

TONY STRIKE

8. IMPROVING ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 England was on the brink of one of the most significant changes in funding for universities in a generation. The introduction of fees of up to £9,000 (€11,500, \$14,400) for undergraduates and a new system of income contingent government backed loans which accompanied the new higher fee filled the news media bringing concerns about the impact higher fees may have on wide social participation in universities. Less demanding of public attention was the question of postgraduate study. In England taught programmes are typically divided into a three year (six semester) full time undergraduate degree with the possibility of progressing to complete a one year (two semester) Master's degree as a separate award. Master's degree entry typically requires a Bachelor in the same or a closely related field. Although England has some discipline areas where the undergraduate degrees are four year degrees with a Master's level exit award (i.e. MEng, MLang) most divide into a three year undergraduate degree and a separate one year taught Master's degree with a dissertation. UK and EU students wishing to study in England can obtain government loans for their undergraduate fees and living costs but not for postgraduate study.

For many EU countries, the creation of a separate Master's degree in the period since 1999 has constituted a significant innovation as part of the Bologna Process. The European University Association reported (Sursock & Smidt, 2010) that in those countries in which long, integrated qualifications were traditional (e.g. in Germany and Italy) and in which the new three-cycle structure had yet to be firmly embedded, most students still opted to proceed from a Bachelor's to the Master's degree, as the labour market still questioned the value of a Bachelor's degree alone. Traditional European universities may expect more than 80% of their Bachelor's graduates to progress immediately to a Master's degree. English progression rates are closer to 25% and falling. The number of UK domiciled and other EU (UK/EU) applications for postgraduate taught study places in England had risen year on year until 2009–10 and then applications fell in 2010–11 and again in 2011–12. Applications submitted by UK/EU applicants for postgraduate taught programmes decreased by 15% over the two years (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2013.) As UK/EU student demand for Master's places in England faltered it was increasingly clear that only those students who could self-fund their academic ambitions could

pursue higher level study (Milburn, 2012.) With many considering the key question of accessing university *at all* given higher undergraduate fee levels, concerns about increased debt and an absence of finance for Master's courses (which were gateways to the professions) were ignored.

Concerns about lower progression rates in England to taught Master's degrees have also raised academic questions about the relevance of the Bachelor/Master structure, but any change requires applicants and principally the professions to agree to an increase in the number of four year integrated awards which would be 3+1 rather than 3+2 in length. In the meantime, lower progression rates to postgraduate taught study in England remain a concern. As the three cycle structure is implemented across Europe the English struggle with progression rates between Bachelor's and Master's may be interesting to observe.

Further, those who believe in the power of education as a force for social mobility based on merit will also be concerned to ensure that opportunities are available for all those with the ability and ambition to progress their studies. If access to higher education is unequal by income, and income differentials are education related, then social mobility becomes a myth. The term 'widening participation' (WP) refers to people from backgrounds under-represented at university. Those targeted under such policies can vary by country and can include an indigenous ethnic, religious or migrant group, for example, dependent on the national context. In England the groups of people targeted at undergraduate level by widening participation measures include young people from low-income backgrounds, those living in neighbourhoods with a low participation rate in higher education, those whose parents did not go to university, young people in care or leaving care, living with a disability or returning to learning as mature students. Widening participation initiatives in England at undergraduate level seek to address disparities in the relative representation of these groups. At the same time as increased fees and loans were introduced for undergraduates, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was created to ensure universities attended to and reported on participation in undergraduate education. No similar understanding of the meaning of widening participation existed for postgraduates and nor were they put within the protection and regulatory scope of the newly formed OFFA. England is familiar with a narrative of undergraduate widening participation, understood in highly codified ways, but does not extend this narrative to postgraduate study.

The English higher education sector lacked a detailed understanding of what motivated United Kingdom and European Union graduates with a Bachelor's degree to further study, what the underlying demand or aspiration was among potential students, what advice and guidance works and why some institutions were more successful than others in recruiting graduates to their programmes, or how universities could act together to conceive widening participation indicators suitable for progressing postgraduates. Policy makers in England are now reaching for funding solutions for postgraduate study which will ensure the best of our graduates are not priced out of postgraduate study. In the absence of a clear and effective national policy in England to deal with falling registrations to postgraduate taught study by

IMPROVING ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLAND

UK domiciled and EU students a major project involving six universities sought to assess demand for postgraduate study from graduates with widening participation characteristics and to make evidence based policy recommendations. It is intended to describe this major project aimed at addressing this developing postgraduate deficit, show how the problem is being approached in policy making, probe the reasons why graduates might (or might not) undertake further study (alumni survey and Futuretrack), describe the approaches to WP at postgraduate level (including how the HEIs conceptualise it) and describe a postgraduate scholarship programme intended to achieve WP. Finally, the proposed national policy solutions are contested.

