

## GMT interview

# Postgraduate applicants need more clarity to make good decisions

with Dr Sue Rigby

**With the number of enrolments onto postgraduate taught courses in the UK falling over the last few years, GMT asks Dr Sue Rigby<sup>1</sup>, Vice Principal of Learning and Teaching at the University of Edinburgh, about the issues surrounding how information about courses is provided and the needs of prospective postgraduate taught students. Will sorting the financing of postgraduate study be the only solution to the falling postgraduate numbers? Or is it a question of getting universities to provide more of the information applicants need to make good decisions?**

### **What is your role in the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG)?**

I sit on the HEPISG as the Scottish representative but because I have experience in postgraduate taught work at the University of Edinburgh, for the last two years I've chaired the sub group of that committee which deals with the information needs of postgraduate taught students. Overall HEPISG looks at how universities can be transparent in the provision of useful data that allows all stakeholders to understand what they are doing, with the focus primarily on applicant and prospective applicant stakeholders. There is also a degree to which universities need to be able to demonstrate that they are meeting benchmarks of expectation nationally and public information is a primary way by which they do that. So HEPISG tries to ensure that universities are transparent and that there's some degree of consistency in the information that they provide to stakeholders. Another example of the groups work is that it also acts as the steering group for the National Student Survey.

The postgraduate sub group were tasked with commissioning research to find out the kind of information that helps applicants to Masters programmes and other postgraduate taught courses to

make good choices. The sub group then make recommendations back to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that would form a basis for how they move forward to deliver the information to applicants.

### **What kinds of information do prospective postgraduate students need?**

They need two different kinds of information. What came out really strongly in the research that we commissioned<sup>2</sup> was that applicants want a lot of quantitative, factual information about the course they are interested in. That information ranges from how much it will cost, to when it starts, to what course choices there are, what campus it will be located on, whether you can do it part-time, half-time; very factual information. Applicants also want access to people who know about the course so that they can ask individual questions. Bear in mind that Masters courses can be taken by very few people, some are very large, but the average size is probably between 10 to 15 students on a course and what applicants want is to get to that level of granularity so that they can find out the experiences of people who have already graduated or who are currently studying the program, or what perhaps the person who runs it is like. The research showed, as you'd expect, that the decision making process to do a Masters is really complicated so what we can't offer is a kind of route map because everybody comes to the process with a different set of qualities they are looking for.

### **Who do you think should be providing this information?**

Universities have to provide it, no one else can. There are lots of search engines that can then link to that information but the only people who can possibly provide it are the universities. But one obvious question would be: do you need a national survey which in some way mirrors the National Student

<sup>1</sup> Dr Sue Rigby is Vice Principal Learning and Teaching at the University of Edinburgh, she is also the Scottish representative on the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group, chairing the subgroup concerned with information needs for postgraduate taught students. Dr Rigby is also a member of the HECSU board.

<sup>2</sup> The report from the research was published April 2014, 'Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study' available from <https://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/pgtinfoneeds/>

Survey? This gets a bit technical. At postgraduate level you would have huge aggregation of the data because when you present data in a survey you need a certain number of people who complete it. For example, the University of Edinburgh has a Masters programme called, Material Cultures and History of the Book. There aren't enough people on that course to return information for a survey so you would have an aggregated set of information for all the courses run in English and that wouldn't tell you anything about that particular Masters programme.

### **So do you think there will be a Key Information Set for postgraduate courses?**

No, there won't be a Key Information Set. But there will be a requirement on universities to provide clear information to applicants in that quantitative area that delivers the level of knowledge that they need to make decisions. But because that's a whole suite of information, the recommendation will be that it be provided on the university's website relating to the program of study rather than in an abstracted form like a Key Information Set.

### **If you could design the perfect information resource for prospective postgraduate students, what would it look like?**

It would be in two parts. First, what I would like is for all the universities to provide relevant, up to date, timely and precise information on their websites about the Masters programmes they run. That's actually a very difficult ask because as people often apply for a Masters a year ahead of it starting, universities sometimes aren't in a position to offer that clarity because course staff move for example, or the timetable changes, but at least there can be an improvement. In particular, there would be clarity around fees.

