Understanding the information needs of postgraduate taught students and how these can be met

Report to HEFCE by i-graduate

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i-graduate
INTERNATIONAL INSIGHT

The International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate)

John Dye (Head of Research Programmes)
Email: john.dye@i-graduate.org

Telephone: 01737 378 413

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1. Executive summary

1. i-graduate have undertaken research on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to investigate the information needs of prospective postgraduate taught (PGT) students and to determine whether there was scope for improving the accessibility, availability and usefulness of information.

2. At the same time, a parallel research project investigating the feasibility of implementing a national survey of PGT students to meet the information needs of prospective PGT students was led by NatCen[1]. Results from each phase of the i-graduate research fed into the feasibility project to help inform the direction of their research.

3. A three-part research methodology was developed to allow for a combination of quantitative and qualitative research and findings. The first part of this research consisted of a literature review of existing sources to investigate the known needs of potential PGT students. The second was to hold 30 focus groups around the UK to gather information directly from existing and potential UK, EU and international students, in addition to interviews of staff and other stakeholders involved in the higher education sector of the UK. The third part was an online survey of prospective, existing, and past students, and staff from higher education providers (HEPs) to provide statistical data to support the research.

4. The research demonstrates that potential students consider PGT study for a number of reasons, particularly the following: enhancing their career and employment prospects or taking a step forward in their academic careers; continuing their learning to expand their knowledge and skills, personal interest and development; or changing their field of study, lifestyle or career.

Provision of information by HEPs

5. Potential students have a range of information needs and there are patterns that emerged from the literature review and were reinforced by the focus groups and survey in which 7,445 responses were received. Students demand a wide range of information but specifically and frequently they are searching for information about specific course content, modules and employment outcomes. Of prospective, current, and past international, UK, and EU students 94-99 per cent thought that course content was the most important factor when choosing a course (page 20).

6. When choosing between which was the more important factor in the decision of where to study, current students gave more weight to the course over the HEP: 49 per cent considered the course to be either important or very important, compared to 40 per cent who considered the course and HEP to be equally important – good evidence of why course-level information is necessary to aid decision-making (page 22).

7. *NatCen's research suggest that whilst a survey of PGT students was of interest, small class sizes mean that data would have to be aggregated at a relatively high level (above course level). This is*

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counter to the demands of potential students whose information needs were firmly focused on course level findings.

8. *Recommendation 1: HEPs should provide a wide range of information related to PGT study, and in particular, course-specific information such as specific course content, timetables, and employment outcomes. The information could be in the form of videos, podcasts, career success stories, or 'at a glance' tables.*

Financial information

9. As the majority of PGT students are self-financed, the cost of the course in its entirety is an important consideration when looking to study on a PGT course.

10. Financial matters were frequently cited as influential in deciding where and what to study at PGT level by students across the UK. Desired financial information included course fees and payment schedules, including comparability of fees between HEPs in the UK and overseas with detailed explanations of how the fees are broken down, financial support and funding availability, living costs, and additional course costs (page 23 and 24).

11. *Recommendation 2: Clear, up-to-date information on the cost of studying a PGT degree should be made easily accessible. Information should include tuition fees, additional course costs, estimated living and accommodation costs, payment structure, as well as any financial support available. Much of this information could be provided by HEPs.*

Needs of international students

12. There are additional motivations for international students to studying in the UK, such as the value of studying and living in the UK, and gaining international experience. International students need information up to one year in advance of their course starting in order to start making the lifestyle changes and investments necessary to move countries (pages 40, 41, 42) and time to apply for visas.

13. Students suggested that a step-by-step chronological guide to the application process should be created online, indicating key dates for milestone events such as scholarship application deadlines (page 34).

14. *Recommendation 3: Where possible, providers of information should make their material available up to one year ahead of the course start date, as international students gather information early on to help them plan their PGT journey. A step-by-step chronological guide to the application process could be provided to prospective students as an aid to the application process.*

Desire for information from human contacts

15. Potential students desire human contacts to meet their information needs. There was a marked demand for a human contact, both with HEP staff and ex-students. Generally students want to know about financing their course and the application process for an individual HEP. However, they also want access to someone who can help with their own specific journey. This may be a faculty member who can tell them about the demands of a specific course, including the

modules they will study, and the content of the modules, or a graduate who can tell them about the actual experience of doing the course, or someone from a similar demographic who can help with questions of living as a student in a particular HEP (page 45).

Potential students expressed a strong desire to be able to talk to someone who knows the answers to students' common questions or, if not, can direct students appropriately to someone else. Student Unions at each HEP could potentially help with these questions.

16. *Recommendation 4: Where possible, HEPs should provide a source of 'human contact' to answer questions from students as many have specific information needs which cannot be met through generic information provided on websites.*

Need for independent information resource

17. This recommendation is based on three different findings from the research. Firstly, participants spoke of the difficulties in finding information that they perceive to be unbiased about courses and HEPs. Prospective students were wary of student ambassadors hired by the HEP for the purpose of promotion and it was thought that these ambassadors may give an incomplete picture (e.g. by only highlighting the positive aspects). In addition, prospective students were wary of headlines promoted by the HEP on their websites that referred to HEP rankings as it was felt that they tended to focus on statistics best suited to the HEP, highlighting the need for an independent resource of information (pages 31 and 32).

18. Secondly, prospective students spoke of the need of having information that can enable them to make comparisons between courses and HEPs. Students believe that the information is available somewhere but found it frustrating that it is not in a common format, nor is it standardised information (page 34).

19. Lastly, it is important to consider the difference in information needs between students who are returning to education after a break and those who move from an undergraduate course straight into a PGT course, particularly within the same HEP. Students felt that it was much easier to find out the information a student needed when they were already within an HEP as they have direct access to course advisors and students from the courses they are interested in and already know general information such as living costs in the area (page 39). This difference demonstrates the need for an independent centralised resource for prospective students who are not currently involved in an HEP to improve access to information.

20. *Recommendation 5: There should be an independent centralised resource to which HEPs can provide data, to meet the wide-ranging information needs of prospective PGT students and information providers, and provide the first port of call for information.*

2. Introduction and background

21. i-graduate was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE to investigate the information needs of potential postgraduate taught (PGT) students and whether there was scope for improving the accessibility, availability and usefulness of information. In addition i-graduate was tasked with assessing whether there was an appetite amongst students for information derived from a survey or not. The research has developed from the White Paper "Students at the Heart of the System"[2] published in June 2011, which sought to "put students in the driving seat" in being able to make informed choices in the decision-making process relating to the courses they opt to follow.

22. There is a perception that, compared to undergraduate (UG) courses, there is less publicly available information about PGT courses. The PGT market is of great importance to the UK and has grown rapidly over recent years with the rate of growth now faster than the UG sector. PGT students now constitute almost a fifth of all students in UK higher education institutions[3] and just over three-quarters of all postgraduate students (the remainder being postgraduate research students)[4]. The demographics and information needs for PGT students could fundamentally differ from those of UG students. PGT students are older, often geographically rooted, have more specialised interests and are potentially less influenced by parents and league tables than their UG counterparts[5].

23. Within the total full-time PGT student population, nearly 60 per cent of students were from outside the UK based on student enrolment data in 2010/11[6]. This international student community is beneficial for the education sector and the UK economy more generally. There was a clear mandate for this research to gain a better understanding of the information needs of both home and international students and to see what differences there are, if any.

24. This research builds upon and adds to the programme of research and development that HEFCE has already undertaken to explore the information needs of potential UG students, develop Key Information Sets (KIS) and report on the National Student Survey (see www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/ for examples of activities).

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2 BIS, White Paper: Students at the heart of the system (2011)
3 www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2355&Itemid=161
4 www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/TaughtPostgraduateStudents.aspx
5 i-graduate (2011). Student Barometer 2011 Autumn Wave data
6 www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239/

3. Methodology

25. A multi-phased, mixed-methods approach was used to deliver this research. The mixed-methods approach combined a desk-research phase (literature review), a qualitative research phase (focus groups and in-depth telephone interviews), and a quantitative research phase (online survey).

26. Each phase produced a distinct set of findings that was then shared with HEFCE, the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG)[7] and the Feasibility consultants at NatCen and provided the starting point for the next phase of the research.

27. An Advisory Board[8] was set up to provide guidance, expertise and additional quality assurance throughout the project and was consulted at each phase of the project.

28. The research questions to be answered were:
    a) Why students choose to study for a PGT qualification
    b) How they decide where to study
    c) How they decide which course to take
    d) What information they would find most useful in this decision making process
    e) What information about PGT courses did potential PGT students attempt to find?
    f) What information is not available, that would be helpful to have?
    g) How they prefer to access the information they find useful (e.g. university web pages, brochures, independent web-sites or via interaction with staff or peers)
    h) How they prefer information (especially statistical data) about PGT courses to be presented
    i) Do the information needs of potential PGT students differ across the UK?
    j) How do international students select PGT courses? What resources do they use? Are their information needs different compared to those of home/EU students? Are there language or cultural issues around the current information provision for international students?
    k) Would information derived from a PGT survey be considered useful by potential PGT students? If so, would the timing of such a survey influence the perception of its usefulness
    l) How do this group perceive the usefulness of the undergraduate KIS, and could a similar set of information be identified for postgraduates?
    m) Do potential PGT students use course comparison websites? If so, which ones? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these sites?
    n) Do potential students considering PGT courses as a stepping stone to postgraduate research have different information needs to those only interested in a PGT degree?
    o) What taught masters courses are commissioned by employers e.g. the Department of Health? What information can employers of PGT and prospective PGT students provide?
    p) What prior qualifications do PGT students have?

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[7]

www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/whatwedo/learningandteaching/informationabouthighereducation/HEPISG_tor.pdf

[8] Comprising William Archer, Sir Drummond Bone, Neil Kemp, and Johnny Rich

q) What do potential PGT students want to know about financial support and employment outcomes?

29. These research questions will be referred to throughout the report.

3.1. Phase 1: Literature review

30. Phase 1 set out to define the scope and parameters of the subsequent phases. Relevant publications were identified through a comprehensive search of online and print materials including policy documents and academic journals. This research started off by revisiting the sources identified by HEFCE and then snowballed as further sources referenced in the initial literature were identified and analysed. Included in the sources were various online forums e.g. Studentroom.com, where prospective PGT students discuss their information needs. Phase 1 also helped to identify Key Stakeholders who should form part of the Phase 2 consultations. Although the scope and research underpinning this report only focuses on Higher Education Providers (HEPs), future research should be extended to cover Further Education Colleges (FECs), as the information needs of prospective PGT students at FECs may differ.

3.2. Phase 2: Consultation with key non-student and student stakeholders

31. In addition to the representatives from HEPs, employer networks, careers advisers and their networks, organisations which have an interest in disseminating information about postgraduate study to prospective students were included. These groups understand the type of information they would like and how it should be used appropriately. The organisations who took part in the in-depth qualitative telephone interviews are listed in Appendix 2.

32. Focus groups were held in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A total of 97 students participated with an average of eight participants in each group. A representative sample of students was selected.

33. Focus groups sought to gather views on the information needs of prospective PGT students based upon personal experience, motivations for PGT study, decision-making processes for choosing their course and HEP, and opinions on the KIS. They also incorporated hypothetical scenario exercises (see section 4 Appendix 3). The groups also sought to garner views on the appetite for a survey of current postgraduates and how information needs may differ according to different demographic and social groups.

34. Appendix 3 outlines the technical process and selection basis of each focus group.

Challenges

35. Whilst the number of students participating in the focus groups was generally pleasing, there were a number of barriers to getting them to engage; not least, was the timing and speed of process needed for these groups. Undertaking this phase during the summer break meant a large number of students were not available – in particular prospective PGT students among undergraduates. In addition, whilst wanting to help, a number of HEPs reported difficulties in contacting their students at this time of year. A number of their own staff were either on vacation, or were busy dealing with a new intake of students. In addition, holding the groups during the peak time of the Olympic Games proved challenging in terms of travel for some students especially those based in London. It was also difficult to access and identify prospective

PGT students who were not currently at an HEP, and who are likely to have different information needs.

3.3. Phase 3: Online survey

36. An online survey was designed to conduct a wider consultation of key stakeholders. The survey had different routing options to allow questions to be asked of specific audiences and to focus on aspects most relevant to each of the key stakeholder groups:

- Current students
- Potential students
- HEP staff
- Professional bodies

More information on this survey can be found in Appendix 3

37. The different types of student group are illustrated in figures 3.1 to 3.3. Forty-nine per cent of respondents were from the UK, 31 per cent were international (non-EU) and 20 per cent were from the EU.

Figure 3.1: Type of student respondent (n=7,445)
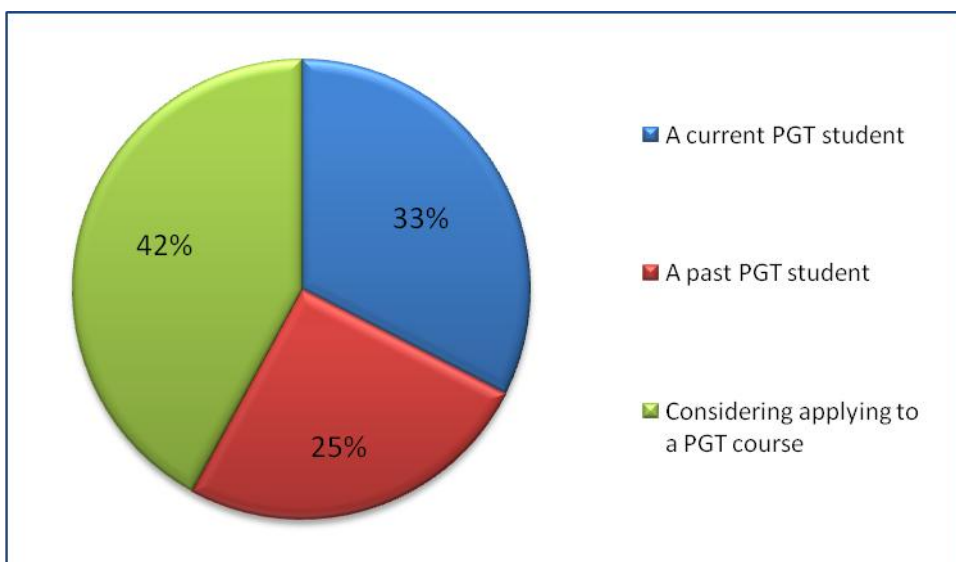
Source: i-graduate 2012

