionable as the evidence in this area is complex. For example Reed *et al.* (2008), drawing on Mather (2006), argue that adults prefer to choose from less options than their younger counterparts.

4.4.1 Adult career decision-making

The educational decision-making process followed by adults has similarities to the career decision making of adults. For example a recent study by Gloster *et al.* (2013) found that although most adults believe the decision-making process is rational, in fact the "decision-making process is a complex construct and one that individuals do not undertake using 'rational' behaviour." Instead, using a behavioural science perspective, Gloster *et al.* identify two types of mental system. System 1 describes automatic reactions with no sense of voluntary control while system 2 is slower, cognitive and more reflective and rational. A recognition of system 1 thinking therefore highlights some of the limitations of viewing adult career decision-making as a rational process and draws attention to adults' pre-existing assumptions and subconscious decision making processes. Gloster *et al.* also looked at the information and influences that adults utilise, noting that they typically consulted family and

friends for information as well as internet-based information, but rarely accessed professional support from careers services such as the National Careers Service.

The research also identified the different career decision making styles exhibited by adults as:

- Strategic: reflective about self; systematic; seeking out information and consulting others; deliberate weighing up of factors influencing the decision;
- Exploratory: reflective after periods of experience; testing ideas through experience; evaluating how they feel about experiences; can be pro-active in looking for opportunities;
- Opportunistic: reactive; responding to opportunities; often taking opportunities pointed out by others;
- Impulsive: emotional; instinctive; often taking very quick decisions with little or no thought about real options or the consequences of decision;
- Passive: laid back; drifting; reacting to choices presented; strongly influenced by others in their choices.

Similarly, in a five-year longitudinal study including 50 case studies, Bimrose *et al.* (2008) identified four career decision-making styles – evaluative, strategic, aspirational and opportunistic career decision-makers – that are closely linked to the rational decision-making tradition:

- Evaluative career decision-makers are concerned about developing their awareness of their skills, improving their self-confidence and feeling able to identify longer-term career goals;
- Strategic career decision-makers are more focused decision-makers, being able to focus on a goal, appraise information and have well-developed problem-solving skills and are therefore likely to have well-developed employability skills;
- Aspirational careerists adopt a style of career decision-making based on distant career goals and their career decisions are inextricably linked with personal circumstances and priorities;
- Opportunistic careerists tend to be more vague and undecided about their careers as they are willing to exploit available opportunities rather than make conscious choices about work.

4.4.2 Adults and higher education

Adults who engage in higher education for the first time later in life or after a period in the labour market have been well studied. For example Davies *et al.* (2002) and Fuller and Paton (2007) both describe the range of personal, social, political and cultural factors that combine to impact on adults' decisions on whether to seek higher education. Smith (2004) also traces the complexity of adult HE decision-making and cautions against making easy

generalisation on a heterogeneous population. Smith goes on to use the work of Osborne *et al.* (2004) to highlight six categories of mature learners:

- 'delayed traditional students': these have chosen to take time out from their education but re-enter through a traditional route;
- 'late starters' who have undergone a life-transforming event and require a new start;
- 'single parents';
- 'careerists' - people currently in employment;
- 'escapees' who are employed but want a different career pathway; and
- 'personal growers' - those wanting to pursue education for its own sake.

Clearly each of these groups has different kinds of motivations. However, other studies have highlighted the importance of career and personal development to adult learners' engagement with HE (Davies *et al.*, 2002; Pollard *et al.*, 2008).

With respect to their information needs, Davies *et al.* (2002) found that the amount of information available was less important to adult learners than its nature and timing. In particular they found that adult learners wanted different kinds of information that helped them to assess how educational choices would fit in with their broader life and work roles. This is backed up by mature students' preferences for part-time study and timetabling in the evenings and weekends, and the importance of an institution's proximity to an adult learner's home (Pollard *et al.*, 2008), what Hetzberg (1966) would describe as the hygiene factors. Employer commitment to support their study was also perceived as an important encouragement to consider returning to education (Pollard *et al.*, 2008).

4.4.3 Continuing professional development

Given the importance that is attributed to career motives in much research on PG study, it is possible to conceive of PG-level study as, in many cases, a specialised high commitment form of continuing professional development (CPD). Cedefop (2009) suggest that there is a trend for increasing formalisation in CPD and highlight the way that PG degrees have been used to provide formal accreditation of participation in CPD. It is therefore relevant to examine the literature on adult engagement in CPD especially if, as Williams and Friedman (2008) argue, engagement with it is growing due to more clearly specified demands of professional bodies.

There are several theoretical models developed to explain, or even predict, the participation of adults in CPD (Craft, 2000; Kennedy, 2005, Murphy *et al.*, 2006) and which explore individuals' motivations to participate (Murphy, 2006; Arthur *et al.*, 2006; Wood, 2008). For example, both Murphy *et al.* (2006) and Wood (2008) looked at the participation of nurses in CPD and came to similar conclusions. They highlighted both extrinsic (largely career-related) and intrinsic motivators (largely interest-related), but also described a range of practical and professional barriers (hygiene factors) that exist which prevent participation such as caring responsibilities, lack of time, lack of financial support for associated costs, lack of recognition

from employer; concerns about balancing work, learning and life and uncertainty that time and money invested will pay off in career advancement.

Arthur *et al.* (2006) explored the motivations around PG professional development for teachers. Motivations included both personal factors around career development and interest as well as more organisational factors such as needing to qualify to play a particular role within an organisation.

The literature around CPD therefore reinforces certain themes already discussed, notably the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to participate in learning and the importance of being able to fit learning activities into established and existing life patterns. It has also highlighted the importance of an individual's employment context in providing both hygiene factors and motivational issues.

4.5 Conclusions

This review of the existing literature has demonstrated that researchers have noted the complexity of PG decision-making but have yet to build clear models to help in the organisation of this complexity. Consequently while there is much that is known about what motivates individuals considering PG study, about what information they find useful in making decisions and about who influences them, it is not currently possible to fully understand how PG decision-making works.

Despite an awareness of this "known unknown", the literature does suggest that we should be sceptical of arguments suggesting that an increase in the amount of information about PG study will result in more rational decision-making. While undergraduate decisions are typically, but not exclusively, made by young people in transition, postgraduate decisions should primarily be understood as adult career decisions. As such it is important to recognise that PG study decision-making is undertaken by heterogeneous individuals with a wide range of different circumstances. It is also important to recognise that much of this decision-making happens within fairly narrowly circumscribed parameters. Postgraduates may be seeking to advance their career whilst maintaining a comparable standard of living, remaining in their present location and continuing to undertake their personal responsibilities to family. As a result, this kind of decision-making is very different, and more pragmatic, to that undertaken by many undergraduates who are, at least in theory, more able to be more aspirational and pursue maximum lifetime income or total career happiness with minimal constraints on their choices.

While not all PG study is career-related, the literature suggests that this is at least a very important motivator for the majority within the postgraduate cohort. Given this, it is perhaps worth noting how little hard information is available to prospective postgraduates about the absolute and relative career benefits of different PG options.

There is clearly room for further research in this area and for development of comprehensive models of postgraduate decision-making. However, the present review provides a summary and a platform from which to hypothesise a broad model (Chapter 6) following a review of the new empirical data collected during this project.

5 Returners to postgraduate study: decisions and information needs

The limited evidence base around postgraduate decision-making described in Chapter 4 meant that collection of new data in this project offered a major opportunity to increase understanding in this area. A survey approach was taken to allow a wide range of perspectives to be registered. As previously noted, the survey was designed to understand the decision-making and information needs of people who consider a return to HE for PGT study, who might be called ‘prospective returners’, in comparison with prospective applicants who are located within the HE system already or have very recently left it (called ‘prospective continuers’ for brevity). It was agreed with HEFCE that ‘returners’ would be defined as those for whom it was 3 or more years since they had graduated from their last HE degree.

5.1 Who are the ‘prospective returners’?

Based on their responses to the survey, the profile of respondents who were prospective returners is shown in Table 3. The profile of a typical recent PGT cohort is also shown.

Table 3 Background characteristics of respondents who were prospective returners (*N* is the number of respondents to that question; percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding).

Characteristic	Sub-group	% of prospective returners	% of PGT cohort 2011/12*
Gender	Male	47	46
	Female	52	54
	<i>N</i>	365	
Age	Up to 25 years	5	46
	26-30	21	20
	31-35	19	11
	36-40	15	8
	41-45	11	6
	46-50	9	4
	Over 50	21	4
	<i>N</i>	487	
Ethnicity (of UK)	Asian	6	8
	Black	14	7
	Chinese	1	1
	Mixed or Other	3	4
	White	75	78
	<i>N</i>	228	
Nationality	UK	63	54
	Other EU country	8	9
	Non-EU country	28	37
	<i>N</i>	369	

*2011/12 HESA data for England and N Ireland (from HEFCE, 2013)

The two profiles would not be expected to be directly comparable, because the profile of those considering PGT study may be different from that of those who actually do study it, and the profile of prospective returners may be different from that of other prospective PGT applicants (which is not known from existing data). In addition, the modest sample size may limit how representative the sample is of prospective returners; nonetheless, the sample clearly contains responses from a diversity of types of respondent within the target group.

However, in many areas the profile is perhaps surprisingly similar, and this simply reflects that the sample contained a wide range of types of prospective applicant within a diverse population of prospective returners.

The age profile is markedly different, as might be expected. By the chosen definition of 'returner' (a period of 3 years or more since graduation from first degree), it was unsurprising that very few prospective returners were aged 25 or under, whereas this age group accounts for almost half of all PGT students. The age profile is particularly distinct in the upper age ranges, with 20% of prospective returners in their forties and a further 20% in their fifties.

What was also quite striking was that over a third of these respondents already had a higher degree (i.e. at above first degree level, Table 4), although the survey question did not distinguish the type of higher qualification. Only a very small proportion of respondents did not have a higher education degree. The proportion who had a first degree from a UK HE institution was 70%, which was only a little higher than the 63% of respondents who were of UK domicile. The majority of respondents from outside the UK had not studied for their first degree in the UK. This is potentially another difference from those who continue to PGT from a first degree, many of whom remain at the same HE institution, at least for international students.

While the modest sample size may mean that its profile does not represent accurately all those who consider a return to HE for PGT, it gives a good idea of the characteristics of the respondent sample and provides a basis for understanding the diversity of this important group, who are a key focus of this research.

Table 4 Qualification and prior HE study characteristics of respondents who were prospective returners

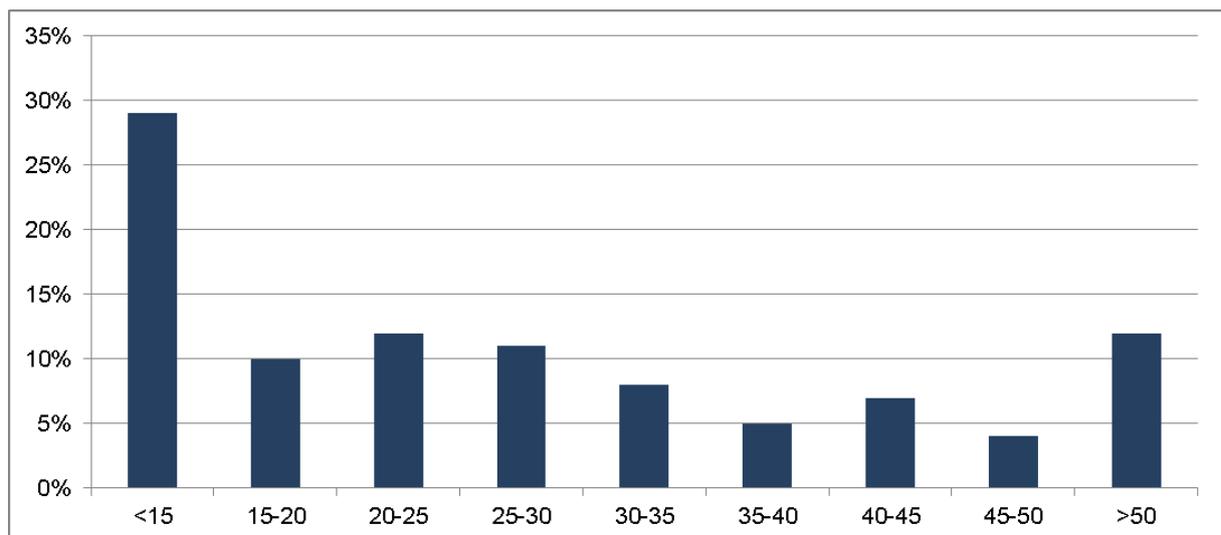
Characteristic	Sub-group	% of prospective returners
Level of highest qualification	Below degree level	1
	First degree (BA etc)	58
	Higher degree (MA etc)	35
	Other	5
	<i>N</i>	<i>487</i>
Location of first degree	UK HEI	70
	Professional qualification	1
	Other EU HEI	4
	Non-EU HEI	22

	Other N	3 326
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In terms of their employment circumstances, when surveyed, the vast majority of respondents considering a return to HE were in employment (85%), split between full-time work (68%) and part-time work (17%), with low percentages unemployed or unavailable for work (5%), in other forms of training (4%) or otherwise occupied (4%).

The more advanced age profile might also be expected to be reflected in a relatively high earning profile. In Figure 3, respondents' earnings are reported in bands as full-time annual salary or equivalent to that for those working part-time. At the high-earning end of the scale, over 12% of prospective returners were earning over £50k annually. On the other hand, half of the prospective returners were earning £25k or less, which is considered to be a typical salary for entry to 'graduate employment', suggesting that most were not earning particularly highly, including many who were approaching or in middle age.

Figure 3 Full-time equivalent annual earnings (in thousands of pounds) of respondents who were considering return to PGT study, N=404



5.2 What are they considering studying?

A very broad breakdown of the subjects that respondents were intending to study at PG level is shown in Table 5, with a recent PGT cohort (shown as percentage of enrolments) for comparison. The profile of subjects is fairly similar, other than that the sample appears to under-represent those studying education (presumably including for PGCE – the Postgraduate Certificate in Education) but relatively to over-represent social sciences, the arts and humanities. However, it does suggest that the sample is reasonably broad and does not completely omit any of the major subject areas studied at PGT level.

Table 5 Intended subject area of study, for those considering PGT study

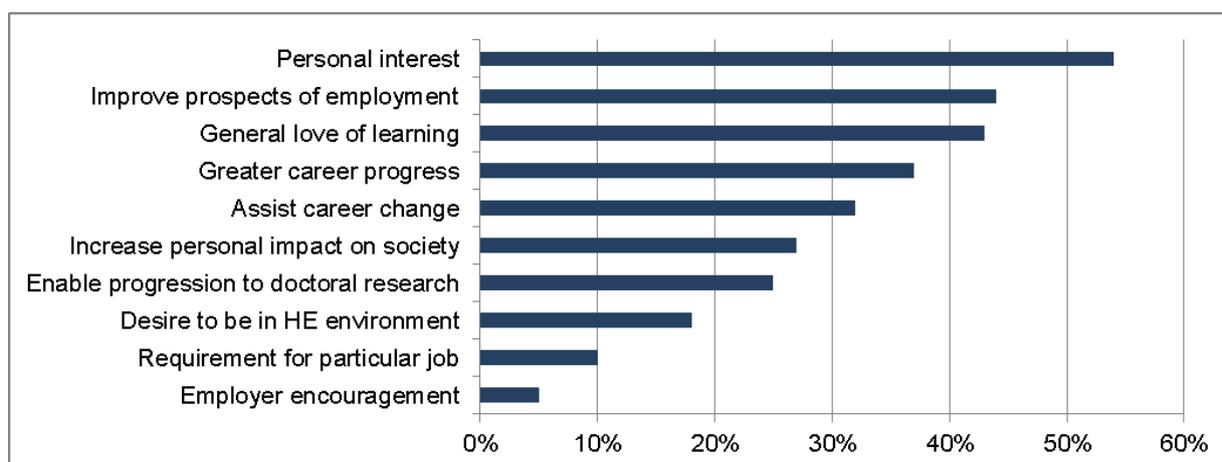
Intended subject of PG study	% of prospective returners	% of PGT cohort 2011/12
Engineering	5	6
Other STEM* subject	26	24
Business/management	21	23
Social sciences	23	16
Arts and humanities	10	6
Creative and design	6	5
Education	10	20
<i>N</i>	305	

*Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

5.3 Why are they considering PGT study?

The most commonly held motivations for considering PGT by those who were prospective returners were personal interest in the subject, a general love of learning, and a series of career-focused reasons (Figure 4). These included both improvement of prospects for employment and also greater progress or a change in career. Very few were motivated by the requirement of a particular job for a PG qualification or the specific encouragement of their employer. Around a quarter were motivated by the thought that PGT study could potentially enable further progression to postgraduate doctoral research.

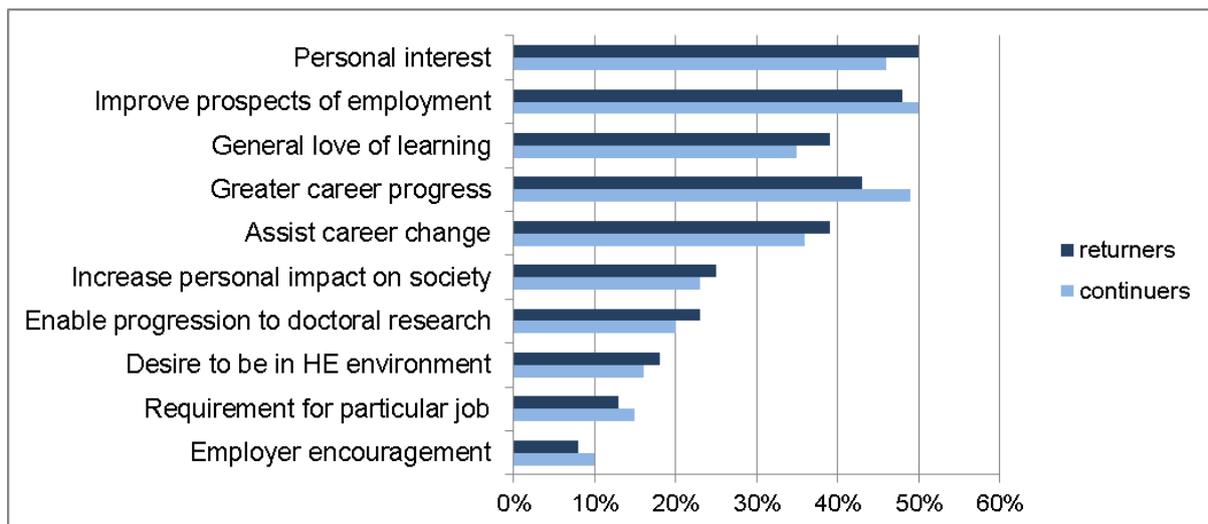
Figure 4 Motivations of respondents considering a return to PGT study (multiple response options permitted, *N*=476)



These results can be compared with the motivations recently reported for all prospective PGT students (i-graduate, 2013), although as we offered more granular and detailed options not all were directly comparable. However, somewhat fewer of the prospective returners cited personal interest (53% compared with 65% of i-graduate's prospective students), or enabling progression to doctoral research (25% compared with 38%), while far more specifically mentioned career change (32% vs. 6%). Employer encouragement was reported by a low proportion in both studies.

The pattern of motivations reported by those in our survey who had actually undertaken (or were currently undertaking) PGT study was very similar to that obtained for the prospective returners. If anything, career-related motivations were slightly more highly reported than by the prospective applicants. Figure 5 shows their motivations, for both those who had returned (after more than 3 years away) and those who had continued more directly to PGT study. Given the modest sample sizes the differences are barely or not significant.

