

Access to postgraduate study
A review of research findings

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Outline

- Why should we care?
- What do we know and not know about access at postgraduate level?
 - my assumption: you already know about WP at undergraduate level
- What is being done about it? Some comments on recent 'policy'
- What could/should be done?

Why should we care?

- Objection 1: “No problem here”
 - University as a great leveller
 - Meritocracy
 - Inequalities come from earlier levels (i.e. schools)
 - Declining ‘background effects’

Why should we care?

- Objection 2: postgraduate study as an esoteric minority pursuit
 - Lionel Zipser in Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue*?
 - 1960 <15k postgraduates (~220k students) = ~7%
 - 2007 >550k postgraduates (2.5 million students) = ~22%
 - Postgraduate initial participation rate now ~ 8%
 - Postgraduate qualifications required for some careers

Why should we care?

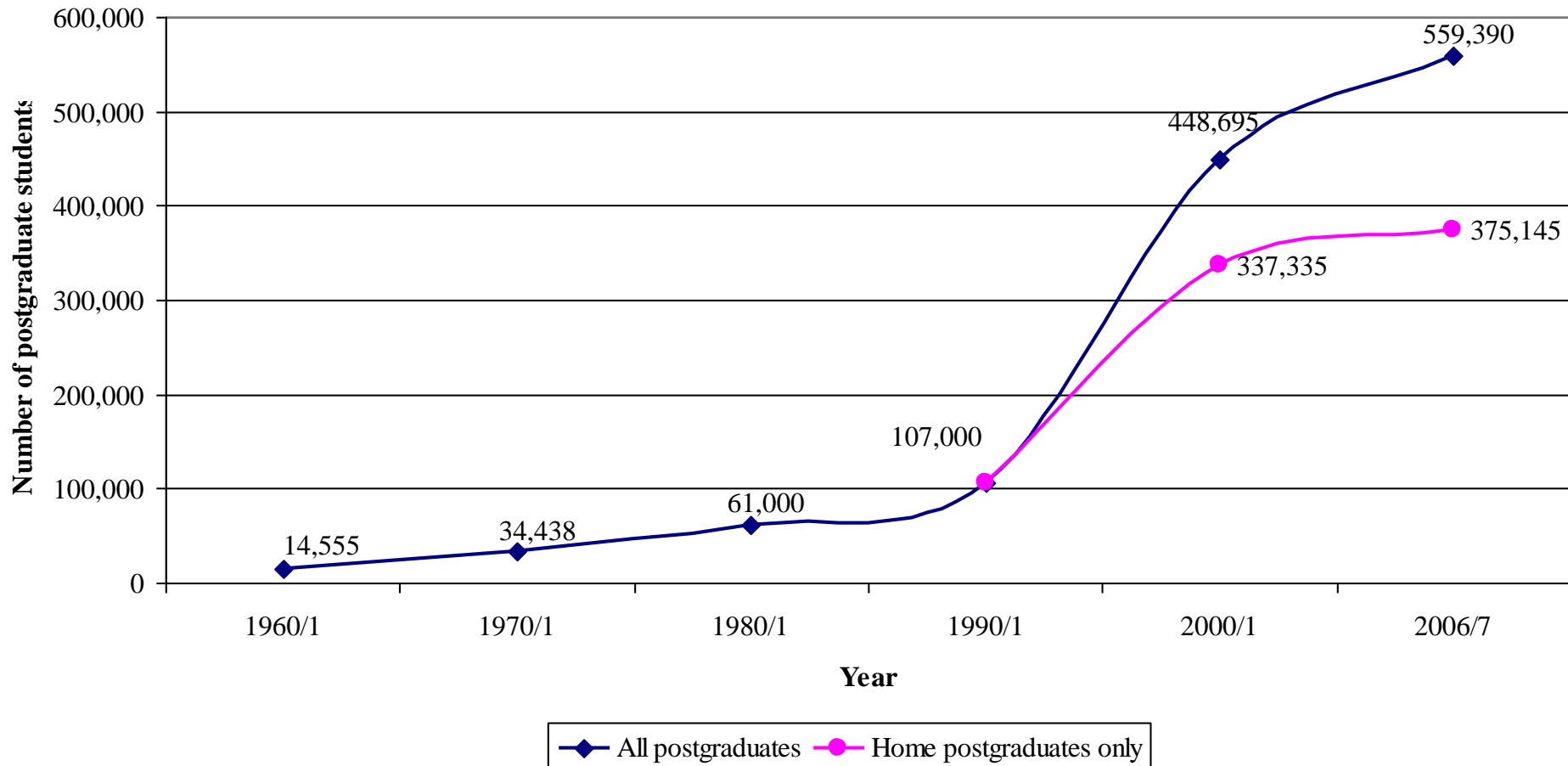
- Objection 3: private not public good
 - Browne Review, p. 55: “the private benefits of taught postgraduate education are predominant over the public benefits and have clearly tended to be sufficient to generate private investment.” [although don’t say the same about research degrees]
 - Teaching? Social work? Medicine? And a long list of others...
 - Why is undergraduate study different?
 - Non-financial inequalities? Gender, ethnicity, social *class* (cultural)