Figure 3.2: Profile of respondents (n=6,921)
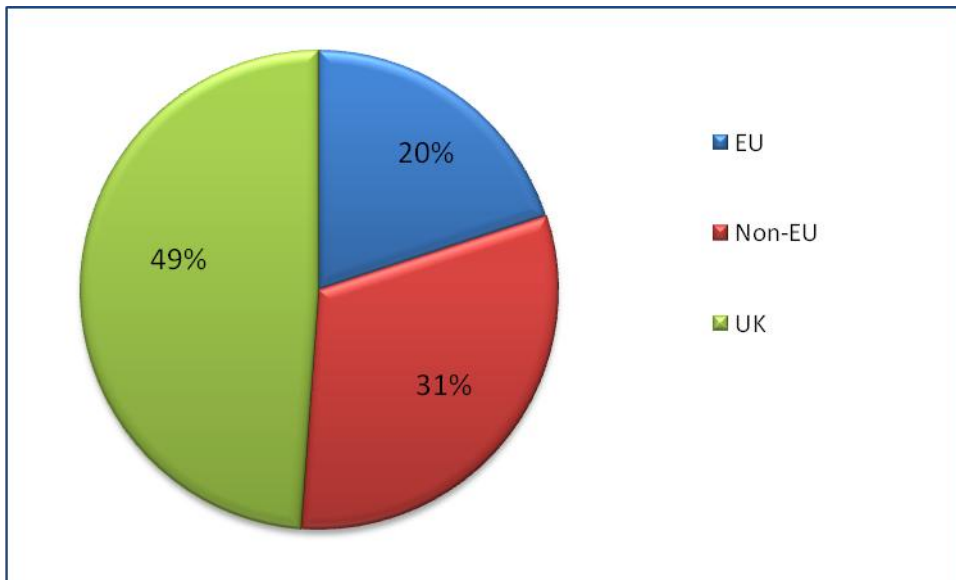
Table 3.1: Breakdown of responses by non-student stakeholders

Position	Proportion	n
Academic staff of university	41%	19
Staff member of university	46%	21
Independent careers advisor	2%	1
Member of organisation with an interest in PGT education	11%	5
TOTAL	**100%**	**46**

38. The main research aims of phase 3 were to:
    ▪ Build a stronger evidence base to reflect the types of information found to be most useful to prospective PGT students and other potential end users. This would be done through the discussions with key stakeholders and focus groups with students held in Phase 2
    ▪ To test whether the views held by focus group members and those discussed in interviews are applicable to a wider student population covering a wider range factors including
        o Demographics
        o Courses
        o HEPs

39. A conscious effort was made to gather responses representing a variety of PGT courses, not just taught masters courses, as students from different types of PGT courses may well have different information needs. The aim was to try to match the proportion of students on the different courses in the UK according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics (see table 3.2). Despite targeting universities which specialised in offering postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE courses) and postgraduate diploma/certificate courses, it was difficult to reach a large proportion of this group due to the summer holidays. However, due to the large population of current and past students who completed the survey, there were enough responses from each group to break them down meaningfully.

Figure 3.3. Current PGT students broken down by type of PGT course

Level of study - Current student only (n=1967)

- Taught Masters degree
- Postgraduate diploma or certificate
- PGCE
- Professional qualification, e.g. Accountancy
- Other

89%
5%
3% 1% 2%
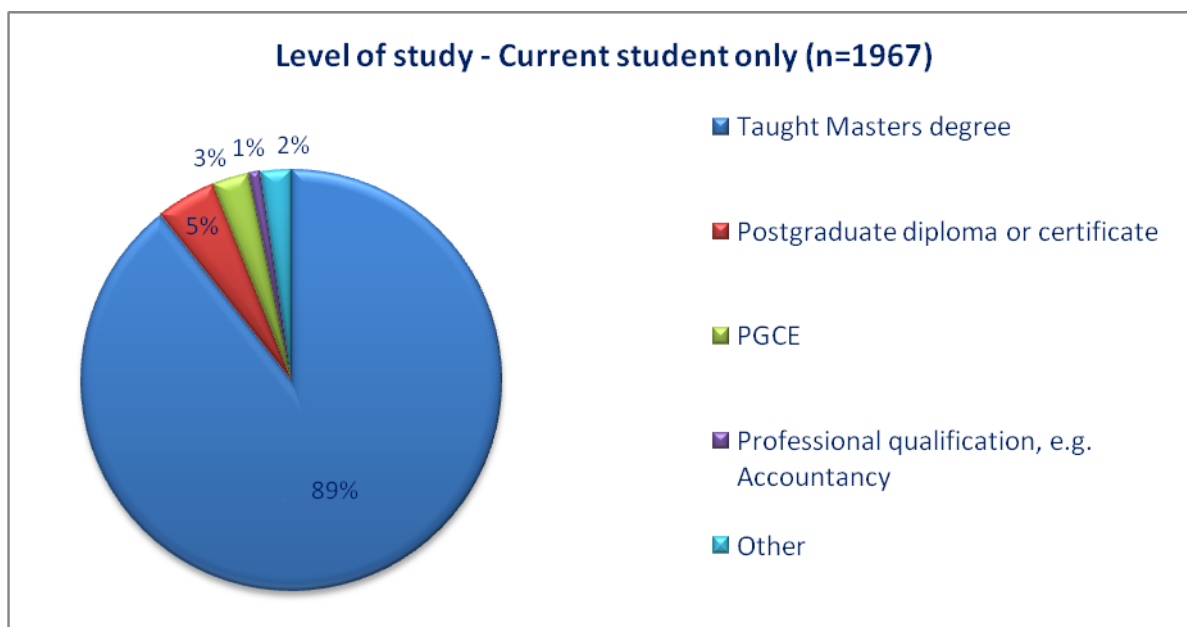
Table 3.2. Proportion of PGT students by type of PGT course in the UK. Sample is based on the 2010/11 HESA Student Record

Specified level of postgraduate study	Total	%
Masters taught	342,810	71%
PGCE	28,530	6%
Postgraduate diploma/certificate (not PGCE)	63,165	13%
Professional qualification	11,390	2%
Other postgraduate	37,315	8%
Total	**588,720**	**100%**

Source: Special data request to HESA by i-graduate

40. The survey questions were based around the findings from the previous two stages, including the spectrum of performance indicators and information needs that employers, careers advisors, prospective students and others identified. In addition to potential requirements identified through Phase 2, the survey addressed motivations of prospective and current PGT students, perceived barriers and employability factors.

4. Findings

41. Using a thematic approach to data analysis, the report has distilled the original questions proposed by HEFCE into seven broad sections below:

- Section 1: Motivations for PGT study

- Section 2: Decisions and existing information

- Section 3: Information gaps

- Section 4: Specific information needs

- Section 5: Information dissemination

- Section 6: Potential PGT survey

- Section 7: How do stakeholders perceive the usefulness of the undergraduate KIS, and if a similar set of information could be identified for postgraduates?

The findings below are organised using these seven themes.

4.1. Section 1: Motivations for PGT study

42.   This section addresses the question:

(a) Why students choose to study for a PGT qualification

4.1.1. Key summary

43. Prospective PGT students were motivated to study for reasons including:

- To enhance career and employment prospects
- As a step towards further academic study
- To continue learning, expanding knowledge and skills, personal interest and development
- For international students in particular, the value of studying and living in the UK and gaining international experience
- To change their field of study or a lifestyle or career change
- For international students in particular, the lower total cost due to the shorter of study in the UK compared to the US

44. More details of these factors are outlined below, as made evident from the literature review and further reinforced by the focus groups and online survey.

4.1.2. Specific observations

45. The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is an annual survey of PGT students[9], asking them about their experience of their course, learning and teaching elements, and skills development. It is run by the Higher Education Academy for HEPs in the UK although it is not mandatory for all HEPs to participate. The main student motivations for taking a postgraduate programme according to the 2011 PTES results[10] are presented in table 4.1

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[9] www.heacademy.ac.uk/PTES
[10] Wells (Higher Education Academy), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011 (2011), p17-19

Table 4.1: Students' main motivations for taking their postgraduate programme

Motivator	PTES 2009	PTES 2010	PTES 2011
To improve my employment prospects	50%	53%	56%
To progress in my current career path (i.e. a professional qualification)	53%	52%	55%
For personal interest	45%	44%	45%
To enable me to progress to a higher level qualification (e.g. PhD)	32%	33%	34%
To change my current career	18%	18%	18%
As a requirement to enter a particular profession	16%	17%	17%
To meet the requirements of my current job	9%	8%	9%
Other	3%	4%	3%

Source: Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011 (2011), p17-19

46. There has been no change in the rank order of motivations since PTES 2010, though some changes in rank order occurred between 2009 and 2010. The most frequently selected motivation in PTES 2011 was 'To improve my employment prospects'. The popularity of this item increased by 3 per cent between 2009 and 2010 and a further 3 per cent between 2010 and 2011. The second most frequently selected motivation in PTES 2011 was 'To progress in my current career path (i.e. a professional qualification)'. Although this item also increased by 3 per cent between 2010 and 2011, this followed a decrease from 53 per cent in 2009. These two results, taken together, indicate that taught postgraduate students are becoming more focused on employability and career development. The results of this survey also reflect the findings of the phase 2 focus groups.

47. Focus group participants were asked to recall their primary motivation for undertaking PGT study. Reflecting the two most important motivating factors recorded from the PTES results above ('To improve my employment prospects' and 'To progress in my current career path'), the most frequently cited motivation to study a PGT course was to enhance career and employment prospects, although a smaller number also saw PGT study as a step toward their pursuit of further academic study.

48. Related motivations included:

- To further their qualifications
- To provide a route into their chosen career or field of interest
- To gain competitive edge over other job candidates, given the current economic climate, the low number of graduates securing jobs and the higher number of candidates with first degrees. Participants felt that a PGT degree would help them stand out from the rest, providing a competitive edge over those candidates with only a first degree
- To enhance their CV
- To specialise in a particular field
- To gain accreditation

49. Interestingly, among the focus group participants, the option to continue learning, expanding knowledge and skills was the second most frequently cited motivation to study on a PGT course.

Arguably, the closest comparable indicator to this in the PTES is the third most important motivator, "For personal interest", at 45 per cent in 2011. The results of the online survey suggest that the greatest incentive to pursuing a PGT course is a personal interest in the subject or for self-development. Some 65 per cent of prospective and 72 per cent of current PGT students in the online survey indicated that this was a motivator for them. This was followed by the desire to develop a career, with 61 per cent of prospective and 61 per cent of current PGT students choosing this option. This generally holds for both domestic and international students, although prospective non-EU international students do slightly favour career development over personal interest as their key motivator. As would be expected there are certain types of degree where this can vary too. Those choosing to do a PGCE put both the requirement of the job (68 per cent) and career development (47 per cent) over personal interest (38 per cent). Some of the survey results are indicated in table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Online survey: Why undertake a PGT course?

	Percentages				Sample Size			
	Current	Past	Prospective	Total	Current	Past	Prospective	Total
Why undertake a PGT course? (multi choice)								
I have a personal interest in subject/It was good for personal development	72%	63%	65%	67%	1873	1573	2494	5940
For my career development	62%	59%	62%	61%	1873	1573	2494	5940
To pursue a research degree/career	30%	27%	38%	32%	1873	1573	2494	5940
It was a requirement to get the job that I want	19%	19%	17%	18%	1873	1573	2494	5940
To change careers	12%	14%	6%	10%	1873	1573	2494	5940
My family encouraged me to	10%	10%	7%	9%	1873	1573	2494	5940
In order to get a promotion	5%	5%	5%	5%	1873	1573	2494	5940
My employer encouraged me to	6%	5%	2%	4%	1873	1573	2494	5940
Other reason	4%	3%	2%	3%	1873	1573	2494	5940

Source: i-graduate 2012

4.1.2.1. International students

50. For international students in particular, the value of studying and living in the UK and gaining international experience was a motivator, with the online survey confirming the added influence of choosing to study in the UK over other countries. Both for EU and non-EU students the primary motivator is the reputation of the UK education system, with 94 per cent expressing this as a choice. For current and past PGT students this reason was more than double that for any other choice when asked for their top three reasons. For non-EU international students the price of course fees (78 per cent) and cost of living (76 per cent) in the UK are also important factors. For EU students course fees in the UK are the second highest driver (69 per cent) in choosing to study in the UK over other countries. Some of the more important drivers found in the online survey results are illustrated in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Important factors for international students when choosing a country

Important factors when choosing country (% important)	Percentages				Sample Size			
	Current	Past	Prospective	Total	Current	Past	Prospective	Total
Reputation of the education system	94%	95%	95%	95%	944	947	859	2750
Course fees in the UK	75%	76%	88%	80%	903	914	841	2658
Cost of living in the UK	70%	70%	84%	74%	906	915	845	2666
Opportunities for full-time work in the UK following studies	64%	68%	81%	71%	877	887	835	2599
Opportunities for further study in the UK following studies	64%	65%	82%	70%	883	881	832	2596
Ease of getting a visa to study	63%	66%	75%	68%	691	711	643	2045
Tourism (scenery, culture, recreation and leisure activities)	64%	68%	61%	64%	907	923	836	2666
How people would behave towards me as an international student	58%	67%	69%	64%	899	916	810	2625
Opportunity for long-term employment or permanent residence	57%	59%	76%	64%	868	861	812	2541
English language support	60%	63%	65%	63%	832	832	786	2450
Ease of getting a visa to work in the UK following studies	56%	61%	67%	61%	689	691	616	1996
Availability of bursaries in the UK	52%	51%	77%	60%	766	783	789	2338
Friends or family already living/studying in the UK	37%	40%	39%	38%	805	810	787	2402
Proximity to your home country	34%	36%	38%	36%	875	886	822	2583

Source: i-graduate 2012

51. International students' motivations to study suggested in the focus groups included:

- Experiencing and learning a new, foreign culture, country and academic system
- To get international experience and meet people of different nationalities
- A desire to come to and live or continue living in the UK after completing a first degree here
- To experience studying in a foreign language
- To validate a degree completed overseas – adding an English dimension
- The quality of the UK education system, the university and course and the value of achieving a UK MSc that is internationally recognised and looks good on their CV

'To learn a different culture, how things are done here in the UK and to experience a different country'

52. In addition, for international students in particular, the cost and duration of study in the UK was a key motivator in their decision to study here.

53. Participants spoke of the duration of some courses being half the time of courses available in their own country or another country. For instance a two year course in the US may take one year to complete in the UK. This was seen to be beneficial to the student, not only due to the shorter study time, but also in the savings on living costs, as they would need to budget for only

one year's living expenses as opposed to two years. In addition, a number of international students reported that some courses were comparatively cheaper in the UK than in their home country, providing further time and financial incentives to study in the UK.

> *'Cheaper than some other countries for instance the same course in the US can cost $60k v UK equivalent $17k'*

54. For both UK and international students, having available funds to finance the course was a motivator to pursue study.

55. Although the non-student stakeholders were not specifically asked questions about student motivation, in the course of discussions, some stakeholders suggested that current and prospective students felt that there are a number of different motivations to study at PGT level in the UK and that these can differ to some extent for international students. One stakeholder in particular made reference to a similar point made by students that for some international students, undertaking a taught masters course in the UK is a way of validating a Bachelor degree completed in their home country.