NATIONAL REPORTS SET A CONTEXT

The “Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance” (Browne, 2010) by Lord Browne, recommended lifting the cap on undergraduate fees (then at £3,290 per year (€4,200, \$5,300)) leading the government to implement a new higher fee cap in England of 9,000£ (€11,500, \$14,400) per year and to introduce a government backed loan scheme for undergraduate fees, offered to all students and to be repaid only when graduates were earning over £21,000 (€26,700, \$33,600). The Browne report advised that participation in higher education be monitored to discover whether the cost of undergraduate education had an impact on the proportion entering postgraduate study. The failure of Lord Browne to address postgraduate funding left fears that postgraduates could become an endangered species and that they needed to become the object of concern. “One Step Beyond: making the most of postgraduate education” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) by Adrian Smith highlighted the importance of postgraduate study to economic growth and international competitiveness and recommended that access to postgraduate study be investigated further and that the impact of financial barriers to access be highlighted.

The nascent national campaign began to focus on fair access with a report on “The Social Composition and Future Earnings of Postgraduates” (Sutton Trust, 2010) which found that 30% of university students educated at private schools were in postgraduate education six months after graduating, compared with 23% of state educated pupils. “Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge” (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2013) chaired by Alan Milburn, showed that postgraduate courses were increasingly common as a required entry route into the professions and that there was no system of financial support similar to that for undergraduate entry. “Transition to Higher Degrees across the UK: An Analysis of National, International and Individual Differences” (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013) reported that there are inequalities in transition to postgraduate study. We also learnt through “Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice” (Higher Education Academy/National Union of Students [NUS], 2013) that clear, concise and accessible information and advice delivered in a range of contexts was key to decision making for prospective students.

“Exploring Student Demand for Postgraduate Study” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013) told us that the recent growth in postgraduates registering in the UK had been driven by large numbers of students from outside the EU with over half of full time postgraduates at ‘Russell Group’ universities (among the most prestigious) coming from outside the UK/EU (see [Table 1](#)). Applications from UK/EU students had substantially reduced. There was a perceived threat to widening participation in postgraduate study for those from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The economic benefits of postgraduate study were increasingly evident and postgraduates enjoyed higher earning outcomes than those with a first degree only (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). The lifetime wage premium has been estimated at £200,000 for a postgraduate Degree (Milburn, 2012). A growing number of professions expect applicants to hold a postgraduate qualification (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Consequently, questions of how access to postgraduate study and the related issues of equity, social justice and social mobility have become politically prominent, with Alan Milburn, the UK government’s adviser on social mobility, stating that “lack of access to postgraduate study is in danger of becoming a social mobility time bomb” (Higher Education Commission [HEC], 2012).

THE POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT SCHEME

In December 2013, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced the launch of the Postgraduate Support Scheme, a £25 million (€32 million \$51 million) publicly-funded competitive programme to assist postgraduate students. The scheme intended to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education and aimed, by working with universities and employers, to stimulate participation by students who would not otherwise progress to postgraduate level. Twenty pilot projects were funded, covering a range of activities including financial and pastoral support, mentoring and networking, curricula change, funded studentships, work placements and a variety of bursary and loan schemes. The pilot projects were concerned only with postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes leading to award of a Master’s degree or an equivalent qualification and did not address postgraduate research (PGR) programmes leading to a Doctoral degree.

The largest of these projects, led by the University of Sheffield, was a consortium of six selective, research intensive, English, Russell Group institutions (Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Warwick and York) which together received £2.9 million (€3.7 million \$4.6 million) from HEFCE and along with matching funds provided by the participating institutions had a combined fund of over 5 million£. The majority of these funds (>70%) would directly benefit students and test the demand for postgraduate study. The project used experimental interventions to propose solutions to important issues associated with postgraduate demand for places and fair access to postgraduate taught (PGT) study. The institutions were motivated to respond to recent reports voicing concerns about the state and long

term future of PGT study: the impact of current finance routes, the additional impact of reforms to undergraduate funding, a documented decline in the market for UK/EU PGT students, employers' concerns around access to the professions, general skills and social mobility constraints leading to access defined by affordability (1994 Group, 2012; British Academy, 2012; HEC, 2012; HEFCE, 2013a; National Union of Students, 2012).

The six participating institutions had distinct missions, visions and strategies. There were, however, common institutional, regional and economic interests and challenges which meant the success of this project was central to all the participating universities' institutional strategies. Each was committed to fairness and equity of access to education based on merit – regardless of background, characteristics or ability to self-fund – and to sustaining and growing postgraduate taught student numbers. The group had some geographical coherence, large postgraduate taught cohorts (see Table 1), belonged to the same (arguably elite) 'Russell Group' and was prepared to act in common cause on widening access while valuing academic excellence. Graduates from more selective institutions have been identified as more likely to progress to postgraduate study (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013).

