



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Howard GREEN

*Chair UK Council for Graduate Education
Dean: Research and Graduate School, Staffordshire University*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The past 10 or so years have seen significant changes in higher education in the United Kingdom. The growth in the number of undergraduate students and the move towards a mass higher education system supported by the promotion of the polytechnics to university status frequently dominates the analysis of this change. For those who have been involved in the postgraduate side of the sector, change has been equally if not more dramatic and rapid, overshadowed only by the sheer volume of undergraduate student numbers.

This paper will consider three broad themes. It will review where we have come from over the last 10 years and identify some of the key elements of change before addressing some of the challenges for the next years. Finally it will describe the role of the UK Council for Graduate Education in this period.

The paper will of necessity be partial and will only skim the surface of many aspects of postgraduate education. It will also generalise across provision and will only infrequently differentiate between postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes. In drawing the material together it will conclude by suggesting that whilst major advances have been made, we remain some distance from realising the considerable potential of postgraduate education for the nation as a whole.

2. THE LAST TEN YEARS - A PERIOD OF ENORMOUS CHANGE:

2.1. The Growth of Student Numbers

The growth in the postgraduate population has created a sector which is out of all recognition to that of the 1960's when the Robbins Report, the first major study

of postgraduate education in the UK noted a population in 1961/62 of 19,400 ft and 6,300 pt students. By 1994/95 at the time of the Harris report, there were 128,300 ft and 187,100 pt postgraduate students. The relative position of PG similarly changed during this period, from 13% in 1979, (100,900 PG in a total population of 787,000). In 1994/95 the comparable figure was 21% (315,400 out of a population of 1,528,600). A similarly dramatic statistic is highlighted in the period 1982/83 - 1992/93 in which the PG population grew by 1125% (from 102,000 - 220,000) compared with 70% for UGs. (UKCGE, 1995). By 1999/00, the latest date for which full information is available, the total population was 151,330 full-time and 257,290 part-time, (HESA, 2001).

Similar structural changes were observed in the mode programmes with a growth in the number of part time students, and equalisation of the gender balance and more recently a significant growth in the numbers of overseas students. In 1992/93 there were 25,100 international postgraduate students in HIEs in the UK, 8% from the EU 92% from the rest of the world. By 1997/98 this figure had risen to 81,000 of which now 33% were from the EU and 67% from the rest of the world, theoretically at least making a major impact on the funding of programmes.

2.2. Quality

The growth in numbers potentially has an impact on the quality of the provision - whether it be non academic provision such as accommodation, to the more academic side including library facilities and opening, academic support and supervisory standards. The UKCGE noted that 'doctoral education was frequently regarded as a cottage industry, a prestigious yet somehow fringe activity in higher education'. (UKCGE, 1996). The movement from a cottage industry to one, which provides excellence in an increasingly mass production environment, has challenged institutions and their regulators. From the ESRC's review of social science completion rates in the late 1980's (ESRC,) to the QAA's various codes of practice including the code of practice

for postgraduate research (QAA, 1999) various aspects of quality have been under scrutiny. Implicitly at least must be the assumption that the increased numbers of postgraduate students were presenting a real challenge to the continued enhancement of delivery.

2.3. Research Training

The adequacy of many of the research degree programmes particularly as far as they provided the UK with trained researchers has been a theme of the 1990's. In 1991, the ESRC addressed the issue, in part to improve completion rates amongst its sponsored student population with the introduction of their Training Guidelines of which the third edition has just been published (ESRC 2001).

The 1993 White Paper - Realising Our Potential - placed considerable emphasis on the capacity of research to contribute to the national economy emphasising the need for appropriately trained researchers.

In 1994, following the theme of the White Paper, the Office of Science and Technology published a paper outlining a recommended structure for a new one-year Research Masters (MRes) degree, which would include both taught and research components. This degree is, intended as a foundation either for a doctorate or for a research career in industry or the public sector. The OST proposed: firstly, a significant research component (60% of the 42-week postgraduate year); secondly, the provision of a grounding in research techniques relevant to a range of disciplines as well as the development of specialist knowledge; and, thirdly, the inclusion of modules intended to broaden the students' experience and to equip them with transferable skills in management, communication, commercial understanding, the exploitation of research, and team-working.