> *'Our [institution's] sense of international students is that they are taking an undergraduate degree at home and then bootstrapping it for a global qualification, cashing it in for a better job or to move faster in promotion of a job they are already in. It is more of a financial transaction for international students, 'I'm paying for it, what will I get?' They are using it as a stepping stone for a more defined career path more than a UK student would.'*

4.2. Section 2: Decisions and existing information

56. This section addresses the following research questions:
   (b) How students decide where to study
   (c) How they decide which course to take
   (d) What information they find most useful in this decision-making process

4.2.1. Key summary

57. Current PGT students reported mixed views on their experience of the process of deciding what and where to study a PGT course. Whilst a large proportion said it was easy, further probing often revealed difficulties or missing information during the process. The focus groups and literature review showed that current and prospective PGT students considered the following information to be the most useful and important in making their decision of what course to study and where:

- Course-specific information
- Fees and financing
- Location and cultural information
- Internal and external reputation of the teaching staff, department and HEP
- The advantages of undertaking the course in terms of outcomes
- Support arrangements

- Word-of-mouth recommendation and drawing on current students' and alumni's experiences

58. According to the PTES survey[11], the top three reasons influencing how students decide where to study are as in table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Reasons why students chose to study at a particular institution

Motivator	PTES 2009	PTES 2010	PTES 2011
The location of the HEP	36%	39%	38%
The overall reputation of the HEP	39%	39%	37%
The HEP's reputation in my chosen subject area	23%	23%	23%

Source: Wells (Higher Education Academy), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011 (2011)

59. Two of the top three reasons highlighted in the PTES survey to select a particular HEP are based on reputation. Further, in addition to the top three figures above, in 2011 23 per cent of students also cited the reputation of the department as important. The PTES survey and the focus groups from this research each indicated that flexibility of delivery and recommendations from others were also very relevant.

60. The online survey also indicated that the reputation of an HEP is important to all students, both domestic and international, and regardless of the type of PGT being followed (table 4.5). Only those following a PGCE scored lower than 90 per cent for this factor, but even this group indicated a strong degree of importance (87 per cent) matching that for academic resources available (also 87 per cent).

Table 4.5: Online survey – student factors when choosing an HEP

Important factors when choosing an HEP (% important)	Percentages				Sample Size			
	Current	Past	Prospective	Total	Current	Past	Prospective	Total
Reputation of the HEP	94%	94%	95%	94%	1721	1443	2198	5362
Academic resources of the HEP (e.g. library, IT)	88%	89%	93%	90%	1719	1438	2191	5348
City/location	80%	81%	84%	82%	1703	1446	2196	5345
Position of the HEP in ranking/league tables	79%	80%	81%	80%	1690	1422	2191	5303
Cost of living/accommodation	71%	70%	85%	77%	1506	1291	2084	4881
Personal safety and security	70%	71%	83%	76%	1661	1414	2178	5253
Accommodation availability	62%	64%	78%	69%	1447	1248	2031	4726
Proximity to home	69%	70%	56%	62%	793	514	1383	2690
Social life	53%	59%	65%	59%	1656	1403	2163	5222
Student Union activities/services	33%	37%	50%	41%	1600	1347	2131	5078
Faith provision	22%	25%	23%	23%	1386	1161	1782	4329
Disability support	20%	19%	27%	22%	1048	849	1385	3282

Source: i-graduate 2012

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[11] Wells (Higher Education Academy), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011 (2011)

61. In terms of the course itself, course content was the key factor in choosing a course for current and past PGT students (97 per cent), although quality of teaching (95 per cent), and the reputation of department or academic staff (92 per cent) also featured highly (figure 4.1). This was a view that was shared by prospective students. Other important factors included the city or location of the HEP and the academic resources of the HEP.

Figure 4.1: Top five factors in choosing a course for current, past, and prospective PGT students – differences between EU, non-EU, and UK students.
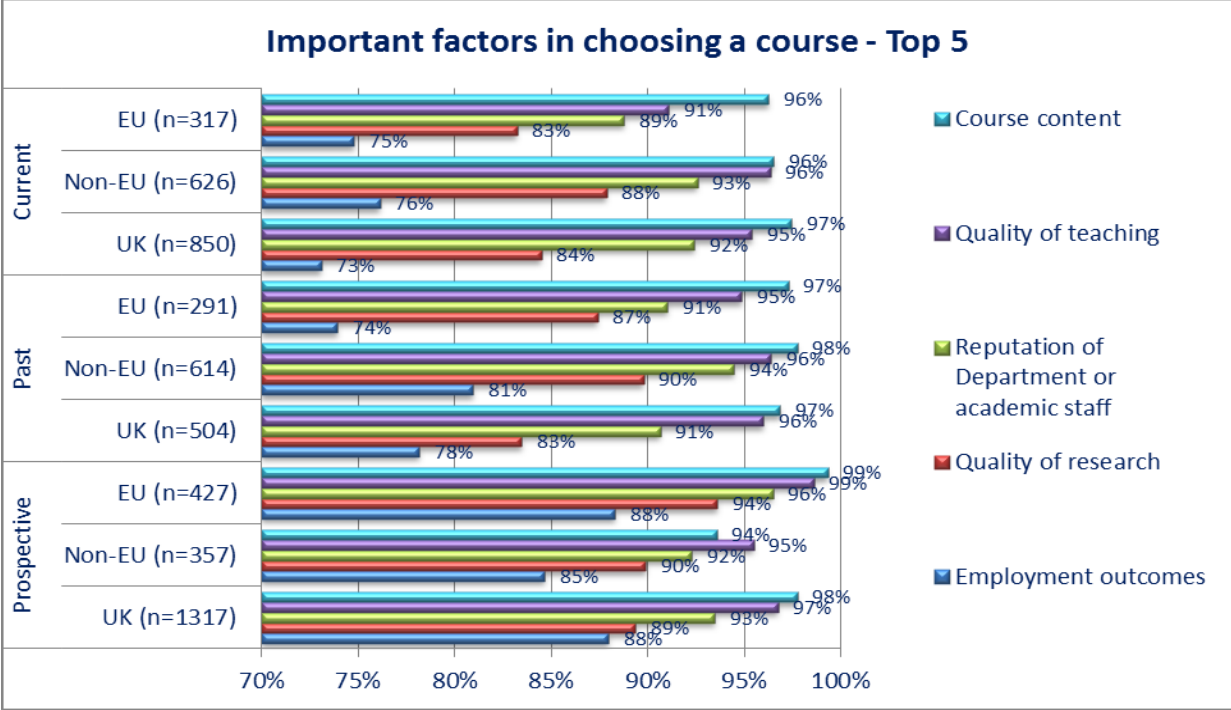
62. Staff and professionals agree that reputation is important to students, which is highlighted in the following tables from the online survey about student HEP and course choices. It can also be seen that staff believed that personal recommendation was the most important information and motivator for student course choices (tables 4.6 and 4.7).

Table 4.6: Staff/professional's view of student choices of HEP (n = 46)

Now please rate how important these following factors are to prospective PGT students in choosing an HEP	%
Reputation of the HEP	96%
Position of the HEP in ranking/league tables	93%
Academic resources of the HEP (e.g. library, IT)	91%
Cost of living/accommodation	87%
City/location	85%
Accommodation availability	84%
Personal safety and security	78%
Social life	72%
Disability support	58%
Student Union activities/services	44%
Proximity to home	41%
Faith provision	29%

Source: i-graduate 2012

Table 4.7: Staff/professional's view of student choices of course

Now please rate how important these following factors are to prospective PGT students in choosing a course	%
Personal recommendation (somebody telling them it was the right place to go)	95%
Course fees of a specific course	93%
Quality of teaching	93%
Reputation of department or academic staff	93%
Position of the course in ranking/league tables	93%
Employment outcomes	93%
Course content	91%
Entry requirements	86%
Length of course	86%
Graduate salary information	84%
Opportunities to work while studying	83%
Internship opportunities during/after course	83%
Specific course title	81%
Scholarship/bursary availability	81%
Flexibility in determining how to study	79%
Loan availability for studies	79%
Quality of research	79%
Career development loans	76%
Student satisfaction rates	74%
Course assessment type	67%
Student drop-out rates/reasons for drop-out	38%

Source: i-graduate 2012

63. Postgraduate taught study relies more heavily than undergraduate study on fee income and features a broader range of non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, allowing newer universities to compete for a share of the increasing market for masters courses. Thus, PGT students are more evenly spread amongst HEPs than research postgraduates, with 1994 Group and new universities appearing among the largest providers (House 2010)[12].

4.2.2. Specific observations

64. During focus groups, current PGT students were asked to describe, in one word, their experience of deciding what course to take and where to study at PGT level. There were mixed views on the experience of those who have gone through the process of deciding what and where to study a PGT course. Whilst a large proportion said it was easy – further probing often reveals difficulties or missing information during the process.

65. The words used are shown in the word cloud, or "Wordle" in figure 4.2. The words used by the students were counted and the greater the frequency with which a word was used, the larger the text in the Wordle. This also shows that many students came up with the same word when describing their experience in deciding which course to take and where to study. Approximately 56 per cent found the experience a negative one.

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[12] House G (Higher Education Policy Institute & The British Library), Postgraduate Education in the United Kingdom (2010), p 42

Figure 4.2: Word cloud indicating process of deciding what and where to study
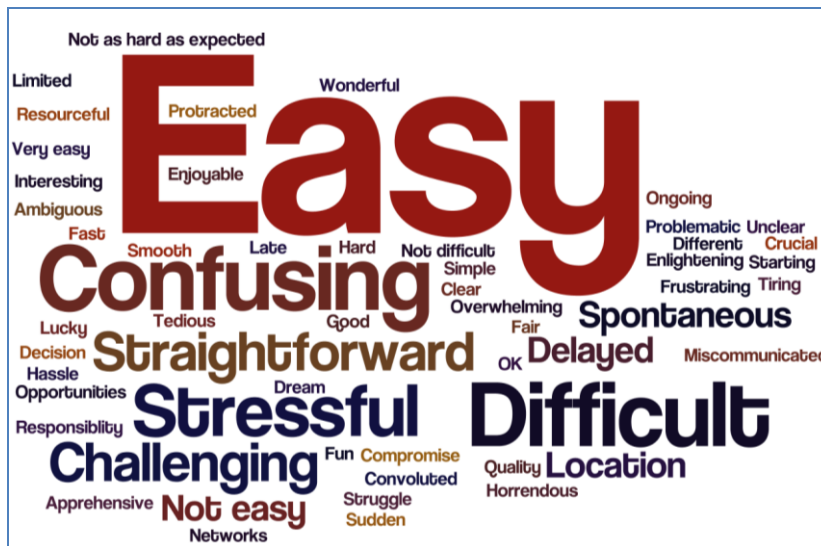
Source: Created using 'Wordle' online software © 2011 Jonathan Feinberg (wordle.net)

66. Of the 97 focus group participants who responded to this question, 34 used a negative term to describe their experience, the most common being 'confusing', 'difficult' and 'stressful'. A total of 29 participants used a positive term to describe their experience, the most common being 'easy' followed by 'straightforward'. The remaining 25 participants used neutral terms to describe their experience, e.g. 'sudden' and 'responsibility'. Following the online survey it is clear that students want the anxiety and stress taken out of their experience and the ability to plan ahead. They want to know dates and times including start and end dates of the course, in addition to:

> *"full details of the course content – module specific information"*

> *"timetable of lecture delivery… hours taught… dates of internship"*

67. In short they want to know the package they will be receiving ahead of arrival. They also want to know what is expected and the expectation for the level of knowledge in their subject. This complements views from the focus groups that students expect to be given some affirmation from the universities that their skillset matches the courses they are interested in.

68. Students were asked at a general level about the three most useful/important pieces of information that they used/are using to decide what course to take and where to study. The responses are listed below, in no particular order, within these overall themes:

- Course-specific information
- Location and culture
- Internal and external reputation
- Word-of-mouth experience

- Financial matters
- Career outcomes, e.g. jobs, salary
- Support arrangements

69. The top three pieces of information typically related to course-specific information, issues of finance, the location and internal culture of the HEP or department. In addition, examples of current and alumni students' work, outcomes and satisfaction are also of importance. Similar issues were raised from participating students across the UK.

70. When questioning the online survey group, current, past and prospective students showed a clear desire to know about the content of the course, with this option being more than double the popularity of the second choice. The second most popular choice for all three categories of students was the reputation of the HEP. Students also wish to know about the reputation of lecturers, course content and research opportunities within their PGT course.

71. When choosing between which was the more important factor in the decision of where to study current students, in the online survey group, gave more weight to the course over the HEP, with 49 per cent considering the course to be either important or very important, compared to 40 per cent who considered the course and HEP to be equally important.

4.2.2.1. Course-specific information

72. The research showed that course-specific information of particular importance included:

- Course dates and duration including term dates, holidays, start and finish dates, dates of submitting assignments and exams
- Course hours and timetable, with specific emphasis on the flexibility of course hours, to accommodate family and employment responsibilities and the hours required for taught and independent study or research time
- Detailed accounts of modules available (mandatory and optional)
- Course quality including quality of teaching
- Detailed scope of the course, including specific course content and topic areas, any statistics or research elements
- Application process including how to apply, timescales and deadlines
- Mode of assessment – whether this is practical, coursework, dissertation, research or exam-based, or a mix and the weighting/proportion of the assessments each mode accounts for
- Grading system and what the grades/marks mean
- Eligibility criteria for enrolment on the course including typical entry requirements, qualifications or experience required, language proficiency and key skills required
- Teaching staff including lecturers, tutors, supervisors, heads of department and their specialisms
- Contact time and hours with teaching staff including staff-student ratio, the ratio of taught versus independent time, total hours of taught lectures and schedule, and approximate total study hours
- Student body diversity and demographics including breakdown of ethnicity and nationalities of students per course[13]

73. Focus group participants identified additional pieces of important information to choosing a course:

- Seek a complete list of all the courses they were interested in that were available at HEPs and a comparison of the features of each
- The expectations of the workload of each course

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[13] *This was requested, but it is important to note that to present this information may facilitate prejudice and may be in contravention of equality legislation*

- Whether it was possible to take on part-time employment whilst studying, particularly if the course is funded
- Whether there is a quota on the demographics of students accepted, so that students have a sense of their likelihood of successful application e.g. British students vs. overseas, different ethnic groups etc., course type and structure.

4.2.2.2. Financial matters

74. Financial matters were frequently cited as influential in deciding where and what to study at PGT level by students across the UK. Financial issues included:

- Course fees and fee structure including comparability of fees to other HEPs in the UK and overseas with detailed explanation of how fees are broken down
- Financial support and funding including availability, eligibility criteria, scholarship types and application deadlines
- Living and accommodation costs
- Additional course costs including textbooks and course materials
- Payment plans and terms including whether instalment payments are available, or whether they are required in a lump sum, and when fees are due

75. In addition to the above, when asked what information they would advise their 'friend' to look for, participants' responses included information on penalties for dropping out and whether they would receive a refund on the course cost or a proportion, whether funded students are treated any differently by the HEP, to see what financial support is available and to have a detailed explanation of how the fees are broken down. Previous surveys, including the PTES survey, showed that finance was less important than other factors in selecting courses. At PGT level, the majority of students (three fifths) are privately funded, and less than a third receive public funding[14]. Taught postgraduate fees are not subject to government caps and HEPs may set a realistic price for provision, which may suggest that in a competitive market place fees are similar at HEPs and that some other factors are more important[15].