Secondly, there would be something that helps people returning to education, maybe after a considerable break, to look at that information with connoisseurship so that they are making good decisions based on that information. You don't prepare for entering Masters study very often, so what you need is help from people who know it inside out and backwards. The worry is: if we provide information flat, the students may not be able to choose a course with the right degree of awareness of what matters. However much information we provide and however clear we are, unless we can also help people be sophisticated in the way they approach that information we won't help; we'll only hinder.

### **Why do you think participation in postgraduate study has fallen recently?**

Finances. There are more and more people competing in the job market so it makes sense for a lot of people to want to improve their job prospects by doing a Masters. But if the individual thinks that the course will cost more than they'll ever get back, then the number of people who are willing to do further study is going to fall. It's interesting because although applicants from the UK have fallen dramatically, international applicants are still rising for most courses, which is why I think we are quite secure in saying that its finances rather than anything else. The range and diversity of Masters programmes and their utility is proven by the fact that we have a huge international market for them. But if we are failing to attract UK students to what we know is a good product and useful to them, it must be because they can't afford it.

Masters applications have always been known to be counter recessional so you always get more applicants early in a recession and later on in a recession finances get tight but also as the recession starts to end, people start to move into good employment without taking that extra step. So there is a long trend demonstrating that when you go into a deep recession, about the only people that it's good for are the providers of Masters education and, as you come out of it that, in a sense, artificially enhanced population gets smaller again.

### **Given the economic value of a highly skilled workforce, what could be done to increase participation in postgraduate study?**

Well primarily the provision of scholarships or very affordable loans. The Government and Funding Councils are very aware of the funding bottle necks, which will only get larger once people who are carrying the full weight of £9,000 a year debt graduate. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC), HEFCE and their equivalent in Wales are looking at a variety of ways that they might tackle that issue. Both HEFCE and the SFC are offering a range of scholarships and bursaries that support people moving into Masters programmes. The HEFCE scheme starts this summer and it's being done through the medium of a range of grants which have been funded to both offer financial support to students and then to explore the consequences of making that offer. The SFC scheme started in autumn 2012, and offers full fee waiver for Masters programmes in areas that the Scottish government wants to enhance the workforce in, so things like energy, finance sector, tourism and so on.

Both of those schemes will need to be evaluated. In the meantime, the Scottish government is looking at ways to offer loans to students who might take a Masters degree. That's still at the discussion stage but I think it's more than likely going to be introduced in the future and I know that the Government in Westminster is interested in that as well.

Without funding Masters programmes are very expensive and particularly expensive if you have to relocate so universities are increasingly looking to provide part-time Masters or Masters that can be studied whilst you keep your job. For example, the University of Edinburgh is doing a set of Masters that are delivered entirely through distance learning. So universities are responding by looking at ways in which people might 'pay as you go' or at least keep a job to pay for the course whilst they are studying. However, for most Masters programmes the requirement will be to have a year spare and that means that it isn't just a fee you pay for the course and the cost of living accommodation but there is also the absence of income.

#### **Do we need different types of postgraduate study?**

You definitely need a primarily research-focused route, postgraduate research through to PhD, which is about thinking deeply and generating or negotiating new knowledge. You also need postgraduate taught because teaching at that level can give you extra skills, it can add a degree of finesse to a degree you did some years ago and it can allow you to do a transition from one career path to a completely different one.

Beyond that you've got a confusing plethora of names of taught Masters provision and that is complicated but I think it's also benign. We have no evidence that people are confused by it beyond the first tentative approach. You've got some very well established brands like an MBA that would never be susceptible to change just because they added confusion. Then you have a whole range of complexity around MScs and MAs because some universities offer their first degree's a Masters but it's not really a Masters and that's where the complexity arises.

