



Masters with a purpose

Taught postgraduate
employability and
employer engagement

Summary report



Universities UK



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INTRODUCTION

The UK higher education sector awarded nearly 168,000 taught postgraduate (PGT) qualifications in 2012–13. The graduates of these programmes make an extremely important contribution to the UK economy and society. To fully realise the benefits of postgraduate study it is important that postgraduates are employable and able to market their talents to employers, but also that employers recognise the benefits that employing postgraduates can bring.

The UK postgraduate sector has grown rapidly in recent years. This growth may not be sustainable, however, without a clear consensus about its public and private benefit, and to date very little attention has been paid to postgraduate employability and employer perceptions of postgraduate study.

The PGT population is also very diverse and is markedly different from the undergraduate population in that around 50% of all PGT students study part time and around 66% are over the age of 25. As the findings of this study show, this diversity has a direct impact on the employability of those with Masters-level qualifications.

This summary report outlines the main findings from a study exploring employer engagement with PGT (specifically Masters) courses in higher education, and provides practical advice and recommendations to universities on how to strengthen relationships with employers and enhance employment outcomes.

Employers in their own words

‘We want to hire Masters students because they have a basic level of specialist understanding in the area we’re looking for. We want to learn from them as much as hire them.’

To download a copy of the full report, visit www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation. For further research on graduate employment and careers, visit www.hecsu.ac.uk and www.cfe.org.uk.

MAIN FINDINGS

- There is clear evidence that university-business collaboration in relation to PGT courses is **diverse and flourishing**, demonstrating the strong economic value of this provision.
- Employers' requirements for Masters-level qualifications are linked to their requirements for **specific skills, abilities and knowledge**. Employers emphasise the value of practical, work-related experience during Masters courses.
- Most employers do not distinguish between first and Masters degree holders in recruitment or reward arrangements; yet some recruit explicitly for those holding a particular Masters-level qualification. Much depends on **historical subject-career trajectories** and what it is that employers are looking for. The former is often associated with the policies and practices of professional bodies and the latter with skills shortages and gaps at organisational level.
- Although there may be **no discrete labour market** for Masters graduates overall, there are subjects (particularly within sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) for which the typical post-Masters trajectory provides access to occupations that are unlikely to be available to those without a Masters. Nonetheless, the employment prospects for PGT graduates are good – and better than for undergraduates, with generally higher rates of employment at six months after qualification.
- Employers who do not specifically recruit for Masters graduates are less aware of the added value of Masters-level learning and there is a need for universities (and graduates) to be able to understand and **articulate their value** to employers.
- The employability of those graduating from PGT courses varies by subject of study, mode of attendance, age group and gender. Because outcomes do not form consistent patterns, universities need to develop a clear understanding of **PGT outcomes** at course level.

1. POSTGRADUATE EMPLOYERS

What do employers value about postgraduate study?

Analysis of the postgraduate labour market is complicated by the fact that not all employers who seek to employ postgraduates do so for the same reasons.

Some employers require applicants to have a Masters degree because they are seeking employees with a particular set of specialist skills, while others are looking for in-depth knowledge of a particular subject. Some employers are reluctant to employ postgraduates because they think they will be more demanding; others welcome postgraduate applicants if they can demonstrate how their experience will help them to perform the role.

The challenge for universities is to identify where their postgraduates fit into this market

so they can ensure that employers understand what courses teach, and students can articulate what they have learned.

Case study: Statistics

A medium-sized employer seeks postgraduate statisticians to work in the pharmaceuticals industry; applicants must have a minimum of an MSc in statistics or a related field because it is the industry standard. More senior roles often require a PhD.

This employer values Masters courses that provide students with opportunities to gain experience of conducting research and analysing statistical problems, enabling them to develop an advanced knowledge of statistical theory and analysis.

Five types of postgraduate employers



TRAWLERS recruit postgraduates who get caught in their net.



SPEAR-FISHERS seek postgraduates with specific capabilities, targeting specialist courses or institutions.



ANGLERS are equally interested in postgraduates and graduates with a good first degree.