> *'Scholarships and affordable fees rank highly amongst internationally mobile research students as factors which attract them to postgraduate provision. Around one third of international postgraduate researchers in the UK are estimated to receive some form of funding from a UK source. One of the largest sources of support is in the form of fee waivers or discounts from UK HEPs. The UK Government supports over 1,500 postgraduate researchers through a variety of scholarship programmes, and Research Councils award around 5-8 per cent of their studentships to researchers from outside the EU.'* (Smith, 2010[16])

76. Students frequently raise questions about funding on forums and websites and demonstrate an awareness but perhaps lack of knowledge of the differences in course fees, and how to compare

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[14] HEPI request from HEFCE: Source of fees for home and EU domiciled taught postgraduate students in English institutions (non-dormant students) 2007-08
[15] House Ginevra (Higher Education Policy Institute & The British Library), Postgraduate Education in the United Kingdom (2010), p 48-49
[16] Smith A, One Step Beyond: Making the most of Postgraduate Education (2010), p10

various courses based on price[17]. Generally, students are faced with either being self-financed or funded by a sponsor (or a mixture of the two). For those having to finance themselves, repayment is an important factor. A career development loan is one potential solution. Students gave mixed views on how easy it is to get this loan and a degree of confusion relating to the repayment terms. For others a distance learning programme allows the student to minimise outgoings by living at home and/or continuing to work. It is perhaps no surprise in the current economic climate that there is a degree of reluctance to take the risk of giving up full-time employment to engage in full-time study.

77. Students are concerned about funding as they fear future government policy will change leading to increased fees at undergraduate level which will have a knock on effect to increase PGT course fees accompanied by cuts to PGT scholarships[18]. Students also felt some resentment of free provision of masters courses in parts of Europe. Besides cheap provision there are also examples of financial assistance such as the Australian system of integrated 'Help' loans[19].

78. Funding concerns are not always an issue for students paid by an employer, however in these cases the information needs are likely to be different with an emphasis on providing the employer with information about course content over course cost. The literature review has also found conflicting evidence on the value employers place on a completed PGT course. Smith (2010)[20] indicates that employers value postgraduates who combine their knowledge with wider employability skills. They are also more frequently looking to universities to develop tailored training for existing staff. There is also evidence of employers sponsoring degrees to promote this support from universities. However, this is contradicted by a poll by the Association for Graduate Recruiters which indicated that recruiters are more interested in work and skills experience than a higher degree qualification[21].

79. Potential students would also have a greater understanding of how much they are paying and how much they could save if comparable information about advertised fees and reductions offered by award schemes through scholarships, bursaries and grants were presented together.

4.2.2.3. Location and culture

80. Location and cultural information of particular importance included:

- The location of the HEP relative to their home and family
- The local area in which the HEP is located in terms of employment prospects/local job market, safety/crime rates, social opportunities/nightlife and cost of living
- How liberal and inclusive the local area is to different social and demographic groups
- Freedom to practice religion in the local area and the facilities available to do so
- The governance and laws of the local area
- Availability of accommodation in the local area outside of campus as well as on campus

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[17] www.postgraduateforum.com/?meta=17&kw=fees
[18] www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/feb/28/postgraduates-on-the-government-agenda
[19] http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/StudyAssist/HELPpayingMyFees
[20] Smith Adrian, One Step Beyond: Making the most of Postgraduate Education (2010)
[21] www.bl.uk/aboutus/acrossuk/highered/helibs/postgraduate_education.pdf

81. Location and cultural information also came out as important issues in focus groups when advising a 'friend' what information they would need to help make their decision of what course to study and where, regardless of whether they were an international or a UK or EU student. In addition to the factors described above, participants would advise their 'friend' to gather information of where, geographically, they can study relative to their chosen course and whether it would be necessary to move. Again, this reflects the findings of the literature review, in particular the PTES survey, which indicated that location was the most important factor in why a student chooses a specific HEP (38 per cent)[22]. Evidence from Ginevra House to the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) indicated that PGT students are more likely to work in their region of study after graduating[23].

4.2.2.4. Graduate outcomes

82. The advantage of undertaking the course in terms of potential employment outcomes was of key concern to prospective PGT students. The following information was felt to be of key importance in making the decision about where and what to study at PGT level:

- Qualification achieved upon completion
- Employment prospects and opportunities, when qualification obtained, in the UK and internationally
- Whether the qualification will provide a step towards further study
- The relevance of the course for future career especially whether the course is best option for pursuit of a specific career pathway
- The professional development offered by the course
- Opportunities for placements, internships or other temporary work offered during or following the course
- How the course will enhance qualifications and expertise already achieved
- Statistics on the career line and average salary of former students who have completed the specific course
- Career service availability and engagement upon completion of the course

83. In addition to the above, when asked what information they would advise their 'friend' to look for in the focus groups, participants said they would advise to seek information on how the course may benefit or provide a pathway to future study, assess what they want out of the course, seek information about work placement opportunities as part of the course and employment outcomes of former students.

4.2.2.5. Internal and external reputation

84. Focus group participants often rated the internal and external reputation of the department and HEP in their top three most important information needs, when considering what and where to take a PGT course. This included the following:

- The emphasis the HEP themselves place on the department compared to others in the HEP
- The HEP's ranking, including those in the Times HE supplement, against other ranked HEPs
- The reputation of the HEP in the UK and overseas

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[22] Wells (Higher Education Academy), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2011
[23] www.bl.uk/aboutus/acrossuk/highered/helibs/postgraduate_education.pdf

- The reputation of the course in the UK and overseas and the HEP's reputation in this field, including how the course is perceived by prospective employers, industry and within academia. This is especially true for those considering PGT study as a stepping stone for a research degree or career.
- The reputation of the department in the UK and overseas including the teaching staff and course directors, whether teaching staff are well-respected or key thinkers in the field of study and the research reputation/profile of the department and staff
- Accreditation and recognition of the course by external professional bodies
- The ethos of the department including the research philosophy
- The research reputation of the department

4.2.2.6. Support arrangements

85. Support arrangements were also considered highly influential in the decision-making process among the focus group participants but cited to a lesser extent than the other categories mentioned above.

- Library and study resources – whether libraries are equipped with sufficient resources appropriate to the higher level of study at PGT level
- Course support from the individual department
- Personal supervision and access to a contact person at the university for support

86. Participants would also advise a 'friend' to find and consider the information above when making their decision. In addition, participants would also advise gathering information on non-academic services offered by the HEP, what happens if problems occur and solutions to these, advance information of events and conferences taking place at the HEP, which may be of interest/related to their intended field of study, support for moving accommodation and the availability of childcare or childcare bursaries and family student accommodation (if applicable).

4.2.2.7. Word-of-mouth experience

87. Finally, students emphasised the considerable value of word-of-mouth recommendation, as well as drawing on current and alumni students' experiences and demographic profile, in making their decision about what and where to study a PGT course. Such information included:

- Examples of current or former students' work, such as dissertations
- Speaking directly with, or reading reviews of, alumni or current students, to obtain their feedback (good and bad) on their experience of the course, satisfaction and outcomes.
- Using recommendations of friends and acquaintances
- Drawing on their own personal experience attending the HEP on another course

88. Participants would also advise a 'friend' to seek this information.

4.2.3. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

89. Overall, key stakeholders were in agreement with current and prospective students in the variety of information needed to make the decision about what and where to study. With reference made to the need for course-specific information such as course content, module choices, contact time with tutors, the mode of study the student will engage in, term dates and student retention figures.

> *'Generically they need information about the course. It is at a course level they need to be studying – information about the department, quality, information about the teachers. Most of the information is at course level.'*

90. Stakeholders made less reference to specific information on a course than current and prospective students, with more emphasis on financial matters, the benefits to study in terms of employability and the reputation of teaching staff – all matters frequently raised by focus group participants. Key stakeholders emphasised the importance of gathering clear financial information, including the fee arrangements and funding options available.

> *'People need as much information as possible on funding, charitable funding, whether they need to take out career development loans and at what rate.'*

91. A significant minority indicated the importance of providing information that allows the prospective student to determine whether the course and study is worth the time and investment. Students need information on what new skills and qualifications it will offer the student going forward and the career prospects upon qualification compared to the advantages of other choices such as going into or continuing employment or undertaking a different PGT course.

92. There was a feeling that undertaking PGT study is an 'investment' made by the student, especially due to increasing fees, and therefore students and key stakeholders often shared the view that questions need to be asked of whether the investment is worth it. Many called for justifying the differing fees between HEPs and a breakdown of what fees pay for:

> *'Funding and what will the costs be? The job opportunities afterwards and how it is going to help me in the future?'*

> *'Is it worth the time and investment? What will it add? What would it offer? Do I do this or something else?'*

> *'Grads are emerging into a competitive environment. There is a threat to enrolment numbers. What you will get for your money e.g. quality teaching and learning? How much support is available if you need to use it? The qualification you will gain? What's the currency of that qualification? I was shocked to see the different range of fees being charged. There was a course on international business for £6,000 at [university] and £22,000 at [university].*

93. Stakeholders also referenced information on the location and internal/external culture of the HEP especially the postgraduate culture, the reputation of the HEP, word-of-mouth recommendation, and support arrangements, all of which were heavily discussed by focus group participants.

> *'At a very generic level, they need course information, but I suspect they are also interested in the culture of the place they are attending, the learning experience they will have. Can I do the course? Does it fit with my undergraduate degree? Will they accept me and something about the postgraduate culture in the university? Postgraduates don't want to be treated as an undergraduate and not*

in a traditional taught environment. The type of research staff are undertaking and their professional practice and how it may relate to their [the student's] work is important. They [students] want to know they are going somewhere which has some standing in their field. This isn't so important at undergraduate level, students are not even aware of who is teaching.'

94. Stakeholders place more importance on gathering information on the suitability of a specific course than prospective students themselves. Interestingly, this was not raised as an issue amongst current and prospective students who thought that other factors were more important e.g. course dates and financial support.

'Most students primarily need to know what courses are out there, what suits them, dependent on their background, what is their suitability academically in terms of what options are available to them?'

'Decisions work in layers; firstly an understanding of why one would study at PG level. They need information that enables you to decide that 'is it right for me in my career plan?'

4.3. Section 3: Information gaps

95. This section addresses the following research questions:
(e) What information about PGT courses did potential PGT students attempt to find?
(f) What information is not available, that would be helpful to have?

4.3.1. Key summary

96. Current and prospective PGT students reported difficulties in sourcing up-to-date, clear and accurate information on the following issues which would assist in making their decision about what course and where to study:
   ▪ Funding
   ▪ Fees and additional costs
   ▪ Access to alumni, current students and teaching staff
   ▪ Opportunities granted by the course
   ▪ Course-specific information
   ▪ Application processes

4.3.2. Initial observations

97. The basis of this work is partially a result of the perception that there is a lack of information for postgraduates, however the literature review has suggested that the opposite is true. There is a lot of information, but it has been diluted by the huge number of sources, often unofficial, who are providing it and an absence of a single, independent reference point for someone considering postgraduate study (Smith 2010)[24]. The focus groups indicated that potential students face the problem of scattered, outdated and misleading information (rather than a lack of information) and the fact that 75 per cent of respondents to the online survey did not answer the questions about information gaps would suggest different problems and the that the wealth of individual needs expressed as information gaps by prospective, current and past students

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[24] Smith Adrian, One Step Beyond: Making the most of Postgraduate Education (2010)

highlight the difficulties universities face in meeting the expectations students have of talking to one person who can answer all their questions. A number of requests are generic and relate to areas such as funding, such as access to scholarships and bursaries, or course content, including descriptions of modules in advance of the course starting.

98. Whilst the early findings of our literature review have found that there is a wealth of certain types of information available on PGT provision, the Oakleigh[25] report (which mainly focussed on understanding the information needs of undergraduate students) found a large variation between those who succeeded in finding what they were looking for and those who actually used it at all (although it should be remembered that this only included 120 PGT students). Evidence from the literature review suggests that students use peer-to-peer web sites to find answers to questions, even when they have already referred to official sources. An example of this is the popularity of discussions on how to apply for bank loans on student forums, despite this information being readily available on more authoritative sites. It is not clear whether the majority of potential PGTs are writing on peer-to-peer sites, however, it is likely that sites such as the Studentroom.com[26] continually grow their bank of information through stored discussion which can be accessed by interested students.

99. Perhaps the most basic information need of prospective students is to know which PGT courses actually exist at different HEPs. For some students there is an obvious link between the path through UG courses, PGT courses and a related career, e.g. Law. For others, this link is not something they know exists prior to embarking on their higher education experience. Whilst they may have some awareness of undergraduate courses or potential careers they would like to follow, the role of an essential PGT course linking the two may not be so obvious. The initial research points to an interesting distinction between UK and international students in which UK students tend to concentrate on looking for information about part-time courses, while international students are more heavily represented in full-time courses and thus looking for information on full-time study[27].

100. Furthermore, it is useful to consider what motivates a potential student to seek information. It may be because they need to resolve a particular issue they have, or perhaps to look more generally at sources (such as guides) which act to extend or explain information that is already in the public domain. There are numerous guides, often appearing in the media (e.g. The Guardian) that list considerations a potential postgraduate student should be aware of when choosing a course.

4.3.3. Student stakeholder perspectives

101. Students were asked what information they were unable to find or to understand personally and/or which information would have made their decision of what course and where to study easier had it been more readily available or clearer.

102. Given the importance placed on financing and fees and the influence such matters have on decisions about where and what to study at PGT level, students reported considerable difficulty

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[25] Oakleigh Consulting & Staffordshire University, Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education (2010)
[26] www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Postgraduate_Study
[27] www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239/

sourcing clear, accurate and up-to-date information on course fees and the funding options available. Such difficulties were experienced across the UK, regardless of location.

4.3.3.1. Funding, fees, and additional costs

Gaps and difficulties sourcing information

103.   Participants found no clear route to funding and a dearth of clear information was reported online with a lack of detail on all the sources and types of funding available including options for HEP funding, employer sponsorships, scholarships, charitable funding, bank loans, government funding and self-funding. There was also a lack of detailed information on eligibility criteria for different funding options, how to apply and the criteria for success.

104.   Students found it difficult to source information comparing fees of courses across HEPs. There was also a lack of clarity over the payment plan options available and a lack of transparency of what fees pay for during their course.

> *'What do my fees pay for?'*

105.   There was a perception that increasing fees have turned the relationship between HEPs and students into a business-customer relationship.

> *'Universities are businesses trying to sell services and we are the customers – the relationship has changed with the increased fees.'*

106.   Students also reported difficulties sourcing information on additional course costs such as those for books, materials, equipment and field trips etc. In addition, students found it difficult to source up-to-date information relating to the living costs of the local area and the accommodation available within the HEP and externally and the associated costs.

Potential solution

107.   Participants recommended a centralised website comparing all the fees of courses across HEPs and detailing all potential sources and types of funding available, with a clear pathway to determine eligibility and clear descriptions of the criteria for eligibility to apply. They also recommended a step-by-step chronological guide to applying for funding with all key deadlines for applications specified. In addition, how applications are judged and the criteria for success need to be clearly outlined so that prospective students can tailor their application accordingly.

> *'A website for independent funding would be useful.'*

108.   The website should be in a table format where students can compare all fees, payment plan options, breakdowns of fees across each course and each HEP, and additional course costs at a glance. In addition, they would like up-to-date comparable information on the living costs in each area where HEPs are located.

