Developing a Survey of PGT Students

Report by Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and NatCen Social Research (NatCen)

May 2018

Authors:

Pollard E, Gloster R (IES)
Griggs J, Comanaru R (NatCen)

Institute for Employment Studies (IES)

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and HR management. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments, agencies, professional bodies and associations. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and HR planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation.

NatCen Social Research (NatCen)

At NatCen Social Research we believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not-for-profit organisation we're able to put all our time and energy into delivering social research that works for society.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Glossary

ABS	Association of Business Schools
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire
CGPSS	Canadian Graduate Professional Student Survey
CRAC	Careers Research and Advisory Centre
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education
ERIC	Educational Resources Information Centre
FE	Further education
GMC	General Medical Council
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HECSU	Higher Education Careers Services Unit
HEDBIB	International Bibliographic Database on Higher Education
HEER	Higher Education Empirical Research database
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEP	Higher education provider
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
LEO	Longitudinal Education Outcomes
NA	Not applicable
NHS	National Health Service
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement

PG	Postgraduate
PGCert	Postgraduate Certificate
PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma
PGISG	Postgraduate Information Steering Group
PGR	Postgraduate research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SEEQ	Student Evaluation of Educational Quality Questionnaire
SEG	Socio-economic group
SERU	Student Experience in the Research University
SHEEC	Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework (now known as Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework)
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service
UG	Undergraduate
UUK	Universities UK
VLE	Virtual learning environment

Executive summary

The UK does not currently have a survey of taught postgraduate (PGT) students in which all providers participate, and therefore no standard mechanism to capture experience and feedback for the entirety of this group of students. With the increasing drive for greater accountability around the provision of PGT study, and widespread support to give PGT students the opportunity to feedback on their experience, the UK funding bodies are exploring potential for a survey where the results would be published and could meet multiple purposes:

- Accountability and potentially, where relevant, regulation of the sector;

- Enhancement of learning, teaching and the student experience; and

- Information provision to support prospective PGT students' decision-making.

To support this work, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and NatCen Social Research to gather feedback from PGT students and expert stakeholders, and to review relevant literature and good practice in survey design, in order to make recommendations for the structure and content of a survey of PGT students for consideration by the funding bodies. This report is one contribution to a programme of work led by HEFCE on behalf of the UK funding bodies, including research and consultation with students and the HE sector and operational considerations of survey delivery and publication arrangements.

Findings and recommendations

Survey considerations and design principles

There is currently no survey questionnaire which has been designed for use with PGT students and which would meet the three intended purposes of the survey. There are, however, a number of existing, well-respected and established surveys in the UK and beyond that capture the student experience, notably the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the National Student Survey (NSS), and the content of these could usefully be drawn on. In addition, the research literature suggests a range of themes for student surveys that could be taken into account. In particular, feedback on the differences in making decisions about PGT study compared to decision-making at undergraduate level, and work on the distinctiveness of Master's-level study, suggest key aspects of the PGT experience which could form topics to include in a survey.

There is great support from both students and stakeholders for a new survey of PGT students, yet implementing this will not be without challenge. Undertaking any survey with students involves genuine constraints which need to be considered. These include considerations of: the number of survey aims (and whether prioritisation is appropriate);

potential for wider (unsanctioned) uses of the survey data; difficulties in providing suitably disaggregated data; dealing with the diversity in the target survey population; and timing of surveys. In addition, good practice in survey design principles indicate that consideration needs to be given to: the length of the survey; using a clear set of criteria to judge potential questions for inclusion; the structure and flow of the survey to enhance the respondent experience and response rates; the potential for routed questions for personalisation/tailoring of the respondent experience; question approaches to be used (e.g. open, closed, answer scales, multi-code questions) and the balance of these; the number of answer categories provided and the direction of response scales used to minimise primacy effects, recency effects, acquiescence bias and yea-saying whilst maximising data quality; how best to take into account expectations when assessing experiences; and methods for engaging potential respondents to encourage survey completion.

Recommendations for consideration: survey themes

There are clear and strong themes capturing what is distinctive and important about the PGT experience that emerge from the primary research with PGT students and expert stakeholders and from the research literature. These are all themes that could be explored in a new PGT survey and developed into questions – subject to the constraints and design issues noted above. The themes can be arranged to follow the student journey starting with motivations and transitions to PGT study and ending with learning outcomes and overall assessment of experience. Example questions that could be used to capture data for these themes are shown throughout Chapter 5.

- **Motivations to PGT study**. These vary considerably (more so than at undergraduate level) and gaining insight into and understanding these is key to contextualising students' expectations, experiences and feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Key (potentially overlapping) dimensions are career enhancement and intellectual/personal development. Capturing motivations will help providers with enhancement and prospective students with information provision and are a priority for a new PGT survey.

- **Transitions to PGT study and settling in**. Transitions at PGT study differ to those at undergraduate level, as PGT study entrants will be familiar with higher education (HE) while feeling they must meet higher expectations set by institutions and can feel underprepared to meet the demands of postgraduate study. The transition can also impact upon the sense of belonging/feeling valued by the study institution, which can be problematic for postgraduate study given the diversity of the population and their relative size/prominence at different institutions. Capturing perceptions of the support provided for settling into their course, and their sense of being a valued member of their university will help institutions with enhancement and prospective students with information provision.

- **Teaching, learning and the academic community.** These lie at the heart of an assessment of the PGT lived experience, and PGT learning is considered more intensive, interactive and personal than that experienced at undergraduate levels. However it is effectively a series of sub-themes all of which are instrumental to the PGT experience. These cover: an assessment of the specific PGT academic

environment, practical issues around delivery, perceived calibre of teaching staff, engagement and interaction with peers, and whether the teaching was appropriate. Capturing the various dimensions of teaching, learning and the academic community will provide measures of accountability, help providers with enhancement (not least with staff development) and provide prospective students with important information to support decisions.

■ **Feedback and assessment.** This is also considered a critical aspect of the PGT experience, and students can have distinct expectations about this, particularly in terms of clarity, timeliness and usefulness. Capturing insights into feedback and assessment will support accountability, enhancement and information provision.

■ **Content and curriculum**. This is closely linked to teaching and learning aspects but is more focused on specific programme content and its perceived relevance, coherence and currency. This can be difficult to capture in a survey as it is highly variable and module specific; relevance may be closely linked to motivations, and content aspects may not be applicable to all programmes. In general content/curriculum questions, for example relating to relevance and coherence of the programme, could therefore be better captured by provider-led module-level surveys. However, common (though not universal) aspects of a PGT programme are: placements, a dissertation and/or major research projects. These are often key distinctive features of PGT study so are worthy of routed questions for those students who will experience and be able to provide feedback on these elements. This will provide data to support provider enhancement activity and information provision for prospective students.

■ **Organisation and management of the programme**. Wider engagement with an institution and practical issues of PGT study are particularly important to PGT students as they tend to have other commitments to balance alongside their studies and may be studying at a distance and/or part-time. Thus satisfaction with the way the course is organised and an assessment of whether course organisers respond to student feedback would help providers with enhancement and prospective students with relevant information to support decision-making.

■ **Learning resources, facilities and wider support.** These are all aspects that can significantly impact upon the PGT experience, and PGT students may have expectations for access to specialist facilities to support their deeper/specialist learning. They can also include specific support/resources provided for targeted groups of students (e.g. disability support, support for international students, and careers support for those with career drivers to PGT study, reflecting the diversity of PGT students) as well as wider support beyond academic assistance. Capturing students' views on the availability/accessibility of aspects supporting the wider learning experience – personal/pastoral support, specialist resources, and library resources/services – would help with enhancement and information provision.

■ **Learning outcomes**. PGT students are more likely to have expectations, and higher expectations, around the skills/competencies developed and career/progression outcomes achieved as a result of their studies (more so than for undergraduate study). Potential PGT outcomes matter to prospective students, and anticipated outcomes can be linked to motivations and also aspirations (which can be difficult to capture and change during study). Capturing actual outcomes will be better achieved through

linkages to other datasets (e.g. Graduate Outcomes, and LEO), however the survey can capture assessment of skills-based outcomes, particularly around the dimensions of "mastersness" that are unique to PGT study. Thus the survey could focus on perceptions of enhancement of academic ability, provision of necessary skills (for planned next steps) and enhancement of employment prospects; and this will support sector accountability, provider enhancement activity and information provision for prospective students.

■ **Overall Assessment**. A measure of overall assessment/impression of their PGT experience is important, provides respondents with the opportunity to reflect on the entirety of their experience, and is a useful and common aspect in any student survey. This could be captured with a question asking the extent to which course expectations were met. Value for money is also a key theme in the HE sector at all levels of study and could be captured (indirectly) in the survey by asking whether the respondent would recommend their course to a friend. Capturing overall assessment will support sector accountability and also information provision.

In addition, demographic and contextual information about the student, their study programme, how they are funding their studies and their pathway to PGT study are all important as they can all impact upon the PGT experience. These are important for understanding differences in experiences but are largely factual, do not provide direct feedback on the experience per se, and are available through other means (e.g. the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Students Loans Company). Therefore these aspects are not a priority to be captured via the survey. Instead consideration should be given to the feasibility of reliably and comprehensively linking these data in a timely manner to survey responses to allow for contextual analysis.

Recommendations for consideration: survey design

The funding bodies might like to consider the following recommendations for the design of a proposed new PGT survey:

■ Students should be surveyed only once regardless of the length of their programme.

■ A small number of relevant questions drawn from existing surveys, such as the NSS, should be included in the new survey instrument to enable comparison.

■ The survey should also contain questions developed specifically for the new PGT survey to fill the gaps identified when mapping themes against the coverage of existing surveys (see 5.11).

■ The flow of survey questions should follow the student journey from motivations to study through to anticipated (or actual, depending on survey timing) outcomes.

■ The survey should have criteria for inclusion of questions.

■ The survey should have a maximum of 30 questions (resulting in a 10-minute survey).

■ The survey questions should be framed in different ways, with a mix of different response categories (but should not use negatively framed questions) as the diversity of formats can have a positive effect on engagement. The survey should use five-point Likert scale questions, a small number (up to three) of multi-code questions with no

more than 10 answer categories, and a small number (up to three) of open text questions.

■ All response scales (with the exception of multi-code questions) should include a clearly labelled 'not applicable' (NA) option at the end of the scale, allowing students to skip questions they do not feel are relevant to them.

■ In designing the new survey most questions should be relevant for the majority of students undertaking a PGT course, so little routing will be needed. Routing should only be used in relation to gathering experiences of placements, dissertations, and final projects.

■ The same survey approach and instrument should be applied across regions/nations as no significant differences were identified across the priority themes that could affect survey development.

■ The questionnaire should be designed to be mode neutral (suitable for all types of delivery) and use a unified mode of construction (where questions are written and presented the same for all modes - or nearly the same - with the intention of giving common mental stimulus) as far as possible.

■ Tutors and social media should be used to publicise the survey, clear information about the purpose and benefits of the survey as well as the time expected to complete should be provided to potential respondents, as well as feedback on survey findings and how they have been used.

Recommendations for consideration: further exploratory work

There are a number of suggestions for further work to support development of the survey:

■ Further consultation with the sector to gather their views on the potential questions illustrated throughout Chapter 5 against the aims for the survey; and further consideration of what the criteria for question inclusion should be, particularly around the issue of broadening beyond the academic experience, as there is currently no clear consensus. Also exploratory work with institutions could be undertaken to see how they view the utility and purpose of potential questions against the identified themes, and their perceived effectiveness in supporting enhancement within institutions.

■ Exploration of the ease of, and timely access to, other sources of contextual (study and demographic) data; the coverage of these data sources; and the potential to link these with survey data to allow for additional analyses of the survey results. Consideration should be given to the extent to which this data could be: consistently provided by institutions during the sampling process; will need to captured after the survey and linked to individual responses; or should be captured via survey questions.

■ Instigation of a thorough cognitive testing programme of a draft survey instrument with a wide range of students who reflect the demographic profile of the target response group, followed by a pilot/dress rehearsal to identify any challenges in administration, response and data collection. At this stage, a range of incentives could be tested with respondents to see which, if any, have a positive impact on response rates.

1　Background and aims

This report brings together findings and recommendations for the structure and content of a survey for taught postgraduate (PGT) students for the consideration of the four funding bodies of the UK. The evidence base presented has been drawn from across three key strands of research activity: a) feedback from PGT students; b) feedback from higher education (HE) expert stakeholders; and c) review of relevant literature. The work has also drawn on the latest good practice in social survey design, including response measurement, and data reliability and validity. This report therefore provides evidence to support development of a survey instrument should the funding bodies decide to proceed with this and further potential stages of the work which would be required such as testing a pilot instrument with PGT students.

1.1　Aims

This research supports the UK HE funding bodies in their work to develop proposals for a UK-wide feedback survey for PGT students. These proposals would be for a new survey to provide information to meet three key purposes:

■ Accountability and, potentially, where relevant, regulation of the sector;

■ Enhancement of learning, teaching and the student experience; and

■ Information provision to support prospective PGT students' decision-making.

1.2　Background

The research literature indicates how PGT suffers from a paucity of research, remains 'neglected' in decisions about HE reforms and has tended to be considered as not having a distinctive market in its own right (Boorman and Ramsden, 2008, reported in Canning, 2014). The research into PGT decision-making is not as developed as that found for undergraduates. The paucity of research is sometimes attributed to the myth of the 'HE expert' applicant and the challenges involved in researching a heterogeneous student body with no typical learning journey (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; Tobbell et al, 2010). Also research highlights that there is no coherent national infrastructure for PGT applicants and therefore no standard information to support choices. Prospective postgraduate students are described as having to decode a disparate network of courses, funding models and modes of study presented by individual higher education providers (HEPs) (Wilkins and Burke, 2015:435; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; Reay, 2002; NatCen, 2013).

Currently no universal survey of PGT students exists which delivers against all three ambitions noted above, and from which the outcomes are published. Therefore there is no

standard mechanism to capture experience data and feedback on this part of the HE sector. While there is already a PGT survey which has strong support in the sector (the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) operated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), see below), the way in which this is delivered reflects that it was designed primarily for enhancement purposes. As noted in the work by NatCen (2013) undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to explore the feasibility of running a national student satisfaction survey for PGT students (in response to the HE White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011), there was, and indeed continues to be, widespread support for a survey of PGT students.

In 2015, the UK funding bodies sought feedback on the desirability of a survey of taught postgraduates as part of their consultation on the 'Review of information about learning and teaching and the student experience'[1]. This was in the context of an increasing drive for greater accountability on the part of providers in this area, particularly due to new funding arrangements for PGT study in England; and a reduction in the thresholds the funding bodies used for publication of survey data, making it more likely that survey outcomes could be published at a level that could help inform decision making. There was support in the sector to give PGT students the same opportunity as undergraduates to feed back on their experiences. However there was also an acknowledgement of the need to avoid survey duplication, so the proposals being developed are for one survey which would meet multiple purposes. This would cover all PGT students[2] including domestic and international students, those studying in institutions and at a distance, and those studying full and part-time.

