

**WIDENING PARTICIPATION  
FOR POSTGRADUATES:**  
Research, Policy, and Practice

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Professor Liz Thomas



## Overview

1. National and institutional policy vacuum.
2. Current national and institutional knowledge about access to PG study.
3. What English HEIs are doing about widening participation to postgraduate study.
4. Next steps
  - Making the 'business case' for WP to PGS
  - Identifying the research priorities
  - Considering institutional responses

## Policy vacuum

‘[P]ostgraduate degrees... have increasingly become an important route into many professional careers... But these courses are substantially more expensive... and there is no student [financial] support framework... **If fair access is to be possible, this issue will need to be addressed**’ (Milburn, Panel on Fair Access to the professions, 2009, p95).

‘Universities should consider whether the widening participation agenda applies to postgraduate study and, if so, what might realistically be done to improve matters’ (Thrift report to Denham, 2009, Summary Report, p. 3)

## Policy vacuum

As the WP agenda takes hold at undergraduate level, postgraduate study is increasingly becoming a means of differentiating oneself in a crowded job market. As such we should be concerned about the demographic makeup of the PG population and whether there are barriers to postgraduate study that affect some groups disproportionately. (NUS, 2009, p28).

18 (14%) of English HEIs discuss widening participation to postgraduate study in their Widening Participation Strategic Assessments. (Action on Access, 2010).

## What do we know about WP to PGS?

“What is striking in this review is the paucity of research examining widening participation in the context of postgraduate education.” (Gorard et al, 2006, §8.4).

“Fair access to postgraduate study has received far less attention than undergraduate study”. (Benton 2009, p. 21).

Zimdars (2009) notes ‘the paucity of statistical information on postgraduate students’ (p. 5).

## Access data

- UUK (2009) review focuses on gender, disability, ethnicity and class and looks at data.
  - **Gender** equality has been achieved overall and women will out-number men; concern in specific discipline areas.
  - **Ethnic minorities** are more than proportionately represented (12% non-white compared to % of the UK population), but lower than undergraduate population and under-represented in some discipline areas.
  - 4% doctoral students disclose a **disability**.
  - Little information on **socio-economic background**.



## Research

- Some data available which indicates under-representation.
- Limited research about the reasons for differential participation.
- Nothing about differential student experiences or success rates in postgraduate research.
- Nothing about progression beyond PGR.
- Nothing about institutional responses to differential participation.

*A slowly developing literature with lots of unanswered questions.*

## HEA postgraduate taught experience survey 2010

- Vocational reasons dominant (about 50%).
- For the majority of students course met or exceeded expectations with regard to a number of dimensions.
- 78% believe their employment prospects have improved.
- Just under **two-thirds of the students were self-funded**, less than a fifth were funded by their employer, and one in twelve were funded by their institution, e.g. bursary or scholarship.

Park and Wells, 2010

## HEA postgraduate research experience survey 2009

- Motivation:
  - 34% - interest in subject;
  - 32% - academic / research career.
- Overall, nearly 60% anticipate a career in HE.
- For the majority of students (about 85%) programme met or exceeded expectations with regard to a number of dimensions.
- 1/3 are self funded, 1/4 institutional funding, 1/4 research council funding.

Kulej and Wells, 2009

## What are English HEIs doing?

- Analysis of widening participation strategic assessments (WPSAs) from 129 HEIs, including PG only.
- The majority of institutions (over 85%) do not refer to postgraduate access or the postgraduate learning experience in their WPSA.
- 27 HEIs (21%), covering all institutional types, make reference to postgraduate activities.
- 18 of these references (14%) are specifically about widening participation to postgraduate study.

**Not currently a mainstream concern in English HEIs.**

## Access to PG study in general

“... diversity is an essential aspect of the learning environment within the creative arts and design, and that in consequence there is **an obligation on us** to ensure that we are providing appropriate opportunities for students from all backgrounds to access our undergraduate and postgraduate offer...**the College seeks to enable students to access postgraduate education**, either at the University College or through the NALN, noting that it is the successful postgraduate of today who is the inspiration of tomorrow, either as employer, teacher or in other ways as a role model.”



## Progression to own programmes

“The University College will **seek to improve the opportunities** for student progression from undergraduate to postgraduate study for those groups currently under-represented in postgraduate education”.



## Targeting under-represented groups from across the sector

Some institutions, particularly those who have substantial postgraduate provision, are **targeting specific groups beyond their own institutions**. Some institutions talk in more general terms about targeting students that are under-represented in postgraduate education, while others identify specific groups. Groups identified include: low income students, older learners, disabled students, under-represented ethnic minorities, and people working in professions without undergraduate qualifications.



## Growing awareness

“Currently, widening participation thinking is predominantly focused on full-time undergraduates and pre-HE/youth work but **it is recognised that we need to refine our understanding** of the issues around access to postgraduate study in the next period.”



## Examples of interventions

- Raising awareness about postgraduate study (e.g. taster sessions).
- Financial support.
- Development of new provision, including professional doctorates and vocational programmes for people in employment.
- Research training and skills development for PG students to support effective progression to the labour market for all students.
- Use of new technology to support successful participation.
- Developing inclusive structures, processes and cultures.



**Take 5-10 minutes with people near you to answer one of these questions:**

1. What is the 'business case' for national and institutional policy on WP to PG study?
2. What are the pressing research questions you would like to see answered?
3. What could or should institutions be doing to widen participation to postgraduate study?



## Policy: Making the case for WP to PGS

- Supporting PG recruitment through new markets, and increased fee income.
- Compliance with equality legislation.
- Pool of talent: securing the most talented students.
- Social justice and social responsibility.
- Enhanced learning experience, especially in professional programmes.
- Diversity in professional workforces.
- Reinforcing widening participation at undergraduate level through staff diversity.

*(See Shaw et al 2007)*



## Research agenda

### Students

- What are the issues effecting access to PGR degrees (cultural, social, economic or educational)?
- Are there differential rates of retention, achievement and progression for student equity groups?

### Institutions

- How are institutions addressing the issue of WP to PGR?

### National policy

- Which policies and interventions are the most effective?

## What could/should institutions do?

- Examine institutional data about progression of graduates to PGS. Use/examine HEA surveys.
- Monitor PG access, retention and completion by equity groups.
- Learn from good practice about WP to UG studies to promote WP in PG programmes.
- Learn from good practice about embedding employability into the curriculum and extend this work to promote progression to PGS.
- Integrate WP to PGS into institutional strategies, e.g. WPSA.
- Create an institution-specific business case.

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## **Professor Liz Thomas**

Senior Adviser, Higher Education Academy  
Director, Widening Participation Research Centre,  
Edge Hill University

Lead Adviser, Action on Access

[liz.thomas@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:liz.thomas@heacademy.ac.uk)

[liz.thomas@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:liz.thomas@edgehill.ac.uk)

[www.actiononaccess.org](http://www.actiononaccess.org)