4.3.3.2. Real life experience

Gaps and difficulties sourcing information

109.   Participants found difficulty sourcing examples of current students' work to give them some insight into what was involved in undertaking the course, despite this being important to them (Oakleigh)[28].

110.   Prospective students also experienced difficulty in sourcing balanced reviews (both positive and negative) of alumni and current students on their course specifically.

111.   Whilst there was often some student feedback on university websites or current students available at university open days to share their experience, participants often felt that the information was irrelevant if the current student providing advice was not studying the specific course they were interested in applying for. Participants sought contact information for course directors and tutors. However, participants expressed difficulty in finding the 'right' person to speak to at the HEP, someone who is in a position to address their queries. Once contact has been made, receiving a timely and adequate response also often proves difficult. Participants complain of being 'passed around' from person to person at the HEP and some get no acceptable resolution to their query. Particular reference was made to the lack of support or information provided by some admissions offices, and particular note was made of the feeling that the offices were ill-equipped to offer information. Often queries were redirected to the website or to others in the HEP rather than being dealt with by the office.

112.   The online survey also suggests that more information is needed relating to individual HEPs, both in terms of the facilities and the surrounding environment. This includes help in finding accommodation and travel information. Information on location is particularly useful for international students who, whilst they may know English, are not always aware of the cultural and practical differences that may exist in the UK. Some students wanted to know the "proportion of foreign and local" students. In the focus groups it was seen that whilst some wanted to know this information to increase their international exposure, others were concerned that there would be an over-focus on one nationality within the classroom. Other comments included a desire to have information on the 'British health system' and even 'What to wear when coming to the UK':

    'We don't have four seasons so I had difficulty understanding how to dress.'

    'Support for international student[s] in handling different education system[s].'

113.   Participants spoke of the difficulties in finding information that they perceive to be unbiased regarding HEPs and courses. This perhaps signifies the reason for a desire for greater contact with current students and alumni so that prospective students feel they can trust that this is the real 'lived experience'.

114.   While prospective students wanted to hear the 'lived experience' from former students on the course, they were wary of student ambassadors hired by the HEP for the purpose of promotion. It was thought that these ambassadors may not be truthful in their experience (e.g. only highlighting the positive aspects and filtering out any negative elements).

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[28] Oakleigh Consulting & Staffordshire University, Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education (2010), p8

'The only information you get is from people who want money off you – it is better to have real views of those who have been there.'

'Being misled by [those] who want to market the course in a particular university.'

Potential solutions

115.   Potential students wanted to have access to examples of current students' work such as research projects and have this available to view on a university website. There is overwhelming consensus in the value and desire for direct contact with existing students through online channels such as forums, social media and meeting students face-to-face, such as through attending student groups.

116.   However, by far the most sought-after way to gather course information was through direct one-to-one communication with existing students, preferably by email, telephone or face-to-face contact which was not regulated or moderated in any way by the HEP themselves and therefore could be trusted as honest opinion and not 'sales speak'. Whilst participants saw the value of statistics on student satisfaction they recognised the difficulty in obtaining this information at PG level (explained in greater depth later) and would see more value in qualitative accounts of past students' experience (which many say they are unable to find). Some students were able to contact current students or alumni directly to ask queries. Others were not and would have valued this opportunity.

117.   Participants also reported a need for contact information for course directors and tutors on the university website so that direct contact could be made.

4.3.3.3. Opportunities resulting from the course

Gaps and difficulties sourcing information

118.   Participants reported difficulties sourcing information relating to where the qualification will lead them in the future.

'Just in understanding what the course will qualify me to do in my future career.'

119.   Participants could also not find clear information about the key skills developed during their course and what jobs including full-time, part-time and internships or future study they could apply for with the skill set achieved.

120.   Participants also found very little detail of the job market locally, nationally and internationally to assess their future prospects, however this information needs to be constantly updated as markets are frequently changing and students would appreciate regular updates during their course as well as during the application process so they can steer their studies accordingly. They also found it difficult to establish whether HEPs have any links with the industry they are studying for a career in.

Potential solutions

121.   Participants recommend clear and up-to-date information on the career paths of alumni, presented online, with links to relevant job sites. They would value detail on the HEP's links with industry and employers and clear, frequently updated guidance on the local, national and

international job market. They also sought detail on the key skills that would be developed throughout the course and the jobs they could apply for with these skills.

4.3.3.4. Course-specific information

Gaps and difficulties sourcing information

122. Course-specific information was difficult to come across. Participants wanted detailed information on:

- Course content
- Up-to-date list of modules available for the coming year
- Details of approximate class sizes
- Demography and diversity of the class based on previous years

123. Participants also wanted details of:

- Course assessment methods
- Course reading lists
- Extent of contact time with their tutor explained
- Tutor to student ratio
- Number of independent learning hours expected
- Number of taught hours per week
- Impact of the course on their personal life in terms of time and resource

124. Participants also sought detailed information on entry requirements, success of former students in terms of the grades they achieved and how many completed the course and what grades mean in terms of employability and opportunities for further study as well as the course timetable.

Potential solutions

125. For all of the above, participants either reported difficulties sourcing the information or a lack of information available. Students seek course-specific, detailed and up-to-date information. They also want to compare course content for the same courses at different universities. Oakleigh also confirms that postgraduate students were less likely to rate prospectuses as useful sources of information and more likely to rate comparison websites[29] highly.

4.3.3.5. Application process

Gaps and difficulties sourcing information

126. The application processes (either for enrolment on a specific course or for funding) were a source of great uncertainty amongst participants. Students were frustrated by the lack of coherent information on how to apply, the eligibility criteria and the deadlines for submitting applications. Some participants expressed frustration at receiving details of the funding they would be eligible for and how to apply too late as deadlines had passed. In some circumstances this led to delays in commencing courses and for some this meant a delay of up to one year.

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[29] Oakleigh Consulting & Staffordshire University, Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education (2010), p8

Some participants also complained of having gone to the effort of applying for funding for course places only to be told that they were not eligible to apply or that deadlines had passed.

Recommendations

127.   As a result of these frustrations and delays in the application processes, participants recommended that a step-by-step chronological guide to application processes is created online, with eligibility criteria and deadlines clearly specified.

4.3.3.6. Scattered, outdated and misleading information

128.   Although the majority of those surveyed have painted a positive picture of their experiences gathering information, suggesting that they found the process of making decisions very easy and straightforward and that they managed to find all the information they needed, there were some negative comments which are captured below.

129.   Information provision is often described by students as vague, scattered, out of date, generic rather than specific and insufficient. Students complained of outdated information on university websites and in prospectuses. One student reported that for her course in 2012, the most recent information that she could find was a prospectus from 2008.

> *'Old information on websites. This needs constant updating to avoid misleading someone.'*

130.   Overall, participants felt that the difficulties with current information provision were triggered by a lack of centralised and timely information, with participants reporting spending considerable periods of time searching for and collating information that was inconsistent across sources and HEPs in terms of content, presentation and timing, making collation difficult at best and misleading about the experience of the course at worst.

131.   Some students applied for courses based on specific modules advertised on university websites only to find the module unavailable on commencing the course leading students feeling frustrated and misled.

> *'Modules are advertised but when course begins no lecturers are available to teach it so the course does not go ahead. This is frustrating and misleading.'*

132.   Others were frustrated that the actual assessment methods were not the same as advertised.

> *'I was told that the course would involve a live project but when I began the course this simply ended up being a standard dissertation. I expected more practical work but the course ended up being more writing.'*

133.   Other participants spoke of statistics in tables on websites being misleading as they lacked explanation and context and therefore it was difficult to know what measurement they represented. Rankings are thought to be misleading as they are based upon the level of research in the HEP, whereas students would prefer a ranking based on the level of teaching.

> *'Information and statistics in tables needs to be explained, otherwise misleading.'*

134. Students also reported feeling misled as they expected further contact with their lecturers outside lectures. Information on contact time with lecturers was not clearly explained on the HEP's website or prospectus.

135. International students often spoke of the desire to undertake study in the UK to gain cultural experience and study alongside people of different nationalities. However, because of a lack of information on the demographic breakdown of the student population, students were often frustrated to find courses where a large proportion of the student population were from their home country, thus limiting the multicultural experience they so desired. UK students are also concerned that student populations for some courses are predominantly those of one overseas nationality rather than a diverse spread.

4.3.3.7. Difficulties understanding information presented

136. Participants were asked whether they experienced any difficulties understanding any of the information they found or that was presented to them. The responses included difficulties in understanding information due to language or poorly worded text or insufficient explanation of tables and statistics. However many experienced problems with the services they were offered or were seeking. For instance there were complaints of inefficient admissions officers who were losing students' important documentation or were unable to address queries instead redirecting students to other sources which were equally unhelpful, a lack of communication between schools and admissions offices leaving admissions staff ill-equipped to answer questions about specific courses and unhelpful finance and careers service staff. Examples of difficulties experienced included:

- Information provided only in English (problematic for some international students)
- Grading systems not often clearly explained
- Information regarding visas and fees for international students seen as too complex
- Information poorly worded or not detailed enough to give sufficient explanation
- Difficulty navigating websites
- Information and statistics in tables needing to be explained, otherwise misleading
- Country-specific information specifically about what constitutes a disability in the UK and how to classify ethnicity (e.g. as a white Mexican, one participant stated that they did not identify with the categories)

4.3.4. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

137. HEPs who work in direct contact with students and prospective students were asked whether prospective PGT students had approached them, their team, organisation or HEP with any recurring queries or specific information that they were unable to provide or find easily. Key stakeholders who were in a position to answer this question reported that they often received queries such as:

- Do you offer {named} course?
- What are the term dates? When would I have to attend the university? When does the course start?
- Information about the location of the HEP. One participant recalled that international students often know about London and other large cities but other areas of the country are less well known such as Nottingham, Leeds, Sheffield and Canterbury

- The reputation of the HEP and how it is viewed and ranked compared to others. How the course is ranked compared to others. Non-student stakeholders believed that UK students have the opportunity to speak directly to universities to gain more awareness than international students about an individual HEP. This is therefore particularly relevant for international students who seek information on the universities' reputations overseas especially by employers in their home country

- How will I fund this course? What are the fees? Can you point me to sources of funding and eligibility criteria? Funding opportunities such as scholarships and bursaries available for UK and international students. Due to the higher fees for overseas students, one stakeholder suggested that international students expect more scholarships to be available to them. UK-domiciled students often ask if there are any funded places or loans available to them, part-time employment opportunities available in the local area/on-campus with details of guarantees of work, and approximate salary of the work. With the fee increases at UG level, UK students want to know if they can undertake the course part-time or via distance-learning to keep their current job, or commence part-time employment during their studies. UK-domiciled students weigh up whether they can afford to quit their job if this flexibility was not offered. International students typically would have less flexibility in this manner. Living costs are common queries from both international and UK-domiciled students

- How flexible is the university in accommodating external commitments? For example, many mature students have to fit their studies around domestic responsibilities and employment

138. The online survey also demonstrates what difficulties staff and professionals observed students experiencing (table 4.8). The chief among these was difficulty with navigating websites, although students were also thought to be concerned with weak, unspecific information, and information that was out of date.

Table 4.8: Awareness among staff of student difficulties with information

Please indicate whether you are aware of students experiencing difficulties with the following:	%
Navigation on websites was difficult	52%
The information provided was not specific enough (e.g. online forums discussed my university but not my specific course)	48%
The information available was out of date	44%
No standard format of information to compare courses/HEPs	33%
There was no independent source of information	26%
The information was only provided in English	19%
The language used was too technical	15%
The information available seemed biased	11%

Source: i-graduate 2012

139. Key stakeholders were asked whether there were any language (technical or foreign) or cultural issues in the current information available for prospective PGT students. One key stakeholder reflected a concern of some current students that due to the lack of information on the demographic profile of students on a specific course, international students would come to study in the UK looking for a multicultural experience and to learn about British culture, only to

find some courses are so dominated by overseas students that they do not receive the experience they desired.

'Universities put out a lot of information and work hard to recruit internally and externally [to the UK]. Some courses are so full of overseas students that the postgraduate experience for overseas students is not good as they are not meeting people from England and they are not sharing experiences of their own culture. They may be in halls of residence and then they go into the classroom only. This lessens the experience for them.'

140.   In terms of language difficulties, students and key stakeholders generally shared the view that a high level of English language ability was expected at PGT level and therefore information materials on courses and HEPs are presented in English for the most part and there is general agreement that it is correct to do so. However, students and key stakeholders both acknowledged that the English language ability of parents of students may not be as good and families were a significant source of information and advice when making the decision of what course to study and where. Therefore if they act as an important source of consultation then HEPs should consider translating information for international students.

4.4. Section 4: Specific information needs

141.   This section addresses the following research questions:

(i) Do the information needs of potential PGT students differ across the UK?

(j) How do international students select PGT courses? What resources do they use? Are their information needs different compared to those of home/EU students? Are there language or cultural issues around the current information provision for international students?

(n) Do potential students considering PGT courses as a stepping stone to postgraduate research have different information needs to those only interested in a PGT degree?

4.4.1. Key summary

142.   There are many kinds of PGT students – differences can be based upon location, nationality, ethnicity, mode of study, motivation to study, religion, disability, sexual orientation and time lapsed from UG study. Students and non-student stakeholders were asked whether information needs differ according to different groups of students.

143.   Findings provided no salient evidence to show a difference in the information needs of PGT students across the UK. However whilst overseas students generally required a similar level of information as UK domicile students, they needed an additional layer of information concerning the practicalities of moving to and living and studying in the UK. These included detailed information on visas, accommodation and the availability of language support or foreign language presentation of course information. For non-EU international students, the ease of getting a visa to study is an important factor in deciding where to study. In the online survey, 67 per cent of current students rated this as being important compared with 82 per cent of prospective students. However, despite the current press coverage of international students the ease of getting a visa was still seen as less important than the cost of studying (both in terms of fees and living costs). One factor affecting this could be that most students completing the survey were already in the UK and so visas were no longer such an issue.