Figure 5 Motivations for considering PGT study, for respondents who were current PGT students or recent PGT graduates (multiple response options permitted, N=948)

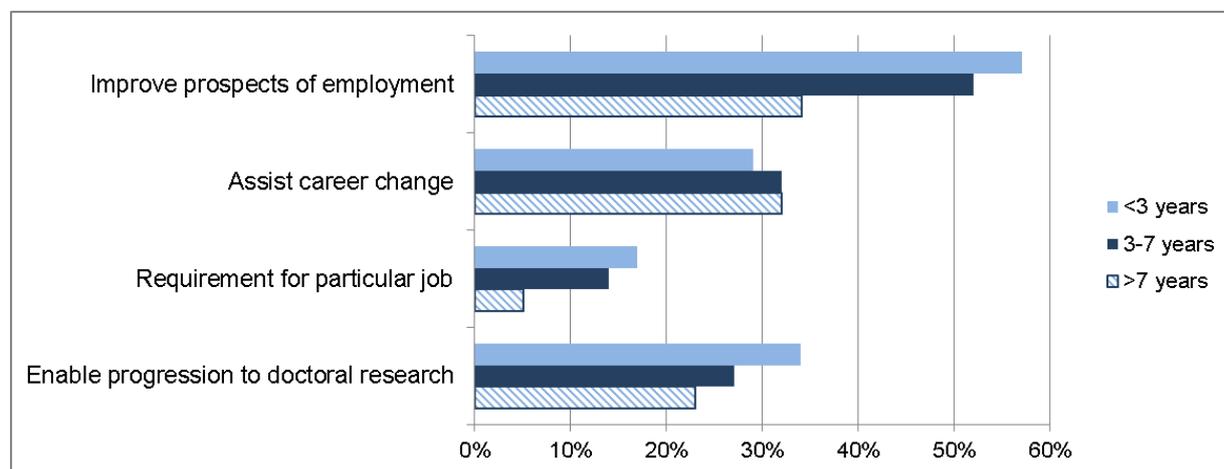


Comparison could also be made with responses to the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Bennett and Turner, 2012) at least where options were directly comparable. More of the prospective returners in our sample cited personal interest (53%) than had the PGT students in PTES (45%). Considerably more had said they were motivated by the possibility of career change (32% vs. 18% in PTES), but somewhat fewer to progress in their current career path (37% vs. 55%).

When respondents' career-related motivations within the survey data were analysed with the length of time since prior HE degree for the prospective returners, there were some apparent differences (Figure 6). Although each of the resulting sub-samples was only of modest size (c.150 responses), the data suggested that relatively fewer of those who had spent longer outside HE were motivated by improved prospects for employment (i.e. gaining a job), the

potential to progress to research or to gain a particular job. On the other hand, more were motivated by thoughts of career change – in fact this was cited by as many of those who had spent more than 7 years outside HE as had cited improved prospects generally.

Figure 6 Motivations of respondents considering return to PGT study, with time since first degree (multiple options permitted, N=713)



To summarise, the new data and comparisons with previous reports show that prospective returners have broadly similar motivations to those reported by those who have studied PGT, but with minor differences. What is most important is that the vast majority reported both intrinsic motivations (such as personal interest) and extrinsic motivations (career-related) for considering PGT study. Those who are further into their career were more likely to cite career change as a motivation. Analysis of sub-groups of respondents with different motivations showed that almost all respondents cited both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations.

One small sub-group did report almost entirely intrinsic motivations, chiefly their personal interest and love of learning, with career-related motivations largely absent. When their responses were analysed more deeply, these turned out to comprise individuals who were older – presumably including some who had established means/wealth such as retirees or were supported by others.

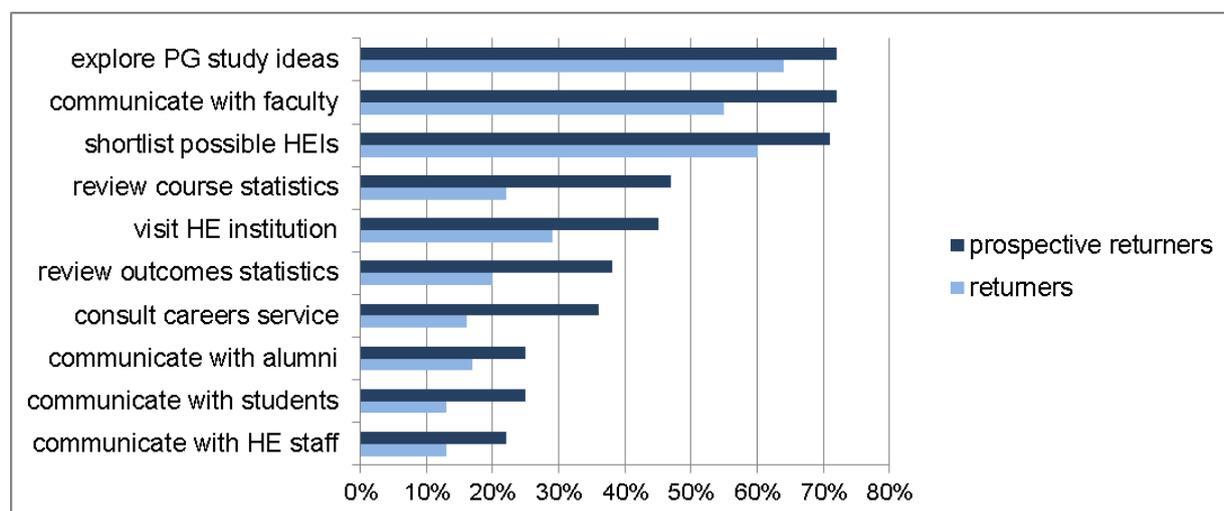
5.4 Their exploration and information journey

In order to ascertain the elements of the ‘journey’ undertaken by those considering PGT study, respondents were asked to confirm which of a number of activities they expected to undertake. Approaching three quarters of prospective returners expected that they would explore different areas for potential study, make a short-list of possible HEIs of most interest to them, and communicate with faculty (Figure 7). Just over 40% expected to visit a potential HE institution and an equivalent proportion to review statistical information about the course and also its outcomes. Only a quarter expected that they would communicate with current students or alumni, while slightly more though would consult their (previous) careers service.

This gives a broad indication of the information-seeking steps that they were expecting to make while considering PGT.

For comparison, Figure 7 also shows the activities that current or recent PGT students (who had ‘returned’ to HE) reported they had undertaken. While the pattern of the ‘journey’ was similar, this would seem to suggest that fewer of those who had done PGT study did actually consult the different types of people than those who had expected to, visited the HEI, or used more detailed sources of information such as outcomes statistics. On the other hand there was little difference in relation to broader exploration activity, presumably largely undertaken on HEI websites. Whether these differences relate to difficulties in access to that information or making contact with the right people will be reviewed in subsequent sections.

Figure 7 Activities expected to be undertaken by respondents who were prospective returners to PGT, and those reported as undertaken by those who had returned (N=856)



A question posed to respondents about when (during their exploration of PG study) they considered financial issues revealed that the majority (over 60%) of prospective returners were thinking about finances before they even looked at any courses, and this continued to be a focus as they developed a shortlist of possible study options. It was only after they had a shortlist that most no longer focused on financial issues. This suggests that fees and funding are a major enabling issue that prospective returners have to consider very early on in their thinking about PGT study.

Around one hundred of the respondents who were prospective returners provided answers to an open-ended question about the point at which they moved from broad exploratory thinking to much more detailed investigation of options on a potential shortlist, and what triggered this change. The most popular responses, by far, related to the key enabling factors that had to be in place for them to consider seriously undertaking PGT study. Almost half of these specifically mentioned funding, i.e. that they had to be in a position where they were confident that funding was feasible:

The single most important factor is affordability.

The cost would be the tipping point for me. If I could financially afford it I would make any other changes to make sure I could do the study, e.g. organise other aspects of my life around the course such as taking holidays to fit in with the study timetable.

If my financial circumstances were to change, to enable progression to the next stage. If my employment prospects were to force me out, i.e. redundancy, I would make applying my next move.

Almost as many respondents mentioned other enabling factors, which would be considered the 'hygiene factors' mentioned in the literature review. In many cases these included very practical considerations around whether the respondent could actually undertake PGT study while still holding down their job and fit it in without negative impact on their family commitments, and so on.

As it needs to fit in with my working life, the location of the university and convenience / times of the lectures are paramount. No point signing up for a course if you can't get to the lectures every week because the travel time is unrealistic.

It would depend on my family situation: namely my wife's employment, and whether we have a child or not.

There are very few unis which offer the course that I'll need to do and offer it as either distance learning or within reasonable distance of home/work to allow for commuting to part time day release.

PG study would be for pleasure only and due to the young age of my children I will not be able to free enough time to continue study until they are older.

I have thought about making this jump 3 times in the last 8 years – my circumstances had changed personally making it a more realistic option.

For many, the tipping point was when the two main enablers of financial viability and practicable study circumstances both fell into place:

In the event that am comfortable with course fees and the learning style, e.g. distance or online learning and satisfactory accreditation and reputation of institution.

Availability of funding and time off from other responsibilities to do the course.

Other topics that were raised as trigger points by much smaller numbers of respondents included specific actions such as direct contact with academic faculty, visiting the HEI or obtaining detailed feedback or evidence that somebody else had made a similar decision and that it had led to a positive career outcome. For a few others again it seemed to be a detailed understanding of the precise course topics that was key to their progression.

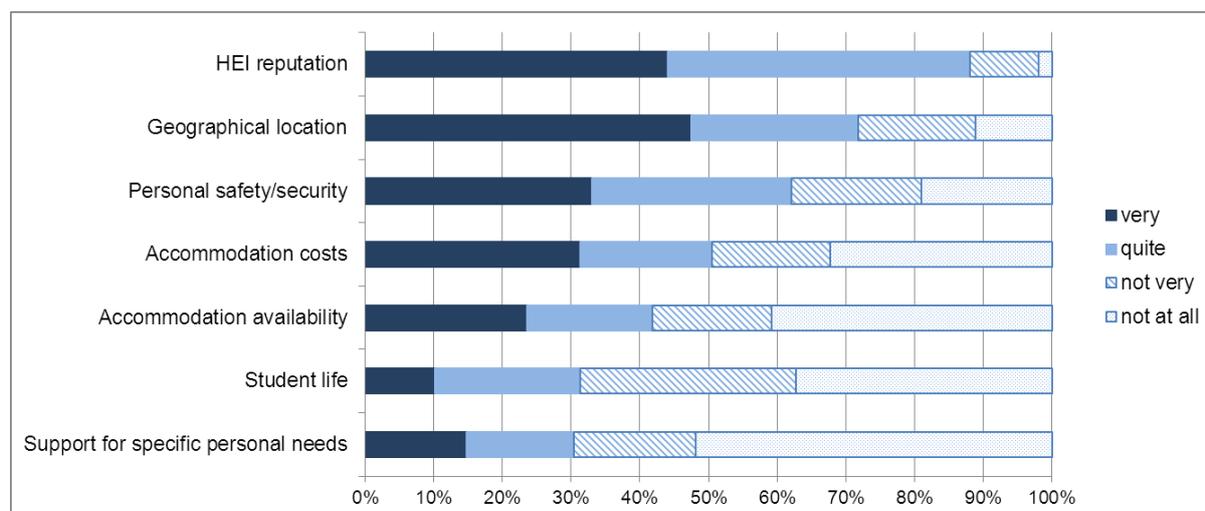
However, the majority of these open-ended responses illustrated the practical issues that have to be dealt with before, or at the same time as, considering more aspirational factors such as the specifics of course content, reputation of institution or evidence of course outcomes.

There was also evidence for how many applications respondents expected to or actually had made for PGT study. The overwhelming majority (95%) of prospective returners expected to make (or had made) 1-3 applications, within which about 40% only a single application. There was some suggestion that those who were not returners were making slightly more applications, which could be evidence that their choices are somewhat less constrained than those of many prospective returners.

5.5 Which information do they find most important?

In relation to the potential HE institution at which they might study, respondents who were prospective returners indicated that the reputation of the institution was uppermost in importance, with almost 90% considering it very or quite important (Figure 8). Almost three quarters considered that its location was that important, and almost two thirds personal safety and security. Considerations such as the availability of accommodation or student and social life were rated as important by half or fewer. However, there were some variations in the extent to which different factors were rated as very or quite important; location was cited as very important by slightly more respondents than reputation, for example.

Figure 8 Perceived importance of different factors by respondents who were prospective returners when choosing a PGT study institution (N=437)

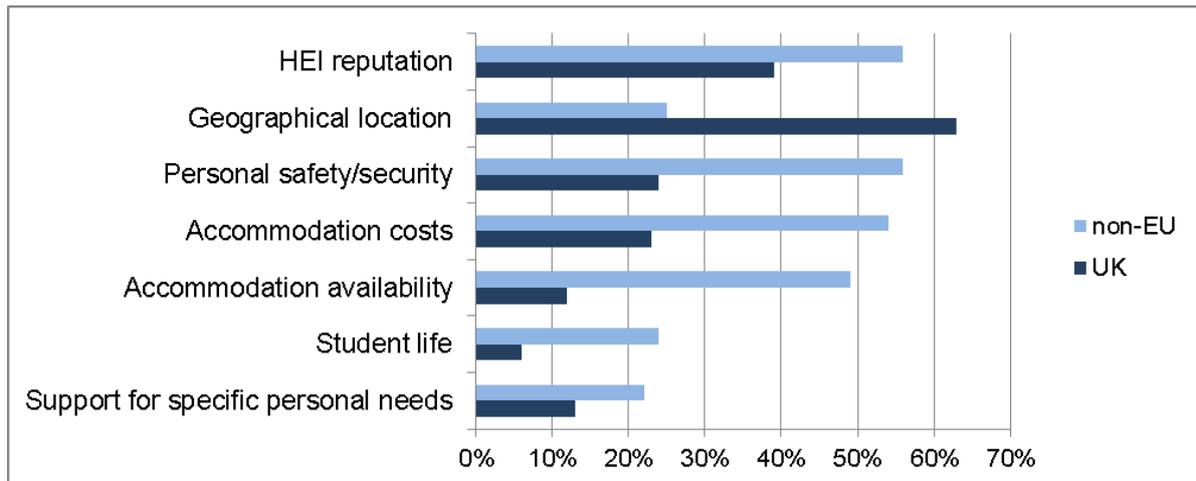


Interestingly, perceptions of safety and security were not rated as more important by females than males, although notably fewer females rated aspects of the student and social life as important than of male respondents.

There were some very strong differences with nationality, as might be expected. Much higher proportions of international respondents rated the HEI's reputation as very important, than of UK respondents, although the proportions rating it either very or quite important were similar (Figure 9). On the other hand, the HEI's location in the UK was as or more important to UK respondents than its reputation, whereas fewer than half of international respondents rated its location important at all. This presumably reflects the critical need for many respondents to be able to study locally.

Issues such as availability of accommodation were also much more important for international respondents. Personal safety and security was rated as very important by over half of international respondents (particularly those from outside the EU), making it the second most important issue after HEI reputation for that group. Figure 8 shows these differences in terms of the proportions of UK and international respondents ranking factors as very important, demonstrating the very different thinking of the two sub-groups in relation to certain issues.

Figure 9 Factors perceived as very important by respondents when choosing a PGT study institution, by nationality (N=518)



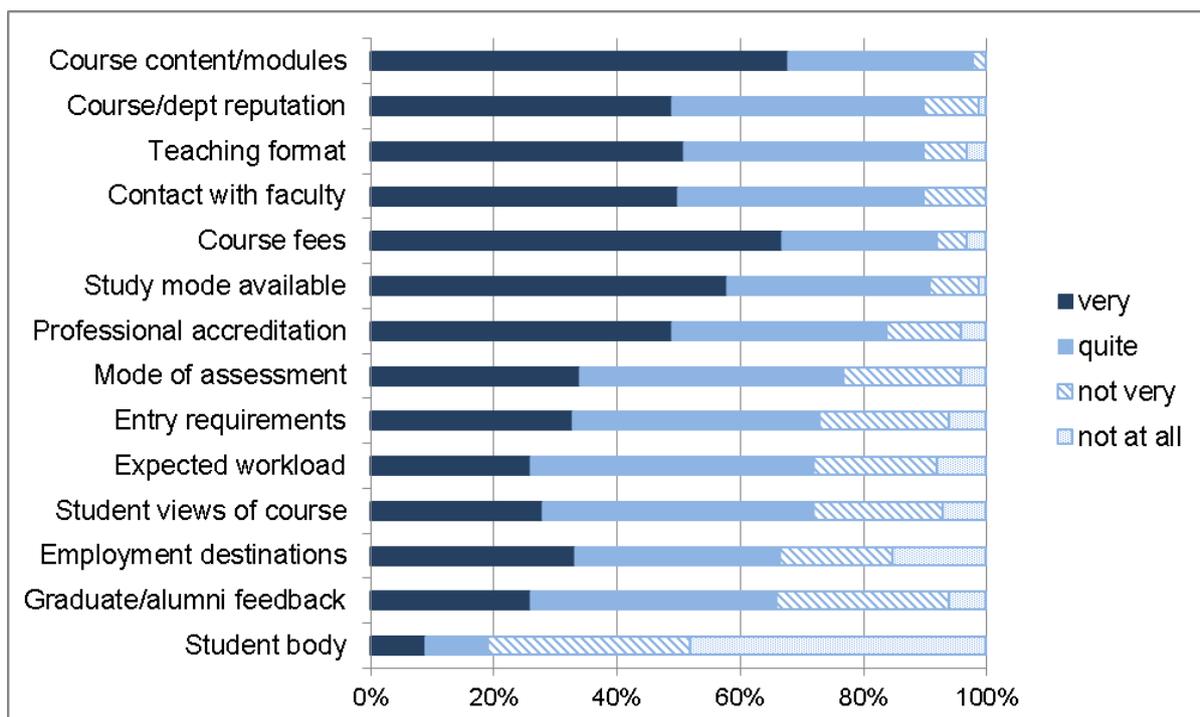
These findings broadly reflect previous research into PGT students' reasons to select an HE institution where, for example, HEI reputation was rated as the most important factor amongst prospective students, and the approximate ranking (relative importance) of these factors was similar (i-graduate, 2013). However, the proportions rating issues such as accommodation and especially student and social life were much lower amongst the prospective returners surveyed here than was found for prospective students as a whole by i-graduate.

Respondents who were prospective returners also ranked the perceived importance for them of a range of issues and factors relating to their choice of PGT course, rather than institution (Figure 10). This showed that the most important factors were related to content, fees and teaching quality (reputation and teaching type) and study modes available. Fewer than half ranked issues such as course workload or entry requirements, or employment outcomes, as very important, but around two thirds rated them as very or quite important. Contact with faculty was rated as much more important than contact with current students or graduates. Of the options, only the composition of the student body was ranked as very or quite important by fewer than half of respondents.

Although there were some variations in the relative ratings of factors as either very or quite important, the perceived importance of these issues (relating to course choice) varied to a much less marked extent between UK and international respondents than was the case for issues about the institution.

It is not straightforward to compare these results with those in i-graduate's research with PGT students as course-related factors were not investigated quantitatively in the same way in that study (i-graduate, 2013). However, comparison of its results with those of respondents in our survey who were current or recent PGT students suggested that there were not major differences between the types of information about courses considered important by returners as opposed to those who had progressed directly from prior HE study.

Figure 10 Perceived importance of factors relating to prospective returner respondents' choice of course (N=435)



5.6 How do they find out about postgraduate study?

The majority of respondents who were prospective returners indicated that they had either used or were aware of individual HE institutions' websites, and the majority of these found them useful (Figure 11). Given that this was a snapshot taken at a particular time, this does not necessarily represent the total proportion that look at institutional sites, as some might be earlier in their information-seeking journey. It was clear that far fewer were using the portal or aggregation websites that collate information about PGT study. For example, the most commonly cited of these was the Prospects site which was known to about half of respondents, although fewer than 30% had used it. The Postgraduatestudentships website was known to slightly fewer (36%) but was rated relatively the most useful of these sites by those who had used it. Supplements or online tabulations by newspapers were used by somewhat more respondents than these specialist websites. What this shows is that most prospective returners appear to be very reliant on HE institutions' own websites, rather than

utilising aggregations of information (which most appeared not to know about). This seemed to be an issue of awareness rather than lack of utility of these aggregation websites.

