

Review of Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Introduction The British Academy is the national academy for the humanities and social sciences. As an independent voice for both the humanities and social sciences, the Academy is in a unique position to undertake a Review of how changes in postgraduate studies are influencing the intellectual health of the nation. The Review Committee consulted widely. It gathered statistical evidence and undertook a large-scale survey of all heads of department in the humanities and social sciences.

Preparation of the report The members of the Review Committee were:

Chairman

Professor Robert Bennett University of Cambridge Geography

Humanities

Professor John Davies University of Liverpool Ancient History and Classics
Professor Paul Slack University of Oxford History
Professor Marian Hobson University of London Languages
Baroness Onora O'Neill University of Cambridge Philosophy

Social Sciences

Professor John Bell University of Leeds Law
Professor Harvey Goldstein University of London Statistical Methods/Education
Professor Tim Ingold University of Aberdeen Anthropology
Professor Kenneth Wallis University of Warwick Econometrics

Secretariat

Mr Peter Brown Secretary of the Academy
Ms Vivienne Hurley Secretary of the Committee

Terms of Reference The Committee was working to the following terms of reference.

- to examine and report on the current state of postgraduate studies in the humanities and social sciences in the UK;
- to gather statistical data, covering a ten-year period, on the composition of the postgraduate student population, analysing in particular the proportion of home-based students and the sources of their funding;
- to consider the present financial arrangements and any particular factors that act as a disincentive to postgraduate study;
- to make relevant international comparisons;
- to consider the implications for the health of the various academic disciplines and the recruitment of the next generation of staff in UK universities.



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Summary of the main findings

The evidence indicates that whilst graduate studies appear to be relatively healthy, this conceals some important underlying problems. The majority of the heads of department indicated that there were currently problems attracting good quality UK PhD students. Similar concerns are evidenced in the longer-term trends of HESA data and the decline in applications received by the AHRB and ESRC. Whilst the presence of overseas postgraduates on our programmes is welcomed, we are concerned, particularly in some subject areas, that this has helped to hide declines in the numbers from the UK. The data suggest that there is a growing concern about the number and quality of postgraduate research students, and there are more urgent concerns in certain subject areas.

There is evidence of a shortfall in the number of PhD students, in order both to replenish the academic profession and also to provide a sufficient supply of highly trained researchers to other areas of British economy and society. The areas of particular concern are Accountancy, Business and Management Studies, Economics, Education, Law, Media and Communications, French, German and Spanish, and Creative and Performing Arts.

Debt (both accumulated from undergraduate study and prospective for postgraduate study) is a major deterrent to potential PhD students. Debt also has a major impact on the recruitment of PhD students because a high proportion of post-graduates are self-funded since the number of studentship awards

is insufficient. There are indications that a self-selection of students is occurring at the PhD recruitment stage of those willing or able to bear continuing high levels of debt. We fear that this will hinder efforts to attract the most able or to increase social inclusiveness. The recent increase in the research council stipend levels for PhD awards is most welcome, but it is insufficient. On present comparisons a grant level that is sufficiently attractive in comparison with other career paths, and is equivalent to that available from research charities such as the Wellcome Trust, needs to be £12,000.

The academic profession is perceived as being no longer attractive to potential PhD students. The difficulties in obtaining a career-track academic post after completion of PhDs, together with low starting salaries and low rates of progression in comparison with those obtained in professions outside academia, are deterrents to potential high-flying PhD students.

Our analyses have identified many areas where research and teaching expertise will soon be lost, with profound negative implications for the ability of higher education to contribute to the knowledge economy, the cultural life of the country and the recruitment of academic staff in the future. We fear that the demonstrable difficulties faced by specific subjects areas are an early indicator of the problems that will affect all subjects within the arts, humanities and social sciences unless urgent action is taken.

Recommendations

Our recommendations seek to specify the special initiatives and policy changes that are required. The most important of these are financial requirements: to provide to postgraduate research sufficient priority and resources to allow it to compete for the highest quality minds in order to maintain and develop Britain's knowledge based economy. These requirements should be of urgent concern to the DfES, HEFCE, OST and the Research Councils in the Spending Reviews in this and subsequent years. Our recommendations are grouped below according to priority.