144.　　Students want an idea of the full journey they will face during their life as a PGT student and after. This starts from the application process "how to start choosing a university in the UK" (for international applicants), "competitiveness of entry into the course" and goes on to cover the course itself "what the first few weeks/months entail", "sample typical student week timetable for specific course" and the potential outcomes to be expected from completing the course "% of students newly employed within 6 months". This was particularly noticeable in the open box responses from the online survey, where a mix of both quantitative and qualitative information was requested. This includes "student feedback on the course" and "past students' employment areas". Employability is an important consideration for some students. They are eager to know the value added their course will offer in relation to their prospects of gaining employment. Students want to know the link between their course and the job market. Information gaps included requests for more statistical analysis of their course outcomes: "Jobs taken on by former graduates (+ percentages of people having done so for each profession, e.g. academic)", "how recent year graduates are faring in the job market". Students also expect a more active role from HEPs in helping them to find employment: "advice into careers after the course", "how the university helps finding a job" and the provision of "Potential employers for after completing studies." This information extends to wanting to know "past student salaries". This value-added is not restricted to employment. Other replies included not knowing "whether my degree was suitable for doing a PGCE". To support this further, staff and professionals provided their view in the survey about the information employers could provide to support potential students. This included information about career paths and salaries and is illustrated in table 4.9:

Table 4.9: Staff views about information employers could provide to PGT students (n=46)

What information could employers of PGT students and prospective PGT students provide?	%
Expected career progression path	74%
Average graduate salary	67%
Job entry requirement	64%
Amount sponsorship provided for PGT courses	64%
Accreditation requirements	62%
Preferred HEPs used for PGT provision	62%
Conditions of sponsorship for PGT course	57%

Source: i-graduate 2012

145.　　Difficulties that students experienced included:

- Language barriers – the vast majority of information on HEPs and courses is written in English, however it is recognised that a high level of English is expected from students
- Complexity in the visa process
- Lack of physical contact with the university and its staff to attend open days, visit the campus and experience the local environment

146.　　The majority of students in the online survey were able to understand information with around 90 per cent of past, current and prospective students not expressing any difficulties in understanding the information they had found. Perhaps slightly concerning is the fact that 15 per cent of current non-EU international PGT students did have difficulties in understanding this

information, with 61 per cent of these suggesting that the information provided was not specific enough. Indeed, this was also the main cause of difficulty for both EU (75 per cent) and UK (62 per cent) current students. Whilst there was a similar strength of feeling among past PGT students, prospective students found that navigating websites was nearly as common a problem as the lack of specific information (49 per cent and 51 per cent, respectively).

4.4.2. Student stakeholder perspectives

4.4.2.1. Do the information needs of potential PGT students differ across the UK?

147.   There was no salient evidence that information needs of potential PGT students differ across the UK. Participants in focus groups across the country expressed similar views on the information needs of prospective PGT students and there was no clear distinction between regions and countries. However some students from Belfast commented that Northern Ireland students sometimes felt side-lined or ignored in terms of involvement in consultations or for funding assistance.

4.4.2.2. Do potential students considering PGT courses as a stepping stone to postgraduate research have different information needs to those only interested in a PGT degree?

148.   Again there was no clear evidence of a distinction in their information needs. However, a couple of students seeking to go on to further study expressed a desire for information relating to the research skills they would acquire on a taught programme so that they could ensure that they had the necessary skills upon completion of the course to pursue postgraduate research.

4.4.2.3. Different information needs for different groups

149.   Participants suggested that different demographic and social groups do have different information needs. One of the potential issues of creating a scenario-based environment in focus groups is the opportunity for speculation bias rather than a recording of a direct experience of the individual from the small sample sizes involved.

150.   An important consideration is the difference in information needs between students who are returning to education after a break and those who move from an undergraduate course straight into a PGT course, particularly within the same HEP. Certainly from the focus groups there was a feeling that it was much easier to find out the information a student needed when they were already within an HEP. They often have direct access to course advisors and students from the courses they are interested in, already know general information such as living costs in the area, know about the university and the way it operates, and also the education system more generally.

151.   Those not in this group are those who have already engaged in some form of life experience before returning to education to engage in a PGT course. These students may be more likely to follow part-time courses due to either family or career commitments, and need information that will allow them to juggle both their existing lives and the new demands of a PGT course.

Religion

152.   Information on the freedom and availability of facilities for different religious groups to practise their faith such as prayer rooms for Muslims and availability of same-sex accommodation would be important in the decision-making process.

Disability

153.   Information for disabled students should include whether HEPs provide learning support for dyslexic students, including extra time allocated in exams, and personal assistance such as disability officers for students with physical disabilities. Information should also be available regarding accessibility for disabled students around campus such as ramps and disabled accommodation. In addition, there should be information about the provision of accessible versions of course reading materials for those with hearing difficulties, or those who are blind or partially sighted, such as audio descriptions, larger font versions or braille. Every HEP is required to have a disability statement; however, no reference was made to this by students or non-student stakeholders.

154.   The online survey also highlighted difficulties some disabled students experienced, with some not getting the information they need, such as accommodation and disability support

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

155.   Sexual orientation may also play a part in the decision-making process for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students who may wish to have more specific information. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, participants were reluctant to talk further.

Ethnicity and nationality

156.   Ethnicity and nationality may also play a role in the decision-making process and thus participants suggested that information on the ethnic diversity of the student population and local area was important as well as the availability of language support and translation services. Focus group participants, regardless of ethnicity and nationality, often spoke of their surprise at the large number of international students or high proportion of just one nationality in their classes. In addition societies, councils and social events dedicated to specific nationalities may be of interest in advance of attendance as well as testimonials of existing students from the same ethnicity or nationality.

4.4.2.4. Do the information needs of EU or international students differ from UK domicile students?

157.   The survey had a good sample of international students, with 63 per cent representing EU or international students and the remaining 37 per cent of students being UK-domiciled. The EU and international students need the same information as UK-domiciled students and also required an additional layer of information about visas, accommodation etc. that increased the complexity of their decision making.

Visas

158.   Information on visas for international students was seen as vital. This included details of the applications process, restrictions, deadlines etc. However many students complained at the

complexity of the information presented and the difficulties they experienced in applying. Smith (2010) also states that the British Council and UK HEPs have a valuable role in communicating to prospective students how the points-based visa system works and dispelling the perception that the system is an obstacle to studying in the UK[30].

Accommodation

159.   UK-domiciled students need detailed information about accommodation on and off campus, however, international students, particularly those who had never visited the UK, required further information in order to feel secure and safe in having a 'place to stay' prioritising accommodation over all other planning arrangements.

Living and studying in the UK

160.   Overseas students sought information on living in the UK in particular, hospitals and medical care, living expenses including energy bills, taxes, transport system, crime levels, safety, policing and laws, the Government, the weather, food, banking and the job market. Students also require information on British culture and societal norms. It was also felt to be important to provide UK-domiciled students with information about the culture of international students on their course in order to facilitate mutual appreciation and understanding.

161.   Prospective international students also required information on the British education system and the expectations of the UK higher education system for independent study and study skills, especially when the British system is considerably different to the one in their home country. The participants of the focus groups pointed out that students are expected to proactively seek information from teachers and support services and overseas students suggested this would require more effort for some countries more than others.

162.   Participants felt that the HEP, current students and staff should be able to provide detailed information on these elements of living and studying in the UK.

163.   In addition, overseas students generally searched a greater number of HEPs and options than UK-domiciled students who are more likely to attend an HEP local to them. This was often for financial and domestic reasons so they could remain living at home and, for some, so they could remain in their current employment whilst studying.

164.   International students in particular, but also some UK-domiciled students, asked for more information about safety and security in the external environment to the HEP, including guidance on how to stay safe. Participants felt that HEPs may be afraid to do this as it could put students off applying. However international students felt that this is invaluable information for people entering the UK for the first time.

Language

165.   Overseas students also sought information on the level of English language ability required for studying and living in the UK and any language support available within and outside the HEP and any likely costs associated with such support.

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[30] Smith A, One Step Beyond: Making the most of Postgraduate Education (2010), p10

Well-known HEPs

166.   It is worth noting the influence of popularity on decision-making for international students. International students often spoke about applying to the universities they have heard of, those that are well-known around the world such as Oxford, Cambridge and London as they know of them and where they are. For instance, one Chinese PGT student reported that a lot of Chinese people go to Westminster University because they recognise the name from knowing 'Westminster Abbey'. International students reported that they did not realise before they arrived just how different UK cities are from one another.

4.4.3. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

167.   Stakeholders acknowledged that it is not possible to have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to information provision as they perceive that there is a difference in the information needs of students dependent on a variety of factors. These include whether they are current undergraduates or prospective mature students, whether they are UK domicile or overseas. It is also felt that the motivation to study has an impact on the type of information students need when making their decision.

> *'There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach, it's granular… hard to imagine a single set of info that would appeal to a student wanting to do a research MSc and a VET student in Rwanda who wants career development…. There is a genuine difference in the cohort of students and their motivation.'*

168.   Stakeholders generally reported that a difference existed between the information needs for UK domicile and EU or international students. Firstly, the motivations of EU or international students for undertaking a course in the UK may be different to those of UK domicile students.

169.   In addition, international students need to be prepared for the British culture and British education system, such as being expected to work independently. Concrete examples include the type of classroom, the mixture of international and UK domicile students in the class, the staff-to-student ratio, British laws including smoking and alcohol consumption, health and safety and the required level of English competency.

4.5. Section 5: Information dissemination

170.   This section addresses the following research questions:
 (g) How students prefer access to information they find useful
 (h) How students prefer information about PGT courses to be presented
 (m) Do potential PGT students use course comparison websites? If so, which ones? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these sites?

4.5.1. Key summary

▪ Students source most information from HEP websites. Other reported sources include online sites dedicated to higher education, students, industry, social media websites, and traditional paper media including newspapers and prospectuses and personal contact including contact with staff and a student's career guidance counsellors. Actual contact with people is seen to be more influential than statistical information.

- Overseas students relied heavily on online resources and email correspondence. However in some countries internet use is restricted resulting in a reliance on education agents and organisations such as the British Council to provide information and support
- Students had a preference for information collated and centralised into one single trusted website that would be genuine and frequently updated as well as printed packs which feature multimedia sources, provide links to other sources of information and give specific information on each course.
- Students sought personal contact with the HEP through meeting lecturers, teaching staff and current students on the specific course at face-to-face open days, attending mock lectures, seminars and attending presentations.

4.5.2. Student stakeholder perspectives

4.5.2.1. Current sources of information

171. Focus group participants and online survey respondents were asked where they source information. Most information was sourced from HEP websites with 70 per cent of current and past students and 72 per cent of prospective students selecting this option. UK students made far more use of university printed documents and guides than their EU and non-EU international counterparts. One medium probed further in the survey was the use of student chat rooms and on-line forums. In phase 1 of this project these were investigated as a way of obtaining an early look of students views. However, the survey indicated that only 5 per cent of current, 8 per cent of past and 10 per cent of prospective students use such rooms. The numbers using social networking sites (such as Facebook) are even lower.

172. League tables are another popular resource for all groups of students. Prospective students in particular place a value on them (40 per cent) when compared with current (28 per cent) and past (29 per cent) PGT students. However, all three groups also value the staff of the university (26 per cent, 29 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively) and current or previous students that experienced studying at the same university or on the same course (32 per cent, 24 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively). It is interesting that the students in the focus groups had a clear preference in having a 'personal' experience to meet their information needs. However, current students are just as likely to use sources such as websites and league tables as they are to talk to university staff or experienced students. This could just as likely to be down to ease of access to these sources as it is through preference. Other reported sources are given below.

Online resources

- Government websites
- Dedicated higher education websites such as prospects.ac.uk or ucas.ac.uk
- Dedicated student websites
- Dedicated industry websites such as Teachernet
- Social media including Facebook student groups and online forums

173. The following Wordle (see paragraph 65) indicates the most popular websites used by those surveyed online, showing that the university websites are the most used resource but other familiar sites include The Student Room and The Guardian.

Figure 4.3: Most popular websites used by students

Source: Created using 'Wordle' online software © 2011 Jonathan Feinberg (wordle.net)

Traditional media

- Newspapers especially Times Higher Education Supplement or The Guardian
- Published league tables
- Paper prospectuses

Personal contact

174. People and human contact were seen to be more influential than statistical information. Personal contact included:

- Open days
- Visiting the HEP in person
- Contacting HEP staff directly including admissions staff, finance staff, career service, departmental offices, course administrators, course co-ordinators, course directors, course tutors and lecturers
- Contact with current students and alumni, class representatives and student champions
- Family and friends
- Current lecturers and tutors
- Career guidance counsellors
- Libraries
- Employers and HR departments
- Careers fairs

175. Overseas students relied heavily on online resources and email correspondence due to the high cost of international telephone calls and postage and their geographic distance from the HEP means it is not feasible to visit the HEP in person or attend open days.

176. However despite the reliance of some international students on online resources, some were isolated from such information through lack of internet availability and access in their country. For instance in some regions of Africa internet connections are poor or the internet is simply not available, or in countries such as China, internet use is restricted. Education agents are thus often relied upon to provide information. However, two students reported that they encountered unscrupulous education agents who advised students to apply for private HEPs which had reportedly lost their licences to teach PGT courses.

'Bogus advisors in your home country force you to go to dodgy private institutions who have lost their licenses. These certified education consultants mislead you.'

177.   Overseas students also make use of organisations such as the British Council for support.

4.5.2.2. Preferred method of presentation

178.   Focus group participants were asked how they prefer information (especially statistical data) about PGT study to be presented. Participants showed an overwhelming preference for personal contact with current and alumni students on the course they intend to apply for. Participants wanted the opportunity to talk to real people who have experienced the course and the HEP. Participants wanted to speak to students directly face-to-face or via email or via online channels to get honest and balanced views of both good and bad elements of the course and HEP.

179.   Participants complained of being redirected to websites when they call the HEP, staff or department for information rather than having their query resolved by a real person.

180.   Participants reported a preference for concise, specific and detailed information presented early on in the decision-making process – for overseas students this must be over a year before commencing the course, for UK-domiciled students, this can be the September one year prior to commencing the course. Suggested presentation includes:

1. Information collated and centralised into one single trusted, genuine, frequently updated website which features multimedia sources and provides links to other sources of information, including:
    - Videos of the university and students speaking about their experiences
    - Podcasts
    - Success stories including statistics on career paths of former students, pass rates and number of students who complete the course
    - Statistics that are presented and explained clearly
    - 'At a glance' tables for instance those comparing key information such as fees, location, student support etc. across the same or similar courses offered by different HEPs across the UK or comparing courses across the UK by sector
    - Question and answer direct contact forums with students and lecturers including contact information
    - Facebook and Twitter accounts linking prospective students with current students
2. A full pack of information including DVDs and CD-ROMS and specific information on each course
3. Personal contact with the HEP through meeting lecturers, teaching staff and current students on the specific course face-to-face at open days, attending mock lectures and seminars and attending presentations.
4. For all prospective students, participants feel that universities should focus more time on ensuring that technical language used in information documents is thoroughly explained.

4.5.3. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

181.   Non-student stakeholders suggested that it would be easier to reach prospective students through social networking sites than through other channels and therefore this would be a suitable mechanism for conveying information about PGT study options. Participants were presented with a list asking which sources of information they currently use when making their decisions about going to higher education.

182. Staff and professionals were asked in the online survey which sources of information they felt students would use to select a course. A teacher or tutor at a previous education HEP was the most popular choice followed by the HEP website (table 4.10).

Table 4.10: Staff views on PGT student choices

Which of the following sources would prospective PGT students use to choose which course to study?	%
Teacher/tutor/lecturer at previous education institution	93%
The website of the HEP	88%
An employer/sponsor	76%
League tables or rankings	71%
Current or previous students that experienced studying at this HEP or this course	69%
Staff of the HEP	69%
A friend(s)	67%
Education agent/consultant	62%
Social networking site (e.g. Orkut, Bebo, Facebook etc.)	62%
Campus open day (on-site or virtual) or visit	62%
Course comparison website	55%
An education exhibition/fair	55%
Family	52%
A printed document/guide from the HEP e.g. prospectus	50%
Student chat rooms/online forum	48%
Education UK website (www.educationuk.org)	45%
Home country government advisory service	45%
British Council	38%
Newspaper or magazine article	21%
Newspaper or magazine advertisement	19%
Printed directory	17%
TV or radio advert	12%
Another organisation presenting the UK (please specify)	5%

Source: i-graduate 2012

4.6. Section 6: Potential PGT survey

183. This section addresses the question:

(k) Would information derived from a taught postgraduate survey be considered useful by potential PGT students?