The MRes initiative has been adopted by several universities and supported by four research councils - the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council. In 1997 the OST issued an interim report on the first two years of the pilot MRes scheme. This document comments on statistics relating to the programmes, on monitoring visits to participating universities and on questionnaires completed by students at the beginning and the end of their courses. OST emphasizes the high demand for MRes courses - three out of the four research councils have had 100% take up on places offered. It reports high levels of student satisfaction with courses, and states that student concerns over the worth of such a newly established qualification are diminishing as the reputation of the Research Masters is consolidated. Included in the report are figures indicating that the proportion of MRes students holding

first class degrees compares favourably with the proportion among students opting for traditional MSc programmes.

The Economic and Social Sciences Research Council has re-emphasised the need for research training for the PhD students, which it supports for over a decade and produces training guidelines to support its requirements. The recently published third edition of the guidelines further develops the approach with a one plus three year model - the first year being devoted to research training and the subsequent three, then PhD., a model not dissimilar from the MRes., (ESRC, 2001).

2.4. Funding

One dilemma, which has faced all those involved in the recruitment of research students and hence the future of research capacity in the UK has been the level of stipends. Traditionally, research students supported by institutions or research councils have received a tax-free bursary to cover living expenses. During the late 1990's, several disciplines found it increasingly difficult to recruit students, in part it was suggested because of the competitive salaries available to new graduates in the labour market in general. This was particularly the case in some of the sciences and economics (UKCGE Dec 1998). Following a review by the Office of Science and Technology (WWW. DTI) stipends are to be increased significantly rising to £9,000 at 2000 prices over a three-year period beginning in 2001/2002.

Another initiative, which in part responds to the stipend problems, is the Doctoral Training Account being introduced by the EPSRC. Rather than allocating a fixed amount for each student stipend, the Doctoral Account will allocate institutions a global sum to cover the entire PhD programme. Institutions will then be able to respond to market and other imperatives in the determination of the level of payment to students.

2.5. New Awards

In the earlier discussion of the increased emphasis on research training within doctoral programmes, note was made of the MRes. This was but one of a several new awards to be developed during the period. Of particular importance is the new group of doctoral awards, which have been developed since the early 1990s. In part responding to the inability of the PhD to respond to the research needs of the professions and professional practice, the professional doctorate, (also referred to as the taught doctorate) has become increasingly popular. First introduced in Bristol University in the form of an EdD, and by SERC (now EPSRC) in their EngD in 1992, the award has developed rapidly. Currently there are over 109 professional doctorates offered in UK Universities in Education, Engineering, Medicine, Psychology,

Business Administration and Health Sciences. (UKCGE, 2000)

The PhD itself has come under increasing scrutiny and with the support of HEFCE, ten UK universities have embarked a pilot programme for a 'new route' PhD which will incorporate taught elements similar to those of the American PhD. The new model which will begin in September this year will include assessed taught units that may involve teaching skills, group work, technology transfer, enterprise skills languages and research skills. This initiative is part of a wider attempt to fight off competition from US institutions in the market for international students. (THES 2001)

2.6. Organizational Change

Attention now turns to the way in which institutional organisation has responded. In this context the graduate school has become the dominant model in the UK following the experience of many institutions in the US (Hogan, 1995). Defined by the UKCGE as '*a distinct organisation concerned with the promotion of high quality graduate education and the administration of graduate education within institutions or across a number of institutions,*' their number has grown from 33 in 1995 (UKCGE, 1995) to over 60 in 1998 (UKCGE, 1998) and over 100 today. In the early part of the decade, graduate schools were more typical of the 'older' university sector. By the end of the decade the 'new' universities had caught up and the model was common across the sector as a whole. That is not to say that all institutions have adopted the same model for their graduate school. Circumstances and needs vary between institutions leading to a variety of models and responsibilities, all however with a common goal - to enhance the quality of institutional postgraduate provision.