Table 1. New full-time PGT registrations in 2012/13

<i>Institution</i>	<i>UK / EU PGT students</i>	<i>Students from outside the EU</i>	<i>Proportion outside the EU</i>
Newcastle	836	1,703	67%
Sheffield	1,183	2,079	64%
Warwick	1,148	1,835	62%
Manchester	1,635	2,561	61%
Leeds	975	1,486	60%
York	861	1,051	55%
Other Russell Group	22,257	24,127	52%
Other Sector	60,750	52,602	46%
All	89,645	87,444	49%

Source: HESA 2012/13

Almost half the PGT students registered are now from outside the EU demonstrating clearly the international diversity which comes with the globalisation of higher education. The numbers may be a concern though for two reasons; if international students come to Europe (or the UK) for a European (or UK) higher education experience and find themselves in an environment where their own or another non-EU national group dominates, they may not find the student experience they sought. Secondly, the absence of UK/EU students may lead to the lack of a sustained

supply of skills to the domestic economy as non-UK/EU students tend to return to their country of origin.

The University of Sheffield was awarded the HEFCE funds and had an agreement in place with the other consortium partners. Each institution nominated a lead person for the project; the themes were each led by one institution on behalf of the group and each institution committed to delivering the whole project scope, with the author of the present chapter leading the consortium. This shared study involved better understanding the student through survey activity; the consortium developed, implemented and evaluated a pilot scholarship scheme, offered at greater scale than any institution could achieve by itself, to test the demand for and to improve take-up of taught postgraduate programmes by UK/EU students, particularly among under-represented groups with recognised WP backgrounds. The consortium, (together representing about 10% of UK and EU PGT student numbers outside of London) designed and piloted products in a study which launched from January 2014, including:

- Exploration of new financial support packages for postgraduates with banks, benefactors and employers.
- New academic innovations in programme design and curriculum offer to encourage and enable graduates to enter postgraduate taught study, with a focus on higher-level skills and the professions.
- Targeted interventions including information, advice and guidance (IAG) to promote these products and facilitate entry to postgraduate study.
- Activity to inform and support evaluation of the above; establishing an evidence-based understanding of which groups are under-represented in postgraduate study.

This collaboration between higher education providers was challenging in the marketised, competitive system of higher education that has been introduced in England (Brown with Cassaro, 2013). Consumer orientated market norms meant that the notion of collaboration between providers to solve common problems could appear to be anti-competitive unless preventative measures were taken. However, collaboration which harnessed the strength of the consortium to face common societal challenges remained a strong imperative. The institutions did not share PGT target, pricing or admissions information, for example, and had to put data sharing agreements in place to allow research. Seeking to correct demand and supply side problems, especially when addressing those presently excluded by the price mechanism of that market, was problematised by the competitive context.

EXPLORING PATHWAYS BEYOND GRADUATION

Perhaps not surprisingly given the focus of policy attention in the UK and elsewhere directed toward undergraduate widening participation, there has been little research concerned with postgraduate populations (Knight, 1997; Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). This is the case across a range of areas so we had gaps in knowledge, including

the aspirations of graduates as they consider the importance of postgraduate education for career entry and career progression, change of subject and institution at the graduate level and how personal factors like the impact of family and work commitments and social background influence choice and possibilities. A testable argument existed that once students graduated from a good university they could no longer be considered disadvantaged, so widening participation effort should properly be aimed only at school leavers making the transition into higher education. The counterfactual argument that postgraduate widening participation was being ignored, leaving large numbers unable to progress needed to be evidenced.

An existing survey of more than 4,000 undergraduates carried out by the National Union of Students for the British Academy (NUS Services, 2013) found that 19% of undergraduates indicated their desire to continue with a postgraduate degree following graduation, with a further 7% highlighting that they would like to do a postgraduate degree eventually. The report went on to suggest that students were, however, not well-informed about how to pay for postgraduate study. More than 40% of those surveyed by NUS intended to fund their postgraduate study through a studentship or scholarship. Other recent research noted that most postgraduate students do not enrol immediately following their undergraduate degree (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013). However, we knew relatively little about graduates' activities in the years between undergraduate and postgraduate study; and less still about those graduates who did not return to postgraduate study.

The alumni survey. The consortium commissioned an alumni survey from the University of York to operate across the six Universities in order to gain new insights into those who might enter postgraduate study, which was not well understood. The survey, for 2009 and 2012 undergraduate alumni of the six participating universities (Wakeling et al., 2014), captured individuals' activities since graduating, including employment and participation in further study. Of particular value, this survey explored graduates' intentions to pursue postgraduate study and their perceptions of barriers to doing this. The consortium alumni survey attracted an overall response rate across the six institutions of 8.7% (n = 2,970). The University of Sheffield attained the fifth highest response rate across the six surveys (7.2%) with a range of 6.1% to 17.3% achieved across the consortium members. The majority of the University of Sheffield alumni who responded stated their current main activity to be employment, which was the highest percentage reported across the consortium (78.3%). Some 39.9% of the University of Sheffield graduates were currently or had previously been enrolled in postgraduate study, which was within the range reported across the consortium. Current postgraduates appeared to be career-minded, with the University of Sheffield alumni most commonly citing 'to progress career' (49.1%) and 'to enter a profession' (47.2%) as motivating reasons for undertaking postgraduate study. Personal savings (25.0%) and gift from family (22.4%) were the most commonly cited sources of tuition fee provision and this pattern was broadly consistent across the consortium institutions. Income from a job played the