4.6.1. Key summary

- Whilst students generally agreed that a survey of current PGT students would be of value, key stakeholders had mixed views on the utility of findings for prospective PGT students
- Students and other stakeholders questioned the value of purely statistical data and felt qualitative responses might be more useful
- Some respondents pointed to the limitations of survey data, suggesting that it can be misleading if taken out of context and is too simple to inform complex decision making
- Some felt social media would be a better outlet for such information
- Some students felt that a survey would be welcomed by current PGT students as it would make them feel valued and that their views mattered

- Some students felt a survey should seek to establish information on how current students finance their courses, what they feel about their course, their levels of satisfaction, what the first three months of the course was like, and any difficulties they experienced and the solutions they adopted as this would assist future students facing similar problems
- Stakeholders felt that students should be asked about their levels of satisfaction with facilities including teaching, departmental facilities, the wider university facilities, library support, access and resources as well as employability, generic skills acquired, placement opportunities and perceptions of value for money. Other questions may include why they chose the course, whether the course met their expectations, what they intend to do with the degree and whether 12 months is an appropriate period of time to complete the course
- To be useful, the outputs of the survey need to be timely for students to use the information. Some suggested that this should be at least a year in advance of commencing the course, especially for international students. The estimated time lag of a survey, as determined in the concurrent NatCen research "The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students", suggests a survey would not meet this need

184. Although there was no evidence from the literature review that students themselves felt that a survey would be useful for supporting their information needs, previous research into the benefits of a national PGT survey by the Institute of Education (IoE) had led to support from the National Student Forum subgroup and the National Union of Students (NUS) with the IoE suggesting that respondents were by and large in favour of extending the National Student Survey to PGT students[31]. All members of the National Student Forum subgroup agreed with the suggestion and one commented 'I think it's an important idea, especially as doing a masters degree is becoming de rigueur these days'. NUS and most HEP representatives also supported this development[32]. There were some reservations with a national survey, as the IoE discovered, with respondents suggesting that the response rates may be low, the existing Higher Education Academy (HEA) Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) was too long and establishing the correct timing of a survey may be difficult. Smith (2010)[33] recommended in March 2010 that 'Prospective postgraduates should have access to the same level of information [as undergraduates]. To address this, HEPISG should consider extending the National Student Survey to include taught postgraduate students'.

185. The question as to whether such a survey would technically be feasible was addressed by the concurrent NatCen research. This concluded that given the small cohort size of many PGT courses, the data would need to be aggregated before being published (which may not be possible for some courses). As course-level results would be unavailable for many courses, a survey would not be feasible as it would not meet the information needs of prospective PGT students.

4.6.2. Student stakeholder perspectives
186. Current and prospective students agreed that a survey of current postgraduate students would be of use to prospective students but some challenged the value of statistical information in the same manner as key stakeholders had. Qualitative information would generally be

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[31] www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/
[32] Institute of Education, Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey (2010), pp57-58
[33] Smith A, One Step Beyond: Making the most of Postgraduate Education (2010), p43

preferred such as case studies of student experiences. Some felt that a survey would be welcomed by current PGT students as it would make them feel valued and that their views mattered.

187. Focus group participants felt that a survey should seek to establish information on how current students finance their courses, what they feel about their course, their levels of satisfaction, observations of their first three months of the course and any difficulties they experienced and solutions they adopted to advice future students facing similar issues.

188. Students also suggested that bespoke findings of such a survey should be provided to each participating HEP so they can act upon issues raised.

4.6.3. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

189. Whilst students in the focus groups and on line survey generally agreed that a survey of current PGT students would be helpful, key stakeholders were mixed in their views on the value of the findings for prospective PGT students. Both stakeholders and students questioned the value of purely statistical data and felt qualitative responses might provide more useful data. The majority of staff surveyed thought that information from a PGT survey would be useful (table 4.11). Research from the concurrent NatCen feasibility study suggests that staff were in favour of an online survey for institutional enhancement purposes. Findings from the feasibility study indicate that staff would like questions on satisfaction with the teaching and the course, perceptions on employment prospects, financial assistance, and specific questions for international and mature students.

Table 4.11: Staff/professionals' views on providing a survey of PGT students (n=46)

Do you think that information from a survey of PGT students would be useful to prospective students?	
Yes	79%
No	21%
Would the timing of such a survey influence the perception of its usefulness?	
Yes	78%
No	23%
When should the survey be administered so that it is perceived to be useful?	
January – March	38%
April – June	34%
July – September	7%
October – December	21%
How useful do you perceive the undergraduate Key Information (KIS) to be for prospective UG students?	
Very useful	9%
Useful	35%
Not useful	16%
Not at all useful	0%
No opinion	40%
How useful would it be if a similar set of information could be identified for postgraduates?	
Very useful	13%
Useful	62%

Not useful	21%
Not at all useful	5%
Do you think that information from a survey of PGT students would be useful to prospective students?	79%

Source: i-graduate 2012

190.   Most accepted that any information is useful and some strongly supported the prospect of a postgraduate survey under the proviso that careful consideration is given to measurement of concepts such as satisfaction level, measures are thoroughly explained and contextual information provided to assist in the interpretation of the data.

> *'Very much so but you have to contextualise the information; we [the organisation] have a policy in favour of a postgraduate National Student Survey, with careful understanding of satisfaction at postgraduate level. Think carefully about what it might mean. What are students trying to get from the course rather than feeling generically happy? Is the sample size going to be adequate? Ask different questions on the level of challenge, employability such as responses 'I feel challenged comfortably', 'I can see this is a postgraduate course and this is meaningful to me'. Need to ask the questions that students want to know.'*

> *'Very relevant. I strongly support it. It needs to include issues and have room for academic and social satisfaction such as life on campus, how integrated they feel, course content and how it was taught. This is important for international students.'*

191.   However others questioned the value of survey data in making multifaceted, complex decisions and that the information could become misleading if it was too simplified and did not thoroughly explain how the concepts are measured or provide a context for differing results across HEPs.

> *'Very sceptical about the value of a survey because I think it would be difficult to get the granularity you would need. Firstly the simplistic league table approach. There is a tendency for overseas students to just know the top ten universities, but what does this mean? What are you measuring? Are they the best?'*

192.   Others would not object to a survey but feel that social media would be a better media for information than through a survey which may be 'a bit old hat'.

> *'Yes [it would be useful], but I wonder if it's a bit old hat. If we talk about social media, that's instant access, could universities be brave enough to set up social media so prospective students can chat to current [ones]? In the graduate recruitment arena it would be useful to have a 'trip advisor' for postgraduate courses. Why does it not already exist? It would need more careful consideration. We have the National Student Survey and I'm all for it. You have to accept that conversations go on so you might as well encourage these conversations, but you have to accept this is how the world is today. You want to check things out and you realise that some people are never satisfied. We learn how to interpret things.'*

193. In addition, one non-student stakeholder drew attention to the effect of nationality on satisfaction ratings:

'Because postgraduate courses have such a nationality mix on them, we know there is a correlation between nationality and satisfaction, e.g. Nigerian students show greater satisfaction than us, compared to back at home, whereas we base our ratings on comparing courses within the UK, course B vs. course C. There are these issues around the validity of comparisons and we have very different expectations. Therefore how meaningful is it really?'

194. Another non-student stakeholder questioned the motives for asking this question at all:

'Would students like a PGT survey? Would they like a £5 note? The answer is obvious.'

195. Some key stakeholders felt that qualitative data should be collected in the survey to provide richer, contextualised data to prospective applicants. Free text comments would capture what students thought of the course rather than relying only on quantitative data. At PGT level it is thought that people are likely to give more thought to what they are writing and are more likely to respond to qualitative questions. Non-student stakeholders feel that students should be asked about their levels of satisfaction with, for example, teaching, departmental facilities, the wider university facilities, library support, access and resources as well as employability, generic skills acquired, placement opportunities and perceptions of value for money. Other questions may include why they chose the course, whether the course met their expectations, what they intend to do with the degree and whether 12 months is an appropriate period of time to complete the course.

4.6.4. Survey timing

196. For findings to be of use, the survey needs to be timely for students to use the information and also undertaken at an appropriate time of year. Therefore when asked when during the course of a year the result of such a survey should be published to optimise the benefit for prospective students, some focus group participants felt that November/December in the year prior to the September course start, whilst others suggest that this should be at least a year in advance of commencing the course, especially for international students.

197. One non-student stakeholder suggested that international students can be considering their study in the UK up to three years before commencing the course, therefore as early as possible in a given year would be preferable. The general view however, is January to June (table 4.11) which is largely concurrent with NatCen's findings of a survey to be help between May and July.

4.7. Section 7: Potential for a PG KIS

198. This section addresses the following research questions:

(l) How do students and non-student stakeholders perceive the usefulness of the undergraduate KIS, and could a similar set of information could be identified for postgraduates?

4.7.1. Key summary

- There was a lack of awareness and knowledge about the UG KIS system amongst prospective and current PGT students, which resulted in a lack of further exploration of the prospect during focus groups despite explaining and outlining what the KIS measures were and examples of how they would be presented on a university website
- Views of non-student stakeholders were mixed. Some felt it would be a good idea to have information collated but most questioned the type of information that could be included and feel it is too soon to consider a postgraduate version when the UG version is yet to be trialled
- There was also a sense that you cannot have a straightforward replication of the UG KIS at postgraduate level because the issues are more complex at this level
- Some were very strongly against the prospect, concerned over small sample sizes rendering findings unreliable as PGT can be very specialised and class sizes small
- However despite the scepticism, non-student stakeholders often recognised the need to have information on current students' perspectives more readily available
- Specific sets of information that could be useful within the KIS include fees and funding options, the application process, accommodation charges, patterns of teaching, assessment arrangements, employability, average salary and levels of satisfaction with the course and HEP

4.7.2. Student stakeholder perspectives

199.   Despite explaining the KIS and describing how it would appear on university websites, a lack of prior awareness and knowledge about the UG KIS system amongst prospective and current PGT students made it difficult to further explore the issues during the focus groups.

4.7.3. Non-student stakeholder perspectives

200.   Non-student stakeholders were asked their views on how a postgraduate version of the KIS system could be useful to prospective PGT students. Of those who were in a position to answer or were familiar with the UG KIS system, views were once again mixed.

201.   Some felt it would be a good idea to have information collated but most questioned the type of information that could be included and feel it is too soon to consider a postgraduate version when the UG version is yet to be trialled.

> *'This would be a natural extension of the direction of the first KIS and I would welcome it if the UG could have a year or so to check it is widely used and helpful, before rushing into the next phase.'*

202.   There is also a sense that you cannot have a straightforward replication of the UG KIS at postgraduate level as the information needs are different.

> *'There is logic to extend the KIS for postgraduate. It makes sense to address the information requirements of postgraduate students but it would depend on information gathered. I would want to hold off for a year or two before a postgraduate version. The information needs are different. You can't just directly model it. We want to see the whole project is useful before we do it at postgraduate level.'*

'I think it needs lots of cautions attached to it as the postgraduate market is very diverse, from mature students to those straight out of university, [and] the nature of courses is diverse. It may be difficult to make it meaningful; just one statistic doesn't make it meaningful.'

203.   Others felt uncomfortable and sceptical at the prospect of a postgraduate KIS and some were very strongly against the prospect. For some this was due to concern over small sample sizes rendering findings unreliable, as PGT can be very specialised and class sizes small. One stakeholder suggested it would be detrimental to have a postgraduate version of the KIS:

'Our feeling is for postgraduate it would be detrimental as it's the wrong kind of information as it is statistics based. With KIS in UG our feeling is we are being limited in info. We think at masters level we need more precision. A straightforward KIS equivalent won't work especially as we are dealing with so many more international students.'

204.   However despite the scepticism of some participants, they often recognised the need to have information on current students' perspectives more readily available.

205.   When asked what specific sets of information gathered would be most useful within the KIS, key stakeholders who responded to this question suggested the following:

- Funding of the course, including scholarships and bursaries
- The application process
- Fees
- Residential accommodation charges
- Patterns of teaching and contact time
- Assessment arrangements such as coursework, dissertation, exams
- Employability and average salary
- Level of satisfaction with the course and the HEP e.g. does the HEP have library and journal facilities to support PGT study level and dissertations

5. Conclusions and recommendations

206.   This study was commissioned to investigate the information needs of postgraduate taught students and how these could be met. Specifically, the research was looking to support potential future students from the UK, EU and other countries in their decision making when considering PGT study in the UK. The information needs of this group, and how HEFCE, UK HEPs and other potential stakeholders in the higher education arena could help to meet these have been studied. The research was also intended to provide evidence for the concurrent feasibility study ("The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students", NatCen Research), acting to provide a triangulation between the students' needs, HEPs' views on the feasibility of carrying out a PGT survey, and the best form of dissemination to meet those needs. The following sections summarise the findings of this research.

5.1. Motivations for PGT study and decision-making factors

207.   Potential students consider PGT study for a number of reasons, particularly the following: enhancing their career and employment prospects or taking a step forward in their academic careers; continuing their learning to expand their knowledge and skills, personal interest and development; or changing their field of study, lifestyle or career. There are additional motivations for international students to study in the UK, including the cost and duration of study in the UK; and the value of studying and living in the UK and gaining international experience.

5.2. Existing information needs

208.   The main need for students is to have course-level information. This includes information about course content, tuition fees and costs. They also report wanting to compare this information to similar courses at different universities.

209.   A lack of a clear timeline means that potential students are unaware of when to apply for courses, potential sponsorship, grants and other funding and even when they need to be arranging accommodation. Prospective PGT students need a clear timeline of when things happen in the PGT application, acceptance and commencement cycles (at a national and institutional level).

5.3. Specific information needs

210.   Different demographic groups have specific information needs. These groups include international students, disabled students and students belonging to different religious groups.

211.   Particularly for international students who had never visited the UK, further information was needed in order to feel secure and safe in having a 'place to stay'. These students prioritised accommodation over all other planning arrangements.

212.   Information on visas for international students was also seen as vital. This included details of the applications process, restrictions, and deadlines. Many students complained at the complexity of the information presented and the difficulties they experienced in applying.

213.   Information for disabled students should include whether HEPs provide learning support for dyslexic students, including extra time allocated in exams, and personal assistance provision, such as disability officers for students with physical disabilities. Information should also be available regarding accessibility around campus such as ramps and disabled accommodation.

214.   In addition, the provision of accessible versions of course reading materials for those with hearing difficulties, or those who are blind or partially sighted, such as audio descriptions, larger font versions or braille.

215.   Information on the freedom and availability of facilities for different religious groups to practise their faith such as prayer rooms for Muslims and availability of same-sex accommodation is important in the decision-making process of these students when choosing a PGT course.