2.7. The National Qualifications Framework

The Framework was finally published by the Quality Assurance Agency in January (QAA, 2001) after a long and difficult development process. The Framework builds on the work of both Harris and Dearing in providing a structure for all postgraduate awards, both undergraduate and postgraduate. At postgraduate level the Framework stipulates two levels, Masters and Doctorate and presents descriptors for outcomes at these levels. It remains for Institutions to interpret these descriptors for programmes they offer. The doctoral descriptors are particularly interesting as they challenge the sector to better define the expected outcomes of the PhD and as a consequence develop more robust approaches to the PhD itself. They also provide the basis for judging equivalence across all doctoral programmes including the professional and practice-based doctorate.

3. THE HARRIS REPORT –1996

The Harris Report deserves separate mention. 1996 marked an important landmark in the development of postgraduate education, particularly in England and Wales, and by extension throughout the UK, with the publication of the Harris report. The report known formally as the Review of Postgraduate Education was originally suggested by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to review its funding method for postgraduate work, following the rapidly increasing size of the sector. Its significance, the first national review of postgraduate education since the Robbins report in 1963, led to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) becoming co sponsors. This is not the place to describe in detail the contents of the report. The conclusions and recommendations are however of major significance for the sector and what follows is a brief review of the key elements.

3.1. Funding

The growth in the sector had led to concerns that without an appropriate and separate funding stream, postgraduate development might take place to the detriment of the undergraduate sector. As was already the case with postgraduate research students, it was recommended that funding should be separated from undergraduates. The report resisted the setting of maxima (as is the case for undergraduates with the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MASN)) as it was felt this would stifle innovations.

3.2. Nomenclature

The report noted the considerable confusion, which existed in understanding the increasing diversity of postgraduate provision, and the various titles adopted for courses and programmes. It suggested that as a minimum the sector adopt a common set of descriptors, which could form the basis of a directory.

Within this framework, it was suggested that common nomenclature be adopted which would for example allow differentiation between programmes which were postgraduate in time but not in level and visa versa.

3.3. Quality Assurance

The report noted the need for consistent quality assurance and recommended that a quality assurance agency (subsequently the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)), which would also deal with undergraduate programme, should have this responsibility.

3.4. Postgraduate Research

The report differentiated between PGT and PGR in its recommendations and made several important, and differentiated recommendations most of which relate to quality. These include:

- A clear statement of expectation of both student and institution
- A code of practice requiring institutions to have in place appropriate facilities and supervision
- The linking of PGR funding to the quality of the research environment and the Research Assessment Exercise.

3.5. Post Harris

The significance of the Harris report is best demonstrated by the fact that many of its recommendations have been already been implemented. Among the key recommendations already implemented or in the process of implementation include:

- QAA qualifications framework
- Codes of practice for PGT
- Code of practice for PGR
- Nomenclature of awards
- Funding of PGR through the research funding model
- Directory of PGT and PGR (CSU Prospects Directory)

4. SOME CURRENT CHALLENGES

The rapid changes of recent years do not mean that the challenges of postgraduate education are over yet. Many remain. Only three are identified here as illustrations of some of these continuing demands.

4.1. Training of Supervisors

Pressures to improve the performance of research supervision and provide supervisors with the appropriate skills for such a task have come from a variety of sources. The increased professionalisation of the academic's work, the insistence of the research councils, increasing numbers of appeals and the QAA's code of practice all point institutions in this direction. Increasingly institutions are struggling with the different ways in which training can be provided, whether it is by

accredited courses, workshops or mentoring. Slowly but surely, supervisors are being encouraged to see their role as more broadly based than simply instructing in the specific area of research.

4.2. Benchmarking the PhD

Now that the QAA has published its descriptors for the Doctorate, the sector will need to establish benchmarks.

4.3. Lifelong Learning

The Dearing report highlighted the importance of Lifelong Learning to society at large and to institution. Harris noted the importance of vocational courses particularly in education and business and management and the increasing numbers coming to postgraduate work as mature students. The Lifelong Learning agenda will however demand new forms of delivery, distributed or at a distance, or increasingly work based.

The client group will certainly be different both in terms of expectation and capability. Much of the work of the Graduate School movement has been to create a climate more sympathetic to the needs of mature students, those with full-time jobs and those with families. Access to institutional facilities can no longer be weekday based. Delivery in blocks of time, over weekends and holiday periods is increasingly demanded.