---

[1] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2015/201524/

[2] To include: Master's degrees (e.g. MRes, MA, MSc, MBA, MLitt); Postgraduate diplomas (PG Dip); Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); Professional Graduate Certificate of Education; Postgraduate certificates (PGCert); Post-registration health and social care qualifications; NVQ (of SVQ) level 5; Level 7 Advanced Professional Certificate. But excludes: Integrated masters degrees, four-year programmes requiring A-level or equivalent for entry (e.g. MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm); Research qualifications (e.g. PhD, MPhil); All undergraduate students (BA, BSc); Students on Non-UK campuses.

2   Methodology

A range of qualitative research methods were used to elicit the views of students and those with relevant expertise in the HE sector, and to draw on existing literature covering the PGT student experience. These are described below.

2.1   A review of recent, established literature

A brief search and review of relevant literature was undertaken to support the research. This aimed to update the review carried out as part of NatCen's study for HEFCE 'The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students' (NatCen, 2013), and to take account of the new context for a PGT survey including changes to funding arrangements, evolution of existing student surveys such as proposed changes to publication thresholds, and a wider remit (set of ambitions) for the new PGT survey.

The three aims for the proposed survey formed the themes for the literature search: information to support PGT decisions, accountability and regulation of PGT provision, and enhancement of PGT teaching, learning, and the PGT student experience. Academic publications and repositories of grey literature were searched online using search terms including: taught postgraduate; decision(-making); labour market outcomes; information; teaching and learning; and quality. Criteria for inclusion in the first sift were: date (from 2007 onwards, prioritising materials from 2013); taught postgraduates rather than all postgraduates or undergraduates; and research with a UK focus. In total 90 papers were accessed from sites including the Higher Education Empirical Research database (HEER); HEA; HEFCE; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU); the International Bibliographic Database on Higher Education (HEBDIB); HE journals such as *Higher Education Quarterly* and *Studies in Higher Education*; government departments; HE sector bodies; research institutes; and university departments. Following a second sift to prioritise the most frequently cited and by relevance, assessed by abstract/summary, 54 papers were included for review. See Annexe One for the bibliography of sources.

2.2   Capturing the views of experts

Three roundtable discussions were held in London during September 2017 with a group of 19 invited sector experts from across the UK. These experts included individuals with senior roles within institutions with responsibilities for planning PGT provision, supporting PGT students, and delivery of PGT provision, as well as individuals with expertise in surveying and researching PGT populations. Each roundtable discussion took three hours and allowed for an extensive discussion of the issues and potential survey content, and was facilitated by the research team. See Annexe two for the list of expert contributors, and Annexe three for key questions posed in the discussions.

In addition, feedback was gathered from the Post-Graduate Information Steering Group (PGISG) and HEFCE colleagues on early proposals and ideas.

2.3 Capturing the views of students

Six virtual (online) focus groups with PGT students were held between 21st September and 2nd October 2017: three groups involved participants studying at institutions in England, one Wales, one Scotland, and one Northern Ireland. In total 43 individuals who were currently studying, had recently enrolled, or who had just completed a PGT course participated in the focus groups.

Two specialist agencies with student panels were used to recruit students[3]. Each of the virtual focus groups lasted one hour and participants each received a £30 incentive payment. The groups were recruited to include representation of students: from a diverse range of backgrounds including international and UK domiciled students, studying a variety of courses, at a range of institutions; and included those who had recently progressed from undergraduate study, as well as those returning to HE after a gap. Annexe four contains demographic details of the characteristics of the achieved sample. Annexe five sets out the questions asked of students.

It is worth noting that, due to the relative length of the types of sessions, the depth of illustration gathered from the stakeholder perspective is greater than that captured from the student perspective. It should also be noted that the stakeholders were able to provide a range of perspectives due to their roles and experiences and so gave a sector-wide view, an institutional view, a departmental view, and also their understanding of student views (from their regular interactions with students). So the student voice is also reflected in the feedback from stakeholders.

The feedback from students is threaded throughout the report but in order to distinguish this from the stakeholder feedback and the wider research literature, the student voice is presented in text boxes.

---

[3] Youth Sight has around 3,000 postgraduate students on their panel, of whom around 80 per cent are studying PGT courses or have applied and are about to start a PGT course (however, the panel primarily includes individuals up to the age of 30). Roots research has around 10,000 students on their research panel from all age groups and ensures coverage of older PGT students.

3 Research context

The gathering of evidence and its analysis and assessment to support development of a new PGT survey is set within a rapidly evolving context. Surveys are becoming ubiquitous and thus challenging to undertake due to survey fatigue. There is increasing demand for quantitative and qualitative information and for standard measures about HE experiences and outcomes to allow for comparison. This section explores aspects of the research context, providing further details of existing surveys targeting HE students, the constraints identified in the research literature and in feedback from experts in undertaking surveys, (particularly surveys of students), and a discussion of the distinctiveness of PGT study.

3.1 Existing surveys in HE

In developing any new PGT survey it is important to take into consideration the current landscape of surveys in the field of HE in the UK and internationally, as any potential themes are likely to cover the same territory as existing student surveys, as topics such as teaching and assessment are core to the student experience.

There are a number of surveys used in the UK and beyond to collect student feedback. These became more frequent and commonplace from the 1970s as student evaluation of teaching effectiveness began to be used to support improvements in student learning and curriculum development, to support administrative decisions and provide information for students to use in their decisions about HE (Canning, 2014). Two surveys appear to be of most relevance to a discussion about a new PGT survey: the PTES and the National Student Survey (NSS). However other surveys mentioned by the stakeholder group and noted in the research are described below.

■ Other surveys used in the UK including discipline specific surveys and those aimed at specific professions: the UK Course Experience Survey (developed by the HEA, and which draws on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)), International Student Barometer (used in the UK and beyond), the Association of Business Schools (ABS) survey of MBA students, the General Medical Council (GMC) surveys of medical students, the Economics Network surveys of UK economics students, and other surveys of professionals (e.g. NHS professionals, teachers).

■ Surveys developed and/or commonly used in other countries including: the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), developed in Australia but based on work originating at Lancaster University and used to survey undergraduates and postgraduates[4], the NSSE, based in the USA; the Canadian Graduate Professional Student Survey (CGPSS), the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU),

---

[4] The CEQ has been updated recently and has been split into two – the Student Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire, and is now known as the Graduate Outcomes Survey.

developed in the USA, and the Student Evaluation of Educational Quality questionnaire (SEEQ), used in the USA.

- Module level surveys, in-course feedback and ad-hoc surveys to explore specific issues or with specific groups of students undertaken by individual institutions in the UK. Work by NatCen (2013) found that providers tend to run their own quality monitoring exercises at module level to provide feedback on what is working well and where improvements need to be made. Additionally many HEIs run 'new student surveys' to capture initial thoughts about the university and early experiences of enrolment, accommodation, facilities etc. (NatCen, 2013)

All these surveys have varying approaches to publication (level and access) and use of the findings, and it is unclear to what extent HEIs use these sources to understand the information provided for prospective PGT students or to understand postgraduate transitions (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2016).

3.1.1 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)

There is strong support in the sector for PTES. PTES was designed for quality enhancement and is felt by the sector to be a positive tool to achieve this. It is owned by the HEA, has been operational since 2009 and is a tool developed for and by the sector to focus on the student experience. It is widely (although not universally) used, most recently involving 108 institutions gathering responses from over 80,000 students (HEA, 2017). It has also evolved over time, with the most recent full review and redesign of PTES completed in time for a full re-launch in 2014 (HEA, 2017). It contains some questions drawn from the NSS but includes more detailed questions on students' motivations, their experiences compared to their expectations, and the depth of their learning. PTES also collects demographic information about the PGT student allowing for bivariate analysis (Bennett and Turner, 2012).

PTES provides or at least attempts to provide student insights into the whole life-cycle of the programme and the university experience (subject to caveats around timing), and for many institutions provides the only mechanism for such feedback and to enable institutions to reflect on the PGT experience. PTES and its published aggregate reports provide the main insight currently available into the experiences of UK PGT students but these are at a very highly aggregated level, as the survey currently does not report publically on individual institutions or courses (Canning, 2014).

The stakeholders consulted felt strongly that the new survey could be merged with or draw heavily on PTES, however the sector would need to be consulted to gauge the appetite (and any potential barriers and challenges) for publishing PTES data along the lines of NSS. There was a sense of frustration about the limited use of PTES data currently as this is not published, and stakeholders argued that publishing PGT experience data would have a number of benefits: help to raise the profile of PGT study within the sector, motivate institutions to take PGT seriously and pay attention to the quality of provision, and ensure a feedback mechanism for this cohort of students.

3.1.2 National Student Survey (NSS)

There is also support across the sector for NSS. Lessons could be learned from the NSS in terms of how it was developed and presented to the sector and how it has evolved and become embedded over time. It was developed primarily as a mechanism to publish data on measures of quality from past students to help prospective students make more informed decisions about what and where to study as well as to provide public accountability. It therefore currently surveys undergraduate students[5], and focuses on the academic experience and teaching and learning rather than on any broader aspects of students' lives and experiences (Canning, 2014; Ramsden and Callendar, 2014). It was first conducted in 2005 and, since 2012, data from NSS is published as part of the Key Information Set on the Unistats website[6]. It is published at discipline level to help prospective students with their HE decisions. Although the NSS is recognised primarily as a tool to gather information to support students' decision-making, it has been used recently as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF[7]) metrics. NSS data is additionally used (unsanctioned) to inform university league tables and subject-based rankings (Canning, 2014; Ramsden and Callendar, 2014).

The NSS initially faced resistance but the survey is now a key tool for the sector. It has focused attention on the student experience and arguably created leverage for change in the sector. It is asserted that the NSS has changed attitudes in the sector as well as mind-sets and behaviours. By publishing data, and opening HEIs up to external scrutiny and enabling comparisons with competitors, it has encouraged institutions to take quality enhancement, curriculum development and pedagogy more seriously.

Some stakeholders felt that as the NSS instrument was designed for undergraduate students it might not be sufficiently aligned to capture the postgraduate student experience, and some were also concerned that if (some) questions were used in the new PGT survey this would allow for comparisons across these two student populations which are perhaps too disparate.

3.1.3 Drawing on existing surveys

We recommend that a small number of questions drawn from existing surveys such as the NSS should be included in the new survey instrument. This will ultimately allow for concepts to be measured over time, and allow for some tentative comparison between undergraduate and postgraduate study (where the wording and/or answer options are common to both). Drawing on existing questions is a useful strategy (where appropriate) as these questions have been tried and tested either through formal and specific cognitive testing, piloting and review processes, or through their continued and accepted use over a

---

[5] However NSS does include students on integrated masters degrees where masters level study is integrated with study at bachelors level within a single programme.

[6] Unistats is the official website for comparing UK HE course data. https://unistats.ac.uk/

[7] As noted above, TEF has been renamed the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework to avoid implying a narrow focus on teaching, but the TEF acronym is being retained. Moving forward, although NSS remains a key component of TEF, the weight of each NSS metric will be halved.

number of years by the sector. However **we recommend that new questions are also developed specifically for the new PGT survey as there are clear gaps in potential topic areas when mapped against the coverage of existing surveys**.

3.2 Learning from previous research

The research literature suggests a range of themes for student surveys and various ways of grouping question sets that could be useful to take into account when developing a new PGT survey. For example, Clarke and Lunt (2014) suggest themes of quality, access and employment outcomes, whereas Kember and colleagues propose three domains: curriculum and content, the teaching and learning environment, and learning outcomes (Kember et al, 2016). In addition, the different student surveys noted above provide further examples of question areas e.g. the International Student Barometer has sections covering arrival experiences, learning experiences, and living experiences.

Additionally some research has explored the information needs of prospective PGT students. These studies suggest themes around practical issues but also aspirational factors and prestige factors such as: course specific information including timing, content, structure, and workload; teaching aspects including contact time, course or department reputation and internal culture; research performance and student entry grades; information about student life; students' experience of and satisfaction with their learning; funding and financial information (including fees charged, wider costs, affordability and potential debt); skills developed and student attainment; and career outcomes, employment prospects and labour market preparedness (Morgan and Direito, 2016; HEFCE, 2016; Pollard et al, 2016; d'Aguiar and Harrison, 2016; Clarke and Lunt, 2014; Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014; Gibbs, 2010 cited in Canning, 2014; Renfrew et al, 2010 cited in Canning, 2014; and i-Graduate, 2013). These are all aspects that could influence decisions about postgraduate study. For example, consideration of financial issues tends to take place very early on in decision-making about postgraduate study, suggesting that fees and funding are potential enablers or barriers to PGT study (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014; Pollard et al, 2016).

3.3 Challenges for a new survey of PGT students

There was great support for a new survey of PGT students, yet implementing it would not be without challenge. The research highlighted a number of genuine constraints and challenges in undertaking surveys and with surveying postgraduate students in particular, which are recognised and acknowledged across the sector and need to be considered when developing a new survey.

- **The number of survey aims**: There may be concerns whether one survey would be able to meet a number of aims concurrently. This could lead to some degree of prioritisation of aims, to ensure that key ambitions are met. For example, research indicates that the Australian CEQ has suffered from the tension of being used for both enhancement and for public accountability (Canning, 2014).

- **Wider uses of the survey data**: New aims or uses can emerge after a survey is developed. For example, a new PGT survey could be used in the TEF[8], if this was extended to postgraduate study, to provide some important metrics. This could act as both a driver for institutional participation but could also be a concern for institutions. Also survey data can be used to construct league tables (as is the case with NSS data) and can potentially lead to gaming to manipulate scores and influence position in these. League tables currently don't exist for PGT study but any universal survey would create the opportunity for comparisons and thus league tables. There was a feeling that the sector was 'mature enough' to ensure that gaming could be minimised.

- **Difficulties in providing suitably disaggregated data:** Students tend to require very specific detailed information, often at course level, to support their decision-making and so often resort to direct engagement with institutions (departments and programme leaders) to make decisions. Research indicates that this is particularly the case with postgraduate students as: courses can be highly specialised and only available in a few institutions so specific details of courses are needed; PGT students can be considered as more experienced/purposeful decision-makers with a better idea of what they are looking for; and PGT students arguably have more precise information needs and inflexible requirements (in comparison to undergraduate students) (Canning, 2014, Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014, i-Graduate, 2013, NatCen, 2013). HE providers may also want disaggregated data (perhaps even at individual student level, to allow for linking with their own data) to support their enhancement activity, and so may have concerns about the size of responding cohorts and whether these are sufficient. This type of detailed information can be difficult to provide from a universal survey involving a very wide range of diverse courses. For example, work by NatCen (2013) undertaken for HEFCE explored the feasibility of running a national student satisfaction survey for PGT students[9] and found widespread support for a survey of PGT students but that practical challenges would make it difficult to deliver such as publishing data at a level that would be useful for students (at individual course level), exacerbated by low response rates.