Figure 11 Awareness and perceptions of usefulness of different sources of information by respondents who were considering return to PGT study (N=405)

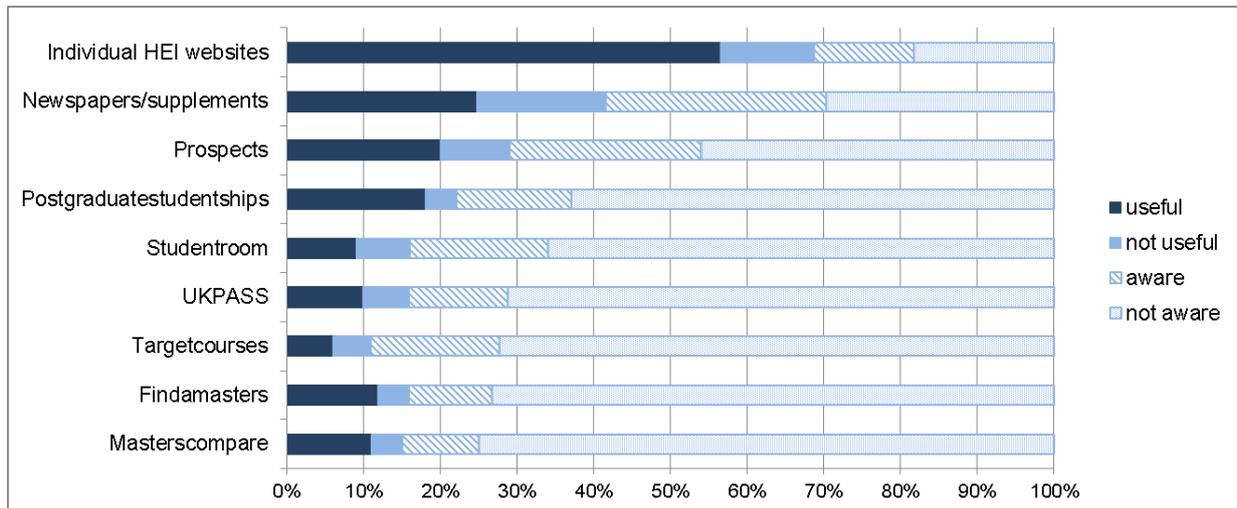
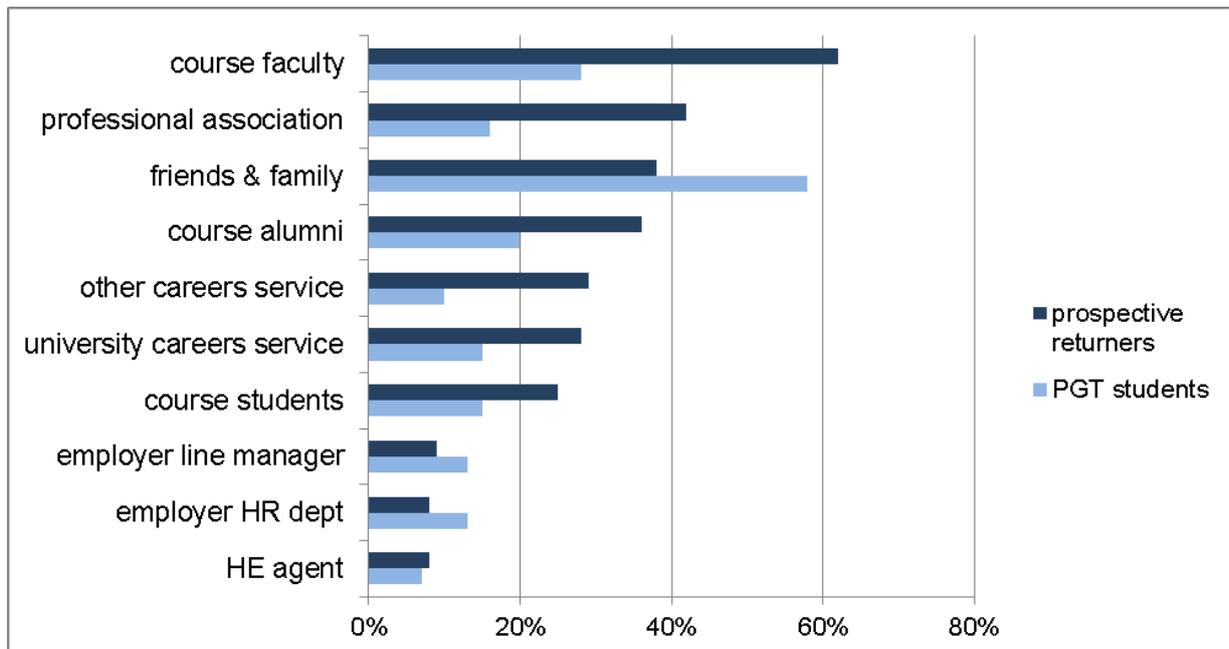


Figure 12 Sources that respondents who were prospective returners expected to consult, and whom recent/current PGT students had consulted when considering PGT study (N=833)



Over 60% of respondents expected that they would directly consult course faculty as part of their information-seeking about returning to HE for postgraduate study (Figure 12). The other

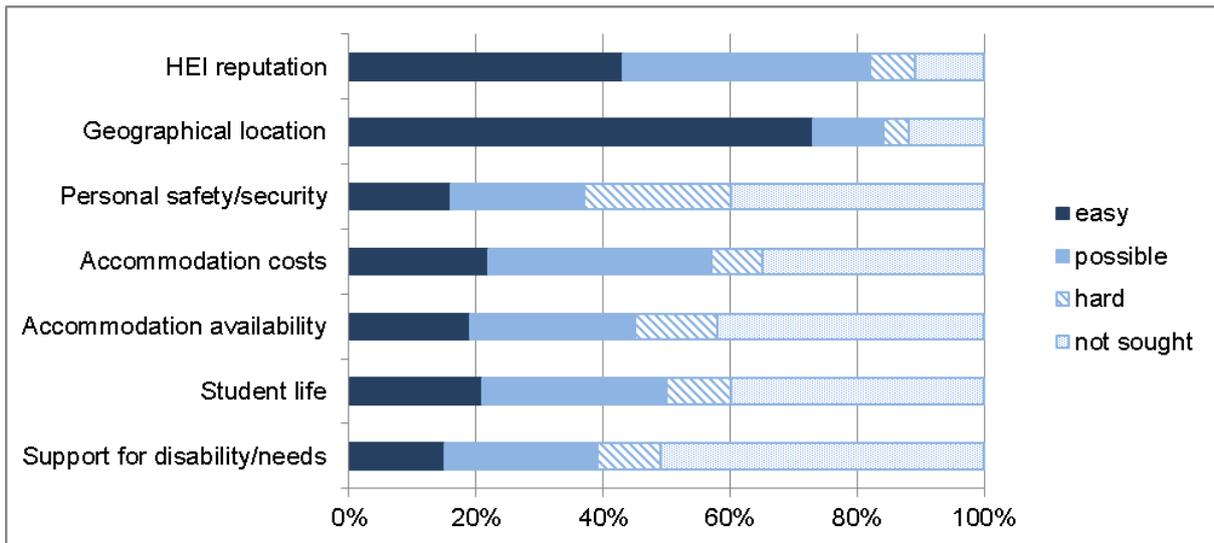
groups most popularly mentioned were friends and family and also professional associations, presumably reflecting that many were thinking about career or employment issues. Around a third of these respondents anticipated consulting alumni of the PGT course, and about a quarter current students. Relatively low proportions expected to or had consulted their former HE careers service (or another advisory service if available). Very few seemed to expect to consult either their current employer or a specialist agent.

In comparison, fewer respondents who were current or recent PGT students who had returned to HE claimed that they had actually consulted people in any of these categories, other than their friends and family (who had been consulted by most). It is unclear at this stage whether these differences reflect differences in expected and actual behaviour or are due to post hoc thinking. More attention will be given to the ease of contacting such people in a subsequent section.

5.7 Can they find the information they need?

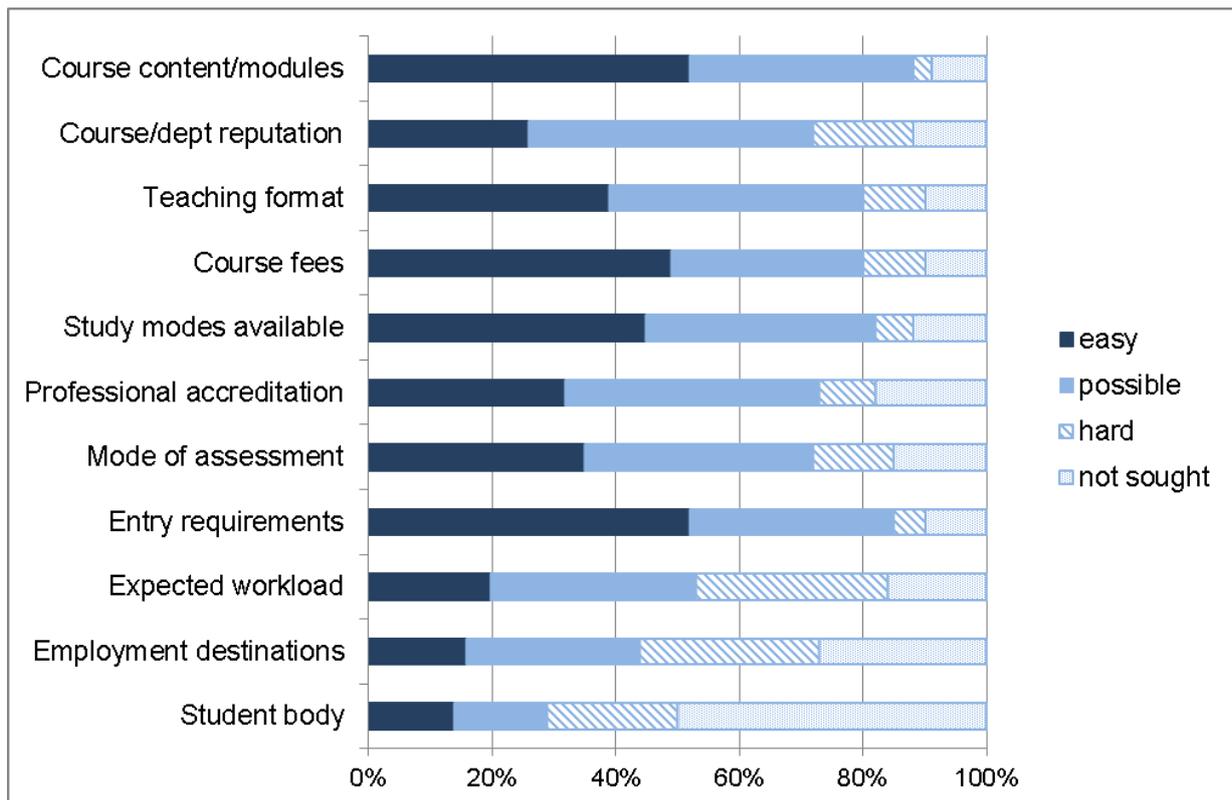
Respondents who were considering returning to HE for PG study were asked how easily they had found information relating to different factors. These are presented in Figures 13 and 14 with the factors in the same order as in Figures 8 and 10, i.e. most important uppermost. Location can perhaps be dismissed as a factor as the majority of HEIs in the UK are named by their geographical location, and can be located factually by many means. Of the other factors about an institution, around half of those who sought the information for a factor had found it easily. Proportionally, the factor about which it was most difficult to find information was safety and security, which was very important to many international students. What was also quite striking was the significant proportions who had not sought (or not yet sought) the information at all. However, it should be noted that these factors were those that many UK respondents did not rate as important, and on deeper analysis it was revealed that the results were heavily skewed by large proportions of UK respondents who had not sought the information (and so were behaving differently from international applicants).

Figure 13 Perceptions of ease of finding information by respondents considering return to HE for PGT study about HE institutional factors and HE course-related factors ($N=295$)



For the course-related factors, in general a higher proportion of respondents had sought information about almost all the factors than had done so about most factors about the institution, other than about the composition of the student body. Proportionally, the factors where it was least easy to find information were reputation of the course or department, workload and also employment outcomes. The last two factors were also the two for which the largest proportions expressed that it had been hard to find information (of those who had tried to). Given the importance of career-related motivations, the last of these in particular would seem worthy of further consideration.

Figure 14 Perceptions of ease of finding information by respondents considering return to HE for PGT study about HE course-related factors ($N=295$)



Comparison of the proportion who found it easy to acquire the information they needed between respondents who were prospective returners and those who had actually studied PGT as ‘continuers’ showed consistent differences. For all factors, more of the PGT students claimed to have found it easy to find information than of the prospective returners (see Figures 15 and 16). This could confirm the impression previously reported that those outside the HE system find it harder to obtain information than those who are already within the HE system (i-graduate, 2013). On the other hand it could instead, or in addition or jointly, be due to other differences such as the timing of the survey (in relation to prospective returners’ information-seeking journey) or simply result from post-event reflection. However, certainly the data do not offer any contrary evidence to the suggestion that prospective returners may find information harder to come across than those who are closer to the HE system.

The same question – how easy or hard – was applied to the issue of direct contact with people involved in the PG course and institution. In previous questions, a large majority of respondents had indicated that direct contact with faculty was very important to them, while smaller but significant proportions sought contact with current course students to obtain direct feedback about the course and/or recent graduates or alumni to learn about the course and its outcomes.

Figure 15 Proportion of respondents who found it easy to find information about institutional factors: prospective returners and recent/current PGT students who ‘continued’ (N=709)

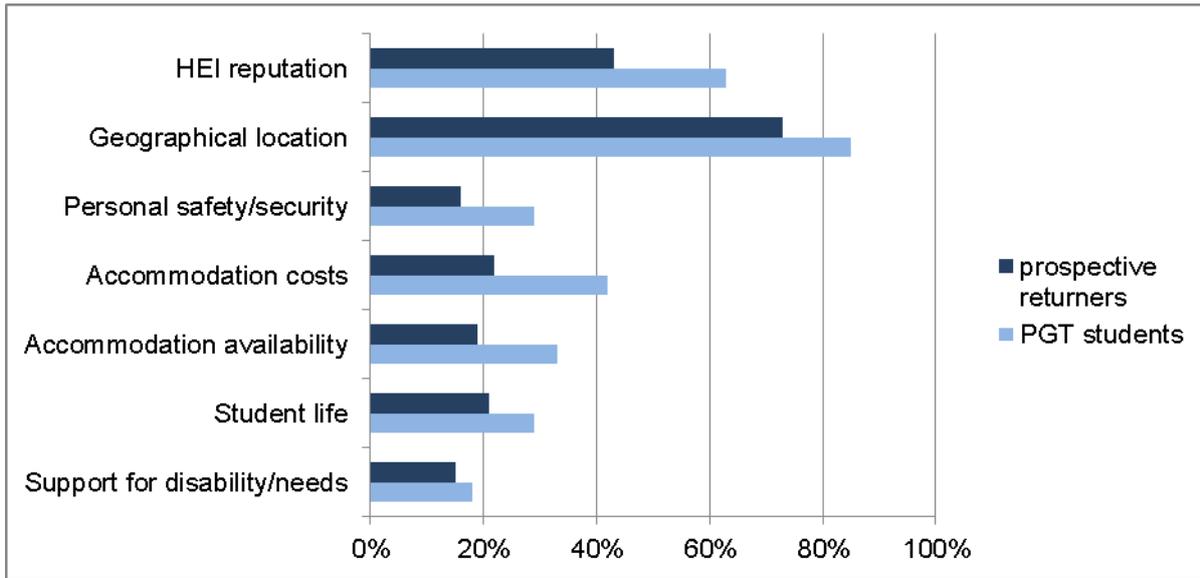


Figure 16 Respondents who found it easy to find information about course-related factors: prospective returners and recent/current PGT students who 'continued' (N=709)

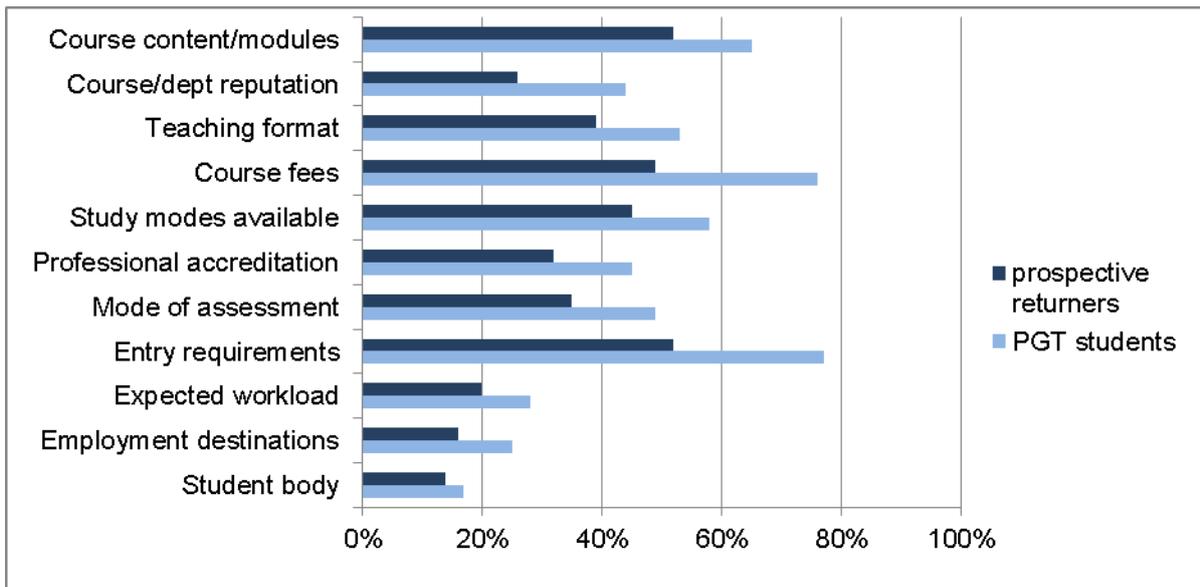


Figure 17 shows that the majority (three quarters) of respondents considering return to HE for PGT study had sought direct contact with faculty, although less than 20% found it easy to do so. Around half sought contact with other types of people and of these the proportions finding it easy to contact them were all rather low, in comparison with the situation in relation to online information provision.