5.4. Information gaps

216.   Students need a clearer link between the course they are offered and the employment opportunities it may lead to. Students wish to know the outcomes of the PGT degree, such as the career paths of alumni, links to relevant job sites, HEPs' links with industry and employers, as well as clear, frequently updated guidance on the local, national and international job market. They also seek detail on the key skills that would be developed throughout the course and the jobs they could apply for with these skills.

217.   The timeframes to apply for different courses at individual HEPs and the other information a student needs relating to information such as finance and accommodation is not clear. The delays in application processes create additional strains on sourcing information. As a result of these frustrations, participants recommended that a step-by-step chronological guide to application processes is created online, with eligibility criteria and deadlines clearly specified.

5.5. Information dissemination

218.   Students are frustrated about the lack of timely information to allow them to plan and make choices. There needs to be early guidance published about funding options, timeframes and application processes, up to one year in advance for international students, if they are to make the investment in their studies to move overseas.

219.   It is clear from the research that potential students need human contacts to meet information needs. There was a marked demand for a human contact, both in the form of university staff and ex-students. It is clear that this is needed on two levels. Generally students want to know about financing their course and the application process for an individual HEP. However, they also want access to someone who can help with their own specific journey. This may be a faculty member who can tell them about the demands of a specific course including the modules they will study and the content of the modules, or an ex-graduate who can tell

them about the actual experience of doing the course, or someone from a similar demographic who can help with questions of living as a student in a particular HEP.

220. One of the most frequent complaints made by potential students was that they could not find anyone in the universities who could answer their questions, with students frequently being forwarded on to other people or asked to refer to university websites. Potential students need to be able to talk to someone who can act as a central resource and knows the answers to students' common questions and, if not, can direct students appropriately.

221. Students and stakeholders asked for an independent, clear and transparent way to find what courses are available and to be able to make informed judgements. We recommend using a two-tier system to address this, firstly a comparison tool (which has a set of standardised information) via an independent centralised resource, which could help students to narrow down their choices and answer broader questions. Secondly, individual websites where they could get more information about specific HEPs. At a minimum, the independent resource would need to fulfil the following information needs:
- Course searches
- Fees, cost of living and sources of funding
- Start dates, timelines, chronology, and deadlines

222. In addition to the website, developing a toolkit would also assist students and HEPs. Higher education providers would be able to give the toolkit to potential PGTs as a way to direct them to the questions they should ask. In its most basic form, this would be a tick list of things to consider and the order they should be considered in: e.g. availability of financial help, period open for application etc.

223. Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are made to help meet the information needs of prospective PGT students:

224. *Recommendation 1: HEPs should provide a wide range of information related to PGT study, and in particular, course-specific information such as specific course content, timetables, and employment outcomes. The information could be in the form of videos, podcasts, career success stories, or 'at a glance' tables.*

225. *Recommendation 2: Clear, up-to-date information on the cost of studying for a PGT degree should be made easily accessible. Information should include tuition fees, additional course costs, estimated living and accommodation costs, payment structure, as well as any funding options. Much of this information could be provided by HEPs.*

226. *Recommendation 3: Where possible, providers of information should make their material available up to one year ahead of the course start date, as international students gather information early on to help them plan their PGT journey. A step-by-step chronological guide to the application process could be provided to prospective students as an aid to the application process.*

227. *Recommendation 4: Where possible, HEPs should provide a source of 'human contact' to answer questions from students as many have specific information needs which cannot be met through generic information provided on websites.*

228. ***Recommendation 5:*** *There should be an independent centralised resource to which HEPs can provide data to meet the wide-ranging information needs of prospective PGT students and information providers, and provide the first port of call for information.*

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1 – Focus groups

Sex	Nationality	Course/Prospective Course	Type of Study	City	Course Type	Previous Highest Qual. Level
M	India	LL.M Law and Criminology	FT	Bangor	PGT	PhD
M	China	LLM in law	FT	Bangor	PGT	BA
F	Ireland	MA Arthurian Literature	FT	Bangor	PGT	BA
M	China	MA Business and Marketing	FT	Bangor	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA in English	FT	Bangor	PGT	BA
M	Colombia	MSc in Consumer psychology with business	FT	Bangor	PGT	BA
F	UK	MSc in Marine Environmental Protection	FT	Bangor	PGT	BSc
F	UK	PGDip Occupational Therapy	FT	Bangor	PGT	BSc
F	Ireland	BA in English with Creative Writing	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
F	UK	BSc Finance	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
F	UK	BSc in Finance	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
M	Ireland	BSc in Geography	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
	UK	Law LLB	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
M	UK	MB MAO BCh Medicine	FT	Belfast	UG	A-levels
M	UK	PGCE/MSc in Physics and Applied Mathematics	FT	Belfast	UG	MA
M	Pakistan	EdD in TESOL	FT	Belfast	PGT	MA
M	India	MA in Sonic Arts	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	India	MA in Sonic Arts	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	UK	MA Medieval History	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	UK	MA Modern History	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA Social Anthropology	PT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	Vietnam	MSc in Finance	FT	Belfast	PGT	BSc
M	Ireland	MSc Mgmt	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	UK	MSc Organisation and Mgmt	PT	Belfast	PGT	BSc
F	France	MSc Process Engineering	FT	Belfast	PGT	BA
M	Ireland	MSc Risk Mgmt and Financial Regulation	FT	Belfast	PGT	BSc
F	Other	GDL	PT	Birmingham	PGT	BSc
F	UK	LLM in Law	FT	Birmingham	PGT	LLB
F	Cyprus	MA Film and TV	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA in West Midlands History	PT	Birmingham	PGT	BSc
F	UK	MA International Development	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA

M	UK	MA Politics (ESRC Research Methods)	FT	Birmingham	PGT	
F	Greece	MA TEFL	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA Tourism Business Administration	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	India	MBA	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	USA	MSc	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BSc
F	Turkey	MSc Economic Competitiveness and International Business	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BSc
F	Canada	MSc in Health Studies	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BSc
F	China	MSc in International Accounting and Finance	FT	Birmingham	PGT	MA
F	UK	MSc in international development	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	UK	MSc in international development	FT	Birmingham	PGT	MA
M	Hong Kong	MSc in Mathematical Finance	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BEng
M	China	MSc in Money Banking and Finance	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	UK	MSc International Development	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	Vietnam	MSc International Money and Banking	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
F	Russian Federation	MSc Investments	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
F	Bulgaria	MSc Marketing Communications	FT	Birmingham	PGT	BA
M	UK	Foundation degree in childhood studies	PT	Canterbury	UG	FD
F	Ireland	MA Fine Art	FT	Canterbury	PGT	BA
F	India	MA in Education (Leadership and Mgmt)	FT	Canterbury	PGT	BA
F	UK	MSc in Health Promotion & Public Health and PGCLT(HE)	PT	Canterbury	PGT	BSc
F	UK	PGDip in Mgmt Studies	PT	Canterbury	PGT	BA
M	UK	UG Applied Music	FT	Glasgow	UG	Scottish Highers
F	Nigeria	MSc in Energy and Environmental Mgmt	FT	Glasgow	PGT	B.Tech
M	India	MSc in Network Security	FT	Glasgow	PGT	BA
M	Nigeria	MSc in Operations and Business Mgmt	FT	Glasgow	PGT	BSc
F	Greece	MSc International Fashion Marketing	FT	Glasgow	PGT	BA
F	Thailand	MSc Clinical Ophthalmology & vision research	FT	Glasgow	PGR	PhD
M	India	MSc in Network Security	FT	Glasgow	PGR	BA
M	Pakistan	MSc Maintenance Mgmt	FT	Glasgow	PGR	BA

M	Malaysia	BSc Accounting and Finance	FT	London	UG	BSc
M	UK	LLM	FT	London	PGT	LLB
F	UK	MA Anthropology and Cultural Politics	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	China	MA in Brand Development	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA in Creative and Life writing	FT	London	PGT	BA
M	UK	MA in Italian	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	Romania	MA in Social entrepreneurship	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	Italy	MA Sinology	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	Nigeria	MBA	FT	London	PGT	BSc
M	Ukraine	MFinance	FT	London	PGT	BSc
F	UK	MRes Heritage Science	FT	London	PGT	BSc
M	Other	MSc Civil Engineering	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	Afghanistan	MSc Cognitive and clinical neuroscience	FT	London	PGT	BSc
M	India	MSc in Environmental & Architectural Acoustics	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	Mexico	MSc in Global Governance and Ethics	FT	London	PGT	BA
F	USA	MSc in Practicing Sustainable Development with ICT4D Specialism	FT	London	PGT	MA
F	UK	MSc in Research Methods in Psychology	FT	London	PGT	BSc
F	UK	MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology	PT	London	PGT	BA
M	Other	MSc Software engineering	PT	London	PGT	Level 3 Cisco
F	New Zealand	PGDip in Professional Development in Teaching	Distance	London	PGT	Diploma in Teaching
F	Indonesia	BSc Mgmt	FT	Manchester	UG	A-levels
F	Ireland	CIPD HRM	PT	Manchester	PGT	BA
F	UK	MA Gender, Sexuality and Culture	PT	Manchester	PGT	MPhil
M	Germany	MA in Creative Writing	FT	Manchester	PGT	PGCE
M	UK	MA European Philosophy	PT	Manchester	PGT	BA
F	Pakistan	MA in Filmmaking	FT	Manchester	PGT	MA
F	UK	CPD MA Maker Teacher	PT	Manchester	PGT	PGCE
M	Argentina	MBA	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
F	UK	MSc in Education Leadership and Mgmt	PT	Manchester	PGT	PGCE
M	Indonesia	MSc in Natural Gas Engineering and Mgmt	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
M	Austria	MSc in Project Mgmt	FT	Manchester	PGT	BSc
M	Lithuania	MSc International Business and Mgmt	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA

M	Greece	MSc International Creative Advertising	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
M	India	MSc Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
F	USA	MSc Psychology & Criminology	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
M	Nigeria	MSc Structural Engineering	FT	Manchester	PGT	BA
F	UK	PGCE Primary Education	FT	Manchester	PGT	PG Cert

7.2. Appendix 2 – In-depth telephone interviewees

	HEPs
	HEPs
1	Canterbury Christ Church University (1st interviewee)
2	Canterbury Christ Church University (2nd interviewee)
3	Cardiff University
4	Coventry University
5	Cranfield University
6	Edge Hill University
7	The College of Law
8	The OU, Milton Keynes
9	University of Birmingham
10	University of Cambridge
11	University of Canterbury
12	University of Edinburgh
13	University of Glasgow
14	University of Portsmouth
15	University of the Arts, London
16	University of Sheffield
17	University of Strathclyde
18	University of Wales, Newport
19	University of Warwick
20	University of York
	Organisations
21	Association of Graduate Recruiters
22	HEA
23	HECSU
24	Hotcourses
25	Graduate Prospects
26	NUS
27	UKCISA
28	UUK (1st interviewee)
29	UUK (2nd interviewee)
	Funders
30	HEFCE
31	Scottish Funding Council
32	DELNI
33	HEFCW

7.3. Appendix 3 – Methodology

7.10.1 Focus group methodology

229.   Focus groups were run for current PGT students and prospective PGT students between the 1st and 31st August, 2012. Each focus group was made up of international and domestic students and prospective students, representatively sampled. HEPs were contacted to promote the focus groups to their students. Each group was limited to between 8 and 10 participants.

230.   A number of key regions were identified to host the focus groups, and included locations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Most of these locations had easy access for at least three HEPs to ensure a wide selection of students. Focus groups were conducted in Manchester, Birmingham, Belfast, Canterbury, Glasgow, Bangor and London. A total of 97 students participated with an average of eight participants in each group.

231.   The selection criteria for the focus groups was to target individuals who would allow the widest diversity overall. For example, where there were more PGT students when compared to undergraduates, undergraduates were selected to ensure a comparable representation where possible. The selection also attempted to ensure an equal mix of male and female participants, a variety of ages, international and domestic students, in a variety of courses. In the case of international students, extra weight was given to nationalities such as Chinese and Indian students who form a significant proportion of PGT students in the UK.

232.   Students who were not selected were offered the opportunity to take part in the Phase 3 survey to ensure that they were still part of the consultation process.

233.   After the initial ice-breaker, participants were individually prompted by the focus group moderator and asked to put their one word into context and describe their experience in choosing what and where to study for their PGT course.

234.   Breakout sessions put participants into smaller, interactive groups of approximately three participants per group. Within their groups, participants were asked to complete a task based on a hypothetical situation (see section 0 Appendix 3). The situation involved a friend who has approached them asking for their advice in looking to study on a PGT course in the UK.

235.   In discussion with other members of their breakout group, participants were asked to consider what they expect their friend's information needs to be and what sources they should use to gain information, based on their own experience. They were also asked to list any difficulties their friend may face in gaining the information needed to make an informed choice and note any additional information needs if their friend were an international student looking to study in the UK – and if their friend identified with any particular groupings (such as disability/religion etc.) and what additional information needs they may have as a result.

236.   Groups were asked to report back on each of the individual points (see section 0 Appendix 3), alternating between groups to tease out the general consensus/conflicting opinions between groups.

237.   If there was additional time left, participants were asked individually to write on a post-it note:

- The three most important pieces of information they used to help decide what and where to study
- What information would have been useful but which they couldn't find
- Any difficulties in understanding the information they found

238.   This task was conducted individually and anonymously (i.e. they were not asked to record any identifying information which would link their responses back to them, thereby allowing participants to include sensitive information they may not have wished to include when speaking to other members in any of the previous exercises in the focus group).

239.   To finish up, participants gave their opinions on one of the following themes which were based upon the flow of the previous sections:

- The appetite for a national PGT survey
- Types of information they would like to be asked in a national PGT survey
- Their opinions on how useful a KIS-type system for PGT students would be
- What information needs there may be in five years' time

7.11.1 Focus group methodology

240.   The representative sample was from our database of students who have completed the Barometer[34] process and given consent to be re-contacted, in addition to our network of universities and those students who were not selected for the focus groups in Phase 2. HEPs involved in hosting the focus groups also assisted in sending out an invitation to take part in the survey to their students as well.

241.   As well as current, past, and prospective PGT students, some staff from a variety of HEPs and other organisations interested in the information needs of PGT students also filled out the survey (table 3.1). However, since the number of responses from this group was low, only some of the results are commented on in this report.

242.   The survey was a mix of open and closed questions. The open questions allowed respondents to express their own views on information needs, whilst the closed questions allowed us to further probe information that had come out of the earlier phases.

243.   The survey was kept open for just over a month and publicised through a number of sources to encourage wide participation. The timeframe was necessarily tight – questions had to take into account the information coming out of focus groups and interviews, but at the same time had to be closed early enough to allow for analysis.

244.   The data analysed in this paper include both complete and incomplete responses and represent the views of over 7,000 respondents.

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[34] i-graduate run the annual Student Barometer with HEIs, asking students about their experience whilst studying. Respondents are also asked whether they would mind being re-contacted for future surveys. Final year UG students and PGT students who indicated that they were happy to be re-contacted in 2010 – 2012 were invited to take part in the survey.