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Where has postgraduate study grown? An international comparative analysis. (0024)

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Abstract

There has been a rapid expansion in Postgraduate study in the past 15 years but there is limited analysis of student Postgraduate data, and available published research literature. To assist in the improvement and enhancement of the student experience at this level requires **an understanding of where significant expansion has taken place, an analysis of the student body undertaking this level of study and the reasons behind the growth.** This paper compares the growth in Postgraduate study in Australia, Canada, and the United States with that in the UK to partially redress this knowledge gap and identifies both the similarities and differences in the different types of courses and student demographics studying at this level. **It will suggest reasons for the expansion and will conclude by highlighting the implications of the findings in understanding postgraduate patterns of study in the UK and across similar higher education sectors.**

Context for the research

There has been a dramatic expansion in many western countries in the postgraduate student body in the past twenty years. It has been a quiet and relatively quick revolution across the higher education sector in the UK and internationally. Although extensive research has been undertaken in the field of the student experience and learning and teaching at undergraduate level (for example: Tinto, 1993; Thomas et.al.,2002; Race, 2010; Morgan, 2012), there is limited although a growing body of research in the area of Postgraduate taught study and the student experience (Wakeling, 2005; Green, 2005; HEFCE 2006; Stuart et.al, 2008; Park and Wells, 2010). A recent report by the Higher Education Commission even went as far as to describe the postgraduate student experience as it being the *'forgotten part of the sector'* (Higher Education Commission, 2012:17).It is surprising that there is little international comparative research identifying where postgraduate study growth has occurred and the possible reasons for it especially as postgraduate education can be of enormous value to the individual, national economies, and also plays a crucial role in driving innovation and

economic growth. Compelling evidence suggests that postgraduate study is increasingly undertaken for career advancement rather than self-fulfilment (Anderson *et al.* 1998; Barber *et al.* 2004; Park and Wells, 2010; Stuart *et al.* 2008).

Understanding the reasons behind the expansion can be useful in aiding the development of targeted initiatives to support postgraduate students and improve their experience but also to plan for continued growth. The objective of this paper is to add to the limited research in the field and contribute to the growing debate on the future of Postgraduate study. The aims are fourfold, firstly, to identify where the growth in PG study has occurred by examining and comparing the level of expansion in the postgraduate student body in Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK. These countries have similar postgraduate environments so the data is fairly comparable. Secondly, it looks at the similarities and differences in the types of courses and the demographics of the students studying at this level. **Thirdly, it will consider the reasons for the international expansion and look at specific variables.** And lastly, it will conclude by highlighting the possible implications of the findings in understanding postgraduate patterns of study in the UK and across similar higher education sectors.

Methodology

In the USA and Canada, students studying at this level are referred to as graduates whereas in the UK they are called postgraduates. Throughout this paper, they will be referred to as postgraduates. Obtaining an overall detailed global picture of postgraduate level study in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class, disability and internationalisation is more problematic than at undergraduate level due to statistics not being separately identified and recorded by any central global organisation such as UNESCO, and because each country records its postgraduate participation statistics in different ways.

Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA were chosen for this comparative analysis as they all have an established Postgraduate sector and keep basic national Government Postgraduate enrolment and awards data which is in a similar format. For Australia, information and statistics have been accessed from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST); for Canada from Statistics Canada (StatCan); for the USA from National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) and for the UK from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

In this paper, a combination of student enrolment figures and award statistics has been used to compare the type of qualification, domiciled status, gender and disability variables between the countries for comparability and consistency. Where statistics are not directly available for a specific variable, statistics have been derived using a combination of data available.

Headline findings

In all four countries, there has been growth in home and international student numbers at Postgraduate level in the past 15 years and there are a number of noticeable similarities. The most popular type of Postgraduate course in terms of enrolments and awards are the Masters/Masters by Coursework (Taught) qualification. There is a proportionally higher level of participation by women compared to men in qualifications such as Diplomas and Certificates. For Overseas Domiciled students, Masters/Masters by Coursework (Taught) is the primary qualification obtained. For Australia and the UK, Overseas students have substantially contributed to PG growth. The full-time study mode is the most popular mode and has been in three of the four countries for many years. It only became the dominant mode of study in the UK in 2010. Within each gender, women participate in part-time study significantly more than men. The proportion of students participating in qualifications with a significant research component has remained stable in all countries. The findings confirm that PG growth is an international phenomenon and not restricted to a particular country.

Implications of the research

Obtaining accurate and available comparable statistics, even across countries that have similar and established PG sector makes identifying and forecasting precise patterns of enrolment and completion behaviour by students in general, and by specific groups of students such as those of different domiciled status, incredibly difficult. Accurate comparative data and information is essential for governments and institutions in identifying new markets and competitors as well as addressing demographic issues at this level of study.

Further detailed comparative research needs to be undertaken to fully understand what has driven the global growth, where the growth has occurred including the characteristics of the postgraduate student body participating in this level of study, and how this impacts on Postgraduate study. When the literature available is examined, a number of contributing drivers to explain the growth are offered but as the evidence does not span all the countries, it is not possible to provide generic explanations even though they may make intuitive sense.

Where there are similarities, identifying and sharing good practice would be valuable, and where there are differences, determining what lessons can be learnt from one another helpful. This knowledge has the capacity to help shape the future of Postgraduate study globally and assist in the sustainability of PGT level study.

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