PRIORITY 1

R1 Allow phased waiving of student debt

One of the arguments in support of the introduction of student loans and the changes in the funding arrangements for undergraduate study was that graduates benefit financially from higher education, and so should contribute towards the costs of their

education. These financial arguments do not apply in the same way for those who decide to stay on to undertake postgraduate studies with a view either to entering the academic profession or the wider research support community to industry and other sectors. In these areas, academic and other research salaries are presently insufficient to recoup the income foregone over the PhD training period. As a result, young researchers and lecturers find it difficult to start paying off their loans when they first obtain a position. In view of the recent announcement by the Government that it is considering whether postgraduate trainee teachers in shortage subjects should have their student loans written off over a ten-year period, provided that they stay in the state teaching sector, we would argue that similar measures should be considered in order to boost academic recruitment, particularly in shortage areas. We believe that this would act as a significant incentive for those considering whether to take up an academic career.

PRIORITY 2

R2 Increase the level of stipend for PhD students and keep under review

We welcome the new research council stipend level for postgraduate students in the humanities and social sciences. However, we believe this is still wholly inadequate and will not solve the difficulties that many subjects are experiencing in attracting and recruiting good quality PhD students. The stipend level needs to be increased to £12,000 at current prices (outside London), more or less in line with that already paid by the Wellcome Trust. This level recognises the PhD as a stage in the training and recruitment process for researchers to academia and research roles in the civil service, industry and other organisations. We recommend the use of the concept of a “training” stipend as a modernisation of the research student concept in line with that in other professions, such as Accountancy or Law. The level then needs to be reviewed annually in line with comparable recruitment salaries. There should also be regular reviews to assess the impact of this new funding regime on students’ intentions to undertake postgraduate study.

R3 Allow postgraduates to apply for student loans

In view of the significance of postgraduate study for the knowledge economy, we believe that postgraduates should be able to obtain loans through the Student Loan Scheme. Postgraduates not in receipt of a studentship (either from the AHRB, ESRC or the host institution) should also be granted eligibility to the Student Loans Scheme. This would significantly promote access to postgraduate education.

R4 Introduce greater flexibility and special initiatives targeted at important ‘endangered’ and ‘emerging’ subjects

We believe that a number of initiatives should be established in order to redress shortages in specific subject areas where there are extreme difficulties of recruitment, or where key areas of expertise that are central to that subject are in danger of being lost. Since subjects evolve and develop, this has to be treated flexibly and regularly reviewed after wide consultation. In addition to the initiatives already announced by the HEFCE, we would also urge that Government and other funding bodies should give careful consideration to the following proposals:

- Encouraging greater flexibility in grants and stipends to encourage recruitment in some areas
- Earmarking funds for areas of national need
- Support for collaborative training programmes in shortage subject areas, particularly with small total numbers. These collaborations

might take the form of regional and inter-disciplinary groupings. In this way, academic staff in shortage areas that are based at different universities or different departments would be able to pool their expertise.

R5 Improve academic pay and conditions

The evidence gathered by the Bett Report demonstrated that academic salaries were considerably less than those employed in other comparable parts of the public or private sectors, with particular problems at the bottom and top ends of the salary ranges. We would urge that action is taken urgently to redress this deficiency. The evidence of our Review suggests that the starting salary and subsequent progression is a particularly strong disincentive to undertaking graduate training. We believe that the starting salary range needs to be increased to £22,000 to be sufficiently attractive: i.e. the Bett levels. This figure needs to be kept under regular annual review in order to retain attractiveness compared to recruitment salaries in other sectors.

R6 Develop greater flexibility in the support of research students (new schemes to support part-time students and schemes in partnership with HE institutions and external collaborators)

More flexible funding should be made available for studentships in the arts, humanities and social sciences, in order to reflect changes in the profile of students undertaking study and to stretch these resources so that the number of awards can be increased. We welcome some of the developments associated with ‘New Route’ PhDs and propose other areas for increased flexibility.