Figure 17 Perceptions of how easily respondents found making contact with key groups of people when considering PGT study (N=297)

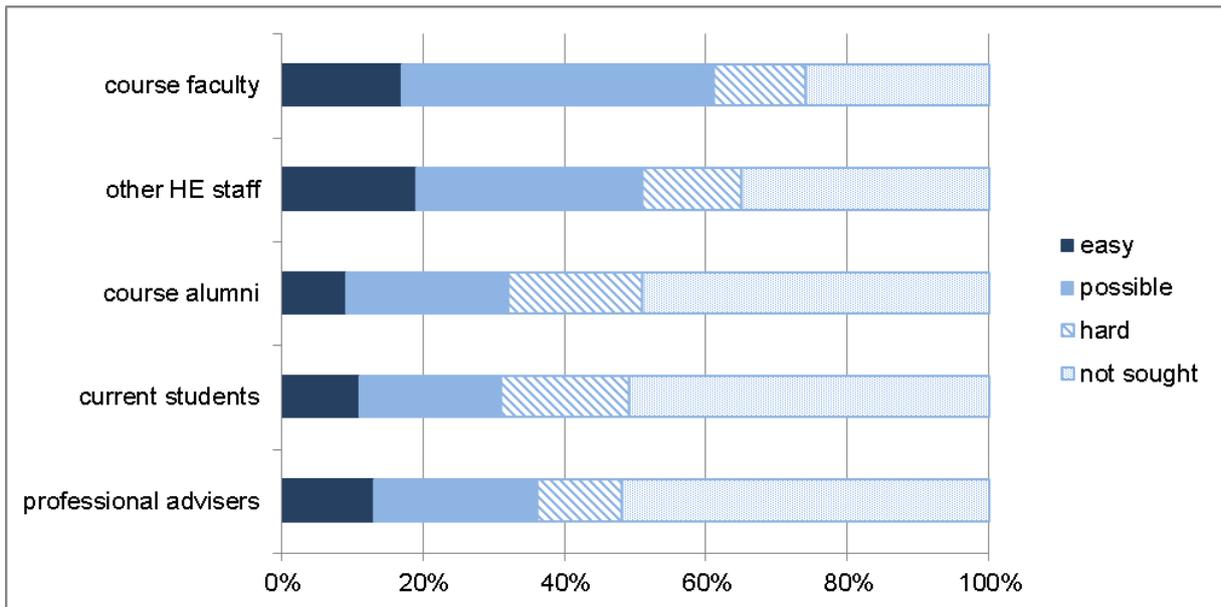
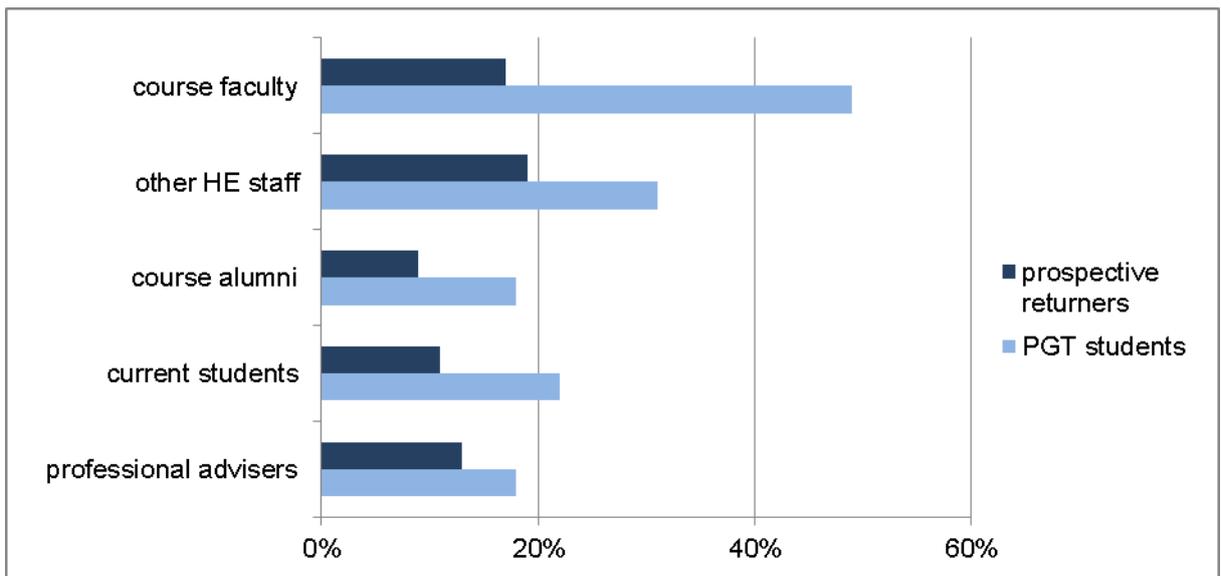


Figure 18 Proportions of respondents who found making contact with different informants easy: prospective returners and current/recent PGT students who had 'continued' (N=731)



In Figure 18, current or recent PGT students who were 'continuers' reported that they found contact with these types of people had been easier than was reported by the prospective returners in the sample. The difference was particularly acute for contact with faculty. This is particularly significant given the high importance imparted to this form of direct contact by all types of respondents. It may also embody the relative advantage of those who are in the HE system already, particularly if they choose to pursue PGT in the same institution. This could well account for some of the relative ease with which PGT students reported finding such contact.

Again, the results do not conclusively prove that these direct contacts are easier for those within HE already, as other reasons could be behind the differences, but the weight of evidence seems to suggest that this is the case.

5.8 Suggestions for improvements to information provision

Open-ended questions offered respondents the opportunity to make comments about their experience of existing provision of information about PGT study, and also to suggest improvements. The majority of comments related to funding and fees, one way or another, which probably reflects the overwhelming importance of this factor within consideration of whether and how to study a PGT course.

The most popular specific recommendation, by far, was for centralisation of information provision:

Having ONE central point of initial, core information - like a UCAS page.

Have one specific website detailing the different postgraduate courses available and links to individual universities which specialise in providing these courses.

Around 30 respondents who were prospective returners sought a central repository of this kind for course-related and institutional information (as they knew was available for undergraduate courses). Although some of these respondents were unaware of the Prospects website and other aggregators, others were aware and/or had used them but still made the comment. Some other respondents sought a national postgraduate funding site, which they could potentially search in order to investigate possible sources of scholarships of other funding for their studies.

Of the other specific comments, the next most popular groups related to provision of more information about career destinations (employment outcomes) and also contact with either faculty or students/graduates on the course. In relation to providing either better career outcomes data and/or more examples of alumni with demonstrable career impact:

It would be great if you can provide more information about the job market after PG studies.

There needs to be more transparency around student satisfaction and career destinations. If university websites could publish statistics about how many alumni have jobs directly related to their postgrad course it would be useful.

I need better, honest, accurate data on my employability and prospects after a course which is specific to a certain career. There's only one pathway from this course, really, and yet little info on whether it's worth the enormous financial sacrifice to career change.

A number of different comments and suggestions were made about options to access course faculty or others related to the course:

Opportunity for 1:1 meetings (e.g. phone or email) with course directors, past students.

Introduce a mentor scheme which allows for students to have a link with professionals or alumni.

Ease of access to speak with students or teachers regarding the course and expectations or opinions regarding it.

A 'go to' person at the university to go to for advice.

Introduce a mentor scheme which allows for students to have a link with professionals or alumni.

Ease of access to speak with students or teachers regarding the course and expectations or opinions regarding it.

There were also a number of comments about HE institutions' websites, including observations that some HEI sites appeared to be focused (or even "*biased*") towards younger 'continuers' or those at the HEI already, rather than mature potential returners to HE, and also complaints about consistency and presentation. There were also requests that different types of information (fees, logistics, other practical issues) should be made available alongside course details, rather than being separated out:

Often the websites only provide cursory information, which makes me think the courses are aimed at people already studying at the institution.

Huge disparity in the quality of university web sites. Some very good, some awful and everything in between.

Depth of information regarding individual postgraduate degrees varies enormously across different universities.

All relevant info together in one place as sometimes you get really excited for a course but [only later] realise that with all the bits together it's not possible.

5.9 Summary

To summarise the main findings of this research into those who are outside the HE system but considering return for PGT study ('prospective returners') and their information needs:

- Prospective returners are a diverse group which is in most respects similar in profile to others considering PGT study. One major difference is their higher and more diverse age profile and it is believed that this has a strong influence on their motivations and needs relating to PGT.
- The vast majority of prospective returners consider PGT from a position of established employment (mostly full-time); although some are already high earners, the majority are not earning at more than entry-level graduate salaries.
- Almost all prospective returners are motivated by both intrinsic factors (personal interest) and extrinsic factors (chiefly career-related), other than a small group of older prospective students who are entirely intrinsically motivated.
- Career-related motivations for prospective returners are more likely to be around progression and especially the potential for career change, whereas most of those who progress more directly from a first HE degree are motivated by prospects of gaining entry to employment. This has implications for the type of employment data presented.
- Many prospective returners face very constrained choices and only consider one or two institutions in which they could practically study; over 95% of them expect to make only 1-3 applications.
- The enabling factors of funding and practicability of study have to be considered at the same time as more aspirational issues such as the course content that interests them or evidence for the potential outcomes that motivate them; funding issues are considered from the very start of exploration. Only when funding and personal circumstances are assured do most of them progress to more detailed examination of options
- The types of information that prospective returners find important about possible PGT courses are very similar to those of others considering PGT study, with only minor variations. There does not appear to be any significant element of information 'missing' (i.e. something that they need, which others do not). This backs up a previous finding that prospective PGT students in general believe most of the information they need does exist somewhere (i-graduate, 2013).
- There is a greater difference between prospective returners and others considering PGT in relation to information about the possible HE institutions in which they might study, but this varies strongly with the type of prospective returner, especially their nationality. Those of UK nationality are much less concerned about aspects of student life, personal safety/security and accommodation (and to some extent even HEI reputation), whereas these are very important to potential applicants from outside the UK, especially those from outside the EU.

- Other than information about HEI location, course content, fees and entry requirements, under half of those who sought all other types of information reported it easy to find; prospective returners found it particularly hard (relatively) to find information about some of the key factors for them, including safety and security, course or departmental reputation, employment outcomes and course workloads.
- There was some evidence to suggest that prospective returners may find the information they seek somewhat harder to obtain than those who are already in the HE system or closer to it.
- The majority of prospective returners are reliant on the information provided by individual HE institution websites. Only a minority use the existing portal or aggregation sites for postgraduate study information. Those sites appear to be broadly useful, but few are aware of them.
- Most prospective returners, and others considering PGT study, felt that it was important to contact course faculty directly. This was the type of informant that they overwhelmingly wanted to talk to, and it could be pivotal in their exploration. However, many found it hard to make the contact they needed, and this was potentially an area where those already in HE had an advantage.
- In comparison, the proportion who sought contact with current students or recent graduates was lower, but still significant, and respondents expressed a need for more ready access to these groups, in relation to obtaining feedback about actual workload and commitments and especially experiences of employment outcomes
- Other recommendations by prospective respondents for improvements to information provision included more consistency on HEI websites and the ability to access different information types at the same time, i.e. about available modes of study and logistics (such as modules and timetables) at the same time as content descriptions, and about fees as prominently as possible. These reflected the deeply constrained choice-making of many prospective returners, encapsulated by the following comment:

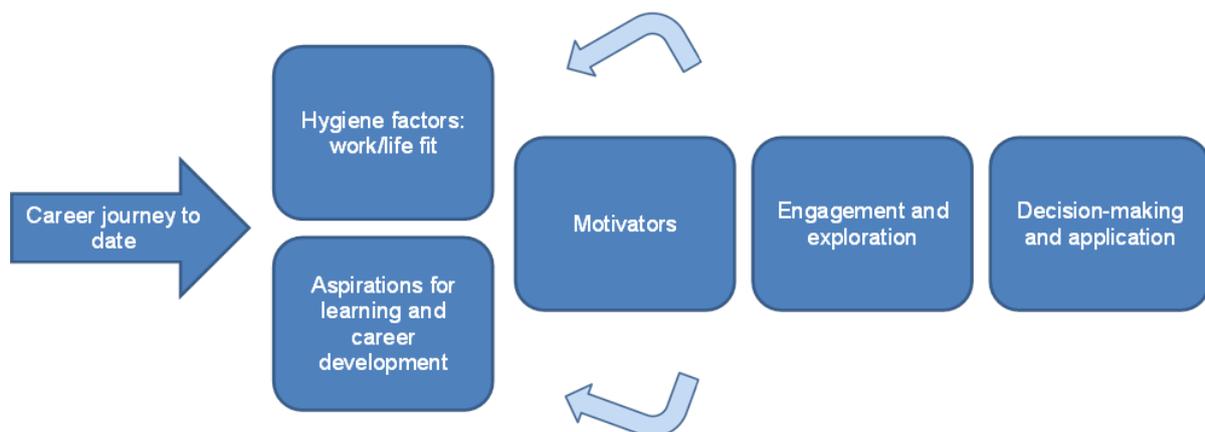
Can I get there from our home, hold down a full time job, and will they want me?

6 A model of PGT decision-making

Based on our synthesis of the existing literature and the main findings emerging from our new survey of prospective returners (which fills one of the anticipated gaps in knowledge), it is possible to propose a new model of postgraduate decision-making. It is hoped that this model can structure the key findings of the project and provide HE institutions and other key stakeholders with a framework for the development of practice. The model sets out to be applicable to all those considering PGT study, not just those returning to HE from other career trajectories.

The model is depicted in Figure 19, with a temporal sequence that broadly runs from the left, where prospective applicants begin to consider the idea of PGT study, to the right hand end where they make applications and subsequently choose an institution at which to enrol. On the other hand evidence suggests that the process is by no means linear, with some of those considering return to PG study in particular progressing to some of the right hand stages but then returning to earlier stages, and potentially circulating like this several times.

Figure 19 Proposed model for postgraduate choices



6.1 Career journey to date

All prospective PGT students bring prior experience and a career history to their thinking about postgraduate study. For some this career journey may be short and its trajectory appear straightforward and progressive, for others it may be more complex and chaotic. However, for all prospective postgraduates this journey will exert influence as who we have been shapes who we are and who we wish to become.

The career journey to date includes both an individual's direct experience of work and learning, and also a broader range of influences relating to their personal and demographic circumstances and access to financial, social and cultural capital. How someone's career

has unfolded so far is also likely to shape the approach that they have to their career and how they make career decisions and influence the way that they draw in career resources and make use of career informants, as well as shaping their aspirations and career identity.

6.2 Aspirations for learning and career development

The model is clear that people do not enter the process of PGT decision-making as rational *tabula rasa*, but rather bring a wide range of resources, experiences and assumptions to their thinking about PGT. One result of these career journeys is the shaping of individuals' aspirations. They may wish to know more about a subject of interest, to earn more, to increase their status or aspire to a wide range of other possible outcomes. For those whose career journey has provided them with some exposure to postgraduate study they may begin to see an alignment between their aspirations and the opportunity that a PGT programme offers.

Our research demonstrates that in almost all cases the aspirations of those considering PGT study were a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Most harboured strong potential personal interest in their subject as well as aspirations to undertake more learning within the HE environment. At the same time the vast majority had career-related motivations, either to progress further in their chosen career path or to make a change to that path. PGT study was seen by many as a means to effect the latter. It is likely that both kinds of aspirations and motivations are present in all potential PGT students.

6.3 Hygiene factors

Alongside the recognition that PGT study may align with an individual's aspirations, the research suggests that people consider the practicalities of study alongside their aspirations. Herzberg's (1966) concept of 'hygiene' factors is useful and it seems that such hygiene factors may be particularly important for PGT decision-making.

It was very clear from our research with prospective returners that they could only conceive of undertaking PGT study if key enabling factors were present, in particular the funding necessary and also a set of personal circumstances that were conducive to study. Many prospective returners were highly constrained by their existing commitments to family, home and employment, and any PGT choices would have to take those into account. This would mean that for many of them their study would have to be by distance learning or part-time or very local to them, so that they could continue to hold down their job, live at home and support their family. Only if those criteria of continuity could be satisfied could they consider undertaking PGT study to fulfil either personal or career aspirations. There was also some evidence that they continued to consider issues relating to these enabling factors throughout their information-seeking journey, right up until the final stages and decision-making.

Those who are considering PGT study as a direct progression from a first degree in HE may have to navigate a different set of hygiene factors as they consider postgraduate study. So while they are more likely to be able to fit study into their life, issues of funding remain. Equally, some of the hygiene factors for international students could be distinct and different from those in the UK. Figure 19 attempts to show that both these hygiene factors and

aspirational thinking have to be present and satisfied as part of progression towards serious consideration of options for PGT study.

6.4 Motivators

In the model, aspirations are understood to relate to an individual's life and career. From the perspective of PGT decision-making a key element of aspiration is the recognition that such aspirations might align with the opportunities offered by postgraduate programmes. Alongside this, however, individuals are reality-checking and working out whether it is possible to pursue their aspirations in this way. The motivators act subsequent to this realisation that postgraduate study might align with aspirations and the recognition that it is possible to pursue postgraduate study. At this point the individual begins to think about whether he or she should consider beginning a postgraduate programme and this requires motivation to act. For example, those contemplating career change (an aspiration) might consider whether the timing is right (a hygiene factor), but when they identify that a PGT programme is required for the desired career (a motivator) they are propelled towards action. Individuals require some motivators to be in place in order to turn their hypothetical thinking about PG study into actions.

6.5 Engagement and exploration

The potential PGT student then enters a more serious exploration stage, where they engage with information about potential PGT provision and providers. In this stage they will find out about the content of courses but also how studying the course could 'fit' their constraints and circumstances of location, timing and so on (and as such refer back to hygiene factors) and whether it will deliver what they are hoping for (referring back to the motivators). This is the point at which they are likely to contact faculty directly. Because many need to be certain that there will be a personal fit, they will need to address detailed issues like the timetabling of modules. This type of need – to explore certain hygiene factors – suggests a different kind of exploration from that associated with undergraduate provision. Therefore the prospective PGT student is likely to consider both issues like content and possible outcomes and also very practical factors such as the mode that suits them, teaching style, requirements and the commitment expected to undertake the course and so on. The output of this stage may be a shortlist of courses and/or institutions which offer the same potential outcomes and which could be attended practically. In reality the shortlist is likely to be very small, and in many cases could be a single institution.

6.6 Decision-making and application

The final stage in the model involves selection of a small number of courses at suitable institutions from the shortlist and making applications to one or more of those institutions. This not only may involve selection or comparison between a small number of opportunities, but also the final decision as to whether to proceed into PG study (assuming that they are admitted) which may be closely tied to satisfaction or changes in their hygiene factors. As the survey showed, in many cases this decision-making is not between various different

programmes, but rather between taking a single identified programme or not taking the programme at all.

Once in the admission process, with one or more institution, engagement continues while both parties (student and institution) make final decisions about the suitability of the fit. If students are still actively pursuing more than one institution or programme they may need to return to the exploration stage before making a final decision. For the institution this final stage is likely to be a critical moment during which a potential student is converted into an enrolled student. Increasingly institutions are building up post-admission engagement strategies in order to increase their chances of a positive outcome of this competitive process.

6.7 Using the model

It is hoped that postulation of this model will assist HE institutions in considering how best to deliver information to those considering postgraduate taught study. What seems clear from the research evidence is that different types of prospective PGT students will progress through the stages at different rates and in different ways. For example providing clear information and assurances relating to hygiene factors is likely to be a more important issue for prospective students who have been in the labour market for a number of years.

What also seems to be clear is that prospective PGT students do not travel through the stages of the model in simple linear fashion, but may progress somewhat iteratively, and move back and forward between some stages. The information known to be sought by prospective returners suggests that they may identify one or two possible courses quite early but at the same time still be seeking reassurance about basic hygiene factors; however, they can only progress to the final engagement and admission stages once those reassurances are in place.

This is potentially different from the expected model for undergraduate choices, within which once some aspirations are known there may be extensive exploration and comparison between quite large numbers of possible institutions and courses. In comparison the typical UK PGT student is likely to be much more constrained in their choices, although it may be that international PGT students' behaviour more closely resembles that of international undergraduates. That was certainly a finding of recent research by Hobsons with non-EU students at different levels of study, i.e. the behaviour of international PG and undergraduate applicants was very similar (Hobsons, 2013).

In the next section we consider how aspects of the information provision strategies of some HE institutions relate to the model and identify practice which addresses some of the issues raised by the research findings.

7 HEI practice to support postgraduate decision-making

This chapter will demonstrate how some HE institutions are responding to the information needs of those considering PGT study. This is presented in relation to the understanding of prospective PGT student behaviour and information needs and the model of PGT decision-making advanced in Chapter 6. The examples were selected to illustrate what appeared to be distinctive or effective practice from our systematic review of many HEI websites; the URLs given were as accessed on 16 December 2013. The case studies are presented in full in the Appendix and offer an insight into some of the challenges for HE institutions providing information to and communication with prospective students and others, and how they are facing them. Managing complex marketing and application processes while maintaining timeliness, consistency and accuracy of content is a significant challenge. It should also be remembered that these represent a snapshot at a particular time, as institutions are continually monitoring the effectiveness of their information provision, and developing and evolving it.