You certainly need different modes of study and what we need in the sector is more clarity about what our Masters are for. You need at least three types, one that is open and exploratory and might lead you to a PhD, one that gives you the opportunity to gain a particular module you now need some years after completing your first degree and you need the type where you can change your career from say accountancy to carbon

capture. But we probably need to be clear about which of those three it is that you are applying for when you're coming back to university.

#### **Do you think there is a difference between the expectations of an applicant to postgraduate study who has just completed their first degree and an applicant who has spent time out after graduation to work?**

There will be a wider diversity of people entering postgraduate study than enter undergraduate study and it's an open question as to whether universities are sufficiently aware of that. Depending on what kind of training you've had since you first graduated you might have particular expectations about what returning to a training environment might be like. Coming into a Masters where you're only previous experience of learning has been as an undergraduate you'd have one set of expectations and probably be very open to that developing and changing. Equally, if you've been out of higher education for a very long time, you'd have a much more purposeful and practical understanding of what you might get in a Masters programme. Most people delivering Masters programmes won't be terribly aware of what those different expectations are on entry.

It might be that part of the connoisseurship required at application is to do with making sure that before students sign up and pay their fees for a course that they have as clear an idea about what the purpose of the Masters is and how that purpose will be delivered through the course. I know of a Masters that runs in educational leadership, it's about the theory of educational leadership and yet you'd be forgiven if you applied for it thinking it would help you to be an educational leader. Nobody is intending to deceive but there is a lack of clarity about the purpose of the study. The more clarity there is before signing up to a Masters programme, the less disappointed students are likely to be.

#### **Finally, if you could change just three things to enhance postgraduate study what would they be?**

The first thing would be sort out the finances. Make it possible for people to do a Masters programme with dignity and to pay it back over a period of time.

Secondly, I think what would really help would be if universities could be more clear about what they need as an educational prerequisite for successful study. You get requirements for a Masters programme that might just ask for a degree in a relevant discipline, but what does that mean? For some programmes, a relevant

discipline means a particular subject or combination, for example, physics, maths with physics or physics with maths. Others may mean any subject from, let's say English; through history, through economics towards classics. So the scale of relevance is unclear and the conflict of that is that universities get lots of applications from people who reasonably believe that they are qualified but aren't. And that makes a big difference to the initial experience of people applying for postgraduate study. I think that is in serious need of clarity because it also means that we could be clearer about the recognition of prior learning. At the moment, people may sometimes be rejected from study because universities lack the clarity to know what they really need and so they put in these holding position descriptions that are confusing to the applicant and in a way confusing to the university making the decision.

The third thing I think that will make a big difference is if we are much more transparent about what the outcomes are for people graduating from a Masters. That could be more qualitative information such as, 'my life was turned around' or 'it's brilliant, it's wonderful' or 'I don't think the same way'. For example, universities could put case studies of graduates on a website. People would realise that that wasn't everyone who'd graduated. If the case study speaks to your aspirations and there are several of them and they show an appropriate diversity, it gives you an honest, not complete, but an honest view. But there are

some outcomes which aren't appropriate for Masters programmes, for example the MBAs have the salary on exit as a very significant part of the algorithm which makes up the rankings used for courses and that for most Masters programmes is futile because people don't come into them straightforwardly because they want to earn more on exit. But equally, that kind of qualitative information which says in detail why individual graduates took the course and reflects on their experiences is not susceptible to statistical analysis. With the statistics you never think you're one of the out-group so I think it's much fairer to give qualitative information that may be a bit biased.

That in a sense would retrofit all that I've talked about, in terms of having clarity about expectations and what the Masters can deliver. Having that qualitative information about outcomes would help all the way through a Masters then. Coming into a Masters you would be aiming for that output so you would be aligned to what you are going to receive and people giving the course wouldn't be dealing with students who maybe hadn't wanted what they can provide. It would be advantageous to have more information like that.

If you take Masters programmes in the UK overall there are a really good range on offer and they really do enhance the majority of people who take them. This is good provision that people should think seriously about, it's just that they need to go in carefully.