WIDENING PARTICIPATION FOR POSTGRADUATES:

Research, Policy, and Practice

A quiet revolution?

UK Postgraduate Student Numbers, 1960/1 - 2006/7



WIDENING PARTICIPATION FOR POSTGRADUATES:

Research, Policy, and Practice

Contrary to declining background effects...

- Credential inflation
- Persistent inequality
- Maximally maintained inequality

WIDENING PARTICIPATION FOR POSTGRADUATES:

Research, Policy, and Practice

Four reasons to care

- Social justice
- Widening the talent pool
- Enlightened self-interest?
- You *may* be required to!

What do we know and not know?



Prof. Nigel Thrift
Vice-Chancellor
University of Warwick

[I]t has become clear that very little is known about the socioeconomic and demographic makeup of those UK students who go into postgraduate study. When compared with the now extensive knowledge of undergraduates with regard to factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class and disability, many questions concerning what, when and why students enter postgraduate study, and particularly postgraduate research, remain unanswered

(Thrift Review of Research Careers, 2008, p. 20)

What do we know and not know?



Adrian Smith
Director General, Science and Research,
BIS

There is very limited data available on which to base an assessment of the issues around access to postgraduate study. We know that in the last decade, participation by UK domiciles in postgraduate education has grown at a slower rate than at the undergraduate level, and that since 2002-03, growth in international postgraduates studying has far outstripped that of UK domiciles. However, there is no conclusive evidence to show whether UK-based growth has been held back because of financial or social barriers to postgraduate study.
(One Step Beyond, 2010, p. 45)

Summaries of existing evidence

- ESRC/NCCPE Research Synthesis (research students only)
- HEFCE Barriers Review 2006
- HEPI report *Postgraduate Education in the United Kingdom*
- My doctoral thesis (only for the seriously curious!)

Postgraduate study: a complex activity

- Many different qualifications with many different purposes
 - PGCE, PGDip, MA, MSc, MEng, MEd, MMus, MRes, MBA, MSW, MPhil, PhD, EdD, MD etc.
- Academic tribes and territories
 - Different rates of progression
 - Different postgraduate ‘styles’
- Modes and locations of study
- Funding source and stage in lifecourse

Some expectations

- The leaking pipeline
- Credential inflation
- Persistent, maximally and effectively-maintained inequality
 - Institutional stratification
- Finance?

Key findings

- Data gaps
- Recruitment and motivations
- Academic and financial factors
- Class, ethnicity and gender
- Other issues

Data gaps

- No-one has (until recently) been asking the questions
 - Institutions
 - Funding councils
 - Research councils
 - Government
 - Researchers?
- No national application system, hence...
- ...little *data* on social class or *analysis of data* on other variables

Recruitment

- The growth curve (home students):
 - PhD: like a mill pond
 - Taught masters: quick, quick, slow
- What's the *demand* for postgraduate study?
- Differences between participants and non-participants?
Aspirations?