7.1 Addressing prospective PGT students' career journeys to date

The model highlights the fact that how an individual approaches PGT decision-making relates to their career journey to date. A key question is therefore how far institutions are able to structure their marketing and application processes in a way that recognises this diversity of needs and approaches. The institutions we interviewed understand the diversity of the PGT cohort and respond by aiming to provide succinct, accessible and descriptive content. They reason that providing too much content segmented for different groups would be impractical and that their websites are already very large, so typically they offer segmented content only on limited themes.

Some institutions identify international students as a particular group with distinct information needs; for example Stirling's high proportion of international students drove some of its thinking when redeveloping its webpages recently. Swansea University was one of a number of institutions to offer a discrete homepage for prospective international students. Swansea's site takes this audience segmentation further by inviting international web visitors to identify their country of origin in order to see the types of information which are most relevant to them (Figure 20). However, many institutions, including Swansea, providing segmented content for international students do so generically rather than specifically at postgraduate level. Potentially, in the context of PGT study, this approach (specific international and/or region-specific pages) could be more effective if it was applied separately to information about postgraduate-level study.

The research did not uncover any examples where the distinction was made between prospective returners (and/or mature students) as opposed to those who progress more directly from prior HE study, although many had generic sections on part-time study. Arguably, all the information provided by the Open University, which focuses on provision of distance courses to those who are outside the HE system, is directed towards returners. Amongst this it offers extremely practical information about the skills needed for

postgraduate study, including a short skills check, to check and reassure potential returners that they are equipped with the skills necessary to undertake a PGT course.

Figure 20 Screenshot from Swansea University website
<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/international/students/your-country/>



It may be that there is a continuum between those students who are ‘continuing’ and those who are returning, which makes segmentation based on this issue difficult to conceptualise sharply. There is also the danger of falling into the reproduction of stereotypes about different kinds of students, their motivations and what their information needs are likely to be, particularly as strong differences were not apparent from the survey conducted as part of this research.

Many institutions offer a high-level page for part-time students across all study levels, but Sheffield Hallam reported that users have found this confusing and is aiming to apply it to undergraduate and postgraduate information separately.

There may therefore be value in institutions exploring opportunities to segment the PGT market more clearly when thinking about how to provide information to prospective students.

The lack of segmentation should not be understood to mean that institutions do not understand the diversity of the PGT cohort. However, the main strategy currently employed to address it is presentation of a wide range of different types of information that HE institutions recognise are useful to different types of prospective student. This focus on the provision of a wide range of information may be wise given the diversity of information types that people seek at any one of the different stages of their decision-making journey and the difficulty of identifying exactly who will need which type of information at what point.

Figure 21 Screenshot from Sheffield Hallam University website
<http://www.shu.ac.uk/prospectus/>

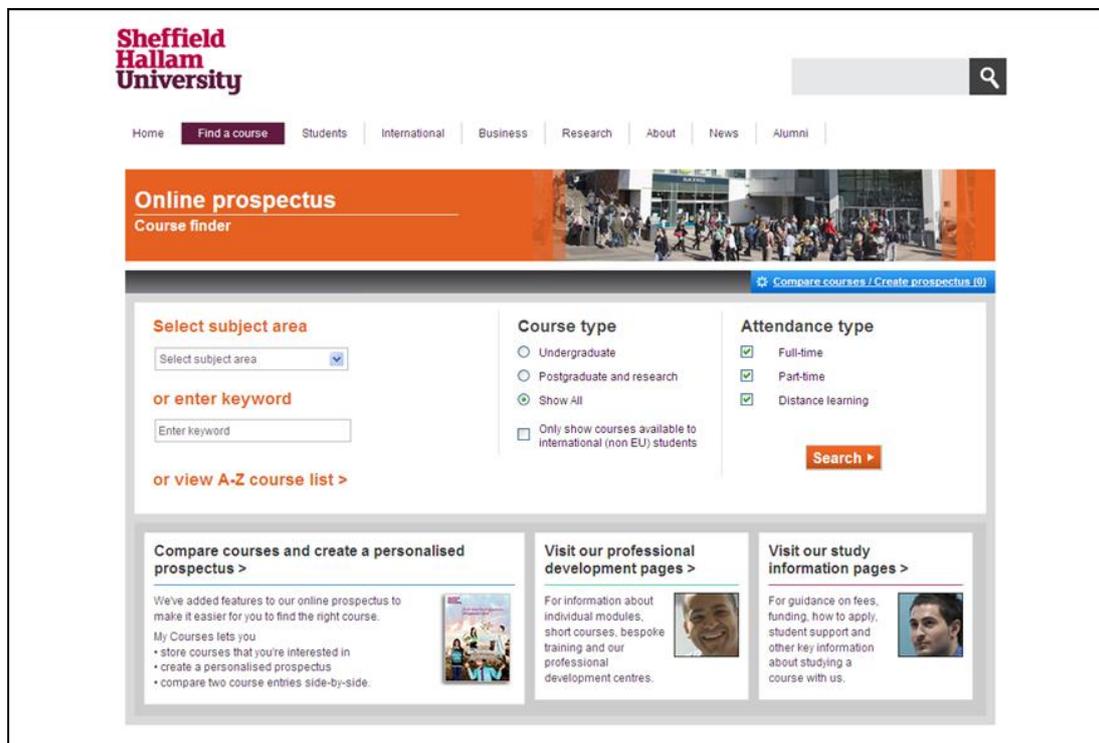
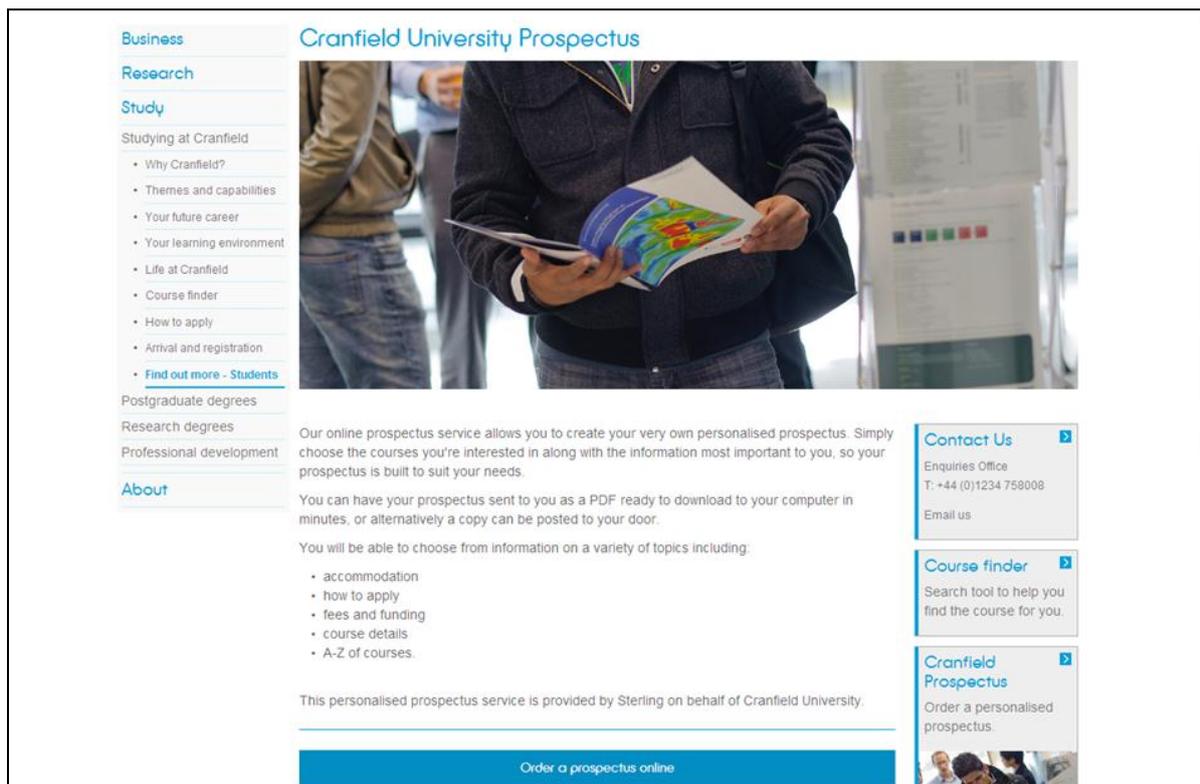


Figure 22 Screenshot from Cranfield University website
<http://www.cranfield.ac.uk/study/studying-at-cranfield/enquiries-and-events/cranfield-university-prospectus.html>



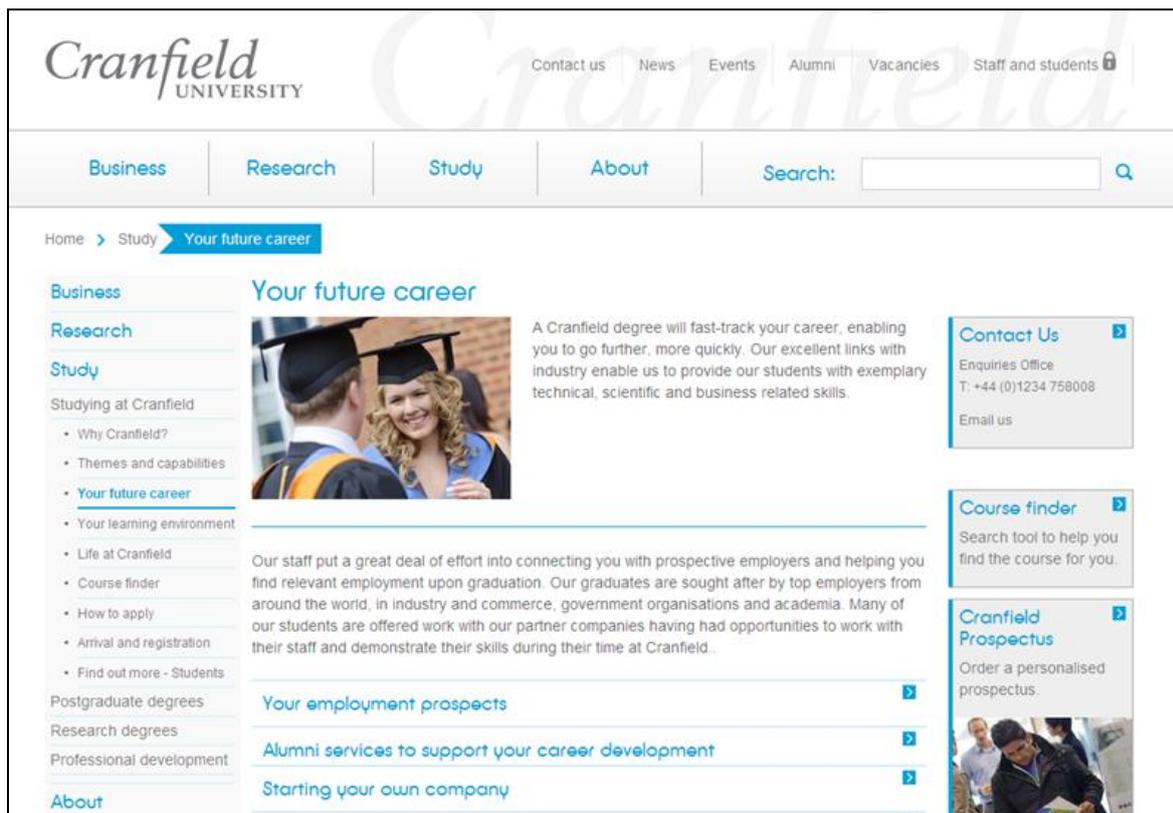
A response adopted by Birmingham, amongst others, is to present a systematic navigation bar on every PGT page which signposts information about a wide range of different study-related and practical issues (which can be seen in Figure 26, a page on funding issues).

Another response to the diversity of potential online visitors considering PGT study which has been adopted by a number of institutions is to offer a 'personalised prospectus.' This gives the visitor the opportunity to acquire information about only the courses or subjects in which they are interested and/or by study mode. At Sheffield Hallam this is largely applied as a searchable course finder tool (Figure 21), including a comparison function, with the opportunity to download 'personal' results, while at Cranfield it is a more literal interpretation of a personalised prospectus, where the user identifies the different categories of information they seek and a bespoke document is produced which contains that information (Figure 22).

7.2 Aligning provision with prospective PGT students' aspirations for learning and career development

The model suggests that a key element of PGT decision-making is the process by which postgraduate study becomes aligned with the individuals' wider aspirations for learning and career development. For HE institutions the ability to recognise and communicate this alignment is therefore critical.

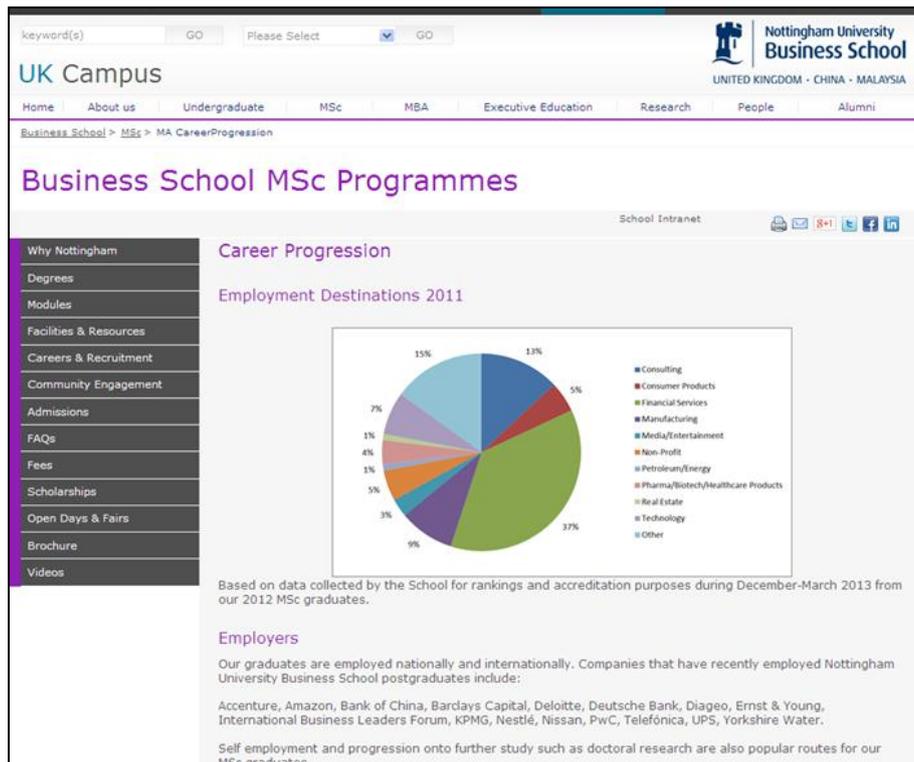
Figure 23 Screenshot from Cranfield University website
<http://www.cranfield.ac.uk/study/studying-at-cranfield/career-prospects/>



The majority of staff in HE institutions who participated in the research were very clear that most potential PGT students would be motivated by career-related aspirations. Many institutions offer career-related information prominently signposted from initial pages about possible PG study.

Cranfield introduces this quite generically (Figure 23) as well as offering information from course-level pages, while Nottingham University Business School is able to offer quantitative employment destinations information for its MSc graduates as a group (Figure 24). This is more easily and meaningfully presented for a specialist institution such as a management school, rather than an institution offering a wide spectrum of subjects where destinations would be far less useful at any grouped level. Staff interviewed did wish to present specific career outcome information but were hindered by the relatively small cohorts for most courses, preventing disaggregation of the quantitative career destinations information available. The careers information they could present was therefore largely illustrative rather than providing 'proof' of the impact of the course on employment destinations.

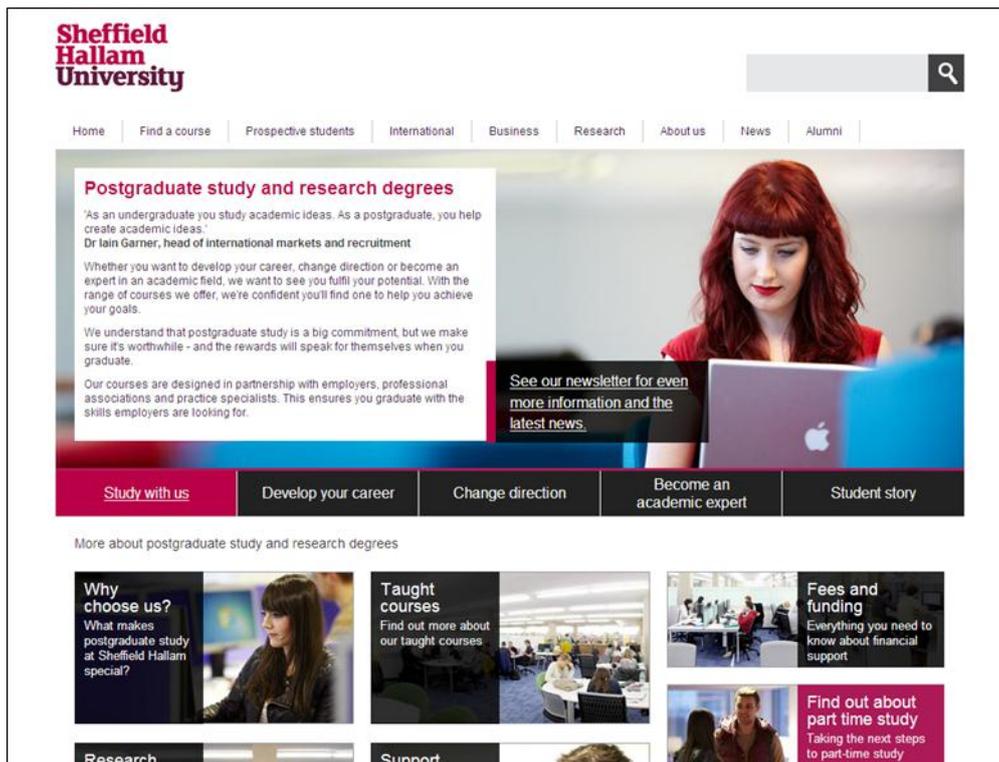
Figure 24 Screenshot from Nottingham University Business School website
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/msc/CareerProgression.html>



Sheffield Hallam has initiated a university-wide project to emphasise how studying its courses enhances employability, and offers Employability as one of the main headings on its Prospective students page (at the same level as Undergraduate or Postgraduate). This gives information relating both to career development and changes in career direction (Figure 25). Its Tomorrow'sYou² project has recently collected video stories of current students including postgraduates who talk about their motivations for study, overcoming doubts about returning to HE, their course experiences and expectations of impact on their future careers. The aim is both to inspire and also to reassure prospective students that it is for 'people like me'. Sheffield Hallam staff reported that this would be extended to include alumni reporting outcomes after their course, which could be useful illustrative material, which it intends to use at a very high level on its website (i.e. as an entry route to more detailed information).

Figure 25 Screenshot from Sheffield Hallam University website
<http://www.shu.ac.uk/students/postgraduate/>

² <http://www.shu.ac.uk/tomorrowsyou/>



7.3 Addressing 'hygiene' factors

In the research we identified prospective students', and in particular returners', need to consider practical issues such as location, study mode and flexibility very early in their consideration of PGT study. Alongside these kinds of issues, funding is a key hygiene factor for all types of prospective student.

The University of Birmingham, and most others, highlight information about funding on their postgraduate homepage (Figure 26) from which there are dedicated pages about finances and funding, amongst which there is a searchable database of postgraduate funding opportunities within the University. Although this is several 'clicks' away from the homepage, it is searchable by subject of study and level. Birmingham also highlights specific scholarships or funds related to each PGT course as part of the information about that course. It is likely that prospective PGT students will find the possibility that funding could be available more important to them than specific information about fees at early stages of their investigations.

