



Widening participation: next steps for postgraduate education

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right degree, the best student experience

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Outline

- Background: postgraduate growth and complexity
- What do we know (and not know) about access to research degrees?
- Some comments on Browne and postgraduates

WP and first degrees

- Historical under-representation:
 - Socio-economic background
 - Gender
 - Ethnicity
 - 'First generation' etc
- AimHigher, student funding, OFFA, Schwartz report, Laura Spence etc.

“No problem here”?

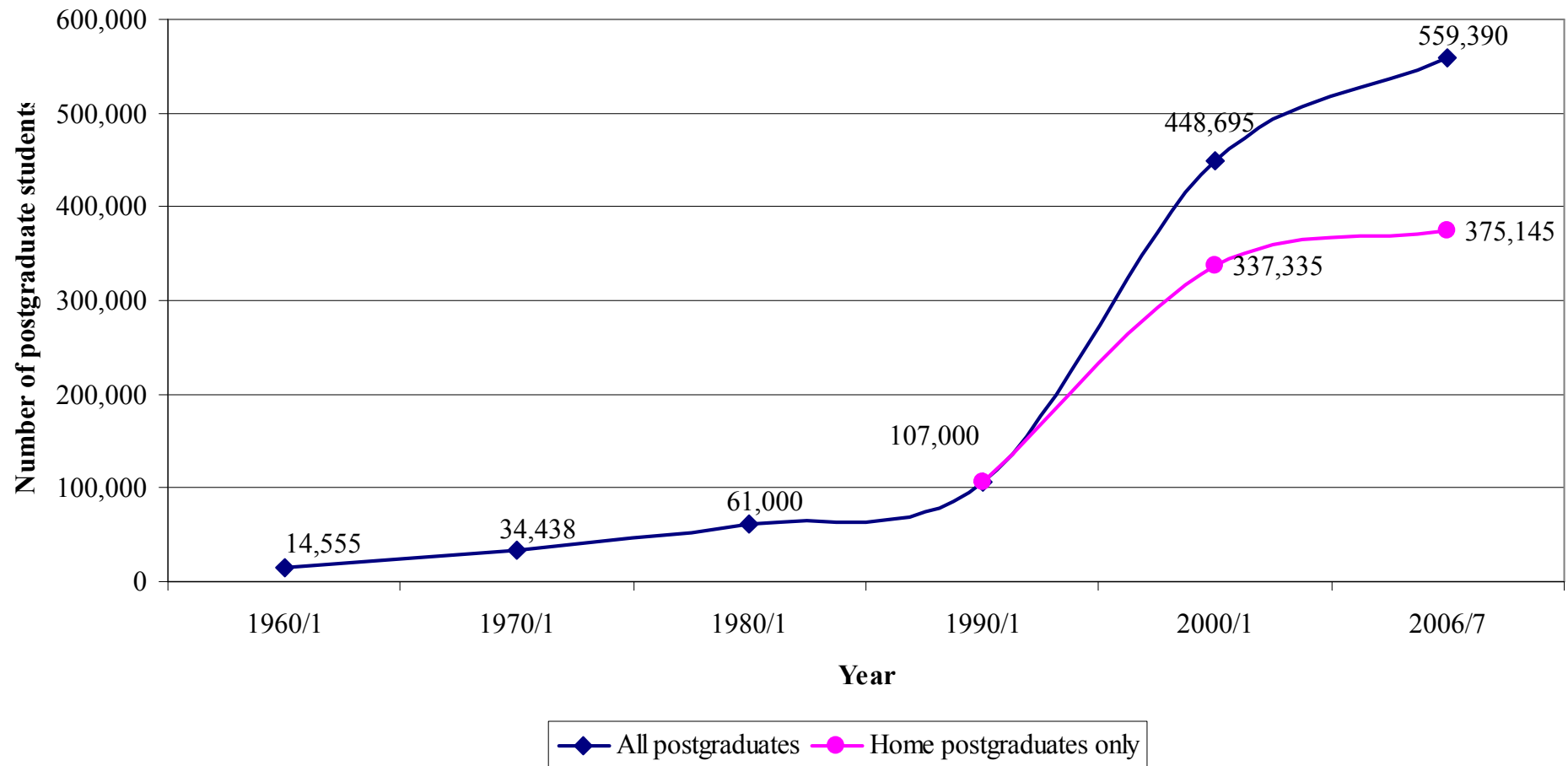
- University as a great leveller
- Meritocracy?
- Problems outside the system? Schools
- Declining ‘background effects’

But...

- Very little attention given to access to postgraduate study, despite...
- ...huge expansion in postgraduate numbers...
- ...and declining value of a first degree?

Quiet revolution?

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



Thrift Review of research careers (2008)



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 (2008, p. 20)

Other recent policy attention

- Alan Milburn's report on access to the professions
- BIS Postgraduate Review *One Step Beyond*
- Lord Browne's independent review of higher education funding and student finance
- Concentration of research funding?

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!)

Some expectations

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

Postgraduate study: a complex activity

- Many different qualifications with many different purposes
- Academic tribes and territories
 - Different rates of progression
 - Different postgraduate 'styles'
- Modes and locations of study
- Funding source and stage in lifecourse

Key findings

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

Data gaps

- No-one has (until recently) been asking the questions
- 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'?
- 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'
- 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 have been a deterrent
 - Including in US studies
 - More research needed on non-participants
- BUT not clear what effect most recent changes will have (see later)
- Finance *must* have an influence (mustn't it?)...but not a 'magic bullet'?

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 themselves make things substantially better or worse. **BUT...***

Future postgraduate fees

- Likely removal of public support for arts, humanities and social sciences subjects
- This must lead to a large increase in postgraduate fees (to overseas levels?)
- Virtually no funding available for taught masters (scholarships or loans)
- Larger and longer UG debt

Summary

- Growing concerns about widening participation at postgraduate level
- Findings and gaps in the research evidence base
- A bleak future? PG WP and enlightened self-interest