most important role in funding the living costs of previous postgraduate students (45.7%). Of those stating they would not consider postgraduate study in the future, the most commonly cited deterrent was ‘currently in employment’ (78.1%), which may imply preference or lack of choice; 48.4% considered postgraduate study to be ‘too expensive’, while around a third stated that they lacked the financial means for postgraduate study (31.3%.) These findings suggested that access to or progression within a career are the most significant reasons that applicants have for aspiring to PGT study and that most use their personal savings or family gifts or employment to pursue that goal. This is a rational risk based choice being exercised by those with access to the resources required to consider their best options (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). A significant minority are, however, excluded from this rational choice-making by their lack of financial means.

The futuretrack survey. A separate study (called Futuretrack) was conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IER), University of Warwick and The Higher Education Careers Service Unit. It surveyed all University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) applicants in 2005–06 and tracked them in a longitudinal study through their undergraduate studies and beyond. UCAS provides a single national application service across the range of undergraduate subject areas and modes of study for all UK higher education providers. The consortium specially commissioned IER researchers to investigate early intentions of graduates for and actual progression to postgraduate study. The analysis focussed on around 10,000 graduates from English HEIs, which included around 1,300 who had subsequently undertaken a postgraduate Master’s degree. It was reported to the consortium universities (Ellison & Purcell, 2014) that around three-quarters of respondents who went on to do a postgraduate Master’s degree were self-funded, supporting our own alumni survey findings described above; further, that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds to intend to do a Master’s degree but less likely actually to do so. This corroborated evidence from other sources – students from low participation neighbourhoods in HEFCE’s Intentions after Graduation Survey were more likely to plan postgraduate study. However, such students were less likely actually to do so (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013; HEFCE, 2013b.)

The Futuretrack data also indicated that students from a lower socio-economic background whose undergraduate degree was undertaken in a pre-1992 HEI (older, more “classical” HEIs) had a higher inclination to Master’s study than those at post-1992 HEIs (the former polytechnics upgraded in 1992), and the consortium and their local comparator HEIs conformed to this pattern. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 allowed all polytechnics to become universities and award their own degrees and it is perhaps not surprising that progression intentions are lower at these new universities given their lower concentration of postgraduate students and lower proportions of staff with PhDs (Tight, 2012). Almost a third of graduates who had repayable debt agreed with the statement: “I would like to do a postgraduate course,

but I don't want to add to my debts." There was some evidence that graduates with very high debt levels (£ >20,000) were less likely than those with lower debt levels to realise their intention to undertake a Master's degree. The Futuretrack results also showed that Master's degrees improved the employability of graduates, especially for those initially in a non-graduate job. While 63% of jobs undertaken between undergraduate and postgraduate courses were at non-graduate level, this reduced to 39% after a taught Master's, even within a very short period of labour market entry. Based on these findings a universal state backed loan scheme as offered to undergraduates could be inefficient as it would offer subsidised lending to large numbers of people who did not need this help and currently self-financed. Graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to self-fund than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and more likely to have taken out a loan for the purpose – which may make state backed loans seem attractive – but those from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to want to add to their existing undergraduate debt burden.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION THROUGH TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIPS

While graduates had responded in a survey expressing intentions to undertake further study and expressing financial barriers to that aspiration it was still important to test that qualifying demand, to see whether the reported intentions could be turned into current applications for study for particular programmes. The six institutions co-operated in offering 350 funded scholarships typically of 10,000£ (€12,800, \$16,000) based on widening participation criteria. Initial eligibility criteria had to be set by the institutions as none existed. It was not known whether the recent loss of Home PGT numbers was due to lack of demand, lack of opportunity or an absence of programmes that prospective students wanted to study. The survey suggested demand existed and the first cohort of undergraduate students paying the higher fee levels graduated in 2015 and so solving the fair progression issue to postgraduate study had become urgent in terms of the time imperative (1994 Group, 2012).

To be eligible for a scholarship applicants had to intend to study at one of the six institutions on a one-year full-time or two-year part-time taught postgraduate programme beginning September 2014, leading to an MA, MBA, MEd, MMus, MPH, MRes, MSc or LLM qualification. They must if selected subsequently take up a place and remain on one of these eligible programmes. Further they should be UK or EU students paying academic fees at the UK/EU rate. These awards were not open to applicants applying for deferred entry given the short term nature of the funding, or to those intending to study for a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education), postgraduate research degree or an integrated Master's degree, or those already holding a qualification at Master's or doctoral level or those being funded by an employer or another public body. None of the institutions entertained merit based selection criteria and did not set a lower contextual offer based on

the applicant's circumstances; so applicants were required to hold a first or upper second class UK honours degree (or equivalent) by July 2014. No conflict was created between excellence and diversity through the absence of any consideration of contextual offers. It was these eligibility rules that permitted an application to be further considered against widening participation criteria. Ascribing criteria to the group perceived as endangered helped to define the object of that concern and focus the campaign to save that group from under representation or future extinction.