HARVESTERS recruit both specialist and generalist postgraduates.



BAITERS do not require postgraduates.

Source: CIHE, 2010

Case study: Engineering

A medium-sized organisation seeks to recruit engineering postgraduates to a two-year training scheme.

This employer recruits postgraduates because the work they will be expected to perform requires employees to have a more detailed understanding and depth of knowledge than would usually be expected from an applicant who had only studied to undergraduate level.

Case study: Business management

A small organisation overseeing the provision of remote monitoring and assistive technology in the health and social care sector seeks graduates to develop the sales and marketing sides of the business.

This employer does not require applicants to have a Masters qualification, preferring to assess their suitability on a case-by-case basis. This employer does not draw a distinction between Bachelors and Masters-level qualifications.

Employers in their own words

‘It’s the subject-specific knowledge gained through Masters and PhD courses that is essential for the organisation [plus] the research experience that goes along with it. This is generally something people don’t get at Bachelors level.’

2. POSTGRADUATE STUDY

Motivations and postgraduate careers

Postgraduate students are not a homogenous group. Age, mode and subject of study all shape postgraduates' experiences in the labour market.

For example, Masters graduates who studied part time were more likely than those who studied full time to be in full-time employment six months after they graduated (73% compared to 57%). Masters graduates who studied full time were more likely than those who studied part time to be unemployed six months after they graduated (10% compared to 3%). This is because these part-timers are largely mature students with an established employment record.

Employers in their own words

'I think you can often see that candidates with the MSc are a lot more mature and grounded than those applying for BSc-level roles... they can come across a lot more decisive and clearer when you're interviewing candidates.'

Providing appropriate careers advice and guidance

Advice and guidance must be tailored to the needs of individual students. Full-time students may need help to identify work placement opportunities, while part-time students who are already working may need help identifying how they can progress within their current role. Similarly, mature students may have had more experience of the labour market than younger students, and might benefit from different kinds of support and advice.

Universities need to manage students' expectations of the labour market through the provision of up-to-date and reliable careers information. Some employers admitted they were reluctant to employ Masters graduates because they believed that they would expect to be paid more or to progress more quickly than colleagues who held only a first degree.

Employers look for different things from their postgraduate employees (eg specialist skills, advanced subject knowledge). Universities need to help students to work out how to articulate to employers the benefits of their Masters education.

Why do students undertake postgraduate study?



57%

Change direction



67%

Access better career opportunities



69%

Develop specialist knowledge & expertise



70%

Develop broader knowledge & expertise



73%

Study subject to a higher level

3. IMPROVING POSTGRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

University-business collaboration

A shared agenda

The most successful examples of university-business collaboration are founded on a shared agenda. Many employers only interact with universities when they are seeking to recruit graduates to their organisations (either at graduate fairs, or by advertising vacancies on careers websites). Universities could consider how other kinds of collaboration might deliver the same outcome; for example, many large organisations consider work experience placements to be part of their recruitment process.

Some employers wish to participate more fully in curricular activities, but are unable to commit resources to activities that do not directly meet the needs of their business. Understanding employers' business needs is key to developing a shared agenda that benefits both universities and employers.

Successful university-business collaboration: key features

- Trust
- Shared agenda
- Agreed objectives
- Relationship management
- Shared language

Sources: Hackman (2011); Spence and Muneera (2006)

Case study: Engaging employers in postgraduate provision

Some university-business relationships combine consultancy with postgraduate provision. One small technology company has close ties with the computer science department of its local university. The company supports the department's Masters programme by designing problems for students to tackle as part of a ten-week group project and regularly employs undergraduate students on part-time contracts.

The company benefits from research and development advice and support from academic staff, and often recruits new staff from the pool of postgraduate students. As a small business, the company has chosen to work closely with one university, rather than with multiple institutions.

Employers in their own words

'I think full-time Masters is often more appealing, because it's more focused. So whilst somebody would have got experience during a part-time Masters, we might prefer [it if they] had gathered that experience during a break between the Bachelors and the Masters.'