Most institutions consulted did think it necessary to have information about these enabling factors directly accessible from a single screen.

Figure 26 Extracts from Birmingham University website
<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/pgt-fees/index.aspx>

The screenshot shows the University of Birmingham website. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for 'University', 'Alumni', 'Giving', 'Working here', 'News', 'Events', and 'Visit'. Below this is a secondary menu with 'Undergraduate', 'Postgraduate', 'Research', 'International', and 'Business'. A search bar is located in the top right corner. The main content area is titled 'Postgraduate taught fees and funding' and features a large image of stacked coins with the heading 'Balancing your finances at university'. Below the image, there are several sections: 'Postgraduate funding database' with a search prompt, 'Earning while you learn' with a brief description, 'Funding for ITE students', 'Contact us', and 'Financial Guide 2014'. A video player is also visible with the title 'Our video guide to postgraduate student finance'. The bottom section is a 'Postgraduate funding database search' form with the following questions and options:

- Please answer the following questions:
- Select a level of study to filter your search:
- Which subject will you be studying?:
- Which fee category do you anticipate paying?:
- What is your nationality?:
- Have you previously studied at the University of Birmingham?:

A 'Search' button is located at the bottom right of the form.

Kingston University offers very clear information about options that may be available for flexible modes of learning, recognising that many of its PGT students live locally and need to study part-time. It provides this information as part of the rationale for selecting Kingston as a university, as well as at course level. For example, for every course it is explicit about the physical location of the teaching. While many institutions offer information about part-time study, this tends to be at a high level (i.e. not specifically for postgraduate study), and there is scope for institutions to more directly inter-relate course-related information and more practical or logistics-related content.

7.4 Providing motivators

Once the prospective PGT student has become confident that PGT study aligns with their aspirations and that it could be a reality for them, individuals need to be motivated into taking action. Usually the action that people will make will be to explore the opportunities that exist for PGT for them and begin to put the necessary life and career pre-conditions in place to enable the pursuit of postgraduate study.

Many of the approaches that HE institutions are using to motivate learners to actively consider postgraduate courses have already been discussed. The dominant strategy is to try to make connections between career progression and PGT study. It may also be possible for institutions to consider how to provide other motivational triggers for engagement with

postgraduate study. This might be through focusing direct marketing in this way, through the careful management of enquiry databases and through linking up with professional bodies or other similar organisations to channel messages in a timely fashion.

7.5 Supporting exploration and engaging with key informants

As they progress in their decision-making journey, prospective students will actively explore the programmes that they are interested in. For some prospective students this is a process of comparing a range of different programmes and institutions. However, the literature review and the survey both suggest that for many prospective returners this process may be a close examination of a small number of options. HE institutions have typically given a lot of thought to this phase of PGT decision-making and provide a wide range of information and resources to support it.

The design of course pages varies greatly institution by institution, although not all are completely consistent, reflecting that most course-level information is generated by academic departments and that there are varied levels of standardisation or centralisation as the information is presented on the HEI website. Some such as Kingston or Sheffield Hallam have a relatively large central digital/web team which encourages strong standardisation of content. Most or all institutions had different articulations of a dual model of content, with core pages produced by the central team and departmentally-originated pages for detailed content. For some the model was relatively more dispersed, with the centre largely providing training and coordination. What was common to all was a dependence on the expertise and enthusiasm of those in departments to provide the very specific course-level content that users require.

Detailed course-level information dominates the volume of PGT content on most HE institution websites. Institutions typically provide prospective students with a range of ways to access this information including structured disciplinary hierarchies, A-Z lists of course titles and search (see Sheffield Hallam's site in Figure 21 as an example).

Stirling and Birmingham have straightforward and consistent presentations of course content, with a side menu for access to information of a wide variety of other types (Figures 27 and 28).

Figure 27 Screenshot from Stirling University website
<http://www.stir.ac.uk/postgraduate/programme-information/prospectus/sport/sport-nutrition/>

UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

Home Courses International Campus life Research Services we offer Alumni & supporters About us

You are here: Courses » Postgraduate study » Taught degrees » Prospectus » Sport » Sport Nutrition

Sport Nutrition

Study Sport Nutrition and graduate with a university degree

MSc

Intro | **Entry** | Course Content | Academic School | Careers

This upgrade to MSc course has been established specifically for students who already hold an International Olympic Committee (IOC) postgraduate diploma in Sports Nutrition.

Course objectives

The course provides high quality research training through planning, conducting and writing up a research project enabling those working in the field of Sport Nutrition to undertake, understand and inform others about research in their chosen area of study.

Fees

2014/15	Overseas	£5500
2014/15	Home/EU	£4000

You should expect to pay fees for every year you are in attendance and be aware fees are subject to revision and may increase annually. Students on programmes of study longer than one year should take this into account when applying.

Sport Nutrition
 Type Part-time, Full-time
 Start date September and March

Sport Postgraduate Recruitment Team
 School of Sport
 University of Stirling
 Stirling
 FK9 4LA
 Scotland
 UK
 ☎ +44 (0) 1786 466498
 ✉ sportpostgrad@stir.ac.uk
 🌐 www.stir.ac.uk/sport

Figure 28 Screenshot from Birmingham University website
<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/taught/gees/hydrogeology.aspx>

BIRMINGHAM Search... Go

University | Alumni | Giving | Working here | News | Events | Visit

Undergraduate | Postgraduate | Research | International | Business

Home / postgraduate / Postgraduate courses / Postgraduate taught degrees / Hydrogeology MSc

Postgraduate taught study at Birmingham

Postgraduate Research at Birmingham

Postgraduate courses

Postgraduate taught degrees

Postgraduate research degrees

Doctoral ReSEARCHer Database (Powered by Findaphd.com)

DR enquiry service

Combined research and taught

Continuing professional development

Distance learning

MOOCs

How to apply

Postgraduate entry requirements

Doctoral research entry requirements

English for International Students Unit

Request a Prospectus

Postgraduate fees and funding

Hydrogeology MSc

Overview | Course details | Learning and teaching | Employability

A comprehensive training in the theory and practice of groundwater science and engineering, providing an excellent basis for careers in scientific, engineering and environmental consultancies, water companies, major industries, research, and government scientific and regulatory services in the UK and abroad. Modules encompass the full range of groundwater studies and are supported by practical field sessions and computing and hydrogeological modelling based on industry standard software.

Scholarships available
See the 'fees and funding' section within the 'Course details' tab for more information.

Course fact file

Type of Course: Taught
Study Options: Full time
Duration: 1 year full-time
Start date: September

Print this page

Download as PDF

Send to a friend

Register your interest

Apply to study here

Postgraduate Open Day Book now

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme 2013

Contact

Professor John Tellam
Email: J.H.Tellam@bham.ac.uk
Tel: +44(0)121 414 6138

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

The research presented in this study suggests that while this kind of factual information about course content is important in supporting an individual's exploration, many people are also keen to access career informants (staff, students, graduates and so on). The extent to which direct contact is facilitated presents a challenge as HE institutions also seek to manage these communications to some extent to provide consistency of service and also to capture key information so as to 'manage' their potential customers.

In the example shown, Birmingham provides the name of the academic responsible for the programme and gives his or her direct contact details, although in reality this is underpinned by a sophisticated contact management system so that the communications are tracked, which was a considerable investment. Kingston is another example where the individual name is offered for direct contact (Figure 29). Other institutions prefer more overtly to direct and filter contact through a departmental or dedicated postgraduate office rather than encouraging direct (or apparently direct) contact with an individual faculty member.

Enabling direct contact with faculty was shown to be critical in our research with prospective students, but inviting unmediated contact with an individual academic has risks, not least the possibility that student enquiries could be handled in an inconsistent fashion (or for example become delayed should an individual be away for a period). Institutions need to make a strategic decision as to how to marry these divergent objectives, as not all can invest in highly sophisticated enquiry handing systems.

Figure 29 Screenshot from Kingston University website
<http://www.kingston.ac.uk/postgraduate-course/pharmaceutical-technology-msc/who-teaches-this-course.html>

[Courses](#)
 • [Pharmaceutical Technology](#)
 • [Entry requirements](#)
 • [Course features](#)
 • [Research areas](#)
 • [Links with business and industry](#)
 • [Facilities](#)
 • [Learning support](#)
 • [After you graduate](#)
 • [Who teaches this course](#) >
 • [Fees and bursaries](#)
 • [Apply for this course](#)
 • [Open events](#)
 • [Choose Kingston](#)
 • [Study resources](#)
 • [Student support](#)
 • [Accommodation](#)
 • [Campuses](#)

Pharmaceutical Technology Masters (MSc): Who teaches this course

[Download a prospectus](#)
[Order a prospectus](#)
[Favourite this course](#)

[Apply for this course](#)



[Postgraduate open days](#)

About the faculty

 The Faculty of Science, Engineering and Computing teaches this course. The Faculty's wide selection of undergraduate and postgraduate courses covers a diverse range of subject areas, from aerospace to geography; from maths and computing to biotechnology; and many more. Our collaborative set-up provides new opportunities for our students, and we design our courses with industry professionals to ensure you stay up to date with the latest developments.

Pharmacy and Chemistry
 The School of Pharmacy and Chemistry is well known for the high quality of its undergraduate and postgraduate courses in pharmacy, pharmaceutical science and chemistry. These include full- and part-time foundation programmes.

Excellent facilities support our teaching – students benefit from new, purpose-built laboratories, equipped with state-of-the-art instruments. Strong links with industry and other key sectors ensure our students are well prepared for today's employment market. These include connections with hospitals and community pharmacies, accreditation from industry bodies, and involvement with active research groups.

Staff teaching on this course

Dr John Fletcher
 Module leader for Pharmaceutical Technology
 Email: j.fletcher@kingston.ac.uk
[Find out more about Dr John Fletcher](#)

Professor Raid Alany
 Title: Professor of pharmaceuticals
 Email: R.Alany@kingston.ac.uk

Find a course
 1. Select type of course...
 All courses
 2. Search by...
 Subject Keyword
 3. Choose from subject list
 Choose a subject...
[Find a course](#)

Related courses
 • [Analytical Chemistry MSc](#)
 • [Forensic Analysis MSc](#)
 • [Pharmaceutical Analysis MSc](#)

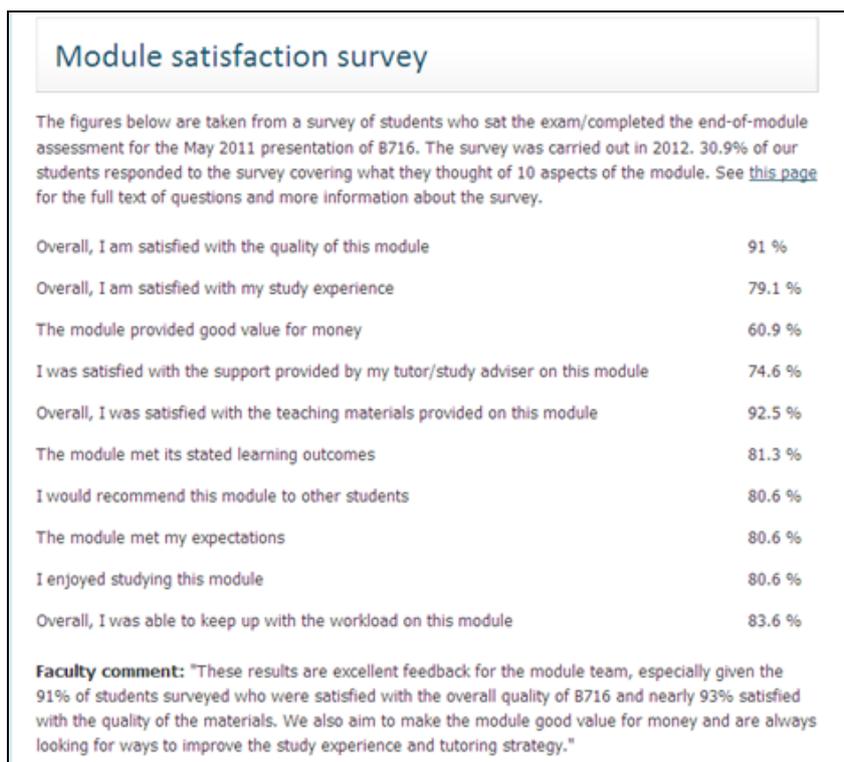
For further information:
 Postgraduate admissions
 Tel: +44 (0)20 8417 4546
[Email us](#)

Location
 This course is taught at Penrhyn Road


[View Penrhyn Road on our Google Maps](#)

Where actual contact with a career informant is not possible some institutions provide alternative ways to access these perspectives, including an increasing number of HEIs which provide testimonies from students or graduates. Sheffield Hallam's video stories of current students, mentioned earlier, are one such example. Kingston provides links to blogs by a range of its alumni, which are hosted on its alumni pages. The Open University provides short reviews by students of modules they have undertaken, and also satisfaction survey results for modules within certain courses (Figure 30), although providing quantitative information of this kind is presumably only viable for modules undertaken by large numbers of students and is not attempted for all course modules.

Figure 30 Extract from Open University website
<http://www3.open.ac.uk/coursereviews/course.aspx?course=b716#survey>



Some institutions have begun to develop ways to facilitate contact between prospective students and career informants in a more structured way. For example Birmingham offers prospective PGT students the chance to communicate with academic faculty (as previously shown) or students. Several options are available to engage with the latter, including its 'Café Masters' events (informal face-to-face events led by current or recent students), webchats and also its postgraduate mentoring scheme (Figure 31). The latter scheme offers enquirers, applicants and offer-holders the opportunity to be buddied by an existing PG student, who will be able to answer questions and (it is hoped) help prospective students with their transition into PG study there. Birmingham admits this is closer to buddying than genuine mentoring, as the latter suggests a longer term relationship which will not necessarily arise. The scheme is organised on a College basis across the University (equivalent to broad faculties). Like many others, the website promotes its open days, as these are known to be influential in the decision-making of those able to attend physically.

Figure 31 Screenshot from Birmingham University website
<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/PG-Mentor-Scheme/index.aspx>

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Search... Go

University | Alumni | Giving | Working here | News | Events | Visit

Undergraduate | Postgraduate | Research | International | Business

Home / postgraduate / Postgraduate courses / PG Mentor Scheme

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme



Welcome to the University of Birmingham Postgraduate Mentor Scheme.

This mentor scheme is a student support network for prospective postgraduate students. The mentors are experienced postgraduates who currently study here at the University of Birmingham, and they will be able to offer help and advice from a student perspective.

You do not need to have previously applied to the University to take advantage of this scheme - it is open to enquirers, applicants and offer-holders.

The mentors will be available until September 2014 to answer your questions, aimed at ensuring you are comfortable with the potential transition into postgraduate life.

You can find out more about the scheme, browse mentor profiles and access their contact details using the links on the right hand side of this page, or through the text links below. The profiles are separated by college, although you may find browsing all the profiles would be useful to find someone with related experience outside your subject area (including their interests, study pattern, area knowledge and personal background).

- Postgraduate Mentor Scheme: College of Arts and Law
- Postgraduate Mentor Scheme: College of Social Sciences
- Postgraduate Mentor Scheme: College of Engineering and Physical Sciences
- Postgraduate Mentor Scheme: College of Life and Environmental Sciences
- Postgraduate Mentor Scheme: College of Medical and Dental Sciences

Postgraduate taught study at Birmingham

Postgraduate Research at Birmingham

Postgraduate courses

Postgraduate taught degrees

Postgraduate research degrees

Doctoral ReSEARCHer Database (Powered by Findaphd.com)

DR enquiry service

Combined research and taught

Continuing professional development

Distance learning

MOOCs

How to apply

Postgraduate entry requirements

Doctoral research entry requirements

English for International Students Unit

Request a Prospectus

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme
College of Arts and Law

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme
College of Social Sciences

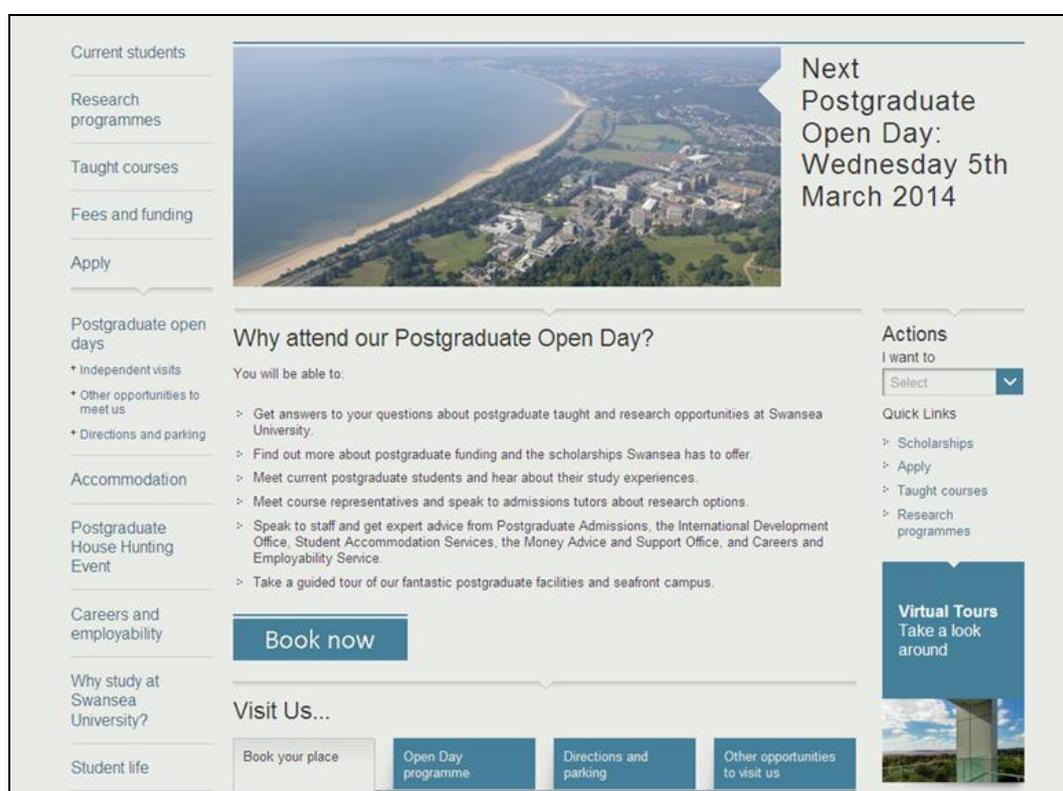
Postgraduate Mentor Scheme
College of Engineering and Physical Sciences

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme
College of Life and Environmental Sciences

Postgraduate Mentor Scheme
College of Medical and Dental Sciences

Kingston and Swansea (Figure 32), among others, augment their physical open day offerings with virtual tours. Although these are not PG-specific, the user is able to select which areas of campus to visit virtually. Cranfield and Birmingham offer open days both midweek and at weekends, specifically to enable those in full-time employment the chance to visit relatively easily, and is also planning to implement virtual open days for international students.

Figure 32 Screenshot from Swansea University website
<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/postgraduate/open-days/>



7.6 Supporting decision-making and application

We saw in the survey that a variety of different issues could trigger prospective returners to progress from broad exploration to detailed consideration of a few serious options. For many it could only happen once they were convinced that their study could be funded and was practical for their personal circumstances. The detailed course-level information provided by institutions, together with financing and study information, provides space for exploration, but ultimately individuals and the institutions at which they intend to study need to move towards making a decision and into the application process. From the prospective student's point of view, this potentially is selection of (generally) 1-3 preferred options they have considered in detail. From an institution's point of view, this is more akin to 'closing the sale' – having attracted the customer by providing the factual information, what more is needed to convince them that this is the institution for them? Most institutions consulted had specific postgraduate recruitment officers or teams who would try to engage with potential applicants and encourage them to apply. Some institutions have invested in CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems and processes to effect this, with prospective international students in particular, and could be able to leverage this for postgraduate applicants more generally.