Encouragingly common factors on how to measure widening participation emerged, although no institution used the whole of the WP criteria list. Even where two institutions shared the same factor, the qualifying measure they used differed. This showed that in the absence of further evidence to institutions no common view existed on the best way to measure widening participation at postgraduate level. Some of the measures of sources of inequality that institutions might have wanted to use were unverifiable or were not available to them: for example, the educational level of parents, those from migrant family backgrounds, access to family capital or levels of social engagement. The objective was not to discover the innate ability of the graduates through controlling for social factors or looking for past educational disadvantages overcome, but to objectively select those with the academic prerequisites who faced barriers to academic progression as measured by their circumstances. Each institution which participated in the scholarship offer developed its set of widening participation criteria for selection (see [Table 2](#)). Some institutions replicated existing understood notions of widening participation used for undergraduates (e.g. first member of the family to go to university), others translated the undergraduate criteria to the new population (e.g. in receipt of State benefit in place of a means tested bursary as an undergraduate) and some were experimental innovations (e.g. graduates who had been out of HE study for more than two years.) A debate took place about the independence of postgraduate applicants from their parents and the extent to which any original disadvantage they may have experienced had been removed on their graduation with a Bachelor's degree.

The Indices of Deprivation were published by Department for Communities and Local Government and measured poverty using different dimensions by locality. The data were based on indicators across income, employment levels, health and disability, education, housing, crime and living environment. It was seen as a useful way of targeting funding towards those who lived in the most deprived areas of the country. POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) was a classification of geographical areas across the UK published by HEFCE showing the different participation rates of young people in higher education.

All institutions considered the necessity for tie breakers. In some cases priority was given to students who could demonstrate that they satisfied more than one of the criteria outlined, in others to students with the highest academic qualifications or

IMPROVING ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLAND

Table 2. Widening participation criteria

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Number of institutions using the criterion</i>
Financial status	Some institutions looked at the applicant's previous undergraduate status. For example, was the applicant in receipt of a full fee waiver as an undergraduate or in receipt of a maintenance grant from the Student Loan Company or in receipt of a means tested bursary as an undergraduate? Other institutions looked at the applicant's current financial status, for example, in receipt of income support (Job Seekers Allowance, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Universal Credit etc.)	6
Deprivation	Measured either by the Indices of Deprivation or POLAR (living in a low participation neighbourhood based on postcode) which are described further below.	6
School achievement	The institutions agreed the applicants had to have the prerequisite qualification for the academic programme to which they were applying, so contextual offers to PGT study were not considered. School achievement data for the year in which the applicants sat their GCSEs or equivalent, compared with the national average for that year were used by one of the institutions in combination with deprivation data (i.e. Indices of Deprivation postcode data).	1
First generation applicant	First member of the family to go to University.	2
Socio-economic classification	UK National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories for parent/guardian one or parent/guardian two, at the point when the applicant was aged 14.	1

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Number of institutions using the criterion</i>
Local authority care background	In most cases this background was an automatic qualifier for the scholarship being awarded, for example, applicant had to have been in local authority care for at least 13 weeks and under the age of 25 on the course start date.	6
Out of HE	Students who have been out of HE study for more than two years.	1
Disability	Receipt of DSA (Disabled Students' Allowances) as an undergraduate student or currently receiving DLA (Disability Living Allowance), Attendance Allowance or a PIP (Personal Independence Payment).	4
Under-representation	Including for example women in science or engineering or ethnic minorities in arts and humanities. These factors caused debate about the line, if indeed one exists, between widening participation, fair access and broader equality goals.	3
Carer	Carer for an ill or disabled family member.	2

the most relevant experience in their field and in others to those judged by a panel to benefit the most, given their circumstances based on textual statements provided with the application. It was not always clear that the formal definitions used by the institutions captured the stories of disadvantage told by the applicants in the textual statements and this further problematized formal identification of the endangered population.

The choice of value of the award varied: £10,000 cash paid in instalments over the duration of a one-year full-time or two-year part-time eligible qualification was typical, to be used for fees or living costs.