- **Dealing with diversity:** When a target survey population is too disparate, it can be difficult for surveys to draw out general messages and interpret findings, allow for comparisons over time, and indeed to design a survey instrument that is relevant to all potential respondents. This is a particular concern for PGT students as the PGT student body is highly heterogeneous. These students come from a much wider range of backgrounds and nationalities/cultures than undergraduate students, come with a wider range of experiences and expectations, and will be undertaking PGT study for a wide range of reasons (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014; QAA Scotland, 2013). In addition the range of PGT programmes is broad and varied, varying in their length, function and intended outcomes, which in essence creates a vast array of unique provision. Together this means that the make-up of cohorts on different courses and

---

[8] TEF was introduced by the Government to recognise and reward excellent learning and teaching. The outcomes from Year Two of TEF were published in June 2017.

[9] This was undertaken in response to the HE White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System', (BIS, 2011).

programmes may vary significantly for example, in some disciplines the majority of students will already be in full-time employment (e.g. health, subjects allied to health, divinity, education, social work, business, and law, see Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014). The complexity/variability could for example limit the potential for benchmarking, and on the global relevance of the survey questions (leading to routing of questions/sections for specific groups of students). A related issue is that a high degree of variability is also related to a high degree of volatility. Indeed, the PGT student population/profile could change dramatically which could affect survey results and comparability over time.

- **How to engage with stakeholders:** the success of surveys can rely heavily on the engagement, support and enthusiasm of those who have direct access to the target respondent population. It is therefore important to consider the motivation of these organisations – what would they gain, is their involvement/support voluntary or compulsory, and what are their concerns? For example, there is no centrally held repository of student (including postgraduate student) contact data, so in order to survey students, researchers need to work with HE providers. HE providers of PGT courses could benefit from supporting a PGT survey by gaining greater intelligence and demographic data on their PGT student cohort, and granular data, even individual-level data they could link with their own data-sources (subject to response thresholds). HEIs may however want to receive the data in a timely fashion so they can act swiftly on the feedback.

- **Timing of surveys**: Timing of surveys can influence decisions about who can be surveyed. For example, as PGT courses are much shorter than undergraduate courses, the final year may also be the starting year; and PGT courses can have several start points and jumping off points, in contrast to undergraduate courses which tend to have just one entry point in September/October. Also with PGT study, individuals might not enrol in a specific programme at the outset. Timing of surveys can also influence what respondents can provide feedback on, and on longer-term recall and perceptions – too early and students may not be able to reflect on the whole experience and anticipated outcomes, and too late and they may not be able to reflect on motivations, transitions to study, and early experiences (with later experiences clouding perspectives e.g. final marks could influence feedback given with bad results leading to negative feedback: Grimes et al, 2017; Kalafatis and Ledden, 2013; Carrivick, 2011). Therefore additional considerations for a PGT survey are: eligibility, whether to include those who withdraw, have already completed or just those still on programme; and when to carry out the survey, whether this takes place during the course or after completion. For example, research into PGT survey feasibility (NatCen, 2013) has shown that HEIs think that the best time for a survey would be May-July, but this is a busy period for staff and students alike due to dissertations and exams.

3.4 What is distinctive about PGT study

Another aspect that can be helpful in developing a new PGT survey is to consider what is distinctive about PGT study and indeed decision-making about PGT study, and so requires specific investigation and explanation. The aspects below are further expanded throughout the discussion of survey themes in Chapter 5.

How students make decisions about PGT study

Students themselves noted how they approached their decisions about PGT study in a completely different way to their undergraduate decisions. They felt better equipped to make their PGT decisions, but tended to have a more limited range of options. They also looked for different information, generally information about courses rather than about institutions and university life. This suggests that prospective PGT students want course or even module-level information to support their decision-making, and as noted above this can be challenging to produce from survey data.

In the focus groups with PGT students undertaken as part of this study, the students reflected on differences in how they had approached making decisions about PGT courses compared to their undergraduate course decisions. They generally felt they had a better idea of how HE worked and therefore what their options were, as one student noted:

"... after three years of studying at uni, you kind of get a better idea of what you want to do".

Students also reported that they tended to be more focused and limited in the range of options they had considered. Indeed their experiences highlighted how PGT students were less likely than undergraduate students to be comparing several options. For example, several participants were geographically constrained in their choice and sought to apply to a local institution, as these two students discussed:

Respondent A: *"If you've got family support you can go anywhere. You can go a long way off, but for me, it was my local [institution] because I had to go nearby…"*

Respondent B: *"That was the same for me. For my undergraduate, I wanted the whole university experience, to move out and live in halls, but for my postgraduate, I just moved back home and I'm living in my family home. I'm not as bothered about the university experience; it's more the academic side".*

Others were seeking a specialist course or a course that had specific modules within it, and were extremely focused on course content. In these instances they described how only a limited number of institutions offered the course they sought, as one student explained*:*

"I wanted to stay up north, so the places for me were University X or University Y, but University Y is more recognised, so it was my only option".

Thus PGT students were more likely to be making a binary decision about whether or not to undertake a specific PGT course now, as illustrated by one student who explained the purpose of seeking information about their potential course:

"So it wasn't that much comparing to others, it was more to reassure me that the uni and the department is good".

Participants in the student focus groups discussed the level of information that would be useful to students, and there was a strong desire to have information to the lowest denomination/highest granularity, for example, specific to their prospective course (were that feasible), otherwise to their school. This was driven by the heterogeneity between programmes both within and between institutions, coupled with the more limited nature of their comparisons or choices. As one student explained:

> *"Different schools and different programmes operate so differently. Even within the same university, two different people could have such different experiences. So, I think the course itself, then the school, or the programme is probably more helpful".*
>
> Feedback from students recognised the changing and evolving nature of postgraduate provision. This meant that several students were part of the first cohort studying their course or programme and therefore had no previous student experience to reflect on.
>
> *"My course is quite new. I think it was only going for a couple of years and the whole world of Health Psychology is quite new".*

The PGT experience

Key work here has been undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in Scotland (and the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC)) as part of their work on enhancement through learning from international practice, PGT experience project (2012/13)[10]. This project specifically addressed the theme 'what is mastersness?' and asked questions about what it means to be a Master's-level student and how they are supported in making that transition. Master's study is recognised as a journey during which the attributes of mastersness are transmitted or acquired, and due to the (short) timescales involved can make for a 'very pressurised experience'. Although the work focused on Masters study (the predominant PGT qualification in the UK) it was felt that the conclusions of the project could be applied to other PGT provision. The SHEEC project developed a framework, setting out a series of seven characteristics or facets of mastersness[11] which cover the expectation of personal development at Master's level, the learning and teaching practices designed to develop these, and the content of PGT courses offered. This work provides an excellent foundation for ideas for survey content focused on skills developed during PGT study and learning and teaching practices experienced:

■ Abstraction – the ability to extract knowledge or meanings from sources and using them to construct new knowledge or meanings. Teaching and learning practices here include: project-based learning to apply theory to real-life problems (including examples from students' own practice and experience); using devices to encourage reflection on knowledge and experiences (such as e-portfolios, journals, learning logs); providing opportunities to work in the field/placements etc; and providing opportunities to work with students from different disciplinary backgrounds.

---

[10] The work drew on the research of Warring carried out in New Zealand, which aimed to analyse how learning levels differ within and between degrees and diplomas using a review of literature and analysis of qualification frameworks and developed a framework to support course design, delivery and assessment. Warring, S (2011) An analysis of learning levels within and between a degree and a diploma: New Zealand case study, Quality Assurance in Education, Vol 19, issue 4, pp 441-450

[11] http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience/the-masterness-toolkit; see also Postgraduate Taught Student Experience Working Group (2013) What is mastersness? Discussion paper: Report of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee Learning from International Practice, QAA Scotland. Accessed at: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/report/what-is-mastersness.pdf

- Depth of learning – the ability to acquire more knowledge and use knowledge differently which could involve engaging with a narrow topic in-depth, engaging with up-to-date research, critical thinking, taking a multidisciplinary approach, and presenting familiar issues/concepts in innovative ways. Teaching and learning practices here include: group work to encourage debate and discussion; opportunities for interdisciplinary work to encourage deeper learning from different viewpoints and critical thinking; using devices to encourage reflection on knowledge and experiences (such as e-portfolios, journals, learning logs); encouraging engagement with and analysis of up-to-date research; encouraging students to challenge assumptions that 'tutors know best'; and encouraging students to draw on their own experiences and practice.

- Research and enquiry – developing critical research and enquiry skills. Teaching and learning practices here include: opportunities for working with academic researchers on activities such as applying for grants, writing about research, developing a research proposal and organising seminars; encouraging students to critically evaluate research papers; encouraging students to develop a reflective portfolio of course work; and encouraging students to draw on their own experiences and practice.

- Complexity – recognising and dealing with complexity of knowledge, learning processes and concepts including integration of knowledge and skills and practical application of knowledge. Teaching and learning practices here include: in-depth reviews of research papers; using devices to encourage reflection on knowledge and experiences (such as e-portfolios, journals, learning logs); opportunities to provide consultancy for industry/external organisations; opportunities for working with students from different disciplinary backgrounds; and opportunities for students to draw on their own experiences and practice.

- Autonomy – taking responsibility for their own learning (self-organisation, motivation, working with others, and acquisition of knowledge). Teaching and learning practices here include: transition support such as study skills modules and level orientation; early feedback opportunities on performance; minimal supervision; self and peer assessment; and group work.

- Unpredictability – the ability to deal with unpredictability in organisational contexts and real world problems, being creative and using knowledge and experience in solving problems. Teaching and learning practices here include: encouraging students to operate with minimal supervision and to organise themselves; encouraging students to engage with external organisations through placements/fieldwork/consultancy or internships; opportunities to engage in simulation-type activities (to experience real-life issues); and opportunities for students to draw on their own experiences and practice.

- Professionalism – displaying professional attitudes, behaviours and values, ethics and integrity (depending on chosen field), reflecting on practice, and becoming part of a disciplinary/occupational community. Teaching and learning practices here include: encouraging students to engage with external organisations through placements/field work/consultancy work/projects; encouraging students to work with academic researchers on activities such as applying for grants, writing about research, developing a research proposal and organising seminars; encouraging students to reflect on their practice and identify the level of competence a professional in their

discipline would need to demonstrate; opportunities for students to draw on their own experiences and practice; and providing a professional skills module.

The work also acknowledged that pathways to PGT study and previous experiences would have a bearing on students' ability (and speed) to develop Master's attributes and the support required (QAA Scotland, 2013).

Stakeholders consulted during this research also discussed what was distinctive about PGT study and it was felt to be about the following (this is further expanded in Chapter 5):

1. Time at the institution, which is much shorter than found with other programmes of study. This can affect expectations for and degree of engagement with the institution, and the experience is also likely to be more intense and therefore stressful than other programmes.

2. Size and diversity of the cohort as often PGT programmes are specialist and small by design (although this is not true of all programmes, for example MBA programmes are often very large). Also for some programmes, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses, UK students may be in the minority.

3. Greater variability in interactions with institutions with the greater prevalence of part-time study and distance/online learning than found with undergraduate study. These forms of study will change the physical interaction students have with their institutions.

4. Students are likely to be more focused on their programme than on the wider university experience, largely due to the degree of self-funding involved which can change expectations for HE and the psychological interaction with institutions. This was also reflected in the student feedback (see Chapter 5).

5. Students will be studying at a higher and deeper level compared with undergraduate study.

4 Survey considerations and design principles

There are a number of overarching principles that should be taken into consideration when designing a survey. These are discussed below with reference to the literature (where appropriate) and the thoughts and feedback from students and stakeholders.

4.1 Length

The length of a survey is a key consideration in the design process and involves a balance between having a survey of sufficient length to capture all the data required and having a survey that is short enough to encourage potential respondents to complete it.

There was a clear steer from the PGT students and HE stakeholders consulted that the new survey should have a completion time of between 10 and 15 minutes. It was noted that the NSS takes approximately eight to 10 minutes (and was deliberately designed to be short, and has been refined-down to a core set of 23 questions) and PTES takes approximately 15 minutes, which was felt to be 'fairly long'. Indeed, Webber and colleagues' analysis of non-response to PTES found that keeping the survey shorter would help to achieve higher response rates (Webber et al, 2013).

Some stakeholders felt that if students were given an engaging, relevant survey they could potentially cope with a questionnaire that was longer than 15 minutes. They suggested a short set of 'core' questions (taking 10 to 15 minutes) with additional optional questions if students are willing to provide further feedback (effectively giving the choice about survey length to the student rather than the provider or sector). However feedback from all the student focus groups suggested that a survey of PGT students should take around 10 minutes to complete. Interestingly, one student focus group discussed that the time they might have to participate could be affected by the time of year, and that they would be less likely to participate if they were surveyed close to submitting a dissertation project.

Stakeholders also discussed the potential for institutions to add their own questions to the survey. It was felt that this can be attractive to institutions and help institutional engagement with a survey. However, it was suggested that the survey should remain as a core set of questions for several years (in a steady state to allow the survey to embed) before allowing additional institution-specific questions which could potentially impact on overall response rates and engagement.

The general rule is that an average of three survey questions can be administered per minute, meaning that a 10-minute survey would include asking each participant approximately 30 questions. We therefore recommend that the new survey has a

maximum of 30 questions. This may mean that not all the areas/themes suggested by this research and presented in Chapter 5 can be accommodated in the survey.

4.1.1 Feedback on criteria for inclusion

To help manage the survey's length, coherence and focus, it can be helpful to have a clear set of criteria against which to judge whether questions should be included. In the early development work undertaken by HEFCE, an initial set of criteria was proposed, developed from the criteria used (with considerable success) in the NSS. The proposed criteria included:

1. Meet at least one survey aim.
2. Have potential to be influenced.
3. Be concerned with the academic experience.
4. Be applicable across all PGT courses/providers.
5. Cover measurable and valid issues.
6. Deliver meaningful and useful data.
7. Produce unambiguous results.
8. Address an enduring issue.

Feedback from the expert stakeholders consulted was that questions could move beyond capturing the academic experience. They noted how postgraduates have 'noise' beyond the academic experience that can affect their engagement, experiences and outcomes so some felt a focus solely on the academic experience may not be entirely relevant for the PGT survey. However, others felt the primary focus on the academic experience was still appropriate for PGT students.

There was also a recognition that some questions may need to be exempt from (some of) the criteria. For example, contextual questions relating to demographics, course details, pathways to PGT study and motivations do not have the potential to be influenced by the HE provider. There was some feeling that expectations may also be difficult for providers to influence. However, they felt that teaching and learning-focused questions should relate to factors that providers could have control over.

Stakeholders felt that another (additional) criterion for inclusion was that any new question should address something that students could really answer and offer their perspective on. Another issue raised here was that questions should not be assessed in isolation but in relation to other questions and within the flow of the overall instrument. Indeed it was suggested that the survey needs to be assessed as a whole – whether all the questions together represent and capture the postgraduate experience.