Perhaps the major challenge in this context is accessing those potential postgraduates who because of lower participation rates in the 1970's and 1980's undertook their training on the job, but who would in today's climate be well qualified for undergraduate programmes. For this group, entry qualifications to postgraduate programmes need to be re-examined and familiarisation programmes developed to introduce them to university life. Failure to address this problem will both disadvantage a significant group of mid career clients and cause institutions to miss a considerable potential market.

5. THE UK COUNCIL FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION

The UKCGE was set up in 1994 by Professor Bob Burgess and a small group of likeminded colleagues to provide a forum for discussion and debate about the many changes that were taking place at that time in postgraduate education. Its mission was and continues to be the promotion of:

- The interests of postgraduate education in all disciplines

- A distinct identity for graduate education and research in higher education

- The development of quality and quality measures for graduate education and research conducted in higher education institutions

- The effective leadership and management of postgraduate students

- The status, education and training of postgraduate students

- Effective infrastructural provisions for graduate education, including appropriate funding

- Equal opportunities for students in graduate education

- The professional development and status of staff and supervisors in HEIs

The Council helps its members contribute to the development of the UK's graduate education culture by systematic enquiry into, creative thought about and critical analysis of education and other issues. Council events and publications support this mission while membership offers people involved in postgraduate education, whether they be administrators, academics or managers, regular opportunities to meet others in the field and participate in specialist networks.

The Council is managed by an Executive Committee elected by the member institutions. Membership is open to all HEIs with fifty or more postgraduate FTEs. Associate membership is available for institutions and organisations, which have an interest in postgraduate activity. Currently there are 126 full institutional members, the majority of UK HEIs. Reciprocal relationships are retained with some specific national institutions.

The Council's work is conducted through several different channels. The two annual conferences, one in winter the other is summer provide the focus for major presentations, discussion and networking. Bringing together a cross section of the postgraduate community the conferences attract over 120 delegates each year. With a variety of formats, ranging from self-help groups to plenary presentations the conferences have provided the sector with a impressive range ideas and information.

Workshops are the forum in which good (not so good) and best practice is presented. Normally the Council runs three workshops each year at different venues throughout the UK; topics included in recent workshops are research degree examining, appeals and

appeals procedure, intellectual property issues and the postgraduate.

The working groups of the Council continue to provide expert overviews of particular aspects of postgraduate education. Made up of colleagues with a specialist interest in the particular subject being researched, eight working groups have so far reported on the following topics:

- Graduate School (1995)

- The award of PhD on the basis of published work (1996)

- Quality and Standards of Postgraduate Research Degrees (1996)

- Practice-based doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design (1997)

- The status of Published work in the submission for Doctoral Degrees in European Universities (1998)

- Preparing postgraduates to teach in Higher Education (1999)

- The International Postgraduate: Challenges to British Higher Education (1999)

- Research Training for Humanities Postgraduate Students (2000)

Forthcoming Working Group reports to be published later this year will include the Professional Doctorates, Research Training in the Creative and Performing Arts and the MRes.

The Council maintains contact with institutions through its newsletter and its two e-mail lists. The e-mail groups provide a valuable service to member institutions by facilitating the sharing of information. They also alert the Council's executive to topics of immediate interest, which may be the focus for other Council activities.

6. CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the changes, which have taken place in higher education as a whole, those of the postgraduate sector have perhaps attracted less attention. They have nevertheless been of enormous significance to the way in which UK institutions of higher education conduct their business. And there is much remaining to be done.

Perhaps I can end this paper with one final challenge, which reflects an area in which the postgraduate sector still lags behind the undergraduate -

and that is in the way we expect students to demonstrate their competences and learning achievements. At the undergraduate level - and for the majority - but not all institutions, this has changed beyond all recognition to the traditions of the 1960's and 70's. Not so with the postgraduate sector in which the thesis still dominates thinking. Perhaps the newly emerging awards, the Mres and Professional doctorate, and the learning outcomes implicit in the QAA's framework will challenge the effectiveness of the thesis in assessing the research capability of our aspiring researchers.

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