In the context of falling numbers of UK and EU applications and registrations to postgraduate study in the UK and uncertainty over the strict eligibility rules and WP criteria some concern existed about whether (despite the survey evidence) there would be enough demand from well qualified people. Individuals with aspiration who met the WP criteria may not have existed and the scholarship places may have gone unfilled. In the event, the response was overwhelming (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3. Demand for widening participation scholarships

<i>Institution*</i>	<i>Number of scholarships originally offered</i>	<i>Number of scholarships awarded</i>	<i>Number of eligible applications**</i>
Sheffield	90	99	304
B	60	68	360
C	50	70	302
D	40	50	239
E	50	79	177
F	60	68	344
Total	350	434	1,726

* *Institutions except Sheffield are represented with the letters B–F. The consortium data sharing agreement permits the publication of data from the other consortium members as long as each is anonymised by using letters in place of the institution's name.*

** *As at 13 August 2014.*

Despite the strict eligibility and WP criteria described above the consortium received some five times more complete and eligible applications (which met at least one of the WP criteria) than it had WP scholarships to offer. In the face of this demand more money was found by the institutions and 434 scholarships were actually awarded against an originally advertised 350 funded places.

The total number of applications was 2,344 compared to the 1,726 shown in [Table 3](#) who were eligible and met at least one of the WP criteria and so would have been entitled to a scholarship had more funds been available.

[Table 4](#) shows that given the level of demand most of the successful applicants typically had to qualify under multiple headings, and a single criterion would not have discriminated sufficiently. This meant that the institutional differences in the precise measures used became less relevant. Where scholarship awards were made to applicants meeting only one of the criteria, this was because it was one of the automatic qualifying criteria; for several of the schemes, care leavers automatically received a scholarship irrespective of the number of other criteria they met. Also, some decisions were dependent on the amount of match funding available for each subject of study; and personal statements added different weighting to the criteria.

Looking at the distribution of the criteria met, it was apparent that a large group existed which faced the greatest barriers to further study and were absent from PG study because they lacked the financial means, not because they lacked the ability or ambition (see [Table 5](#)). Of the 434 scholarships offered, 416 students registered and commenced their studies in 2014. The scholarship holders were selected by the institutions using set criteria; but to get to that stage the applicants had themselves to decide to pursue postgraduate study, select a university and a programme, find the scholarship scheme and apply. It was clear that information, advice and guidance

Table 4. Number of criteria met by successful individual applicants, by university

Institution	Number of criteria met					Total
	1	2	3	4	5+	
Sheffield	49	39	11	0	0	99
B	1	3	18	31	15	68
C	0	0	57	12	1	70
D	0	6	38	5	1	50
E	55	22	2	0	0	79
F	22	22	23	1	0	68
Total	127	92	149	49	17	434

to support that choice and ensure registration were important parts of the process (Hutchinson & Jackson, 2007).

This distribution of criteria met by the eligible applicants clearly showed that a disadvantaged socio-economic situation was the main obstacle to postgraduate participation for the majority of those who aspire to, but cannot proceed to study for a higher degree. In 2014 when home student numbers were falling it was not clear in advance that applicants would be found who met the eligibility and WP criteria and who saw benefit in further study. It is unlikely that those who met the eligibility criteria but did not get the scholarship would still enrol given the gap between their financial status as measured and the resources required for fees and living costs.

Table 5. Number of applicants meeting the individual criterion

Criteria	Sheffield	B	Institution C	D	E	F	Total
Financial status (6)*	255	340	287	205	54	180	1321
Deprivation (6)	131	152	116	55	16	83	553
School achievement (1)	–	87	–	–	–	–	87
First generation applicant (2)	–	253	–	–	–	241	494
Socio-economic class (1)	–	–	–	–	0	–	0
Care background (6)	4	3	1	1	1	1	11
Out of HE (1)	–	104	–	–	–	–	104
Disability (4)	42	–	–	30	10	50	132
Carer (2)	5	–	–	1	–	–	6
Under- representation (3)	12	–	5	–	25	–	42
Exceptional circumstances (1)	–	–	10	–	–	–	10

* The number in brackets show the number of institutions using the criterion, so ‘–’ represents non-use and a zero represents usage with no applicant meeting the criteria.

FINDINGS

It was found that the aspiration to higher level study existed but that the opportunities were not the same between different socio-economic groups. UK domiciled and EU PGT students faced barriers to participation. Potential PGT students who had the ambition and merit but not the financial resources to proceed with their education required targeted help, if society was to benefit from their talents and commitment. More specifically the study found:

- Universities can develop the criteria, launch and operate a postgraduate taught scholarship scheme in a timely way.
- Universities are prepared to match fund (and seek additional benefactor funding against) a state contribution to deliver postgraduate taught scholarships.
- Widening participation criteria for postgraduate study are possible to develop and can be operated successfully to target and select students for awards.
- Graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds to intend to go on to postgraduate study but less likely to actually do so.
- Master's degrees improved the employability of graduates, especially for those initially in a non-graduate job, even within a very short period of labour market entry.
- There was overwhelming demand from eligible applicants for an appropriately promoted postgraduate scholarship scheme using widening participation criteria.
- Most graduates fund postgraduate study from personal savings, gifts from family or employment during study and so a state loan scheme would displace the private resources of those who presently can and do pay.
- Almost a third of graduates who had repayable debt agreed with the statement: "I would like to do a postgraduate course, but I don't want to add to my debts." There was some evidence that graduates with very high debt levels (£ >20,000) were less likely than those with lower debt levels to realise their intention to undertake postgraduate study.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Having shown through survey data that a disadvantaged socio-economic situation is the main obstacle to intended postgraduate participation we have found that appropriate, well-advertised access to scholarship funding for disadvantaged groups produces demand for postgraduate study. The falling postgraduate applications and registrations are due to identifiable barriers not lack of ambition or merit or interest in the programmes on offer. Universities, benefactors and employers should be motivated to engage in helping to solve these problems, and universities have shown they can create innovations their scholarship and academic offer in a way which is effective.

The Institute of Public Policy Research's (IPPR) Commission on the Future of Higher Education in England (CFHE, 2013) proposed that the government should create a new postgraduate loans scheme to enable fairer and wider access to postgraduate courses. The UK Chancellor in his Autumn Statement (HM Treasury, 2014) announced the introduction from 2016–17 of new income contingent loans for English domiciled and EU students studying at English universities who were under 30 years old and who wished to undertake a postgraduate taught Master's in any subject. These loans, of up to 10,000£, are planned to be repaid concurrently with undergraduate loans. Concurrent repayment means graduates will be paying back their PG loan alongside their UG loan rather than enjoying a consecutive repayment mechanism for each debt. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) briefing on the Autumn Statement (Johnson, 2014) said that under this system postgraduates in work would face a 50% tax rate: 20% income tax, 12% National Insurance, a 9% repayment of their undergraduate loan plus a 9% repayment of their postgraduate loan. The 2016–17 implementation date means the postgraduate loans will not be available to the first cohort of students graduating with higher fees and debts in 2015.

The Autumn Statement continued:

To support students until these loans are in place, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) will allocate 50 million £ in 2015–16 to universities to offer bursaries on a match funded basis. These will be 10,000£ each and will benefit 10,000 students. (HM Treasury, 2014)

It is argued here that the evidence suggests that extending the recently introduced undergraduate state backed and income contingent loan scheme to postgraduates will be less effective given debt adversity than utilising any available government subsidy alongside matching institutional funding to create a new national PGT scholarship scheme, supported by the provision of guidelines on the widening participation (WP), to provide targeted help to overcome the barriers some students face. Targeted bursaries need to be part of the longer term solution.

Australia and the US have postgraduate loan schemes. The UK government does currently provide an information portal to professional and career development loans (www.gov.uk/career-development-loans/overview) offered by some banks but the high interest rates, non-income contingent payback terms and the need for a good credit record mean that they are not suitable for many. The government pays the interest which accrues during study and for one month after the approved course finishes, but after that the loan operates as a normal bank debt.

It may be premature for England to celebrate the recent announcement by its government that it will extend state lending to postgraduates. If the goal of the proposed state funding mechanism is fairer access rather than the state sharing the risk on future earnings with those students who can already pay (by delaying their payments until they are earning) then government may not have reached for the best social solution. The Institute for Public Policy Research proposed

that all students studying for a postgraduate course should be eligible for a loan from the government, repayable on an income contingent basis (Muir, 2014). However, indications from this study suggest that, in the absence of a state loan scheme, most can and do pay their fees from personal savings, family, employer sponsorship or employment during study. Our findings on current sources of funding suggest a state-backed income-dependent loan scheme for postgraduates may be inefficient and end up costing more than required as lending would simply displace these private resources and employer sponsorship of those students who currently pay. Further, students from lower socio-economic groups who currently do not participate in further study are unlikely to want to add to their existing undergraduate debt burden so the beneficiaries of the new loan scheme will be more affluent students who are not averse to more debt. Universities supported by benefactors and employers are interested in securing fair access and higher level skills using carefully targeted scholarships but need continued match funding, rather than stop-gap funding, from government to make these schemes work. A targeted national postgraduate scholarship scheme, administered by institutions and based on appropriate criteria, would have an audience and help in ensuring fair access to study and the professions and this may be a better, more effective use of public funding. Universities are making innovations to their postgraduate offer, to sustain or increase demand, by thinking about the attractiveness and accessibility of their postgraduate taught programmes. State funding could be utilised to match universities' additional scholarship funds (provided from their own or benefactor sources) to create a larger scholarship fund.

The first cohort of UK/EU undergraduate students paying the higher English fee levels will graduate in 2015, hence solving the issue of sustained and fair progression to postgraduate study remains urgent. With booming international demand from outside the EU for the excellent postgraduate programme offer in England it is alarming that UK domiciled and EU student registrations in England are falling. It is contended here that the aspiration to higher level study exists but the opportunity to act on that aspiration is dependent on socio-economic background, and some UK/EU students face barriers to participation. It is important our professionals come from all walks of life and we should all hope that talented graduates who otherwise would not have the option to proceed with their education are helped to find a way so we can all benefit from their talents and commitment. To give able graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds a social lift through pursuing higher education, the system has to be accessible to them; otherwise privilege will continue to be enforced by affordability.