It was clear that in the absence of any national admissions system (there being no equivalent of UCAS for all PGT course applicants), institutions manage their admissions processes in somewhat different ways. Some HEIs have invested in highly automated application systems which enable progress tracking by applicants. Detailed investigation of these admission systems was outside the scope of this study. However, guiding applicants through application processes and information about timescales for responses is important, and application-tracking can also help to trigger decision-making by prospective students.

Some prospective students may move to the application stage before they have really made a decision. The information that they subsequently receive in relation to finalising their fees and funding and about the potential timetabling of their teaching may prove pivotal in whether they can practically enrol on the course. This would suggest that it is important for HE institutions to provide appealing and useful information relating to processes and opportunities for post-admission engagement, in order to maximise the chances of 'converting' the applicant to an enrolling student.

Several institutions are developing rich media content to provide additional and attractive information to maintain engagement with the applicant. This could range from videos of the department or guest tutors, or trips undertaken during the course, or personal blogs or narratives to continue to reassure applicants that those on the course are people like them.

Swansea provides good admission and post-admission information (Figure 33) including clear expected turnaround times for responses and the subsequent requirements and processes through to enrolment. This extends right through to post-enrolment assistance with finding accommodation and an annual 'postgraduate house-hunting' event as an opportunity to meet other students seeking to share accommodation.

Figure 33 Extract from Swansea University website
<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/postgraduate/apply/after-application/>

After you apply

- Current students
- Research programmes
- Taught courses
- Fees and funding
- Apply
 - How to apply
 - After you apply
 - Accepting your offer
 - After accepting your place
 - Entry requirements
 - English language requirements
 - Taught via the medium of English
 - Acceptable English Language tests
 - Requirements for English speaking countries
- Postgraduate open days
- Accommodation
- Postgraduate House Hunting Event

We will acknowledge receipt of your application via email (online applications) or by letter (paper applications) within 2 working days.

If you have not sent all your supporting documents with your application, please do so as soon as possible so that your application can be considered and a decision made on whether to offer you a place. Please quote your Swansea student number in all correspondence with us.

Your application will be considered "complete" once your supporting documentation is received; it will be processed by the Postgraduate Admissions Office and then sent to the relevant Admissions Tutor in the appropriate College for a decision.

Our decision:

Following consideration by Admissions Tutors in the academic Colleges, you will be informed whether:

- > You are to be offered a place
- > You are to be invited for interview
- > We are unable to offer you a place

You will receive either a **conditional** or **unconditional** offer from us, or we will inform you that we are unable to offer you a place. We will notify you of our decision by letter (international applicants are sent a copy of their letter by email). Offer letters to candidates in the UK are sent by first class post. Airmail postage times from the UK vary depending on the country of destination.

Taught Master's applications: Once we have received all the necessary supporting documentation, we aim to notify you of our decision (or issue an invitation for interview) within 10 working days from the date we acknowledge receipt of your application.

Research degree applications: we aim to make a decision within 4 to 6 weeks, depending on the additional information we require (for example, further details of your research proposal).

Interviews:

The majority of programmes do not require an interview as part of the selection process. If an interview is required, the purpose and format will be communicated to you by the College so you know what to expect and what role this plays in the overall selection process.

A few Masters' courses (specifically in the Department of English Language and Literature) require candidates to provide additional written work to supplement an application.



After you apply
What happens next?

Nottingham University Business School breaks its provision of FAQs (frequently asked questions) down into those for general admissions (in reality all stages leading up to application), offer-holders and those who are actually enrolling (Figure 34). It also invites communication between offer-holders and its careers service and offers them links to online resources to help them develop their business skills and employability even before they start the course. Such efforts are likely to be important a part of continuing engagement with the student, because many are in reality only going to make a final decision some time after they make their applications.

Figure 34 Screenshot from Nottingham University Business School website <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/msc/FAQ.html>

keyword(s) GO Please Select GO

UK Campus

Nottingham University Business School
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Home | About us | Undergraduate | MSc | MBA | Executive Education | Research | People | Alumni

Business School > MSc > FAQs

Business School MSc Programmes

School Intranet

- Why Nottingham
- Degrees
- Modules
- Facilities & Resources
- Careers & Recruitment
- Community Engagement
- Admissions
- FAQs**
- Fees
- Scholarships
- Open Days & Fairs
- Brochure
- Videos

Frequently Asked Questions

- [General Admissions Questions](#) ▼
- [Questions Specifically in relation to Offer-Holders](#) ▼
- [How do I accept my offer?](#) ▼
- [Do I need to pay a deposit?](#) ▼
- [When can I apply for accommodation?](#) ▼
- [I have not met the conditions of offer can I still start the course?](#) ▼
- [I was made a conditional offer and have evidence that I met the conditions of my offer. What do I do now?](#) ▼
- [Are there any scholarships available?](#) ▼
- [I have been awarded a scholarship and/or my sponsor is paying the full tuition fee amount, who do I need to inform?](#) ▼
- [How much additional money is needed to cover living costs, e.g. food, books, accommodation?](#) ▼



7.7 Recommendations

Recommendations for HE institutions based on the case study work are included in chapter 8.

8 Key findings, recommendations and questions for stakeholders

This section reviews the key findings of the study and sets out a series of recommendations and questions for different stakeholders. The questions are designed to stimulate thinking rather than to pre-judge what the responses of stakeholders should be.

8.1 Information needs and provision

There were a number of key findings relating to the provision of information to support postgraduate decision-making:

- The postgraduate population is very diverse and, unsurprisingly, this means that they approach decision-making about PGT study in a wide range of different ways.
- Some respondents were interested in the idea of a national site providing information about postgraduate study.
- Respondents to the survey were typically interested in very local and programme-specific information about the courses that they were exploring.
- Prospective postgraduate students believed that most of the information that they needed to make their decisions was available somewhere but was not always easily found, and they would like better signposting to this information.
- There was some evidence that those returning to HE for PGT study found it somewhat harder to find the information they needed than those continuing from prior HE study. There was no evidence that they needed different or new types of information.
- The types of information that they found hardest to find related to safety and security (for international students), course or departmental reputation, expected time commitment and workload, and career outcomes for graduates from a specific programme. For the latter they were not necessarily looking for DLHE³ type employment destination data, but for evidence of longer term impact of undertaking a course on career progression or change.
- Overwhelmingly the direct human contact they sought was with course academic faculty, while significant minorities also wanted to interact with current students or recent graduates to share experiences and gain new perspectives.
- The model of postgraduate decision-making provides a possible underpinning for many of the findings of this research.

³ HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey

Key recommendations and questions

For HE institutions

- Institutions should aim to provide consistent, accurate and up-to-date course-specific content, and make it accessible or searchable by a range of means. *Course exploration is the heart of the information journey, once reassurance is available that study is possible and could be funded. In addition to A-Z lists of course titles, access to course information via course title clustering or broader subject group, by career sector or study mode are all useful entry routes.*
- Information about finance and funding needs to be accessible at all stages of the decision-making journey, generically and in relation to the course being considered. *Fees and extra course costs are only part of this and potentially less important than the question of whether funding might be possible. Searchable funding databases – including by course subject – are recommended where feasible.*
- Institutions should develop information about programmes that provides a greater level of detail about the programme workload and how it is distributed across the year. *This was revealed as one of the areas of information that prospective returners found hardest to obtain, but is critical to reassure them that study is feasible for them.*
- Institutions should develop a wider range of information (both quantitative and qualitative) about the career outcomes for graduates of their specific PGT programmes. *Since many returners to HE seek career progression or change, not entry to a first job, employment destination statistics may not give them the evidence they seek. Qualitative stories from graduates from the specific course sharing their experiences and career outcomes will also be effective. This could be linked to facilitation of contact with graduates to share experiences.*
- Institutions should review the way that they provide information in the light of the model of PGT decision-making proposed in this study. *The decision-making journey for many prospective applicants is not linear, so well-designed websites will enable users to migrate quickly between information reassuring them about hygiene factors they need to satisfy and the course-specific content that motivates and inspires them. This has implications for webpage design and layout.*
- Institutions should consider segmenting their marketing and provision of information further to recognise and reflect the diversity of the PGT market better. *This might be segmentation based on UK vs. international students, ‘continuers’ vs. ‘returners’ (although this is perhaps a continuum), by different career-driven motives (progression or change), or broadly by subject or career sector.*
- How could institutions make more use of the wide range of information and resources that exists online to support postgraduate decision-making? *Prospective students indicate that many of these are useful, but most prospective students are unaware of these resources.*

For the sector

- Should the sector collaborate to develop a central website for postgraduate courses? *In considering this question it is important to be mindful of (1) the fact that respondents are seeking programme-specific information and (2) that there are already a number of commercial sites occupying this space. Any new site would therefore need to find a distinctive place in the market that meets student needs (and would be unlikely simply to mirror Unistats for first degree students).*
- The sector should review (and consider endorsing) and recommend that HEIs promote the 'Postgraduate Choices' toolkit as a basis for assistance for prospective students.
- Should there be any attempt by the sector to agree minimum types and levels of information that will be available about each postgraduate programme?
- Should the sector commission work to explore effective ways to present information about the career outcomes of postgraduate programmes? *At present institutions are comfortable with presenting quantitative information and able to marshal individual case studies but there is very little practice in between these two extremes.*

For policymakers

- Is the current approach to the collection and distribution of postgraduate information adequate to underpin growth in the PGT market?

8.2 Human contact and career informants

There were a number of findings which related to the opportunity for prospective students to connect with people who might be able to inform the decision that they were making.

- The people with whom respondents to the survey were by far the most keen to make direct contact were academics directly involved in teaching the specific course they were interested in, but many did not find this easy (especially those outside the HE system).
- Significant proportions wanted to make contact with current students on the course, recent graduates and other kinds of career informants. Few found this easy.
- Institutions in the case studies raised some of the challenges of providing direct access to a wide range of individuals while still ensuring a consistent experience for prospective students.
- The extent to which rich (e.g. video) or social media are being used to provide narratives from current students or recent graduates is modest but increasing.

- Given the importance reported of visiting an institution (as a potential trigger for selection), a few but growing number of institutions offer virtual tours, visits or events for remote and international students who cannot visit the HEI physically.

Key recommendations and questions

For HE institutions

- Institutions should develop careful strategies to facilitate the direct contact with academic faculty sought by prospective applicants, but underpin this with an enquiry-handling system to ensure timeliness of response and also to enable capture of key information for their CRM systems. *Substantial investment may be required for automated systems to do this but there may be more creative and pragmatic approaches.*
- Institutions should actively develop rich and social media resources to inform prospective students and to create dialogue between potential, current and future students. *Increasingly, people regard relevant personal narratives as important and potentially as reliable as corporate information; this could augment evidence for outcomes as well as sharing experiences to reassure returners that PGT study is for 'people like me'.*
- Institutions should consider using their current students in engagement and ambassadorial roles with enquirers, applicants and offer-holders. *Ongoing engagement will support prospective students' progress towards application and ultimately decision prior to enrolment; such effort by current students could be used as part of employability learning.*
- Can HE institutions develop systems that provide a greater level of access to career informants with direct experience of the programmes that applicants are interested in? *The case studies suggested that enabling such direct contact to be made is important but will work best if managed or tracked in a structured way to ensure consistency.*

For the sector

- Can stakeholders and participants in the sector develop an approach to the sharing of new and innovative practice in this area? *Providing prospective students with direct access to career informants will be a new area for most institutions and there would be value in dialogue as institutions develop approaches to this issue.*

For policymakers

- Should there be any imperative on institutions to provide access to student perspectives on PGT programmes?

8.3 Professional career support

A number of research findings related to opportunities for prospective students to access professional careers advisory support.

- Relatively few prospective PGT students had obtained any professional guidance or career support for this decision.
- This was likely to be harder for prospective returners than for those already within the HE sector, who have more immediate and physical access to a university careers service.
- Our 'Postgraduate Choices' toolkit, which offers support to all groups of potential PGT students, could provide the basis for more specific PGT study advice by existing institutional careers services and also potentially the National Careers Service.

Key recommendations and questions

For HE institutions

- Institutions should make use of good third party resources such as the Postgraduate Choices toolkit, promoting it to prospective students embarking on their information-seeking journey.
- Should HE institutions routinely provide career support to their graduates? *At present some but not all institutions provide this service to their alumni for a period after graduation, but not all graduates are aware of this opportunity.*
- Should HE institutions open up their careers services to prospective postgraduate students? *There may be substantial implications for both resourcing and for issues of impartiality if this approach is actively adopted.*

For the sector

- Should there be a stronger national agreement about the entitlement of graduates to access career support from the institutions where they undertook their first degree? *At present this entitlement is highly variable across institutions and not well understood by many graduates.*

For policymakers

- Should the National Careers Service be up-skilled to manage enquiries about postgraduate study? *At present the National Careers Service has a remit to cover all adults in England. However, in practice the focus of the service is likely to limit its expertise in relation to PGT.*

8.4 Processes and policy issues

Although not directly a focus for this research, institutional processes and cultures were part of the context for the study and a number of challenges were evident for institutions.

Key recommendations and questions

For HE institutions

- Admissions processes should be clearly explained including the timescales expected for communications and decisions.
- Institutions should consider opportunities to continue to engage with the prospective student after application. *This is partly to raise the chances of the student selecting the HEI and enrolling, but also reflecting that for many prospective returners the final decision to study a PGT programme may be very late indeed, i.e. right up until enrolment.*

For the sector

- Could there be scope to share experiences and best practice as institutions grapple with the challenge of meeting students' information needs at the same time as operating in a business-like manner? *The issue of progressive centralisation of institutional processes, while detailed knowledge remained at a faculty level, was for example a consistent challenge across all the HEIs studied*

For policymakers

- The lack of a centralised application process may be framing the way in which the PGT market is working and could reinforce the tendency for PGT applicants only to look to a very limited number of institutions. Is there a policy aspiration to develop the PGT arena into a more genuine market, and to reinforce the possibility of rational decision-making within it, in which case a centralised system or other market support mechanism might need to be considered?
- This report has highlighted the 'hygiene' factors that enable serious consideration of PGT study for many students, particularly those from the UK that return to HE after some years in the labour market. These are clearly strongly linked to issues of socio-economic position or advantage. Should there be further consideration of how widening participation strategies should be adopted at the postgraduate level?

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10 Appendix – Case studies

This selection of case studies is included to provide key contextual information to support the good practice highlighted in Chapter 7, which it is hoped will be useful for HE institutions. This is the material, along with our initial review of the 36 websites, from which the practice was identified and illustrated. Our thanks are due to the institutions and named staff for sharing information and background so readily and helpfully.

University of Birmingham

The University of Birmingham has responded in multiple ways to what is known through research about the information needs of taught postgraduates. Foremost among those needs is detailed information about a postgraduate course, its cost and where it might lead. The University has made several enhancements that help prospective PGT students make decisions about the likely return on investment in a postgraduate course. Such decision-making support is underpinned by a robust enquiry management system.

Some 4,500 first-year postgraduate students enrolled in taught courses at the University of Birmingham in 2011/12, the fifth highest number of the Russell Group of universities. Birmingham has a higher proportion of part-time taught postgraduate students (31%) than the Russell Group average (24%). This is largely due to its areas of strength in social science, with many courses attended by employees as on-going professional development. 33% of all PGT enrolments are in Education and 19% in Social Studies. Such enrolments also help to give Birmingham a higher proportion of UK students (55%) plus a slightly older age profile than the Russell Group average.

Steve Allmark, Head of Postgraduate Recruitment, leads a large team including two recruitment officers and three advisers. The team is supplemented by doctoral and Masters students employed in enquiry-handling and promotional roles.

Much effort has gone into providing students with complete and timely information on fees, accommodation costs and possible funding sources. Birmingham's 2014 Postgraduate Prospectus lists the fee for every PG course for every mode of study. A parallel information-gathering exercise has collected details of each school's scholarships and bursaries. As a result the postgraduate section of the Birmingham website now offers a substantial database of funding searchable at subject level (Figure 25).

PGT course information available on the website includes not only course outlines but, in many cases, detailed information about individual course modules. A further enhancement would be to enable pre-entrants to click through to the actual course module record – that is, the detailed information that students traditionally receive at the start of term, including timetables – to enable a full understanding of what a course entails. The University Registry is currently undertaking a review of systems needed to enable such a development.

With regard to employability information, all courses on the website contain a section with a description of typical career paths from the course. Sometimes this section also contains

data from the HESA (DLHE) survey of PG alumni six months after graduation. The University also publishes destination data at school level in the *What do Birmingham postgraduates do?* publication, and offers this to postgraduate applicants as a download. Where available, employability information for postgraduate research (PGR) and PGT graduates are shown separately.

Steve Allmark explains that *What do Birmingham postgraduates do?* is one of several enhancements benefiting PGT that have grown out of initiatives developed to strengthen the recruitment and experience of PGR. Another example is the 'Café Masters' series of informal face-to-face events led by current or former Birmingham Masters students. They share their experience to help prospective applicants to learn more about the experience of studying for a Masters degree at the University.

The University's postgraduate enquiry management system has seen regular enhancements over the last few years. Prospective PGT students have the choice of directing queries to either current students or staff. The University's Postgraduate Mentor scheme (Figure 30), set up several years ago to facilitate new students' transition to PG study, is now available as an email enquiry and informal buddying system for prospective applicants as well as those with an offer of a place. Some 80 doctoral- and Masters-student volunteer mentors are profiled on school web pages. Mentors are often asked student-related questions that prospective applicants might feel reluctant to put to the University through other channels. The scheme is particularly well used by international enquirers.

Investment in Tribal's SITS Enterprise Service Desk (ESD) technology enabled postgraduate enquiries directed at staff to be harvested from all email addresses across the university. The PG Recruitment team are now able to effectively, economically and efficiently manage high volumes of enquiries from prospective students as well as provide support in the management of those enquiries across multiple academic schools and other central support functions. This ensures that queries are handled promptly and avoids academics being burdened with answering the non-course-related queries they sometimes receive.

Central monitoring of enquiries also facilitates the capture of contact information: emails in response to queries give enquirers the option to sign up for a range of further information on topics such as open days, postgraduate fairs, and newsletters. Employing doctoral and Masters students on the enquiry service, with their personal knowledge of how postgraduate study works at the University, has worked very well. Such is the success of the postgraduate enquiry service that the University is investing in developing a dedicated contact centre to handle all enquiries from prospective undergraduate through to PGR.

Acknowledgement:

Steve Allmark, Head of Postgraduate Recruitment

Cranfield University

Deciding that its website was no longer fit for purpose, Cranfield University looked to develop a new, customer-focused website built upon a thorough appraisal of user needs. The result is a well-designed site that makes it simple for users to find the information they want through a number of search options and clear navigation. The website is the latest example of several enhancements that respond to prospective postgraduates' needs and preferences.

Cranfield University offers advanced practical, postgraduate and professional education in science and technology subjects and business management. Students from over 100 countries make up its taught postgraduate population of around 4400. 47% are following part-time courses; the great majority of these are employer sponsored. 48% of PGT students are from the UK, a substantial 29% from the wider EU, and 23% from the rest of the world. Many of those from the wider EU are following 'double degrees' developed through long-standing strategic partnerships with top universities in France, Spain and other countries.

Professor William Stephens, Cranfield's Secretary and Registrar, explains that people considering a Cranfield Masters are focused on career development in one of two ways. Some are seeking a particular course that will help them progress in their existing career; others want to change career and are looking for the best course to launch them in a new direction. Cranfield's strong links with industry attract potential students to the university. Word of mouth and, particularly, the student's employer are major sources of referral. Awareness of Cranfield's science and technology courses among prospective PGT students is variable, however: the lack of an undergraduate population and of PGT 'league tables' are disadvantages in this respect (in contrast, Cranfield's School of Management benefits from a high profile, aided by global MBA rankings). Given this context, a professional, high-quality website was seen as crucial, both to communicate the Cranfield offer to prospective PGT students, and to match the expectations of employers.