We recommend that the survey uses criteria for inclusion to help in its development and also as it embeds and responds to changes in the research context and landscape of PGT study. However, we recommend that further work is undertaken on what the criteria should be, particularly around the issue of broadening beyond the academic experience, as there is currently no clear consensus.

4.2 Structuring the survey

The structure of a survey is an important consideration as it can help with the logical flow of questions, it can group questions covering a similar theme or questions using a similar format together, and can enhance the respondent experience and help engagement with the survey and thus positively influence response rates.

One suggestion from stakeholders was that the survey could be structured as a reflective journey that could follow the student from when they entered the programme through to their expectations for outcomes. The extent of the student journey that could be covered in the survey will however depend on the planned timing of the survey. For example, it was noted that some stakeholders feel PTES takes place too early in the student life-cycle to be able to really capture experiences of the dissertation. The chronology of the student journey was also used in the work of the Postgraduate Taught Student Experience Working Group (QAA Scotland, 2013) which characterised the transition from Master's-level study as involving three stages and identified pointers for practice at each stage. The three stages are: 1) getting there and settling there (involving orientation, developing confidence, meeting diverse needs, securing engagement); 2) being there and staying there (involving ensuring subject breadth, integrating disciplines, creating a sense of belonging, encouraging communication among students, particularly distance-learning students, developing writing skills, establishing and using networks, and engaging in research activity); and 3) moving on from there (involving developing a real-world application of knowledge, instilling professionalism and an understanding of the professional context, encouraging reflection).

We recommend that the survey follows the student journey from motivations to study through to anticipated (or actual, depending on the timing of the survey) outcomes.

4.2.1 Using routing

Routing in surveys can be a way to include extra questions targeted at certain groups of respondents. Routing in student surveys is common, enabling surveys to be personalised and tailored for respondents (Wakeling et al, 2017 re: HEFCE's Postgraduate Support Scheme 2015/16; HEFCE, 2016 re: the Intentions After Graduation Survey).

Among the stakeholders there was support for routed questions to enable different pathways through the survey and different questions for certain groups of students, as it was felt that some elements of the student experience were not relevant or applicable to all (e.g. placements, dissertation, projects). However there was no definitive agreement among stakeholders about which students should get separate questions. For example while some felt international students were quite different and required additional questions (language issues, settling in, safety of local area) others felt this group of students faced similar challenges and experiences, and their perceptions of quality may not differ from those of home students. It was also noted that international students themselves are a very diverse group of individuals. The research literature also indicates that international students are often subject to additional questions covering wider aspects of their experience such as physical environment, food, transport, accommodation,

availability of jobs, personal and local community relationships (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012, p68).

Other (non-mutually exclusive) groups with potentially different issues, experiences and challenges could have some questions directed specifically at them, were identified as students:

■ Learning online (compared to those who are full-time and campus based);

■ Already in work and undertaking PGT study as part of their professional development;

■ Studying part-time and possibly juggling numerous commitments; and/or

■ Returning to HE after some time (in contrast to those transferring directly or fairly quickly between undergraduate and PGT study).

There was also some discussion about the potential to route questions by student motivation but this was perhaps felt to be too complex, and instead questions would need to be assessed for relevance for all potential motivations to (and anticipated outcomes for) PGT study.

Overall it was felt that in designing the new survey most questions should be relevant for the majority of students undertaking a PGT course, so little routing would be needed. The agreed exception would be questions relating to placements, dissertations and final projects, as these aspects are important aspects of PGT study but not universal to all courses or students.

We therefore recommend that routing is only used in relation to gathering experiences of placements, dissertations and final projects.

4.3   Types of question

There are a wide range of question approaches available when designing a survey including open questions which allow respondents to provide their own answers.

4.3.1   Open questions

Open questions can work well, but the burden of coding data for statistical analysis, which is costly, time-consuming and subject to error, suggests they should only be used in moderation. Other difficulties are that respondents may not provide sufficient detail when answering to capture key differences; open questions can generate responses which do not directly connect to the question asked; and, for telephone interviews, it can be difficult to get interviewers to probe consistently. The stakeholders consulted also reflected that open questions ('which provide an opportunity to explain') take longer to complete, and can be a burden to analyse. Nonetheless, allowing a small number of open questions has some benefits: if participants feel strongly about a particular issue that was not asked about in the survey, a general open question allows them to provide this feedback in their own words (providing an outlet). This was reflected in the stakeholder and student discussions, who felt that including open questions in the new PGT survey would be beneficial, and would provide the 'real voice' of students and greater depth of information.

The focus groups with students indicated that open questions could provide prospective students with useful feedback and insights. The students reported that they were keen to hear the voices of past students and to get a greater depth of insight than can be provided by numbers alone to help them to understand what undertaking a PGT course would really be like. They would therefore welcome the inclusion of some open questions around key points, although some reflected that these types of questions are more time-consuming to complete and require a greater depth of engagement in the survey process, so would be likely to add to length and the requirement for an incentive to participate.

Stakeholders also felt that open questions would be particularly useful for HE providers in terms of enhancement (one of the key survey aims). Open questions could therefore be focused on areas for improvement such as: what aspects of their course/university experience could be improved; what aspects didn't meet their expectations (and why); what aspects of their course/university experience worked well (and why); and what was the best thing about their PGT experience. Stakeholders felt that these types of open questions would be particularly valued by institutions as they provide detailed constructive feedback that can be fed directly into quality enhancement activity.

4.3.2 Closed questions

Generally the majority of survey questions are closed, as these are easier and quicker to complete and also to analyse. Closed questions provide a given set of responses that the respondent selects from. Options for closed questions include Likert answer scales (usually five or seven-point) where the respondent selects just one option from the scale, and multi-code questions where respondents can select any number of options given.

Response scales

Some existing student surveys (e.g. the NSS) use a single answer scale (agree/disagree) across all questions; this ensures the survey can be completed quickly by minimising thinking time. However, there are a number of disadvantages to this approach. Firstly, agree/disagree scales may be prone to acquiescence bias, as respondents have a tendency to choose positive responses over negative ones. It has been shown that, overall, more participants agree with a statement than disagree with its opposite (Krosnick and Presser, 2010)[12]. Secondly, when completing a survey quickly, and presented with a list of questions all with the same answer scale, participants may be tempted to select the same (positive) category for all statements – this is known as 'yea-saying'.

Strategies used in survey design for avoiding acquiescence bias and 'yea-saying' in agree/disagree scales have included reversing the polarity of statements (so some are worded positively and some negatively). Respondents are thus forced to think about each statement rather than repeatedly selecting 'strongly agree' for each item. However, Saris

---

[12] Krosnick, J. and Presser, S. (2010) 'Question and Questionnaire Design' to appear in the *Handbook of Survey Research* (2nd Edition) James D. Wright and Peter V. Marsden (Eds).San Diego, CA: Elsevier.

et al. (2010)[13] demonstrate that negatively-worded agree/disagree items, such as 'I rarely do X', have lower levels of reliability than equivalent positively phrased items, e.g. 'I usually do X.' It can be concluded that negatively-worded questions, although preventing 'yea-saying' can be problematic, and have implications for data quality.

We recommend that the new survey does not include any negatively framed questions and so will avoid the issues discussed above. However, we also recommend that questions are framed in different ways, with a mix of different response categories. The response options lead naturally from the questions, lowering the cognitive burden by mimicking real-life question-answer dyads. Using different answer scales should promote engagement, whilst at the same time preventing 'yea-saying'.

We also recommend that all response scales (with the exception of multi-code questions) include a clearly labelled 'not applicable' (NA) option at the end of the scale. This can be particularly important when scales are used for response categories, as respondents will tend to use the neutral mid-point option if a NA option is not provided, and this will impact upon scoring results. Providing a NA option, allows students to skip questions they feel are not relevant to them, without forcing a valid response; thus addressing concerns that the mid-point option will be used when a question is not relevant.

Multiple response (multi-code) questions

Multi-code questions that involve respondents selecting one or more responses from a long list of options can potentially be problematic as they can lead to primacy or recency effects. If long lists are presented to respondents in a visual format, such as in a web survey, there is a tendency for people to only look at and select their responses from the first few items in the list rather than read all items (primacy effects). If the list is read out, for example in a telephone interview, then respondents are more likely to only remember the last few items (recency effects) and choose their responses from them. It is therefore advisable to have as few answer categories as are needed to accurately capture the range of different responses, to a maximum of 10. These types of questions should be used in moderation as they tend to be more cognitively taxing than those using a Likert-scale or binary response.

We recommend that five-point Likert scale questions, a small number (up to three) of multi-code questions with no more than 10 answer categories, and a small number (up to three) of open text questions are used but that these should be included towards the end of the survey. These different types of questions could have a positive effect on data quality, as the diversity of formats can have a positive effect on engagement.

---

[13] Saris, W. E., Revilla, M.E., Krosnick, J.A. and Shaeffer, E. M. (2010) Comparing Questions with Agree/Disagree Response Options with Item-Specific Response Options, *Survey Research Methods*, 4 (1), 61-79

4.4   Assessing students' expectations

It was felt to be important to take into account students' expectations when measuring their experiences, and to explore whether expectations were met. There was a concern that high or unrealistic expectations from students would be reflected in poor feedback. However, this can create the need for additional questions, increasing the length of the survey and potentially reducing the response rate (and thus lowering the base size for analysis). In order to fully account for expectations, questions would need to be asked in pairs: the first in the pair capturing students' expectations of a particular element of their course, the second in the pair measuring to what degree expectations had been met. The two-part question is more complicated in terms of analysis and increases the burden for participants. An additional issue when attempting to assess expectations is recall bias. Responses to questions asking participants to reflect on expectations prior to an event, in this case before starting their PGT course, might be coloured by more recent experiences and therefore may not necessarily provide an accurate measure of pre-course expectations. Respondents might also find it difficult to remember what their expectations were.

A more effective solution is to capture both expectations and experience in a single question, although necessarily subjective. We recommend that this approach is used when compiling the new survey, rather than using two-part questions.

4.5   Mode of administration

The mode of administration of the survey (i.e. the way in which the survey is delivered) falls outside the scope of this research, however there are a number of issues related to survey mode that should be considered if and when moving into the testing and pilot phase of the survey development:

■ An online approach, if chosen, should begin with a mobile-first design. There is increasing evidence (Ofcom Technology) that internet users most commonly use their smartphones to access the internet. Participants are thus more and more likely to take part in an online survey using their mobile phones, rather than a tablet, desktop, or laptop. This places increased importance on ensuring web surveys are optimised for completion on a smartphone.

■ Consideration should be given to online interviewing. Some groups can be more easily contacted using online video conferencing tools (e.g. Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts etc.) than by telephone. This may be particularly true of students who change addresses and telephone numbers, but might have the same handle for video tools, which are more easily transferred from device to device. Another benefit of offering video as opposed to telephone interviews is that is offers the interviewer some control over the participant's environment and offers the interviewer an opportunity to observe the participant while administering the survey.

At this stage (while survey mode is being decided) we recommend that the questionnaire is designed to be mode-neutral and to use a unified mode[14] construction, as far as possible. This means that the questions and response options remain the same regardless of whether the survey is administered online or over the telephone.

4.6 Methods for engaging respondents

An issue raised by stakeholders was that due to the short time that PGT students are with their institutions any survey capturing their feedback is unlikely to benefit the respondents directly and so they are unlikely to be motivated to engage with the survey: *'they are too busy to be altruistic'.* However, stakeholders were optimistic and felt that a survey that allowed for reflection on the student journey (as noted above) would be engaging for students and so could encourage completion.

> Students through the focus groups provided suggestions to foster greater engagement. They felt that personal approaches (e.g. from someone known to them within their institution) would be likely to increase response rates, as would a survey that was interesting and appeared to be relevant. They also discussed the incentives used by other surveys they had taken part in in the past, and generally felt that an incentive demonstrated the value of the information requested to some degree – this could be a small token, such as a free cup of coffee. They were perhaps more swayed by incentives that provided an immediate reward, although there were mixed reactions to a prize-draw type of incentive.

Other suggestions from the stakeholders for aspects that could support engagement and maximise response rates included: ensuring that the language and terminology used in the survey is tested to be sure it was understood by all potential respondents; providing feedback on the action taken from the survey findings (the 'you said, we did' approach as used with NSS); thinking carefully about the title of the survey (which can imply rationale/purpose); use of social media to publicise the survey (especially for international students); timing of the survey to avoid particularly busy/stressful periods for students (such as assessment periods); and to harness the support/encouragement of tutors.

Other aspects indicated by the literature review that can positively affect response rates include: sending reminder emails, ensuring clarity about the purpose of the survey, and engendering feelings of connection to the university community (Webber et al, 2013):

> *'... higher education institutions may wish to review their strategies for advertising student experience surveys to focus more on their purpose rather than their impact.'*

(Webber et al, 2013, p.71)

We recommend that tutors and social media are used to publicise the survey, that clear information about the purpose and benefits of the survey as well as the time expected to complete is provided to potential respondents, and that feedback on

---

[14] Dillman, D. A. (2017) 'The promise and challenge of pushing respondents to the Web in mixed-mode surveys', *Survey Methodology*, 2, 12-001.

survey findings and how they have been used is provided. We also recommend that a range of incentives are tested during the pilot phase to see which, if any, have a positive impact on response rates.

5   Survey themes

Clear themes capturing what is distinctive and important about the postgraduate study experience from the perspective of students and stakeholders emerged from the focus groups and discussions and these present clear areas to explore in a new PGT survey.

It should be noted however that the themes are highly interlinked, suggesting that a survey of PGT students should be regarded as a whole in order to capture the entirety of the PGT experience, rather than as a set of disparate themes. It was also noteworthy that when exploring experiences, aspects could arguably be captured under various themes. For example, 'belonging' was at times conceived as part of a theme around the organisation and management of the programme, which included aspects of wider engagement with the institution, and at other times it was conceived as part of the transition process into the institution.

5.1   Demographics and contextual information

Several themes emerged related to capturing information about the student, their study programme, their pathway to PGT (prior study experiences) and how they were funding their PGT study, as these factors could all impact upon the PGT experience. These aspects were felt to be important in providing contextual information, which in turn would allow for in-depth analysis of findings, rather than providing direct feedback on the student experience per se.

Student demographic data

The diverse backgrounds of the students participating in the focus groups emphasised the heterogeneity of the PGT student population and also the diversity of their learning experiences. Aspects of likely difference in the experience of PGT study were noted specifically for international students, as well as those studying part-time, and several groups discussed working alongside studying. More generally students felt their expectations and experiences of PGT study were affected by their motivations, reasons for studying, and trajectory (to and through their studies), rather than by demographic groupings, such as gender, per se.

Students collectively reflected on the diversity of their PGT programmes and the impact this had on their experience, although there were common threads that united PGT students. For example:

"Everyone here has got so many different experiences, because we're doing such different things. It has to be course specific, because you have to ... before you take the big step of doing a postgraduate, you have to be able to visualise how your life will be with that extra study on top of you, and that can only be done course specifically".

