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Entry to Study Expectations of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Postgraduate Taught Students

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Abstract

There is extensive knowledge of learning and teaching behaviour and practice at undergraduate level, but limited, albeit increasing, of postgraduate taught study. The Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP) was one of 20 projects funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to explore ways of widening participation at postgraduate master's level. It was the largest consortium comprising of 11 universities across the UK (9 English, 1 Scottish and 1 Welsh). PEP assessed STEM postgraduate masters students' learning and teaching experiences and expectations through an online survey during Induction period (Entry to Study survey). The survey explored students' experiences of previous learning and teaching methods, their understanding of academic feedback and their preferences, as well as their expectation of learning at postgraduate taught level (PGT). This paper presents different student´s experiences and expectations by groups such as gender and mode of study. The findings suggest that a 'one size fits all' learning and teaching approach to PGT students is not adequate to support the student experience due to the complexity and multiplicity of postgraduate the student's profile, background, needs and expectations.

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Keywords: postgraduate taught study; entry to study expectation; STEM; learning and teaching; government funded research.

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1. Introduction

There has been an expansion in the number of postgraduate students in the UK over the past decade (Morgan, 2014b). However, in contrast with undergraduate level (e.g. Thomas, 2002; Morgan, 2011; Stuart et al., 2008), there is still limited research about the postgraduate masters (known as PGT hereafter) student experience, students' prior learning experiences and how this might affect and impact on study at PGT level (Morgan, 2013b; Morgan & Rigby, 2014). Independent bodies such as the Higher Education Commission, have commented that 'Postgraduate education is a forgotten part of the sector' (Higher Education Commission, 2012:17).

The Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP), which was one of the twenty projects funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2013, was designed to investigate the expectations and attitudes towards Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) PGT study, and post-study outcomes from the perspective of students, universities and employers to support and sustain PGT growth in the UK. PEP was the largest consortium comprising of 11 universities (9 English, 1 Welsh and 1 Scottish) that are geographically dispersed universities across the UK.

PEP collected data on expectations of studying at PGT level of new STEM students enrolling at the start of the academic year 2014/15 via an online survey – the Entry to Study Survey (ESS). The ESS aims, structure, procedure and demographics are presented in the section below.

1.1. Entry to study survey

Aims: To collect demographic variables, information on prior feedback experiences, and the expectations of new PGT students relating to their upcoming academic studies; to identify any particular issues that appeared to affect successful engagement; and to determine what interventions or activities could be put in place to manage student expectations and improve their experience.

Structure: The survey comprised open and closed questions. It collected demographic data to check the representation of the sample and to provide detailed analysis of the questions asked with different student characteristics such as gender, domiciled status, generational status, entry route to study. It contained eight sections designed to obtain as much information as possible about their prior experiences of higher education and their PGT expectations and aspirations. The sections were as follows: 1) previous study qualifications; 2) previous study experience; 3) current study information; 4) motivations and challenges of postgraduate study, fees and funding; 5) postgraduate study expectations; 6) your current learning expectations; 7) attitudes towards postgraduate study; 8) biographical details. The survey consisted of 92 questions, providing a massive amount of information and an extensive dataset. The questions were developed from an existing survey that had already been implemented at the lead university (Morgan, 2013b) and it was piloted with 25 students.

Procedure: New PGT STEM students across the 11 participating universities were asked to complete the Entry to Study survey during the orientation period in September/October 2014. They were informed about the purpose of the survey, that it was anonymous and voluntary, and were made aware that the survey had two aims: firstly, to provide their university with data to contribute to understanding and improving their experience and, secondly, to act as a personal development activity for new PGT entrants, as they would be asked to reflect on how they had previously learnt and how they wanted to, or expected to, learn at postgraduate level. Within six weeks of the orientation period, each university published a self-help sheet for their new students that contained some of their basic findings of the survey, along with advice and guidance in the areas students had highlighted as potential problems.

Demographics: The sample comprised of 1226 students, of which 37% were female and 63% male; 83% were studying full-time and 17% studying part-time; 52% were first generation and 48% second generation; 60% were UK domiciled, 11% European (EU) and 29% Overseas (OS). Other demographic variables, such as discipline, age and ethnicity, are described in Table 1 (source Morgan & Direito, 2016). Students whose parents (or guardians) had not been to university were classified as a first generation student, and those that had one or both parents attend were classified as second generation. In terms of *route into study*, students coming straight from university were the ones