As low salaries and the growing level of student debt increasingly deter younger candidates, it will become increasingly important for some subjects to recruit professionals who wish to move from a commercial environment. We believe that the ESRC and the AHRB should establish a pilot scheme targeted at some subjects, in collaboration with universities, in order to attract and fund part-time research students with relevant professional skills. Institutions could be required to bid competitively for a quota of awards. As part of the bidding process, these institutions would have to show that they recognise the special needs of part-time students and can provide the necessary support for them.

Many institutions already part-fund graduate studies by a variety of part-time teaching posts and scholarships. The EPSRC has recognised this flexibility by introducing a new structure of “doctoral training grants”. We consider that the AHRB and the ESRC should also give urgent consideration to ways in which they can offer part-awards in partnership with HE institutions and external collaborators, especially in areas of

identified shortage and need. This would be one way in which a national strategy could be developed in order to address areas under threat.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

R7 Increase the number of postdoctoral fellowships

We believe that the number of postdoctoral fellowships is currently far too low to sustain the needs of trained researchers. The total number of postdoctoral awards should be increased.

R8 Improve the marketing of postgraduate opportunities and research careers by the OST/Research Councils/AHRB/British Academy/Universities

We believe that more should be done to raise the profile of postgraduate research and also the academic profession. We should like to encourage the OST, the ESRC, the AHRB, the British Academy and universities to work together in order to better promote the opportunities that are available.

R9 Ensure that there is comparability between the grant levels for masters and PhD awards in the humanities

We believe that careful consideration should be given to the balance of masters and PhD awards. It is important that there should be a sufficiently large pool of potential candidates for PhD study. We are concerned that there has been a proposal in the humanities for different levels of grant for masters and PhD students. We understand that the AHRB is still considering this proposal and we urge them to maintain parity in value of awards.

R10 Increase the number of awards available in the arts, humanities and social sciences

We believe that the skills gained during a PhD in the arts, humanities and social sciences are a necessary part of the supply of trained researchers for a wide variety of careers, not solely for academic careers. In addition, the UK should be striving to maintain the HE sector's standards of excellence by encouraging more of the most talented undergraduates to stay on to undertake postgraduate study in preparation for academic and other research careers. The widespread perception amongst undergraduates of the lack of postgraduate awards in the arts, humanities and social sciences has deterred many high quality candidates from undertaking postgraduate study. In view of the increases in undergraduate debt, we fear that even more will be deterred in the future. In the past, a high proportion of research students in the arts, humanities and social sciences has supported their studies themselves. Whether, in general, they will be able or willing to do so in the future is doubtful, as their level of accumulated debt is likely to increase. We are also concerned that those who do choose to continue

are increasingly those able or willing to take on high levels of debt, thus undermining the objective of graduate training being more socially inclusive.

In order to address this, we believe that there should be a greater number of awards available to research students in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Our view is also shared by the majority of the heads of department who responded to our Survey.

R11 Protect institutional support arrangements for research students

Universities themselves are the single most important source of funding for full-time UK research students in the arts, humanities and social sciences. It is therefore important that any changes in the way in which universities are funded take account of their role in funding postgraduate research students in these subject areas. We are concerned about the implications of the HEFCE's proposal to modify its funding formula by changing the volume measures. This will reduce incentives to recruit research staff and students. We are concerned that this will reduce an important, indirect source of support for research students. We urge the HEFCE to reconsider this proposal.

R12 Review the subject classifications for national data on HE

National data on staff and student numbers are collected in rather broad subject categories, so it is currently difficult to identify subject areas which may be experiencing difficulties. We hope that the proposed expansion of the subject classifications used by UCAS and HESA will help to alleviate such problems in the future.

R13 Monitor the impact of changes in prior preparation for undergraduate studies

There is some evidence that the traditional initial preparation for some subjects within the arts, humanities and social sciences at secondary schools has in recent years become rather limited in its breadth and depth. Given the competitive qualifications framework of UK HE, universities' attempts to redress these deficiencies at undergraduate level are often hampered by the lack of time available. We urge that further work should be undertaken in this area to assess the extent of the problem and possible remedies.

Request for comments We welcome any comments that you may have on the Review's findings. Please send your comments to Ms V Hurley, The British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH (email: v.hurley@britac.ac.uk). Preferably these comments should reach the Academy by 30 November 2001.