Overall, in their feedback, students were less vocal about the importance and relevance of collecting general demographic data than stakeholders, but the variety of their contexts implies

that sufficient demographic information will need to form part of a survey to enable rich and relevant analysis of the data and allow for segmentation.

Stakeholders felt it was important to capture contextual information about PGT students to make up for the shortfall in centrally held data on the PGT student population. The paucity of information is blamed on the lack of a UCAS equivalent for postgraduate applications (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). Another driver for collecting data on the demographics of PGT students is the belief that the population has been changing over time and is likely to continue to do so with the introduction of Master's degree loans. There was a strong desire among stakeholders to capture as much information as possible via a survey.

Suggestions from stakeholders for demographic data to collect were wide-ranging and included: country/home region and distance from home to place of study, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, current employment status and work hours (to see if students are working alongside their studies, and if they are currently working in HE). There was also a keen interest to capture some form of socio-economic data to explore social class/widening participation characteristics as this was seen as a key issue for providers. It was acknowledged that some HE providers do collect socio-demographic data from students but that it is not comprehensive and can be challenging to collect at PGT level. This is particularly the case for older individuals, for international students and those not directly transferring from undergraduate to postgraduate study. It was noted that simply having an undergraduate 'flag', that identifies disadvantage/low socio-economic group, that is transferred to the PG record would miss many individuals. Suggestions for capturing social class included gathering home postcode to allow for Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification[15], but there was a discussion about whether postcode at the time of applying to postgraduate study or postcode at the time of applying for undergraduate study would be most appropriate. Stakeholders also noted how other biographical factors could impact on students' PGT experiences, such as having caring responsibilities and dealing with life events such as bereavement, but felt attempting to capture this degree of detail would be going beyond the scope of the survey.

Study/programme information and pathways to current PGT programme

As part of the drive to better understand the PGT population and to contextualise students' feedback on their experiences, stakeholders felt it was important to gather data on respondents' current programme of study and institution, but also to understand how this relates to their previous studies – both discipline and institution (although recognising that not all PGT students will have studied at undergraduate level). In terms of current programme, stakeholders felt that the data collected should include: level of study, discipline, institution, mode of study, whether the student was campus based or a distance learner, and length of/current year of programme. These could all be used in the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

---

[15] POLAR might not be appropriate for all UK nations.

Discipline was considered particularly critical, and stakeholders discussed how pathways to certain disciplines could be very different. For example, there can be a wide range of routes to business PGT programmes, but a much narrower range of pathways to science programmes. The length of programme was also raised as important contextual information, as PGT programmes tend to be shorter than undergraduate programmes and some PGT programmes are particularly short (e.g. PGDip and PGCert which can be less than one year).

Stakeholders wanted to understand students' PGT experience in light of their earlier HE study, including undergraduate study discipline, institution, and also the year when the student finished their most recent undergraduate level study in order to understand transitions and pathways to PGT study. It was argued that capturing the year an individual completed their previous study would show the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate study. Previous discipline indicates whether students are changing discipline or looking to gain greater specialisation or depth through their PGT study, and previous institution indicates whether students are attempting to familiarise themselves with a new institution. All these aspects will affect expectations, information requirements and support needs (particularly around transitions and settling in).

Stakeholders also wanted data on what individuals were doing before their PGT studies such as whether they were in work and what field this was in, and it was acknowledged that this could influence funding (e.g. whether employer funded).

Funding

When discussing funding, PGT students mentioned the variety of ways they had funded their current course, including scholarships, bursaries, borrowing from relatives, and loans. They often discussed the amount they had paid in postgraduate fees in relation to their fees and funding experience from their undergraduate studies, and the comparative difficulty they experienced in sourcing finance to support their PGT studies compared to their undergraduate experience. This increased their sensitivity towards price for PGT study, as one student explained:

"You're definitely more aware of the price, because there is less funding available."

The scale of PGT course fees, and the way that students had funded their studies, framed their expectations for the course in a number of ways that were distinctive from their undergraduate experience. For example, PGT students expected to have greater access to professional opportunities, greater contact time with teaching staff, and smaller class sizes, as one student discussed:

"For example, at my course they say, 'We have small class groups,' and as small groups they said eight people, but it turns out there are, like, fourteen... If the group is smaller then it's more engaging, whereas if it's a larger group, it's fine but it's also a different dynamic."

These themes are all returned to in Chapter 5.

Students were conscious of their financial investment and for some this had shaped their decisions about what to study and where, and made them quite transactional in how they viewed the PGT experience. Some students had one eye on the perceived value of the course, both for them and future career options, but also reflected on the value the course and institution was likely to have in the eyes of others (e.g. prospective employers).

Some students also mentioned the other costs they had incurred in taking a PGT course, and whether these were what they had expected. For example, one international student discussed the fees associated with undertaking English language assessments.

The research literature indicates that prospective PGT students' information needs include funding and financial information including details of fees and extra costs such as living expenses, potential funding sources, affordability and potential debt (i-Graduate, 2013; Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014; HEFCE, 2016; Pollard et al, 2016; Clarke and Lunt, 2014).

Stakeholders felt the level of fees charged and how students funded their studies again helps them to understand and contextualise the student experience, and argued that funding forms part of study programme information. Suggestions for data that could be collected about funding included: the level of fees charged and whether students faced additional costs beyond tuition fees; take-up of Master's loans; and whether students used income from paid work to fund their studies. There was a strong interest in understanding employer involvement in PGT study in terms of providing funding support as well as wider support, such as time off for study. It was felt that employer support could affect students' expectations of their experience and of the (anticipated) outcomes from their studies. Other funding aspects that could be explored, but were seen as a lower priority, included: attitudes to debt (e.g. loan aversion) and levels of existing debt (the latter is less of an issue in Scotland as undergraduate fees are not charged), and perceived awareness of costs before starting their studies.

The interest in funding is reflected in the research literature, which highlights that there is very limited evidence about how domestic PGT students fund their studies and how the recent changes in undergraduate fees might affect applications to postgraduate study, potentially acting as a deterrent to progression to postgraduate study (UUK, 2014; Clarke and Lunt, 2014; Pollard et al, 2016; Wakeling et al, 2017). There is a desire in the sector to understand the extent of self-financing, other sources of funding that are utilised, and how this varies between domestic and international students, and the real impact of the increase in undergraduate fees (UUK, 2017).

Sourcing contextual data

Contextual data is clearly considered to be important in understanding PGT experiences. Student demographics, PGT study arrangements (and pathways to PGT study), and how students fund their studies can all impact significantly upon the PGT experience. However, the survey may not be the most appropriate vehicle to collect such data as this would make the survey very long; and some, if not the vast majority, of the desired contextual data is held in other datasets. These other sources of contextual data include:

■ The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record which records information about the PGT student and their study programme, although it may not readily provide information about previous undergraduate study, particularly if individuals have taken a break between their studies.

■ The Student Loans Company data which records information on undergraduate loans and debt, and Master's loans (although will not have attitudinal data on students' finances).

■ The HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) annual survey, which records information on students' attainment and outcomes six months after completing their studies. This includes employment data including location, occupation, sector, salary and some attitudinal data on the quality of employment. The DLHE survey (which will be replaced by the Graduate Outcomes survey in 2018) will be undertaken 15 months after graduating. This means there will be a considerable time lag in accessing this data.

Consideration should therefore be given to the feasibility and reliability of comprehensively linking relevant data from other sources to a PGT survey to allow for contextual analysis of the student experience. This will include assessing the comprehensiveness and relevance of the variables that could be provided from the other data sources. This data is likely to be factual rather than attitudinal, narrow in focus, and may not have been designed to capture the nuances of PG study. It will also require putting in place permissions to link the survey data to these other data sources, and considering when these variables will be available to link to survey data (i.e. the lag involved).

We suggest that financial data is gathered from the student record data but if it was felt that funding information relating to PG study was not sufficiently captured in these other data sources, a multi-code closed question could be asked along the lines of the following:

How do you fund your tuition fees? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

1. Master's Loan
2. Other loan (e.g. bank, career development loan)
3. Other self-funded (e.g. savings, earnings, family)
4. Your employer
5. The university that you are studying at (e.g. bursary, scholarship, waiver)
6. A UK Government body (e.g. the NHS, Department of Health, Department for Education)
7. The European Union
8. Overseas government
9. Other (e.g. charity, research council, or professional association e.g. Royal Society of Chemists, Institute of Physics)

Follow-up open text question for those selecting 'Other':
Please tell us who pays the fees for your course.

5.2 Motivations

Both students' and stakeholders' views noted the importance of motivations to the PGT experience, for both contextual and analysis purposes. This was a priority theme for both students and other stakeholders.

Motivations for undertaking PGT study were described by participants in the student focus groups. These were varied and covered employment, interest, career change and advancement within academia, as indicated by the following quotes:

"Well, the actual job at the end of it as well, or the actual experience of it as well, basically. That was the motivation."

"I felt like I found a passion for what I was doing and so I wanted to take it further to take advantage of the fact that I felt I was doing really well in undergrad, and I felt like the potential was there for me to, like, do it straight away, which I thought I was kind of on a wave of learning and I quite enjoyed it".

"For me it was more about a change in career. I didn't want to do biology by the end of my degree, I want to go into financial services, and so that's why I'm doing my Master's in a related subject now".

"I've always wanted to do a Master's degree because I've always wanted to be in higher education. I want to move on to a PhD eventually."

Throughout the discussions, motivations clearly influenced what students were seeking from their course, and their expectations from the experience, and these were varied and personal. This highlights the need for the survey tool to capture variance in motivation and for variance to be accounted for in the analysis and interpretation of survey results as far as possible.

Stakeholders felt it was important to include a set of questions around motivations or reasons for studying, arguing this was critical in understanding and contextualising students' expectations, experiences and overall feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. It was noted, however, that motivations could change during the course and so suffer from post-hoc adjustment/rationalisation if asked as part of a survey undertaken at the end of a programme of study. Stakeholders felt motivations to studying at PGT level were considerably more varied than at undergraduate level, and could be influenced by life stage and labour market factors (among other things). Key dimensions here would be employability/career enhancement and intellectual and personal development (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive). Motivations are therefore also closely linked to pathways to study and previous employment and study experiences and to anticipated outcomes (e.g. planned next steps, such as postgraduate research).

Other motivational aspects that stakeholders suggested could be explored included: reasons/motivations for choosing to study at the particular institution (which would provide useful information for institutions, although arguably more for marketing than enhancement activity), and whether students had considered any alternatives to PGT study such as work-based routes. These were seen as a lower priority.

Motivations for studying at PGT level are discussed in the research literature which also concludes that motivations influence decisions, expectations and experiences. The research tends to draw out categories, clusters or typologies of motivations to see how different drivers can affect decisions and experiences. Examples of clusters include:

- 'Employed career progressors' (looking to specialise and progress in a career)

- 'Career changers';

- 'Academically motivated' (looking to study at greater depth, preparing for PGR study);

- 'Training for a specific profession' (mainly those looking to enter a career);

- 'Interest driven'; and those with

- 'Mixed motivations' (including those undecided about their future and looking to keep their options open or to improve on their undergraduate grades and experience) (Pollard et al, 2016).

The literature indicates how both occupational or career-centric factors (e.g. career development) and financial factors are regarded as important drivers given the investment of time and money required of individuals for PGT study. Indeed, career drivers are considered to be sharply defined as a main motivator to study at PG level in contrast to undergraduate study (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014). However, personal interest and subject interest are also highlighted as important drivers and many prospective postgraduate students have both personal or intrinsic motivations and career-related or extrinsic motivations (Pollard et al, 2016; Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014; Bennett and Turner, 2012; Stuart et al, 2008; i-Graduate, 2013; Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004).

Motivational data is clearly a priority area for a new PGT survey. Below is an example of a closed multi-code question that would identify the reasons why students have undertaken their PGT course. Its design reflects the fact that students may have multiple motivations for study and therefore they can select all that apply. The question is based on one used successfully in the Postgraduate Transitions Survey, but adapted in reference to PTES, with answer categories reviewed to find the right balance between comprehensiveness and brevity (bearing in mind the risks of recency effects).

What motivated you to study for your current postgraduate qualification? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.
1. To enable you to progress to a higher level qualification (e.g. PhD)
2. To progress in your current career path (i.e. a professional qualification)
3. To enter a career in higher education (e.g. a research or teaching career)
4. To change your current career
5. To improve your employment prospects
6. As a requirement to enter a particular profession
7. To meet the requirements of your current job
8. To develop a specialist set of skills and knowledge
9. For personal interest
10. Other (please specify)

5.3   Transitions to PGT study

As with motivation to study, students' transition to PGT study was considered a priority theme for the survey by students and stakeholders. Aspects of transition include settling in, information provision, feelings of preparedness, and developing a sense of belonging to an institution. The latter is included in this theme as it can be seen as the product of a

successful transition to postgraduate education. Aspects within this theme also link to the theme of learner resources, facilities and wider support (discussed below).

> It emerged in the focus group discussions that some students appeared to feel under-prepared or lacked confidence about transitioning to PGT study. Students in this situation talked about the higher expectations upon them at postgraduate level.
>
> *"I think it's more intense compared to when I did my undergraduate… it's full steam ahead. There's no easing or waiting."*
>
> They tended to reflect that they were expected to independently *'step up'* to the challenge of postgraduate level study and some students discussed the importance of conversations with university staff in instilling a sense of confidence in their ability to achieve, as the following example illustrates:
>
> *"I think the most important thing is to know that my tutor is there if I need them, feel encouraged that, this might look difficult, but you more than have the capability of doing it."*
>
> PGT students noted that their expectations were formed at the application stage, through the provision of information, and during the first few weeks of the course. Expectations regarding the shape of the course, availability of support and resources, and assessment methods were used to compare against their actual experience. Students formed expectations of many dimensions of postgraduate study. For example, they formed expectations around the access to teaching staff, degree of feedback and response times, and, where relevant, time available for laboratory work. (These are also discussed later in this chapter).

Stakeholders felt an important aspect of the PGT experience that should be captured in the new survey was students' experience of the transition process – the recruitment, enrolment and induction process to their course and institution. This is what the International Student Barometer terms 'arrival experiences'.

In terms of induction, stakeholders particularly wanted to capture experiences of the welcome received and the support provided by the institution in making the transition to postgraduate study/getting up to speed, for example whether they were given help with study skills preparation (particularly those returning to study after some time, and/or changing disciplines). It was noted that the transition process can help students develop a sense of belonging, and to feel valued by their institution. Stakeholders were concerned that feeling valued could be a problematic area for PGT students given the diversity of the population and their relative prominence at different institutions (e.g. they may be significantly outnumbered by undergraduates). In terms of support for the transition to PGT study, there was a concern that many PGT students are underprepared for postgraduate study which can affect their performance and negatively impact on perceptions and experiences. They may lack confidence, writing ability, and critical thinking and analytical skills. International students were also mentioned as a group of students with specific support requirements to make effective transitions to UK PGT study (e.g. language needs) and indeed some international students in the focus group discussed the importance of understanding support for students with English as a second language. The new survey would be able to explore and compare the experiences of transition support received by home/UK-domiciled students and international students.

