

Higher Education Funding Council for England

Title	Providing postgraduate taught information, and launch of 'Steps to Postgraduate Study'
To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of universities in Northern Ireland Heads of universities in Scotland
Of interest to those responsible for	Admissions, Marketing departments, Learning and teaching, Students, Postgraduates, Careers advice, Information provision
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Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

Providing postgraduate taught information, and launch of 'Steps to Postgraduate Study'

1. In April 2014 we published research and guidance on the types of information that taught prospective postgraduate (PGT) students need to help them make decisions about study ('Guidance to institutions on providing information for prospective postgraduate taught students', HEFCE Circular letter 10/2014, www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/Year/2014/CL_102014/). We said that we would develop an online decision-making tool based on its findings. This tool, 'Steps to Postgraduate Study', is now live and can be found at <http://postgradsteps.hefce.ac.uk/>.
2. Sponsored by the four UK higher education funding bodies, the new website provides information and resources for prospective UK, European Union and international students considering taught postgraduate courses. It highlights questions that students may wish to ask themselves and course providers about their study options, and provides links to where they may find answers.
3. In England, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has consulted on the provision of loans to postgraduate students, and there is a commitment to reviewing further information needs in the context of the introduction of a loan scheme (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/postgraduate-study-student-loans-and-other-support>). The new site is a pilot, testing a new approach to supporting postgraduate course choices.
4. We invite all UK higher education providers to link to the website from their postgraduate course pages.

Background

5. The four UK higher education funding bodies (HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland) work collaboratively to support improvements in information provision for prospective PGT students.
6. As well as developing guidance to institutions on providing information for prospective PGT students, a key focus of our work has been researching the evidence base for information needs (see 'Postgraduates: Policy and Funding' on the HEFCE website, www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/pg/information/). Our research findings have highlighted a need to make existing resources more easily accessible and simpler to navigate, based on the specific kinds of information that evidence suggests prospective PGT students are interested in.
7. To address this need, we commissioned a web resource based on 2014 research by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre and the University of Derby International Centre for Guidance Studies, 'Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study' (www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/pgtinfoneeds/).
8. The website has been developed by Fluent Interaction in response to feedback from user-testing workshops with prospective PGT students. This work has been overseen by the Postgraduate Information Steering Group, chaired by Prof Sue Rigby, Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching at the University of Edinburgh.

Action required

9. We invite all postgraduate taught course providers to link to this website from their postgraduate information pages. This will ensure that the resource can be found by prospective students at an early stage of their information journey. Research suggests that the first searches for information about postgraduate courses commonly target institutions' own webpages.
10. A logo for this purpose is available to download alongside this letter at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2015/CL_162015/. The standard text to accompany this should be the name of the resource, 'Steps to Postgraduate Study', and the explanatory text 'The official, independent guide for anyone considering a taught postgraduate course'. (This text has been chosen to reflect user-testing outcomes where prospective PGT students voiced a preference for information that was provided by an official but independent source.) We suggest setting up the link so that it opens in a new tab, as this will help the user interact with the resource in tandem with the source institution's own website.
11. Once the link is made we would be grateful if institutions could provide us with the web address of the page on which the link is held by emailing pgt@hefce.ac.uk. This will help us evaluate where institutions are siting the link, and whether this has any effect on prospective students' probability of accessing the resource.
12. We will use analytics to track usage of the site, including where visitors come from and where they spend the most time when on the site. We are keen to share the outcomes of this work with institutions: if you would like to be included, please tell us so when providing information on the link. We also encourage feedback once the website is active, to inform future improvements.

Next steps

13. The website will be formally launched and actively promoted to prospective PGT students in autumn 2015. We will encourage other information providers to use 'Steps to Postgraduate Study' under the terms of an Open Government Licence, as well as by linking to the site.

14. 'Steps to Postgraduate Study' is a pilot of a new approach to supporting decision-making for prospective students, and the evaluation of the site will feed into other areas of our work on information throughout the student lifecycle.

15. Decisions on the future of the resource will be taken after the site has been live for a minimum of two years. In England, this will also take into account the BIS consultation on the provision of loans to postgraduate students, and the review of further information needs in the context of a potential loans scheme.

Enquiries

16. Enquiries and feedback about the site should be sent to pgt@hefce.ac.uk. Thank you in advance for your support of this resource for taught postgraduate students.

Yours sincerely

Professor Madeleine Atkins

Chief Executive