REFERENCES

- 1994 Group. (2012). *The postgraduate crisis*. London, UK: 1994 Group Policy Report. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/pdf/1994grpPostgraduateCrisis.pdf>
- Brown, R., with Cassaro, H. (2013). *Everything for sale? The marketisation of UK higher education*. Abingdon (Oxon), England: Routledge.

T. STRIKE

- Browne, J. (2010). *Independent review of higher education funding and student finance*. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31999/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf
- Commission on the Future of Higher Education (CFHE). (2013). *A critical path: Securing the future of higher education in England*, IPPR. Retrieved from www.ippr.org/publications/a-critical-path-securing-the-future-of-higher-education-in-england
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). (2010). *One step beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education*. London, UK: BIS.
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). (2013). *Exploring student demand for postgraduate study*. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from <https://www.ukcge.ac.uk/pdf/2013%2012%20bis-13-1319-exploring-student-demand-for-postgraduate-study.pdf>
- Ellison, R., & Purcell, K. (2014). *Addressing the research questions via Future Track data analysis: Final report*. Coventry, UK: Warwick Institute for Employment Research.
- Hesketh, A. J., & Knight, P. T. (1999). Postgraduates' choice of programme: Helping universities to market and postgraduates to choose. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(2), 151–163.
- HEFCE. (2013a). *Postgraduate education in England and Northern Ireland (Overview report 2013)*. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2013/201314/Postgraduate%20education%20in%20England%20and%20Northern%20Ireland%20Overview%20report%202013.pdf>
- HEFCE. (2013b). Trends in transition from first degree to postgraduate study: Qualifiers between 2002–03 and 2010–11. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2013/201313/Trends%20in%20transition%20from%20first%20degree%20to%20postgraduate%20study.pdf>
- Higher Education Academy/NUS. (2013). *Behavioural approaches to understanding student 2013*. Retrieved June 25, 2014, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/Behavioural_Approaches_to_Understanding_Student_Choice.pdf
- Higher Education Commission (HEC). (2012). *Postgraduate education: An independent inquiry by the higher education commission*. London, UK: HEC.
- HM Treasury. (2014). *Autumn Statement, Cm 8961*. London, UK: HMSO.
- Hutchinson, J., & Jackson, H. (2007). *Cross-government review of information, advice & guidance services for adults*. Derby, UK: University of Derby, CeGS.
- Johnson, P. (2014). *Autumn statement briefing*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Retrieved December, 12 2014, http://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/budgets/as2014/as2014_johnson.pdf
- Knight, P. (1997). *Learning, teaching and curriculum in taught Master's degrees*. London, UK: Cassell Education.
- Milburn, A. (2012). *University challenge: How higher education can advance social mobility: A progress report by the independent reviewer on social mobility and child poverty*. London, UK: The Cabinet Office.
- Muir, R. (2014) *Reaching higher: Reforming student loans to broaden access to postgraduate study*, IPPR. Retrieved November, 7 2014, http://www.ippr.org/assets/media/publications/pdf/reaching-higher_Oct2014.pdf
- National Union of Students (NUS). (2012). *Steps towards a fairer system of postgraduate funding in England*. London, UK: NUS.
- Panel on Fair Access to the Professions. (2009). *Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions*. Retrieved November 7, 2014, from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61090/IR_FairAccess_acc2.pdf
- Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission. (2013). *Higher education: The fair access challenge*. London, UK: Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission.
- Sursock, A., & Smidt, H. (2010). *Trends 2010: A decade of change in European higher education*. Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.
- Sutton Trust. (2010). *The social composition and future earnings of postgraduates*. Retrieved June 6, 2014, from <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/about/external/publications-social-composition.pdf>

IMPROVING ACCESS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN ENGLAND

- The British Academy. (2012). *Postgraduate funding: The neglected dimension*. London, UK: The British Academy.
- Tight, M. (2012). *Academic staff in UK higher education institutions: Are they fit for purpose?* Lancaster, UK: Lancaster University, Department of Educational Research.
- Wakeling, P., & Kyriacou, C. (2010). *Widening participation from undergraduate to postgraduate research degrees: A research synthesis*. York, UK: University of York, ESRC/National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Retrieved June 14, 2014, from http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/widening-participation-final-report_tcm8-6381.pdf
- Wakeling, P., & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2013). *Transition to higher degrees across the UK: An analysis of regional, institutional and individual differences*. York, UK: Higher Education Academy.
- Wakeling, P., Hancock, S., & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2014). Widening access to postgraduate study and the professions. *University of Sheffield pathways – Beyond graduation survey: First look report*. York, UK: University of York, Department of Education.

Tony Strike
University of Sheffield, UK