Secondary considerations within the transition theme included students' experiences as they started their programmes (to compare with their feelings at the end), and the pre-course information provided to PGT applicants, about the description of their courses, and whether students felt they were provided with enough information at the start of their course. However, stakeholders recognised that the timing of the survey may mean questions around pre-course information provision, recruitment and induction experiences and their role in setting expectations may be less relevant and subject to post-hoc adjustment or recall bias (i.e. too long ago for individuals to have accurate recollections). These may be better captured in a separate induction survey.

Another aspect of transition that stakeholders felt could be explored included whether students deferred entry and if so how providers kept in touch with them; how many other providers they applied to; and whether they received conditional offers. However these aspects were felt to be secondary considerations and be applicable to a limited number of applicants.

The transition is therefore an interesting area to explore for PGT students. It appears to be a different experience to that faced by new undergraduates due to PGT study entrants being familiar with HE whilst at the same time feeling they must meet higher expectations set by institutions and potentially lacking the skills and confidence that would help prepare them for PGT study. The transition period is also important for a successful PGT experience and outcomes.

Below are examples of questions focused on experience of transition support and developing a sense of belonging – considered to be priority areas for a new survey. They are both closed questions and include a mix of answer scales: satisfied/dissatisfied and agree/disagree. The first example assesses the satisfaction received with the support provided by their institution to manage the transition between undergraduate study or work to PGT study, and has been adapted from the University Experience Questionnaire. The second example captures students' feelings of belonging to their institutions which would indicate how successful the transition has been.

How satisfied are you with the support provided by your university to help you settle into your course?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. I did not need any support

To what extent do you agree or disagree that you are a valued member of your university?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. This is not important to me

5.4   Teaching, learning and the academic community

This theme was considered to lie at the heart of the new PGT survey, but it was recognised as covering a number of discrete aspects so would need to be captured with several questions.

The teaching and learning experience emerged from discussions with PGT students in the focus groups as a core area of focus for a survey as its components were frequently instrumental to their PGT experience. The students reflected that key dimensions such as: the student-to-teacher ratio; and one-to-one access to teaching staff and their degree of responsiveness (e.g. to answer queries) defined their experiences. For example:

"It's individual, outside the classroom, because in the classroom it's quite hard to get that individual support for your essay and your questions in front of the entire class".

"Me and my friends would try and get in touch with professors just via email and it could take a week just to get a reply, which when you're coming up to deadlines is not the ideal. We never really got to go and visit them to ask them questions, and sometimes you just need that extra little bit of support or access time to them".

At undergraduate level, students felt that learning was more static, with students receiving lectures and having less opportunity for questioning and discussion. At postgraduate level they tended to be expecting a more intensive and personalised learning experience than at undergraduate level. The interactivity of sessions, the opportunity to direct their own learning, and the time allowed for opportunities to discuss, challenge and participate alongside peers was seen as being an important distinction between the postgraduate and undergraduate teaching and learning experience. The quotes below highlight students' expectations and experience of engagement and interactivity with other postgraduate students and teaching staff, and the experience of shaping their own programme of learning (through direct engagement with staff):

"The course will be tailored to your own interests … it won't be some general module. You make something out of it. Something that will matter to you."

"Student engagement with lecturers or student engagement with other students, so how much would you be working together, are you just going to be sat in a lecture theatre watching a lecturer talk at you or are you going to be doing activities to learn the different concepts and skills".

"At undergraduate I never really had contact with a professor, but I spend a lot of time with them now… it's very specialist".

"At postgrad you're tailor-making your course and the relationship with your tutors".

The student groups also identified other dimensions of the teaching and learning experience unique to study at postgraduate level. Several groups of students discussed the importance to their experience of networking with their fellow students; and also, for some, the opportunity the course gave them to extend their network into local industries and with employers. One group reflected on the importance of what they called *"the network of the department".* The following quotes provide examples of why networks influenced PGT experience:

"I think networking is quite important, so that you're on the mix with different people because it could be that you'll work with those people later on".

"The department's relationship with employers and with the connecting professions and other institutions"

For some courses/disciplines students discussed the importance of staff having recent experience in the workplace. More generally, students expected that they would have access to high calibre teaching staff as part of their PGT studies, and staff who were more experienced or well-published than they would have had access to at an undergraduate level. For example:

"For me it's important to have access to world leaders in their own right in what I was going to be studying, because I as paying a lot of money for it. So, it was quite important for me that these were the people that were leading the field in their research".

"The level of teaching at my postgrad institution is much higher than in undergraduate. I just feel that the professors are much more experienced and have much more knowledge".

Other aspects students felt defined their PGT experience were the level of intellectual challenge involved, particularly compared to undergraduate level, and related to this the expected level of independent learning, and the workload and pace. This links back to the theme of transition, and whether students are adequately prepared (or forewarned). These students' comments were typical of PGT student experience of the level of challenge and workload:

"The course I am doing is part-time, so fitting it in around a job or a family, you want to know roughly what the workload would be … you're not spoon-fed at postgrad level; they give you the information and you go away and well certainly on my course, you're left much more to it."

"I knew it was going to be a step up from undergrad, it was going to be harder and I would need to put more hours in … but at the same time there was also more independent learning".

"Now you're almost at the professional level where you're sort of given a skeleton and you have to go in and do everything yourself … they keep throwing around independent work, and it's very true. My course director said you need to treat it as a full-time job. I thought she was kidding, but she wasn't! You are required to do a lot and you have to be prepared for that".

Teaching and learning was also a priority area for the survey content from the stakeholders' perspective. They wanted a new PGT survey to capture the lived experience of PGT students of their learning and teaching. They recognised this theme was somewhat complex and had a number of dimensions or sub-themes covering:

■ An assessment of the specific PGT academic environment including: the intellectual challenge, level of difficulty and stretch, whether the student felt they were pushed academically, whether the course represents a 'step up' from their previous (generally undergraduate) study, the rigour and depth of study, whether it allowed for complex ideas to be explored, whether it was stimulating, and whether they were encouraged to ask questions and make contributions. These aspects link with the facets of 'mastersness' discussed earlier, and sets PGT study apart from undergraduate study.

■ Practical issues such as: modes of teaching/types of delivery (face-to-face, distance learning etc., whether semester or term delivery), size of teaching groups (there may be expectations for smaller groups), whether PGT students are taught separately or jointly with undergraduates, the amount and sufficiency of contact time (although it was noted that questions here may need to be specific about the purpose of the contact time rather than overall contact time per se), opportunities for interdisciplinary work, extent of flexibility and potential for tailoring the experience (also see content

and curriculum), and level of workload (again how this compared to expectations or previous experiences of workload and whether the institutional expectations around workload were made clear in advance).

- The perceived expertise, prestige and calibre of teaching staff including: relevance of tutors' expertise/experience (perhaps through published work), currency (how recent) of their research, the quality of the teaching received, extent of engagement and interaction with their academic tutors, personal tutors and supervisors, accessibility/approachability of the teaching team, respect from teaching staff (whether treated as equals), and enthusiasm of staff. Work by Canning (2014) notes how research has found that non-educational factors can impact on the student learning experience, such as interaction with their faculty and the 'service' they receive from staff and administrators as well as resources provided to students.

- Engagement and interaction with their peers including: exposure to other people and potential to join or build networks; whether they were encouraged to build links across programmes, years of study, and even across institutions or with industry; whether they feel connected and supported, and have a sense of community around the course (part of communities of practice/learning community particularly important for those learning at a distance), extent of group working, an assessment of their learning community (quality of classmates, for example - this was felt to be important to MBA students - and characteristics/variety of their course mates), and learning gained from other students.

- Overall assessment as to whether the course met their learning requirements, and the learning and teaching was felt to be appropriate/fit for purpose etc.

The theme of teaching and learning was considered to lie at the heart of the PGT survey, and the range of dimensions it incorporates suggests a number of potential questions could be developed. Below are a number of example questions covering the dimensions of workload and challenge (new questions) and intellectual stimulation (drawing from the wording of NSS).

Is the workload on your course:

1. Much too high
2. A bit too high
3. About right
4. A bit too low
5. Much too low?
6. Not applicable

Is the course content:

1. Much too difficult
2. A bit too difficult
3. About right
4. A bit too easy
5. Much too easy?
6. Not applicable

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your course:

The course is intellectually stimulating

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Some further example questions could be used to capture the dimensions of networking and interactivity, and these have been adapted from PTES and are based on an agree/disagree scale.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your course?

I have been encouraged to ask questions and make contributions in taught sessions.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

I have been given sufficient opportunities to work collaboratively with other students as part of my course.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

I have been given sufficient opportunities to network with professionals in my chosen field.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

The suggested questions below capture teaching quality. The questions about teaching quality in the NSS and PTES ask about the 'teaching on the course' rather than directly about key teaching staff. Feedback from students taking part in the focus groups, felt that it was important for the survey to capture teachers' experience in their field, and that this was a distinguishing feature of their experience of PG study. It would be extremely difficult to capture this concept without an explicit reference to teaching staff. The feasibility of the use of such questions should be included in planned further consultation with the sector to explore and address any concerns from academic staff. The example questions below

use this approach to capture teaching quality and focus on whether teachers have relevant and current experience, are able to convey ideas and techniques effectively, and students feel they have appropriate contact time with their teaching staff. These use a mixture of 'agree/disagree' and 'too high/too low' answer scales.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the key teaching staff on your course?

The key teaching staff on my course (i.e. tutors, lectures, supervisors) have relevant and current experience in the field.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

The key teaching staff on my course (i.e. tutors, lectures, supervisors) are able to convey ideas and techniques effectively.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. (Not applicable)

The amount of contact time I have with the key teaching staff on my course is appropriate (whether that contact is face-to-face or virtual).

1. Too high
2. Too low
3. About right
4. I didn't need contact with teaching staff

5.5   Feedback and assessment

Another important theme suggested by the research as defining the PGT student experience centred on feedback and assessment.

The student focus groups indicated that feedback and assessment was a key area affecting their PGT experience, and they had distinct expectations about the extent and timeliness of this at a PG level. At the outset, they wanted to know how the course would be assessed and when. Several groups discussed the use of group work in the assessment process, and their experiences of this, which they tended to feel were not always a fair way to reflect their individual performance, with their results sometimes adversely affected by the performance of others.

The timeliness of feedback from staff to students was felt to be an important dimension, as was the detail contained in the feedback. Students wanted to be able to learn from assignments and

to understand how they could improve, so it was felt to be important that the feedback contained direction for future improvement and development, and was frequent and timely so they could see how they were progressing. For example:

"You should be more critical here, but not necessarily giving you the how to… expanding on maybe you could improve by doing x, y and z."

"I think feedback is really important because it actually allows you to develop at a quicker rate. So if you don't really have that much feedback, you don't know how well you're doing and it's easier to get lost, than if you have routine feedback week on week."

Linking feedback to contact with tutors and staff, students expected that should they require it, staff would be available for one-to-one discussions about written feedback they received on their work.

Stakeholders identified a number of aspects to the student experience of feedback and assessment, and these included:

- What form the assessment took (formative, summative);

- When it happened/frequency and whether timely;

- Perceptions of whether it was appropriate/manageable (e.g. Did students feel over assessed? Was it set at the appropriate level?) and useful (e.g. Did it support development of skills? Could it be acted upon?);

- Whether it was tailored; and

- Whether the criteria were clear, transparent, consistent, and fair.

Stakeholders acknowledged that feedback was dynamic – the approach to assessment and feedback could change over the period of a course (e.g. commonly dissertations are used as a formal assessment in Master's programmes at the end of the course) and similarly students' need for feedback may also change.

The examples questions below could be used to explore attitudes to feedback and assessment received during their course – in terms of clarity of marking criteria, timeliness of feedback and usefulness of feedback for their academic development – and are adapted from PTES and the NSS and use the 'agree/disagree' format. The closeness of these questions to those included in the NSS means that it may be feasible to align them, thereby making it possible to compare results for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Feedback on assessed work is timely.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Feedback is useful in improving my work.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

5.6   Content and curriculum

The content of this theme is closely linked to the teaching and learning experience but is more focused on the specific content of the programme and its perceived relevance for the student.

> The focus groups with students highlighted that central to students' views of the content of the course was whether the content was up-to-date and, for example, covered the latest research or enabled them to use and gain experience of the latest technologies. This was important to their experience of PGT study, and linked to their motivations, for example, working in academia or employment, as these two students explained:
>
> *"You're trying to get published from a Master's level, so you need the people that are guiding you to be teaching you the most up-to-date content, because you're never going to get published from something that's dated back to the 80s,"*
>
> *"How up-to-date they are with the rest of the field they're working in, because I think that's the most important thing for preparing you to work within that field or go onto further academic studies."*
>
> Several students felt that it was the currency of the course content that would result in a career advantage. For example: *"There were modules for stuff like live tweeting. It wasn't around a couple of years ago. So being up-to-date was vital for me to then succeed in a career".* Thus currency was really important to students and they wanted to know about this before starting their course. The content and curriculum students were able to follow could be affected by institutional organisation and management (see Section 5.5)

Stakeholder discussions suggested that the following were all important facets of understanding PGT experience of course content and curriculum:

■ Perceived relevance of the curriculum (eg. to work/career goals, but this will not be important to all);

■ Design and coherence of the programme ('greater than the sum of its parts');

- Potential for tailoring the experience, and the degree to which students felt they had choices over their options and how the course was configured;

- Whether it provided what the student was hoping for in terms of breadth and/or depth e.g. whether the course allowed for exploration of concepts in depth; currency of the material (whether it was up-to-date); and

- Practical issues such as whether the course is accredited by a professional body although this will be dependent on course type and student motivations.

However, it was recognised that course content varied considerably from programme to programme and from module to module, and therefore some of the specifics might be better captured in module-level surveys designed and administered within individual institutions rather through a national survey.

Extra elements (e.g. placements, projects and dissemination)

Some dimensions of PGT programme content were considered worthy of exploring with a national survey, as they represented a distinctive feature of PGT-level study for many (although not all) students.

> Students in the focus groups also discussed a range of dimensions of their experience of course content and curriculum that were specific to their chosen course and programme. These included the experience of placements, attendance at relevant conferences, and access to professional networks. However, these experiences and expectations for postgraduate courses tended to be very personal and specific as these examples illustrate:
>
> *"I do a three-month live project at the end of my course working with a local company, so then it would be really useful to know if a previous student has worked for the company, what project they worked on and how it went."*
>
> *"To me that was really important because we got quite a few opportunities… to take part in conferences and helping out with interviewing lecturers and other academics. So that was really important."*
>
> *"I was never really told whether they have any sort of connections with other companies for placements or for jobs afterwards."* (See Section 5.4 for further discussion of the importance of networks to the learning environment).