Motivations

- Note to self: not *everyone* wants to (or can)!
- Does it 'pay off'?
 - Benefits and *perceptions* of benefit
- PhD: self-help literature and the trial by ordeal
- Masters: the Johnny Logan view? (“what’s another year?”)
- The few studies of motivation are either of existing students or (rarely) of UG finalists

Academic factors

- It's attainment, stupid!
 - Degree classification
- Disciplinary and institutional differences
 - Russell Group
 - Subject of first degree
- Student 'mobility'
 - Institutional
 - Disciplinary
 - Geographic

Financial factors

- What we all know already: PG study is ‘unregulated’
 - A (substantial) minority pay their own fees
 - Maintenance support?
- PG fees are similar to UG fees now
 - Future position unclear
- Who receives funding from whom?
- Disciplinary differences

Debt

- Debt *per se* does not *seem* to be a deterrent
 - Including in US studies
 - More research needed on non-participants
- BUT not clear what effect most recent changes will have
- Finance *must* have an influence (mustn't it?)...but not a 'magic bullet'

Gender

- Gender is a (qualified) success story at UG level (at least in terms of participation)
- Women form the majority of postgraduates (~57%)
 - and have a higher PG participation rate (about 10%, compared to about 7% for men)
- BUT women underrepresented among research students
 - and less likely to ‘progress’, holding other factors constant
- We have the data!!!

Ethnicity

- White British, Black African, Chinese and 'Other' groups have higher representation at PGR level than UG
- Black, Chinese and 'Other' groups have higher representation at PGT level than UG
- Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups have lower representation at *any* PG level than at UG
- Why?
 - Disciplinary differences?
 - BUT within-discipline studies

Social class

- Data and measurement problems
 - Occupation, residence, education?
 - All graduates = middle-class?
- Immediate and later transitions
 - Little substantive difference in immediate progression by class, controlling for other factors
 - BUT how do we treat first-degree institution?
 - Re-emergence of inequalities in later entry?
 - PGCE

Other issues

- Disability
- Family
 - Partners, children, ties
- Sexuality
- Age
- Multiple (dis)advantages

The Browne Review – some comments

“At a time when public resources are constrained, there is no compelling case for removing investment from undergraduate students to give it to postgraduate students.”

- *No surprise there. Seems reasonable? But remove from which undergraduates to give to which postgraduates?*

The Browne Review – some comments

“Many postgraduate students have already been in work and so may have savings as well as a financial track record which helps for obtaining credit. Some are supported by employers in doing their degree. Therefore they have better access to private investment than undergraduate students and undergraduate students should therefore be the priority for public investment.”

- *True to some extent. But this lumps together all taught postgraduates when they are a highly diverse group (academically and socially)*

The Browne Review – some comments

“we have seen no evidence that the absence of student support in the taught postgraduate market has had a detrimental impact on access to postgraduate education.”

- *Key word here is access. There is little robust evidence either way on financial support, so this statement is highly speculative. It is more accurate to say there has been little detrimental impact on **participation**, although that in itself might rise were more support available. Whether that would be desirable is another question.*
- *The Review adopts the approach in respect of part-time undergraduate study*

The Browne Review – some comments

“we should focus on improving access at the undergraduate level and that may over time help also to ensure that it is solely academic performance rather than social background that determines entry to postgraduate study.”

- *This would be accurate if it added “access to research intensive institutions” but it could be as productive to encourage access **from** teaching-focussed institutions*

The Browne Review – some comments

“It is possible that, in the future if students are paying higher fees to enter undergraduate education, they will be less likely to participate in postgraduate study. Trends in postgraduate study should therefore be monitored carefully, including after the introduction of any further changes to funding and student finance.”

- *Seems reasonable. On the basis of what we know now, there is no strong reason to suspect the changes Browne introduces will make things substantially better or worse.*

Further reading

- Wakeling, P. (2010) Inequalities in postgraduate education: a comparative review. In G. Goastellec (ed) *Understanding Inequalities In, Through and By Higher Education*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 61 - 74.
- Wakeling, P. and Kyriacou, C. (2010) *Widening Participation from Undergraduate to Postgraduate Research Degrees: a Research Synthesis*. Swindon: ESRC and NCCPE.*
- House, G. (2010) *Postgraduate Education in the UK*. Oxford: HEPI.*
- Machin, S. and Murphy, R. (2010) *The social composition and future earnings of graduates: interim results from the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics*. London: The Sutton Trust.*
- Wakeling, P. (2009) *Social class and access to postgraduate education in the UK: a sociological analysis*, PhD thesis, University of Manchester.*
- Wakeling, P. (2009). Are ethnic minorities underrepresented in UK postgraduate study? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63(1): 86-111.

* = downloadable