

Review of Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Professor Robert Bennett FBA, *Chairman of the British Academy's Graduate Studies Review Committee*, reports on the main findings and recommendations of the Review.

The members of the Review Committee were Professor Robert Bennett (Chairman), Professor John Davies, Professor Paul Slack, Professor Marian Hobson, Baroness Onora O'Neill, Professor John Bell, Professor Harvey Goldstein, Professor Tim Ingold and Professor Kenneth Wallis.

The Academy's Review was set up because of concern about the number and quality of students staying on to undertake post-graduate PhD study in the arts, humanities and social sciences. There was particular concern that *home students* were in decline. There was also worry that this might be influencing the ability of the universities to recruit well-trained academics; and to supply PhD-trained researchers to other sectors – in government, management, business services, and the cultural and heritage industries.

Our findings largely confirm the worries that led to the establishment of the Review. This has led the Review Committee to make some firm recommendations to government, universities, the funding councils and research councils.

The Review would not have been possible without the support of a very energetic Committee which sought to cover a range of institutions and disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences. It was developed through a wide process of consultation, and it also gathered

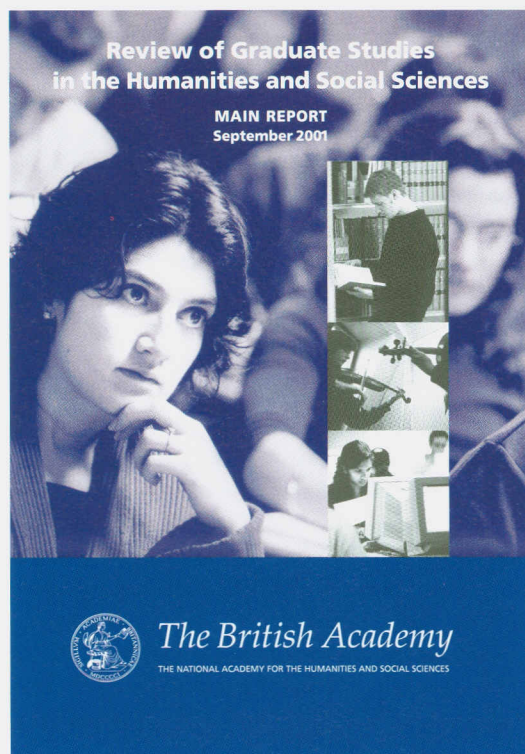
statistical evidence and undertook a large-scale survey of all heads of department in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

So, what of the Review's findings and recommendations? The essential question is, will the brightest minds continue to undertake PhDs, and if they do will they wish to continue in subsequent research careers? The Committee is particularly concerned about this demand-side aspect of research careers. It also sought to explore whether a self-selection of students is occurring at the PhD recruitment stage of those willing or able to bear continuing high levels of debt.

I will focus on our five main findings:

First, the report shows that there is not a general decline in PhD numbers, they have increased. But the growth is in non-home students most of whom seek careers back in their own countries. In itself this is welcome. It is a major part of the Higher Education (HE) contribution to Britain's exports and balance of payments.

Second, there is, however, a problem with home student numbers. The proportion of undergraduate qualifiers taking further study has fallen, similarly in arts, humanities and social sciences as in sciences. There is a particularly sharp decline in the number of those with firsts staying on. Despite numbers growing slowly overall, there has been a significant absolute decline in some subjects, particularly economics, politics, business and management studies and European languages. Also the declines are much more marked for part-time students. We fear that the current conditions within the HE sector are similar to those within the school sector a few years ago, where recruitment difficulties first emerged in specific subject areas but quickly escalated until they have become systemic. PhD recruitment is showing signs of an emerging system-wide problem. Increasingly students who are economically rational and have other choices do not find it financially attractive to stay on, whatever their discipline. Hence, we are concerned that recruitment is becoming self-selective of those who can afford it. It is important to note that incentive effects are particularly worrying when



such a high proportion of students are self-financing – much higher in the arts, humanities and social sciences than in the science areas.

Third, we have found that the general level of quality of students remains high, but the demand for ESRC and AHRB awards seems to have fallen somewhat in recent years as measured by the proportion of AHRB and ESRC students with firsts.

Fourth, once recruited to academic jobs, retention may be becoming a more significant factor. The outflow rate from academia to the EU and overseas has risen more sharply than the inflow rate. However, from the Heads of Department survey, it is clear that recruitment is the main current problem perceived, whilst retention is becoming a concern. HE salaries have grown less rapidly than general graduate salaries. Also early years' salary progression is much slower than other graduate salaries. Academic salaries appear to give inadequate incentives to take a PhD and to stay on in a subsequent research career. Our findings are thus similar to the Bett Review. The research-led component of the knowledge-based economy is being clearly undermined.

Fifth, as with PhD recruitment, some subjects are experiencing difficulties recruiting academic staff earlier than others. Our surveys identify a group of disciplines and specialities that are endangered, and emerging specialities that are struggling to recruit. It is notable that most of these areas are those most closely associated with quantitative and marketable skills sought elsewhere, with which the attractions of research careers are just not able to compete.

