

Dr Wendy Piatt, Director General of the Russell Group of leading universities, writing on the importance of funding for postgraduate research students, for the Centre Forum report *Postgraduate education: better funding and better access*.

In the debate about how to make sure postgraduate education is properly supported it is easy to focus on postgraduate taught students who make up a far greater proportion of the UK's postgraduates. However, policymakers would be making a grave mistake if they disregarded the often distinct needs of postgraduate research students.

The 24 Russell Group universities are especially concerned about postgraduate research because they are the major providers of research degrees and account for 54% of all postgraduate research students in the UK. But postgraduate research students should be of concern to everybody. They are vital to the UK economy, to driving growth and innovation and tackling major business challenges. The UK's ability to provide enough people skilled to this high level is an important factor in attracting global investors to locate high-value businesses here.

Some postgraduate research students set up their own companies as a result of their successful research projects, whilst others are in high demand from research and development-intensive companies and public sector organisations. They also contribute to wider cultural and social benefits through their essential contribution to UK research. But whilst overall postgraduate numbers have increased steadily in recent years, the vast majority of this growth has been on taught programmes, not amongst postgraduate research students. Between 2007 and 2011, the total number of postgraduate taught students in the UK grew by nearly 52,000 while the number of postgraduate research students grew by only 15,500.

The UK has an international reputation for high-quality postgraduate education, and is an attractive destination for European and overseas research students. Our leading universities are competing for postgraduate students in a global market place. Russell Group universities are already hugely successful in attracting talented researchers from around the world. The proportion of staff who are not from the UK stands at 33%, compared to 19% in other UK universities. More than 40% of students on postgraduate research degrees within the Russell Group now come from outside the UK.

Whilst we certainly celebrate the fact the UK is so attractive to international students, we also need to remain appealing to the best home students interested in postgraduate research. There is clearly a danger that many of the best and most

committed home students will choose an institution outside the UK where financial support is more readily available. So what can we do to encourage them to stay?

Current funding for postgraduate researchers comes from a diverse range of sources. For postgraduate research provision, public funding is essential within the overall funding landscape. The UK research councils invest more than £350 million a year in funding postgraduate researchers and support more than 30,000 researchers at any one time.

Block grants are allocated by research councils to universities, which are then responsible for selecting which students receive funding. A recent and welcome development has been the introduction by several research councils of the Centre for Doctoral Training model which has enabled universities to do more to integrate advanced teaching and research, provide opportunities to work across disciplinary boundaries, and promote collaboration between institutions.

The Government must continue to support postgraduate research students through research council (and HEFCE) funding. To maximise the UK's position in the global market, public investment should be directed towards those institutions who can deliver excellent research degree provision and ensure the next generation of researchers receive world-class training and support.

But even within the Russell Group less than a quarter of postgraduate researchers receive research council or British Academy funding. We would like to see Government funding for postgraduate research students increased but we are not just relying on that. Our universities put a huge amount of effort into fundraising to help support postgraduate students, and they currently grant fee waivers or other discretionary awards to about one in six of their postgraduate research students.

Universities want to increase the availability of bursaries and scholarships for both home and international research students, through fundraising from alumni, businesses and charities. The Government could support their efforts to raise funds for postgraduate scholarships through philanthropy and business contributions, through, for example, match-funding or additional tax incentives.

Student loans for postgraduate students could remove some of the barriers to participation, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. But the postgraduate sector is diverse so a one-size-fits-all approach to student finance is unlikely to be appropriate or effective. Research students, who will usually be embarking on several years of postgraduate study, may well be reluctant to take on the sizeable loans required to cover the full costs of their course. Moreover, a loan to support a PhD student for three years would almost certainly be perceived as a riskier investment for the loan-provider than the smaller loan required by a one-year Masters student. For postgraduate research students, therefore, a loan scheme could only ever be part of the funding solution, alongside publicly funded grants, institutional scholarships, and support from employers and others.

All these measures will help but more is needed to protect the UK's international competitiveness in attracting internationally mobile research students. The UK still does not do as much as it could to enable and encourage PhD students to remain and work in the UK once they have achieved their qualification.

Future policies relating to the funding of postgraduates must fully consider the particular needs of students on research degrees, as well as those on Masters and other taught degree programmes. One clear priority is to maintain and, if possible, widen access to postgraduate study for home students. Equally important for the UK, however, is to strengthen its ability to compete internationally for the very best postgraduate students.

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