Discussions with stakeholders indicated that there were aspects to programmes that applied only to certain courses, disciplines and groups of students and these could be conceptualised as 'added extras' that were particularly distinctive in PGT study. Questions gathering data about these elements would need to be routed or presented as optional questions, as not all individuals would have access to such experiences. Common extra elements included: the experience of placements, and the experience of undertaking a dissertation and/or project(s) and the support/supervision provided for these. Others included: support for professional development, linkages to industry/networking opportunities to engage with employers, and/or opportunities for visits/tours.

As questions capturing the key extra elements of the PGT experience would need to be routed, reflecting the fact these aspects are an important but not universal part of PGT study, an initial (multi-code) exploratory question could be used to determine whether the

student has taken part in any placements, dissertations and major/final projects. The responses can then be used to determine which follow-up questions each student is asked. The routed questions following this, could explore support received during the set-up and during the course of the placement, and support received during the course of their dissertation or major project using a 'satisfied/dissatisfied' format. In addition, students completing a dissertation/ major project might be asked about support from their supervisor, as well as the 'value added' to their skill set. Example questions to capture this theme are given below.

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the following:

The support you received from your institution to **set up** your placement?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. I did not receive any support (not applicable)

The support you received from your institution **during** your placement?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. I did not receive any support (not applicable)

The support you received while undertaking your dissertation/thesis/major or final project?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. I did not receive any support (not applicable)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Your supervisor/ tutor had the skills and subject knowledge to adequately support your dissertation/ thesis/major or final project?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Working on your dissertation/thesis/major or final project has provided you with additional skills than your course alone?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

5.7 Organisation and management of the programme, and wider engagement

Another core theme, 'organisation and management' focuses on the student's experience of how well their course is run and managed.

The student focus groups indicated that practical issues (e.g. timetabling and communications) were important to students' experience of PGT study. The groups were vocal about the importance of the organisation and management of the programme and knowing timetabling sufficiently in advance in order to fit around other commitments, as well as knowing how the year was structured (e.g. when assessments took place). This was particularly important as a PGT student, as many also had work and other family commitments.

The content of courses was particularly important to PGT students, particularly in relation to their reasons for studying as they often undertook the course to gain specific content knowledge through studying specific modules (see also Section 5.6). Some students discussed that in their day-to-day experience of the course they had found there to be timetable clashes between some of the modules they would have liked to select, which affected the programme of learning they were able to follow in reality.

Students in the focus groups had varying expectations about what their experience and extent of engagement with the wider institution would consist of. The discussions here were more focused on social aspects and activities rather than about support accessed, spaces used, and feeling valued by the institution. For example, some students talked about wanting/expecting to participate in societies and to engage in campus life, while others expected that they would be able to participate in extra-curricular activities to further develop and enhance the skills gained from their course, as one student explained:

"The student experience for my postgrad degree to me means more extra opportunities… to go to lectures, to build your skills, so all the societies you can do but actually taking a leadership role."

Overall, however, most PGT students felt that the social aspects of the course and university environment were less important than they had been at undergraduate level:

"It was more about building your skills, and actually concentrating on what you can take out of this experience rather than, as an undergrad, having a bit of fun."

Stakeholders wanted to understand PGT students' engagement with the wider institution (although not particularly the social aspect to HE which was felt to be a lower priority for postgraduate students in general). A key issue here for stakeholders was the 'institutional presence' of postgraduates and whether PGT students felt they were an integral and important part of the university or a hidden, invisible and less valued part of the institution; and whether they felt listened to. They felt this theme therefore should gather data on the

amount of time students spent on campus and/or whether they accessed resources remotely (e.g. through virtual learning environments (VLE)), gathering feedback on the spaces and facilities used on campus (e.g. library), views on whether there are specialist facilities and spaces for postgraduate students such as dedicated study, meeting or work spaces, and perceptions of the extent to which PGT students feel supported by, listened to and catered for by the institution (although some elements here overlap with the theme of learning resources and wider support: see Section 5.8). Stakeholder discussions indicated that the latter could include practical issues such as whether the timetabling works appropriately (and is respectful of students' commitments), and reflects the timetable they were shown when they applied. This was found to be a particularly critical issue for those studying part-time (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014).

The example questions are illustrative of how a survey of PGT students could capture the facets of the organisation and management of the programme that were most important to students and stakeholders – how the course is organised, how changes are communicated to students, how well the course timetable fits alongside other commitments. The questions below are based on those included in the NSS or PTES, but the question wording and answer scales have been tailored to PGT students, with the intention of facilitating engagement. A new question could also be developed to capture views on whether students felt listened to.

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the following:

How your course is organised?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. Not applicable

How any changes in the course or teaching are communicated?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. Not applicable

How the course timetable fits with your other commitments?

1. Very satisfied
2. Mostly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Mostly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied
6. Not applicable

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The course organisers listen to and respond to student feedback?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

5.8   Learning resources, facilities and wider support

Another theme that emerged from the research as being important to the PGT experience focused on the support provided by the institution and the resources that could be accessed.

Some PGT students in the focus groups discussed the influence of the wider support and learning resources on their experience. In one group a disabled student discussed the *"steady support network"* she had experienced as part of her undergraduate studies, and as she transitioned into PGT, the student needed to make use of university support for disabled students. There were other examples of pastoral support being important, such as for this student who struggled with the increase in challenge presented by PGT: *"I don't really feel there was any support for us. It was either figure it out, or leave… it was sink or swim."*

Some international students discussed requirements and support that were important to them in order to effectively study at PG level, such as support available to help them to meet the English language requirements, as one student questioned, *"Are they [the institution] able to help them with language or pronunciation, for example, vocabulary?"*

Other students discussed the importance of employability and careers support such as help identifying the skills they had developed as part of their course, writing CVs, and practising applying for jobs. One student described careers support as a central part of the student experience, and one which could enable students to realise their motivations and reasons for undertaking the course: *"So, developing your employability skills, knowing how to sell yourself in interviews, knowing how to write a professional CV or academic CV, just things like that. So, I'm sure all universities have career departments, so whether they actually came into a few of your sessions and actually run through these things with you."*

Access to resources was also important to students. All groups discussed the importance of access to sufficient and current learning resources, including access to laboratories, having digital access to publications, but also to notes and videos of sessions should they be unable to attend. Students, whose courses made use of specialist equipment and/or specific software, reflected on their level of access to these (set against their expectations) as being important to their course experience, as one student studying a science course detailed:

"I would have liked to know more in terms of what's available within the university itself, what sort of equipment is in the lab, whether they have EEGs or whether they have just software or things I might need."

Discussions with stakeholders identified a number of important elements within the theme of support and resources:

■ Learning resources provided and accessed, including access to specialist software and training to its support use; and availability of specialist facilities such as studios or

laboratories, and whether students had sufficient time in and access to these specialist learning environments. PGT students may have expectations for specialist equipment and even segregated/dedicated PGT facilities. It was noted that where courses are delivered wholly online, campus-based physical facilities provided, such as library buildings and catering, will not be relevant. Thus learning resources could also specifically cover virtual/online provision and access.

- Experiences of pastoral support provided by the institution (and this could link to issues around wellbeing). Wellbeing was discussed by stakeholders as being of interest but it was felt to be a challenging theme for the survey as it would need to be very focused and linked closely to the course/study experience. There was a sense from stakeholders that this was too easily affected by other things going on in a person's life, therefore making it difficult for questions about this to square with the criteria for inclusion related to question responses being able to be influenced by institutions.

- Use of wider support facilities and services such as careers support, counselling, and disability support (e.g. If you have a schedule of adjustments in relation to a disability how satisfied are you with how those adjustments were met?) etc.

Potential questions in this theme could therefore capture important elements of the wider learning experience. The examples below cover personal support (known as pastoral support), availability of specialist learning resources and library services. The example questions are intended to capture students' views on the availability of services, rather than their awareness of them, and use an 'agree/disagree' format. These are new questions (with the exception of the question focusing on library resources which has drawn on PTES).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

There have been sufficient opportunities to access personal support services (i.e. pastoral support) throughout your course.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. I haven't needed to use personal support services

You have sufficient access to specialist resources (e.g. equipment and software) needed to fulfil the requirements of your course.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. I haven't needed any specialist resources

The library resources and services (physical and online) meet your needs.

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. I haven't needed any library resources or services

5.9   Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes were considered important for addressing the aims of the PGT survey, to be particularly distinctive for PGT study (and differ to those anticipated from undergraduate study) and to matter to prospective PGT students.

> PGT students had distinct ideas about the skills they hoped to develop as a result of the course and the career opportunities that they felt had or would open up, and these differed to those that they expected after studying at undergraduate level. The outcomes students anticipated were linked to their motivations for doing the course, but they discussed making links with other professionals and building networks through PG study, taking the next steps towards a PhD or further study, career change and entering employment and being able to draw on specialist skills or knowledge. The students reflected less on learning outcomes that were not so immediately relatable to the motivations for undertaking PGT study (e.g. developing critical thinking), although two of the focus group discussions explored the extent of independent learning gained during studies and opportunities for researching into their chosen field, as these examples illustrate:
>
> *"[During postgraduate study] I thought I'd do more independent learning, which was true. It was more research into your own field, that's what I expected… I obviously knew it was going to be a step up from undergrad, it was going to be harder and put more hours into it and that turned out to be true."*
>
> *"You're investing a year of your life in something and you're obviously doing it because you want a good career at the end of it, so it's good to know that your predecessors have actually gone into areas similar to what you're looking at and that it has been a benefit to them in pursuing the sort of career that you're after, because otherwise it makes doing a Master's irrelevant if it's not actually going to be a stepping stone to where you want to be."*

Learning outcomes were felt to be particularly important amongst the stakeholders. Essentially this could be split into two sub-themes: a) career/progression outcomes; and b) skills and competencies developed.

Career outcomes could include: students' assessment of their professional preparation/work readiness (d'Aguiar and Harrison, 2016) and perceptions of career enhancement from the programme. Both of these would be linked to students' employability outcome expectations for the programme (and motivations for study), and how they intend to use their qualification/views on what they hope will happen next (e.g. career prospects, promotion, change job). There was support therefore for exploring the extent to which a student's experience was felt to be meeting their career expectations. This theme could also include practical outcomes such as linkages and networks made with employers; and whether students feel they have been given the tools to support their transition into professional employment (although this may not be relevant for all,

depending on their motivations for PGT study and planned next steps). It was acknowledged that career aspirations would be interesting to cover, but could be difficult to measure, and are likely to change over the course of PGT study. Capturing actual outcomes (and experiences of the transition from PGT study) could also be difficult depending on the timing of the survey; employment outcomes will be mediated by pre-PGT experiences and whether they have been employed throughout their studies. Also capturing actual outcomes may be better achieved via Destinations/Graduate Outcomes survey data and/or Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data when this becomes available, and this provides an opportunity to compare actual with anticipated outcomes to see if expectations are borne out.

Outcomes could also include an assessment of the skills, knowledge and behaviours, gained though engagement with PGT study (such as independence, critical thinking, understanding of research methodologies etc.). It is worth noting how the current longitudinal DLHE survey includes additional routed questions for research postgraduate (PGR) students only, which specifically addresses this theme – capturing perceptions of the impact of PGR degree on individual's current work, although this is due to be replaced with the new Graduate Outcomes survey.

Suggestions for skill-based outcomes for the new PGT survey included exploring perceptions of whether skills have improved/been developed, and the extent to which students were able to practise/apply this knowledge/skills. It was suggested by stakeholders that this question set could tie in explicitly to what PGT students (particularly Master's students) are expected to be like/to have gained when they exit their programmes. This could draw on the literature on the facets of 'mastersness' explored by the QAA Scotland (see Section 3.4 above). This could include questions such as: 'My ability to handle complexity has increased as a result of my engagement with the programme'; and 'I am a more autonomous learner as a result of my engagement with this programme'. Stakeholders also felt an open question could be asked here about the skills students felt they gained from their programmes. The research literature indicated that student surveys can include questions on skills learned and competencies acquired (Carrivick, 2011). It also indicates that as PGT students may have already been working in the field that they are studying, it is argued they are more able to clearly articulate the type of advanced specialist knowledge and skills that they expected to acquire/develop through their programme and whether the content and curriculum enabled them to do so (Kember et al, 2016).

Another suggestion from stakeholders was to gather attainment from the programme such as grades, but it was acknowledged that this was unlikely to be uniform across programmes (levels and disciplines), would depend on the timing of the survey, would be clouded by issues such as grade inflation, and could perhaps be better captured in other mechanisms (e.g. student record). An interesting potential area within the theme of outcomes raised by stakeholders was whether there had been any unanticipated outcomes for students from their PGT experience.

Illustrative questions for this theme could capture skills gained and employability, and whether the course has resulted in desired learning outcomes. This includes development of wider skills and achievement of outcomes (beyond employment/ employability), recognising that students undertake postgraduate study for a variety of different reasons.

The three example questions below focus on perceptions of enhancement of academic ability, provision of necessary skills, and enhancement of employment prospects. They all use an 'agree/disagree' format, and the first has been developed from PTES but the others are new questions.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Your course has enhanced your academic ability?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Your course has provided you with the skills you need for what you want to do next?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Mostly disagree
5. Definitely disagree
6. Not applicable

Your course has enhanced your employment prospects?

1. Definitely agree
2. Mostly agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Definitely disagree
5. Mostly disagree
6. Not applicable

5.10 Overall assessment

It was felt to be important to capture students' overall impressions of their course, and give them the opportunity to reflect on the entirety of the experience.

> Students reported that some measure of overall view of the programme would be important to capture in a survey. Some students framed this in terms of student satisfaction, although some reflected that they would want to understand the factors that were driving satisfaction and look behind that headline figure, and indeed some of these elements might be more important to them than overall satisfaction. These contrasting views are highlighted in the following examples:
>
> *"I think what's important is to have a satisfaction rating, like, 'How satisfied are you with the course and the quality of teaching?' "*

> *"For me it's a combination of … it's about the quality of the tutors and their knowledge and so that's very important to me around what's in the actual module – what you're going to be taught and how up-to-date they are with the rest of the field they're working in because I think that's the most important thing for preparing you to work within that field or to go on further academic studies."*

There was a strong interest from stakeholders in capturing expectations that students had for their course before they started and to see whether their expectations were met (and to what extent) and some assessment of whether students felt they 'got the product they thought they were buying'. However, it was acknowledged that this kind of assessment was not straightforward in that: a) expectations may change (consciously or unconsciously) during studies so could be affected by the timing of the survey, and b) may be affected by the experience of the programme.

There was also interest in students being given the opportunity to reflect on the entirety of their experience. Learning from the NSS indicates that students tend not to like single questions asking them to judge the entirety of their course, and instead would prefer to judge different aspects, modules or years of study (Griggs et al, 2014). Stakeholders similarly felt that students should not be asked directly about value for money and that this could be explored indirectly rather than as a direct question, and by using a number of questions. For example, through questions around (with hindsight):

■ Whether students would have made the same decisions about study programme and study institution;

■ Whether they would recommend the course and institution to a friend;

■ What they felt they got from their PGT study (that they didn't get from their undergraduate study); and/or

■ How they feel they have benefited from the experience/what value has it created for them.

