

Postgraduate taught course developments in geography, earth and environmental sciences in the UK: an initial assessment of drivers

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The oft-quoted drivers for taught postgraduate developments in the higher education sector in the UK are multifarious, embracing the need to generate income beyond undergraduate numbers, increase international student numbers and tie into the market training needs of the regional and national economy. Evidence from the Prospects website (www.prospects.co.uk) indicates a rapid expansion in taught postgraduate provision in UK HEIs, with a trend towards more vocational courses and with conversion courses dominating over those with more traditional academic extension. As an introduction to this special *Planet* edition on postgraduate education, it is useful to reflect more fully on the other drivers for postgraduate taught course developments and evaluate the role of staff and student aspirations in steering postgraduate taught course developments. To fuel the debate, this introduction is grounded on the evidence drawn from a GEES Subject Centre funded small project on the development phase of taught postgraduate courses in geography and the environment in five institutions that deliver postgraduate provision. These vary on the basis of size, location, strategic setting and funding context (University of Gloucestershire, University of Dundee, Oxford Brookes University, Coventry University and Farnborough College of Technology). The stakeholders interviewed comprised course development team leaders, the development team, academic and practitioner reviewers, Heads of Postgraduate courses and Heads of Quality Assurance.

To the question: 'In your opinion, what has motivated postgraduate taught course development within your institution / the department?' we received this feedback:

To ensure vertical integration of provision including research degrees: possession of a range of courses at different levels is a fundamental part of the work of a university; Masters is a step between undergraduate and research.

To respond to a logical extension to previous course provision: postgraduate qualifications are an attractive offering, adding extra career paths.

To ensure the development of a vibrant postgraduate community in the university: benefits exist to institutional status, staff and other students; additional research benefits include, for example, potential research assistants.

To provide an opportunity for additional academic development: Masters level courses help students to grow academically and vocationally, either to go back to the workplace, or towards research or vocational PhDs.

To provide extended skills training: some skills and knowledge require the underpinning of an undergraduate degree; Masters level allows students to expand on undergraduate training, and also brings in skills from the workplace.

To respond to market demand: different vocational provision requested from the university portfolio; to secure increased student marketability.

To allow more advanced student engagement with University research activity: research experience helps students with problem identification and their real world application.

To help alter the status of the institution: raising the profile of postgraduate courses benefits status.

To allow staff the opportunity to engage with teaching at a higher level: staff have the benefits of engaging with increasing student expertise; increased quality / level of work, leading to greater staff satisfaction.

To develop business links with regional communities: good links are positive for public relations.

To introduce courses that are recruiting well elsewhere: e.g. motivation for a current course came from a course developed at another university, expanded in line with new skills.

To respond to student demand for jobs in related topic area: student motivation is typically vocational; many students are not getting jobs with only an undergraduate degree so need a postgraduate qualification; there is also demand by students' changing careers.

To allow the opportunity to trade at an institutional level: demand from industry/employers for postgraduate qualifications.

To develop the vocational dimension of academic courses: responding to the needs of professional bodies and employers.

To allow internationalisation and positioning: e.g. European Masters, run between several institutions to maintain international presence; to deliver on targeted growth in international students.

To allow departments to develop integrated portfolios: institutional approach is hands off; institutional champions are extremely important in the development process.

In summary, the evidence suggests that the drivers for postgraduate taught developments are complicated and multifaceted within the overarching financial imperatives of institutions. Themes drawn out of the above responses include: institutional status and its progression; increased vertical integration of course provision; synergies with applied research activity; development of the staff resource; increased external links and networking with 'the workplace'; and the internationalisation of course portfolio with associated positioning in national and international markets. Are there different drivers in your institution? Please let us know your views.

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