Professor Clifford Friend, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, points out that the new website's customer-focused approach leads on from earlier student-oriented enhancements. These include:

- a personalised prospectus: enquirers select relevant content and opt to download a PDF version or receive a print version by post
- a selection of open days throughout the year, including some weekend dates
- an online application portal enabling prospective PGT students to keep all information in one place and track the progress of their application.

Amy Greenaway, External Communications, led the website project. For her, a key weakness of the old site was that its structure mirrored Cranfield's internal organisation (e.g. School microsites) and did not sufficiently consider the user's perspective. The project to redevelop the website was a major investment – not least in staff time. A working group comprising people from the marketing departments of each School and shared services was tasked with finding the best solution for external audiences – a brief which sometimes took the group out of its comfort zone. One challenge was being prepared to leave out sections of

the old website (much was no longer needed as Cranfield had a well-established intranet).

The working group looked at the websites of some other universities, and – importantly – non-university organisations (such as professional development providers and those of Cranfield’s strategic partners and other corporates the University works with) to identify good practice elsewhere. This helped inform external agencies on design and development of the site. A key principle is to enable users to control the information presented: as well as search options for courses, student funding, and academic experts, the use of cascading menus and the ‘expand/collapse’ feature enables the reader to home in on the information they require. Website design is based on templates, which makes it easier to aggregate content as well as provide consistent information. When supplying content (using a single form), academic and other staff select appropriate tags, to enable the same content to be accessed under different headings. For example, a page about research Masters courses is found via both ‘study’ and ‘research’ menus, as well as via search.

To assure quality, final content is the responsibility of a virtual web team of 30 people across schools and service departments. The team is split into nine subject-specific sub-teams, each co-ordinated by a lead web editor. Led by the Communications team, all have taken part in training in writing for the web, search engine optimisation, picking images and best practice in CMS (content management systems). When course leaders and service departments provide information it is edited by the next available member of the appropriate sub-team, ensuring timely posting of new content. There are already signs that departments prefer the new arrangements and are engaging more with content development.

The new website went live in September 2013 with core content. Since career relevance is so important in the choice of postgraduate study, Cranfield is particularly keen to expand rich content related to the course pages on ‘Your future career’, such as alumni profiles and case studies: the launch version of the website is just the start.

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Phil Bailey, Assistant Registrar

Kingston University

Kingston University's website is user-friendly and gives the prospective postgraduate student much helpful information about studying there. Course options are presented clearly and consistently. As a multi-campus university (a potential source of confusion to prospective students) Kingston's website successfully provides comprehensive but easy-to-digest information about its various locations.

Kingston University has almost 4000 taught postgraduates, 60% of whom are enrolled as part-time students. Around a quarter of postgraduates are international students, from a wide range of countries.

The typical Kingston postgraduate graduated from their first degree within the last five years and is doing a postgraduate course to improve their employability or career prospects. Alison Steel, Kingston's Director of Marketing and Communications, observes that most prospective postgraduates make instrumental choices based on subject, the perceived value of the course and their personal circumstances. Providing good course detail and financial information on the website is therefore a priority.

PGT information – through the website, print prospectuses and email marketing – is co-ordinated centrally by the web and communications teams, who liaise with the university's five faculties. The university has recently appointed a central Postgraduate Marketing Co-ordinator. Faculties will still bring flavour and distinctiveness to their postgraduate marketing while benefitting from the enhanced support of the central marketing team.

General and course-specific information for prospective postgraduate students is housed on the university's corporate website, a site for external visitors only. The website is geared to user requirements. Consistent presentation, clear navigation and appropriate 'tone of voice' are core principles. The university has invested strongly in its web and digital team, led by Matt Osbourn. Matt emphasises that improving the user experience is at the heart of Kingston's approach. Website enhancements must have a good answer to the question: How will this help the user?

Evidence-based enhancements are developed through tracking user behaviour, monitoring trends and horizon scanning. For example, since more people are using non-standard sizes of computer screen and reading email on mobiles, Kingston has developed its corporate website to have a fully responsive design so that the site automatically adjusts to the shape of the user's screen space. Student ambassadors are involved in user testing and the web team liaises with the design and publication team to ensure appropriate presentation and tone of voice. The concern for user needs is equally evident in website content, such as the information about the four Kingston campuses, which includes 'virtual tours'.

A large proportion of site visitors reach the website via organic search (i.e. from a generic search engine) rather than as referrals from third-party websites or advertising. Such visitors are already motivated to look into courses at Kingston: the web team use this information to impress upon course directors the importance of sending through up-to-date course information.

The web and digital team collect course information by providing faculty postgraduate marketing teams with (mandatory) set fields for completion. Faculties are also encouraged to supply additional information helpful to potential students, such as student and alumni profiles (written and video). Faculties are able to edit some web pages themselves, but the web content editor maintains an overview to ensure quality. Central control by the content editor over how course information is presented has two benefits. First it ensures that course information is sufficiently detailed and appropriate for the web (the content editor rewriting as necessary so that content reads well for the web). Second, central control helps optimise traffic to the site: the content editor checks that course information includes key terms for search engine optimisation.

A constant challenge is maintaining and enhancing the quality of course information. While some course directors are very mindful of providing updates and value-add information, for others this is a lower priority. The web team supports busy course directors by linking relevant stories from the news section of the corporate website to the relevant course pages.

Employability information for postgraduates is an upcoming priority for the website – to extend existing good practice across all postgraduate courses. This aim responds to the university's recent Review of the Academic Framework, which has introduced an embedded employability curriculum at discipline level. The aim of the review was not only to modernise the curriculum in line with contemporary needs, but to define more clearly what Kingston offers students, as part of the University's commitment to producing 'confident, creative and resilient graduates'.

Acknowledgements:

Alison Steel, Director of Marketing and Communications

Matt Osbourn, Web and Digital Manager

Nottingham University Business School (NUBS)

Nottingham University Business School attracts a highly international postgraduate population. Student feedback suggests that applicants value the opportunities provided for making contact with university staff and students during the application process. These opportunities include support from in-house careers staff.

Nottingham University Business School (NUBS) offers an extensive number of full-time postgraduate taught programmes and one part-time programme (an Executive MBA). In 2013 NUBS had over 500 students enrolled on postgraduate taught programmes across full-time and part-time MSc and MBA courses at its UK campus. This case study focuses on the one-year MSc programmes at NUBS where overseas students – from 47 countries – make up over two-thirds of the total. The largest cohorts are from India, China, Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Amanda Shacklock, MSc and Doctoral Programmes Manager, explains that among the attractions of postgraduate study at NUBS are small class sizes, extensive choice of optional modules and, for students on some courses, the opportunity to spend a semester at one of the University's two overseas campuses in China or Malaysia. Indeed, the university's Far East campuses and international offices have a major impact on recruitment. Students moving to Nottingham after studying at one of the overseas campuses form a growing cohort.

The University's International Office (IO) has responsibility for overseas recruitment and for relationships with overseas partners. The University has offices in Brazil, Mexico, China, Malaysia, Ghana and India. Recruitment events across the world are the most important means of face-to-face contact with prospective international students. Each year NUBS MSc admissions staff meet with the IO to review the success of the previous year's events. The team also briefs the International Officers about the courses and what is available.

Prospective students seeking business school further degrees are particularly interested in how the programme will provide them with a return on their investment. Additional accreditation by professional bodies (such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing and Chartered Banker Institute) is attractive to potential applicants, and some NUBS courses offer a dual award in partnership with other Schools in the University. Decisions are also influenced by family, overseas agents, alumni and – importantly – business school standing in international rankings and accreditation held (such as EQUIS and AMBA).

Applications for masters courses are made online. In line with an increasing number of other institutions, the University has introduced an application fee for all but existing University of Nottingham students. The purpose of the fee is to attract only applicants with a commitment to postgraduate study (the university had been receiving several thousand PG applications each year). All applications go to a central admissions unit before transfer to NUBS where they are sent to the academic admissions tutor for review and a recommendation. Successful applicants are sent an offer by the University, from autumn onwards.

Julie Blant, Postgraduate Careers Service Manager, explains that the NUBS careers team also look to engage with potential students early on and support them in exploring how their

PG studies can help their career. Careers staff contribute to the newsletters sent to offer-holders and provide them access to online resources to help them identify skills, interests, motivations and preferred business culture at an early stage.

The careers service also publicises its calendar of careers events and employer visits. In addition it provides destination information (see Figure 24). The careers team can be contacted with queries about where the course might lead and takes part in open days and recruitment activities. Looking ahead, the team is setting up a webinar series which will be made available to potential students. This will provide another valuable channel for engaging in career thinking before the start of postgraduate studies.

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Julie Blant, Postgraduate Careers Service Manager

Sheffield Hallam University

How can university websites most effectively meet prospective students' needs both for clear and accessible factual information and more personal content such as testimonials to encourage their interests and aspirations? Sheffield Hallam University has developed a distinctive solution, where its online prospectus plays a key role.

Sheffield Hallam University draws a large proportion of its UK postgraduate students from the city of Sheffield and surrounding region. Around 80% of its UK taught postgraduates study part time. Of these, three-fifths are aged 30–49, and nearly two-thirds are female. This profile reflects extensive provision of masters for professional development in Education and Health Sciences. International students account for 37% of all postgraduate enrolments.

Analysis of web traffic and user feedback has confirmed that visitors come to the site seeking course information above all else and that a prospectus is seen as the primary resource for finding out more. The University has responded to these motivations by linking the two: it provides a personalised online prospectus generated from a course finder search mechanism. The resulting resource aims to meet considerably more information needs than does a traditional 'static' prospectus. The online prospectus is distinctive for being customisable and for its rich content at course level.

Joe Keable, Communications Officer, who is responsible for the online prospectus, says that since prospective PGT look to a prospectus as a key source of information, the online prospectus should contain as much vital information to support decision-making as possible. At the same time, information must be easily discoverable – hence the design principle that all information is on, or directly accessible from, the course page. The Online Prospectus: Coursefinder page (which visitors reach from 'Find a course' on the University home page) enables the user to search for courses in a variety of ways: by course area, A–Z or key word, filtered by mode of attendance (part-time, full-time and distance learning) as well as level (undergraduate or postgraduate and research). Having found a course description, with its associated information about who the course is designed for, entry requirements, fees, funding, assessment, and other key facts, the prospective student can also gain a sense of what their experience on such a course might be like by exploring other written, visual and aural material. On the MA in Cultural Policy and Management page, for example, interactive media boxes include staff profiles, alumni profiles and out-of-class activities. Examples of rich content on other course pages include 360 degree tours of course workspaces, images of student coursework and course leader introductions.

Dawn Shepherd, Student Marketing UK Manager (PG PT) feels that providing students with this breadth of information gives important support for decision-making. Given the logistical and financial challenges faced by many prospective PGT, reaching a decision to apply for a course can take years rather than months: prospective students want to be sure they have made a good course decision. She adds that market research shows that users want rich content to complement core course information, not substitute for it, and that written content is highly valued as well as video.

Other innovative features of the online prospectus include the ability to compare two courses side by side, save courses for future reference and create a personalised prospectus.

Although printed guides are still published to give generic information about studying at Sheffield Hallam, all course-level information is now obtained directly from the website, enabling enquirers to print the most up-to-date course information.

Generic 'Postgraduate study information' web pages complement the online prospectus. These pages contain extensive information to support PG decision-making such as reasons for choosing Sheffield Hallam and available support. Other study information pages are dedicated to international students, undergraduates and employability (pages for part-time students are soon to be integrated into other areas in response to user feedback.)

Like other universities, Sheffield Hallam wants to convey to potential students how its offer is not just about providing a course, but a wider developmental opportunity, with support for employability part of that experience. One chosen method is an evolving media campaign 'Tomorrow's You', featuring profiles of current Sheffield Hallam students talking about their experiences. Postgraduate students are well represented among the short videos and written material. Such profiles exemplify how potential students can find information that resonates with their aspirations and addresses some of their questions and concerns. Postgraduate interviewees typically talk about their motivation for the course, doubts about returning to study resolved and challenges overcome, the course experience and features, benefits (including unexpected ones), relevance to current job (if part time) and future career. The University is planning to feature students after they graduate to extend the future reach of these testimonials from student experience to where it may lead.

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Ian Healey, Digital Marketing Officer, Sheffield Hallam University

University of Stirling

A visitor to the University of Stirling's website will find it simple to absorb essential information about its postgraduate programmes. The University has recently redeveloped its website to focus on providing the core information potential applicants need for their decision-making. Website development is part of a wider change whereby web content leads print material (e.g. the prospectus). While academic Schools are responsible for web information, Stirling's Graduate School has a cross-cutting role to help spread good practice.

The University of Stirling has over 3000 taught postgraduate students; around 60% study full time and 55% are from outside the UK. With 89 countries represented, Stirling has a very cosmopolitan student body with diverse needs. The Stirling Management School contains the largest proportion of overseas students and has close links to employers. The University, through courses in the School of Natural Sciences has had major success with the Scottish Funding Council-funded 'Making the Most of Masters' initiative (<http://www.mastersprojects.ac.uk/>).

The university's marketing channels are its website and prospectus, which is also available as an 'app' for smart phones and tablets. Dr Stephanie Colvan, Stirling Graduate School Policy Officer, explains that the website has recently undergone significant review and enhancement. A key aim of the new site is to present the core information users need for decision-making.

First, effective course search requires an understanding of how users might look for subjects – so one prerequisite is careful choice of course names. A choice of navigational means (e.g. 'A to Z', 'by Subject', 'by course title' and 'by School') is provided to enable users to find relevant information quickly and efficiently.

Much effort goes into making sure that information about programme objectives and learning outcomes is described in succinct and accessible language, both to assist with decision-making and ensure potential applicants have a clear understanding of content and shared expectations. Each programme description gives prominent display to information about available modes of study, entry criteria, fees and start dates. Other core criteria for decision-making are future careers and availability of funding. Programme information includes a section about careers where, in general terms, the destinations of Stirling's PGT graduates are outlined. As for funding, the scholarship pages of the website bring internal and external funding opportunities into one searchable area, enabling users to access information relevant to their level of study, nationality and subject of interest.

Stirling, like other institutions with a significant number of postgraduate programmes, knows that achieving accurate and timely web information requires concerted effort and close management of information across different stakeholders. Marketing, the web team and the recruitment and admissions services are managed centrally under a single directorate, Development and External Affairs. The university's seven academic Schools are increasingly adopting a business partner model that sees marketing officer roles shared between a named school and the central marketing function. Stirling Graduate School, an overarching 'virtual' school, straddles academic and services areas and works with both to develop consistency in form and content of web and print information.

The central marketing and web teams have oversight of the PGT programme information provided by Schools for the top-level web content, which feeds the published prospectus and the app. The use of a single source of programme information is important to ensure consistency. Schools provide enhancement to core web content on school-/division-specific webpages through additional information about the discipline, context and research groups. Course module information is also available on School pages (and is managed by Schools).

The University has an annual process of information update and checking in the early spring 18 months in advance of the applicant year of entry. The web content management system is locked to schools at this point and central teams undertake quality control/house-style monitoring of all information for all PGT programmes. Web information is updated in real time as changes to the University's portfolio occur throughout the year. Its fast-track programme approval process – designed to reduce the time from 'proof of concept' to 'market ready' – enables early promotion of new programmes.

Stephanie Colvan says that implementing a 'web leading print' approach that places responsibility for course information with Schools requires staff to work in unfamiliar ways, which can bring challenges. Identifying and training those staff with new responsibilities has been the first step in addressing these, and support is in place to help embed these activities. Stirling Graduate School promotes and shares good practice across Schools in areas such as developing effective programme information.

With the same rigorous intent as the website redevelopment, a review of the 'student journey' is also underway, to optimise the University's communication at all key points of contact from enquiry through to enrolment, and to ensure delivery of key messages and calls to action. As part of this the University has carried out reviews of enquiry management and postgraduate admissions processes, aimed at streamlining systems to maximise effectiveness and to enhance the service to prospective students and other stakeholders.

Acknowledgement:

Dr Stephanie Colvan, Stirling Graduate School Policy Officer

Swansea University

Ensuring that prospective students are able to access the information they are looking for, and providing them with helpful information they may not have been aware of previously, so that they can make informed decisions, is fundamental to Swansea University's strategic approach to information provision for prospective postgraduate taught students.

Swansea University has over 1,500 postgraduate taught students, of which approximately 66% are enrolled as full-time students. Around 35% of taught postgraduates are International students. The largest numbers of postgraduate taught students reside in the Arts and Humanities, Human and Health Sciences, Law, and Management subject areas. In 2015 the University's Bay Campus will open, providing facilities and capacity to increase the number of postgraduate students studying at Swansea University.

The University's surveys of prospective postgraduate students show that they find out about its degrees through various routes – existing academic supervisor, employer, friends and family, and external course comparison websites are often cited. Once aware that Swansea University offers a programme that may be of interest the vast majority of prospective students indicate that they find the information they require on the University website.

While there are times of the year that more postgraduate applications are made than others, the University receives applications throughout the year. Some students apply early (a year ahead) and others apply very late, particularly those completing an undergraduate degree at the time (in the week before enrolment). As applications are spread throughout the year the 'student journey' is quite different for each applicant. For example, many funding deadlines are early in the year and late applicants miss out on the opportunity to apply for funding.

The postgraduate taught section of Swansea University's website includes information for students up to the point of enrolment. The Student Recruitment Office has oversight of the postgraduate taught branch of the website to ensure quality, appearance, consistency and accuracy of information. The content and design of the sub-sections within the branch are the responsibility of those departments most closely associated to the content (e.g. the Admissions Office maintains the 'apply' section, and Colleges maintain the course pages).

Dr Mark Skippen, Senior Postgraduate Recruitment Officer, explains that Swansea University's Marketing Strategy supports the University's Strategic Plan, and includes the specific aim to 'Improve the communications journey for potential applicants'. To this end the 'student journey' has been mapped out and used to develop the content and detail of the channels of communication with prospective students.

One example of how the University helps prospective applicants with clearer information is in explaining the application process. As Mark Skippen points out, the direct application process can be confusing for some prospective postgraduate students who have only been through the UCAS process (or another form of application in the country of their previous institution) or who are applying to other universities with different processes. To help prospective students the University has set up an 'apply' navigation page that reflects the main steps of an application. Applicants can visit the [/postgraduate/apply/](#) page, identify which section reflects their current stage of the process and navigate to the information they

need more quickly than they might do if the information was all on one page.

Improving the presentation and management of information are ongoing processes. Depending on the level of change being considered, developments to the web pages are normally discussed between the Web Team, Digital Marketing Office and the department responsible for the section on the website. All of the central pages of the website must have an English and Welsh version which can slow the content updating process a little.

Since the course pages have been identified as the most visited part of the postgraduate section, teams are working towards ensuring that all information that a prospective student might need is located on a course page or easily accessible from it. The University is also working towards having as much course-page content as possible populated from its databases to reduce duplication of work, and importantly to reduce the risk of inaccuracy due to human error.

Mark Skippen notes that the continually increasing number of external course comparison websites and the possible differences between their content undermine some of Swansea University's work to ensure accurate information is available to prospective students. The University currently manually updates six course comparison websites and further scholarship websites. Some external websites do not update their systems regularly so the information is often out of date.

The University's postgraduate web pages encourage prospective students to contact the University by email, phone, or attend an Open Day if they have questions that cannot be answered when they look at the website at whatever stage of the process they are at. Enquiries are also received via the University's social media channels. Following a review of how prospective student enquiries are handled, a new relationship management system for communicating with potential students at all stages pre-enrolment has been rolled out.

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Dr Mark Skippen, Senior Postgraduate Recruitment Officer

11 List of abbreviations

CMS	Content Management System
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education [Survey]
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
KIS	Key Information Set
NSS	National Student Survey
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
PG	Postgraduate
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
PGR	Postgraduate Research
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TNE	Trans-National Education
UG	Undergraduate