Employers in their own words

‘From the employers’ perspective, after the [placement], you know the person and their skills, and they understand the ethos of the company and it helps avoid going through a lengthy recruitment process.’

Building relationships with employers

Successful university-business collaboration is founded on good working relationships. These relationships take time and energy to build and maintain. Universities should:

- establish effective channels of communication with businesses or professional organisations (eg maintain contact with alumni working in specific fields, and publicise information about course content to ensure employers are made aware of the differences between different courses and universities)
- build relationships with employers through academics who work with businesses as consultants, or deliver courses for continuing professional development
- maintain regular contact with employers (through regular meetings, attendance at professional conferences, collaboration on student placements etc) to build trust and mutual understanding

Helping postgraduates to find work

Postgraduate employers value work experience, but the compressed nature of many Masters programmes can make it difficult to incorporate employer projects or placements into courses. It can also be difficult to persuade employers to offer work placements.

When seeking to source work placement opportunities, universities should work with employers to find activities that will benefit both the student and the organisation. If employers are reluctant to commit to offering work placements, universities might suggest other ways they could participate in Masters programmes; for example, they could invite employers to participate in the delivery of courses as guest lecturers or as advisors on student projects or dissertations.

Case study: Creating opportunities for work experience

Rather than complete one long placement, students studying for an MA in sustainable development advocacy at the University of Worcester complete three month-long placements designed to give them the opportunity to lead a project on behalf of their hosts.

This programme of short-term, project-based placements has been so successful that the number of placements offered now exceeds the number of students seeking work experience.

Case study: Creating a shared agenda

Aston University Business School appointed a corporate relationship manager to build relationships with industry partners. Rather than seek to persuade employers of the benefits of collaborating with the business school, he contacted businesses to discuss their needs with a view to exploring how collaboration might help.

Discussions with GlaxoSmithKline led to the development of an internship programme providing students on the MBA course with opportunities to participate in real consultancy-based activities.

Balancing the needs of employers with the needs of students

Universities need to balance concern for Masters graduates' long-term employability with employers' more immediate employment needs. Working with alumni may help universities seeking to reconcile these two different employment needs as these graduates will have experienced trying to balance the need to improve the skills required in their current job with the need to develop the skills they will require to progress into new jobs in the future.

Employers in their own words

'If you have a Masters programme that combined a traditional MSc programme with some sort of other hands on experience... then that's certainly going to make that individual stand out more over others.'

Universities might invite alumni to act as informal tutors, role models or mentors to broaden postgraduate students' understanding of career development and the importance of maintaining employability once in employment.

Employers in their own words

'Businesses need to tap into affordable R&D environments. That's one of the reasons we got involved with the university ... it's an affordable, professional decision for us. Ultimately to me it seems to be a win-win.'

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The postgraduate labour market is complex and demand for postgraduate skills and knowledge varies according to the business needs of the employer. Some employers only recruit Masters graduates; others do not make a distinction between first degrees and postgraduate qualifications when recruiting graduate employees. Universities need to understand where their postgraduates fit into this market.

Key points for universities to consider include the following:

- Postgraduate employers value work experience; indeed, some value it more highly than postgraduate study.
- Successful university-business collaboration is based on shared agendas, trust, familiarity and mutual understanding.
- Universities could do more to understand and articulate how postgraduates might add value to organisations.
- Postgraduates are not a homogenous group. Full-time students may have different needs to part-time students. Mature students may have different needs to younger students. Universities must take this into account when providing careers and employability support and advice.

Universities should:

- work with employers to explore how university-business collaboration on postgraduate programmes might help meet their business needs
- recognise the need for robust information about PGT course outcomes, and for access to careers and employability advice and support prior to application
- actively share good practice within and between universities, and consider developing inter-institutional collaborative arrangements
- encourage the development of 'sandwich Masters' courses that include long or substantive periods of work placement to develop the application of learning in relevant industrial settings
- recognise that building effective working partnerships with employers will take time and energy
- encourage students, employers and institutions to consider Masters degrees as 'degrees with a purpose', rather than simply an extension of undergraduate learning

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Universities UK

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