These bald statements you will find backed up by statistical analysis in the Review's reports. They lead naturally to a set of recommendations that focus heavily on the financial incentives and disincentives to study for a PhD or to stay on into a research career. We hope that ministers will be able to respond by recognising the emerging crisis of recruitment, and by giving our recommendations a priority in DfES bidding in the Spending Review, in this and subsequent years.

Main Recommendations

Our main recommendations are as follows:

First, we feel that the single largest boost to PhD study would be the waiving of student debt, phased over some years, after recruitment to, and

continuation in, a research career in universities and similar institutions. We see our proposal as similar to that being mooted by the Teacher Training Agency. It would also help to counteract the incentive effects of the growing number of 'golden hellos' and traineeship grants offered by the private sector. Given the small numbers of the students we are talking about, the total cost is relatively small, but the incentive effect, and the immediate marketing boost would be very significant.

But, second, we believe that there is also a wider system problem. Put crudely, the level of grant is just not high enough. It is obviously unrealistic to expect grants to match the best graduate recruitment salaries in the private sector. But does a grant level that, at best, approximately equates to the minimum wage have a realistic chance of attracting the best minds from all backgrounds into research?

We welcome the action taken by the government to raise grants to £9,000 by 2003. But we feel this is just not enough. Our analysis shows a widening disparity of grants and graduate starting salaries that goes back decades. The problem is fully recognised by some funding bodies. For example, the Wellcome Trust and some other research charities already pay stipends of over £12,000.

We feel that this level of grant is needed. It also a level of grant that can be better equated with a traineeship expectation, as in other careers. Whilst the concept of a PhD to pursue purely individual study might have been justified in the past, the modern expectation of large-scale research training for a broad range of careers that contribute to the knowledge-based economy requires a set of realistic financial incentives to people, in return for which the training is undertaken.

There are also some other important financial recommendations:

Third, postgraduates should be allowed to apply for student loans.

Fourth, academic pay, particularly at the starting level should be improved in line with the Bett Report.

These are all demand-side aspects. Let me now turn to the supply side.

Fifth, we are concerned about the rigidity of the present PhD model. We believe that a more flexible approach to management of research

The main report of the Review is accompanied by two supplementary reports: the first provides more detail on the Survey of Heads of Department; and the second supplementary report provides more detail on the statistical data drawn from HESA.

training is needed which would encourage a wider diversity of student entry, particularly part-time study, and could also focus on endangered and emerging areas of particular research need. This leads to a number of suggestions in our report.

Our main recommendation is for more flexible funding by AHRB and ESRC that allows more partnerships with HE financial resources, and with external collaborating bodies. For example, the new EPSRC approach to doctoral training is worth consideration for adaptation to the needs of arts, humanities and social sciences. The most desirable feature is that this gives greater freedom on the level of grants, and the way they are allocated, to HE institutions.

We also welcome moves by the government and HEFCE to establish a 'New Route' PhD. This encourages intensification of the training component of PhDs and increases the scope for external collaboration. These changes all help towards establishing the concept of a 'traineeship' grant at a realistic financial level.

Each of these approaches is capable of being focused on specific disciplinary areas and specific student groups, thus helping to fill emerging gaps, in endangered specialisms, and encouraging social inclusion.

We also feel that major marketing initiatives should be taken by OST, ESRC, AHRB, the Academy and universities to raise the profile of postgraduate research, and research careers. There are also other

recommendations to HESA, HEFCE, the research councils and universities which are in the full report. All aim to focus at a more strategic level on the problem of research recruitment.

We hope that ministers will welcome the analysis and concerns expressed in our report. We particularly hope they will share our worry that there is an emerging crisis of recruitment to PhD research and subsequent research careers. Naturally, we hope that our chief recommendations on the phased waiving of student debt, access of postgraduates to loans, increases in grant levels and increases in salaries will figure in the DfES bidding in the current Spending Review, and in subsequent years.

Can I conclude with a final more general comment. We hope that all will come to share the Committee's view that research in the arts, humanities and social sciences makes a major contribution not only to universities, but also to many industries that underpin the knowledge-based economy. The government through various reports, particularly from the Treasury, OST, DTI and DfES, has shown considerable concern with the science research base. Our report shows that similar concerns are now warranted for the arts, humanities and social sciences – and these are disciplines that contribute to some of the most rapidly growing sectors of the economy. We feel that the government needs to give as great an emphasis to the contribution of these disciplines to economic productivity and economic growth as it has given to sciences.

The report of the Review was launched at a conference held in the British Academy on 21 September 2001 at which Professor Bennett presented the main findings and recommendations of the Review. The Minister for Higher Education, and the Chief Executives of HEFCE, the AHRB and the ESRC were the other speakers at the event.

The reports on the Review's findings and recommendations are available from the Academy's web site at www.britac.ac.uk.