There was a strong feeling among stakeholders that this reflection and overall assessment of the PGT programme/experience should not solely be about satisfaction. Indeed there was scepticism about the notion of universities being about student satisfaction: *"Some people would argue that what we ought to be striving for, especially at Master's level, is dissatisfied students – people who have been made to think and maybe change their views."* (This reflects the 'pedagogy of discomfort' literature).

The questions below are illustrative of how students' overall impressions of their course could be effectively captured using the principles described above. These are new questions rather than drawing on existing NSS, PTES or other survey questions. They reflect the aspiration to derive a sense of 'value added', while avoiding difficulties with using this (ambiguous) term explicitly. The PGISG felt strongly that asking students whether they would recommend their course to others (using a scaled question) would capture overall satisfaction successfully. A closed question would be an effective way to test whether students' expectations had been met, and this broad question allows the survey to measure expectations against experiences, without the difficulties involved in exploring specific issues.

How likely would you be to recommend your course to a friend or colleague?

1. Very likely
2. Quite likely
3. Neither likely nor unlikely
4. Quite unlikely
5. Very unlikely

To what extent have your expectations for your postgraduate course been met?

1. Not at all
2. Very little
3. Some
4. Quite a bit
5. Very much
6. Not applicable

Following up negative responses to any of the questions in this theme with an open question seeking reasons would allow respondents the option of explaining their answers. Responses to both could be analysed by HE providers and used for enhancement activities. For example:

Please tell us why you wouldn't recommend your course [OPEN]

Please tell us why your course did not meet your expectations [OPEN]

An open question could also be used to seek responses about what students have gained from their course, and this would capture more in-depth and tailored information about what the institution is providing for students, for example:

What are the key things you have gained from your course? [OPEN]

5.11 Mapping the themes

The themes described in this chapter have been drawn together in the table below (Figure 1) and mapped against whether they would meet the three survey aims, namely to collect and provide:

- Quality assessment data for the sector (accountability purposes)

- Provider enhancement data (enhancement purposes) and

- Information to support decisions of prospective students (information purposes).

In addition, the sources of evidence have been marked alongside and where suggestions were felt to be of a lower priority (with the understanding that any survey would need to be of a finite and manageable length), or where the information could be better obtained from other sources, or are covered under other themes, these are also noted.

Figure 1: Mapping themes against aims and sources of evidence

Theme	Aim(s) addressed	Sources of evidence
Contextual data (largely from external sources) - demographics incl. socio-economic group and domicile (L,Sk,St) - study/programme information (Sk) - previous experiences (L,Sk) (low)	Accountability; Enhancement; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St) Literature (L)
Funding (largely from external sources) - sources of funding incl. employer sponsorship (L,Sk) - level of fees (Sk,St) (low) - attitudes to debt (Sk) (low) - awareness of costs (Sk) (low)	Accountability; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Literature (L) Students (St)
Motivations to study - motivations to PGT (L,Sk,St) - motivations for choosing their university (Sk) (low) - whether considered alternatives to PGT (Sk) (low)	Enhancement; Information provision	Literature (L) Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Transitions to PGT and settling in - whether supported in making the transition (Sk)(St) - preparation for PGT (Sk) - pre-course information/communication (Sk) (low) - recruitment/induction/welcome (Sk) (low)	Enhancement; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Teaching, learning and academic community - experience of distinctive PGT aspects incl. interactivity, challenge, complexity (Sk,St) - experience of practical PGT aspects (workload, class size, contact time) (Sk,St) - subjective assessment of key teaching staff (L,Sk,St) - interaction, learning and support from peers (Sk,St) - overall assessment of teaching/learning experience (St) - peer networking opportunities (Sk,St)	Accountability; Enhancement; Information provision	Literature (L) Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Feedback and assessment - appropriate (timeliness, manageable, level) (Sk,St) - usefulness (directions for improvement)(Sk,St) - clarity (Sk) - fair (transparent, consistent, individual) (Sk,St) - format of assessment (St) (low) - timing and frequency of assessment (Sk,St) (low) - tailored (Sk) (low)	Accountability; Enhancement; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Content and curriculum (largely from module surveys) - relevance of curriculum (Sk) - whether material was up-to-date (Sk,St) - coherence of programme (Sk) - potential for tailoring (Sk) (low) - accreditation by professional body (Sk) (low)	Accountability; Enhancement; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Placements, dissertation and major projects (routed) - support/supervision (Sk) - support for professional development (Sk) (low) - links to industry/professional networking (Sk, St) (low)	Enhancement; Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Organisation and management of the programme - experience of programme organisation (St) - timetabling (Sk,St) - communication (L,Sk,St)	Enhancement; Information provision	Literature (L) Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)

- wider engagement/belonging (L,Sk) (covered under Transitions)		
Learning resources, facilities and wider support - access to sufficient/current resources (digital)(Sk,St) - access to specialist resources (Sk,St) - student voice/representation (Sk) (covered under Organisation and management) - pastoral support (Sk) - wider support (e.g. careers/employability)(Sk,St) - social facilities and activities (St)(low)	Enhancement Information provision	Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Learning outcomes - assessment of skills/knowledge gained (incl. soft skills such as confidence, autonomy/independence) (Sk,St) - assessment of career progression/career outcomes (work readiness, professional preparation, career enhancement, employer linkages) (Sk,St) (possibly routed) - preparation for next steps (Sk) - any unanticipated outcomes (open) (Sk) (low) - expectations for next steps (after PGT study) (Sk) (low)	Accountability Enhancement Information provision	Literature (L) Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)
Overall assessment - whether expectations met (Sk) - feel valued by their institution (Sk) (covered in Transitions) - value of the experience/what they have gained (over and above UG study) (Sk) (open) - whether would recommend to others (Sk) - perceived value to employers (St) (low) - whether would make same PGT choices (Sk) (low) - whether considered dropping out (Sk) (low) - satisfaction (St)	Accountability Information provision	Literature (L) Stakeholders (Sk) Students (St)

Source: IES/NatCen, 2018

6   Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter summarises the considerations and recommendations for the design and content of a proposed new UK-wide survey of PGT students. Overall, the student and stakeholder evidence suggests there is an appetite for and supports the development of a survey instrument. We have illustrated a number of ways in which postgraduate study is distinct and student experiences could be captured in order to meet survey aims around information provision, accountability and enhancement. The research has also highlighted a number of challenges and gaps in understanding which suggest scope for further work, such as testing a pilot instrument with PGT students and further engagement with the HE sector, to ensure the usability of the survey findings from its perspective and ensure any survey design is feasible.

The conclusions and recommendations presented below draw on the evidence presented in the chapters above from: PGT students; HE expert stakeholders; and a review of relevant literature. In formulating the recommendations, the authors have benefited from the insights of and discussions with HEFCE colleagues and the members of the PGISG. While there are some clear ways forward with regards to design principles and survey content, other aspects will require the further reflection and consideration of the UK funding bodies.

Consideration of the findings from students and stakeholders alongside the latest good practice in social survey design has resulted in several recommendations to support the effective design and implementation of a survey of PGT students.

1. **Students should be surveyed only once regardless of the length of their programme**. PGT programmes tend to be one year or less in duration, but some programmes (particularly those undertaken part-time) may take more than one year. We suggest that students only be asked to complete the survey once during their programme.

2. **The survey should have a maximum of 30 questions.** The general rule is that an average of three survey questions can be administered per minute, meaning that a 10-minute survey would include asking each participant approximately 30 questions.

3. **A small number of relevant questions drawn from existing surveys, such as the NSS, should be included in the new survey instrument.** This will allow for concepts to be measured over time, and allow for some tentative comparison between undergraduate and postgraduate study.

4. **The survey should also contain questions developed specifically for the new PGT survey**, as there are clear gaps in potential topic areas when mapped against the coverage of existing surveys.

5. **The survey should have criteria for inclusion** to help in its development and also to use as it embeds and responds to changes in the research context and landscape of PGT study.

6. **We recommend the survey includes a mix of questions i.e. that it uses five-point Likert scale questions, up to three multi-code questions with no more than 10 answer categories, and up to three open text questions.** These different types of questions could have a positive effect on data quality, as the diversity of formats can have a positive effect on engagement. Also ensuring the majority of questions are 'closed' questions facilitates the ease and speed of completion**.**

7. **We recommend that questions are framed in different ways, with a mix of different response categories.** The response options lead naturally from the questions, lowering the cognitive burden by mimicking real-life question-answer dyads. Using different answer scales should promote engagement and enhance the user-experience, while at the same time preventing 'yea-saying'.

8. **We recommend that all response scales (with the exception of multi-code questions) include a clearly labelled 'not applicable' (NA) option at the end of the scale**. This can be particularly important when scales are used for response categories, as respondents will tend to use the neutral mid-point option if an NA option is not provided, and this will impact on scoring results. Providing an NA option, allows students to skip questions they feel are not relevant to them, without forcing a valid response, thus addressing concerns that the mid-point option will be used when a question is not relevant.

9. **Routing should only be used in relation to gathering experiences of placements, dissertations and final projects.** Overall it was felt that most questions should be relevant for the majority of students undertaking a PGT course, so little routing would be needed. The agreed exception would be questions relating to placements, dissertations and final projects, as these aspects are not universal to all courses or students.

10. **The same survey approach and instrument is applied across regions/nations**: In the course of this work, we did not find any potential regional or national differences that could affect survey development.

Students and stakeholders determined a number of ways in which they felt that the PGT student experience was distinct and which should be reflected in a survey of PGT students. Stakeholders felt that a survey could be structured to follow the student journey to allow for reflection, logical flow and to enhance the respondent's engagement with the questionnaire.We recommend that the survey follows the student journey from motivations to study through to anticipated (or actual, depending on the timing of the survey) outcomes. The following figure (Figure2) illustrates the suggested flow, as reflected in the ordering of themes in Chapter 5.

Figure 2: Suggested structure of a questionnaire

- Motivations to PGT study
- Transitions to PGT and settling in
- Teaching, learning and academic community
- Feedback and assessment
- Placements, dissertation and major projects (routed)
- Organisation and management of the programme
- Learning resources, facilities and wider support
- Learning outcomes
- Overall assessment

Source: IES/NatCen, 2018

The research with students and stakeholders identified a number of important themes for a survey. These were mapped in Section 5.11 against the survey aims and sources of evidence. The chart below (Figure 3) includes the themes from this exercise that were given highest priority. It should be noted that the number of themes outnumber the recommended number of questions (30) so there is unlikely to be scope to accommodate all these areas.

Figure 3: Priority themes for a survey

Theme	Priority areas
Contextual data*	- demographics - study/programme information
Funding*	- sources of funding incl. employer sponsorship
Motivations to study	- motivations to study PGT
Transitions to PGT and settling in	- whether supported in making the transition - preparation for PGT - wider engagement/belonging (feeling valued)
Teaching, learning and academic community	- experience of distinctive PGT aspects incl. interactivity, challenge, intellectual stimulation, complexity - experience of practical PGT aspects (workload, class

	size, contact time) - subjective assessment of key teaching staff - interaction, learning and support from peers - overall assessment of teaching/learning experience - peer networking opportunities
Feedback and assessment	- appropriateness (timely, manageable, level) - usefulness (directions for improvement) - clarity - fairness (transparent, consistent, individual)
Content and curriculum**	- relevance of curriculum - whether material was up-to-date - coherence of programme
Placements, dissertation and major projects (routed)	- support/supervision - support for professional development - links to industry/professional networking
Organisation and management of the programme	- experience of programme organisation - timetabling - communication - student voice/representation
Learning resources, facilities and wider support	- access to sufficient/current informational resources (digital) - access to specialist resources - pastoral support - wider support (e.g. careers/employability)
Learning outcomes	- assessment of skills/knowledge gained (academic skills but also soft skills such as confidence) - assessment of employment prospects (career progression/career outcomes) - preparation for next steps
Overall assessment	- whether expectations met - value of the experience/what they have gained - whether would recommend to others - satisfaction

* These aspects could be captured using wider data sources: HESA student record and Student Loans Company data
** These aspects could be captured with module-level provider-administered surveys

Source: IES/NatCen, 2018

There remain two areas relating to survey content that require further exploration. First, if a survey instrument is developed using the themes and question areas suggested above, then the funding bodies may want to undertake further work with the sector to explore how institutions view the utility and purpose of proposed questions in these areas and their effectiveness at supporting enhancement within institutions. Additionally they may want to consult further about the criteria for inclusion, specifically: whether questions could move beyond a focus solely on the teaching and learning experience (as suggested in this report) to capture a broader experience involving peer learning, pastoral support and wider institutional engagement; and to assess whether questions meet at least two of the overarching survey aims. They may also want to explore whether institutions would be comfortable with questions about teaching quality making explicit reference to teaching

staff (i.e. whether this would raise concerns from academic staff) which represents a departure from PTES and NSS.

Second, feedback strongly identified that study programme and demographic data are important in the analysis of the survey findings to contextualise and help understand any differences in experience between student groups. Contextual data could be gathered where possible from other (linked) sources, so questions about these aspects could be minimised and thus reduce the potential length of the survey. Further consideration will need to be given to the extent to which this type of data could be: consistently provided by institutions during the sampling process; linked to survey responses from administrative or other datasets; or will need to be captured via survey questions. For example, detail on previous undergraduate study could be provided by HEFCE/HESA through matching records for those students who completed their undergraduate studies within 15 years of starting their PGT studies. In reviewing whether and how to link survey responses to other datasets, consideration will need to be given to the completeness of variables, and whether and how this affects potential robustness. Some datasets are likely to be partially completed or only available for some groups of students. For example, home postcode at the time of applying for undergraduate study will not be available for all PGT students, and will be missing for those who studied outside the UK for their undergraduate studies and could not be used to derive a measure of socio-economic group. This level of missing data is perhaps acceptable, and arguably measures of socio-economic background used in the UK are culturally specific and thus not applicable/relevant to non-UK individuals.

Lastly, the design principles and potential survey questions outlined in this report are intended to be a first step in the development of a new UK-wide PGT survey. At this stage we recommend that the questionnaire should be designed to be mode neutral and use a unified mode of construction as far as possible (while the survey mode is being decided). Following further consultation with the UK funding bodies and with the sector (if appropriate), and the development of a questionnaire, we would recommend that further development work is undertaken in the form of a thorough cognitive testing programme with a wide range of students (ensuring the demographic profile of the target response group is adequately reflected). This qualitative technique (based on methods used in cognitive psychology) is employed in questionnaire design to help prevent measurement error, and promote the validity and accuracy of the survey.[16] Once questions have been cognitively tested, a pilot study will also help identify any challenges in terms of administration and response before the survey is rolled out. During this piloting stage a range of methods to publicise the survey could be tested including the use of tutors and social media; and also a range of incentives to engage prospective students could be tested to see which, if any, have a positive impact on response rates. Generally when publicising the survey we would recommend the provision of clear information about the purpose and benefits of the survey, the time expected to complete, and feedback on survey findings and how they have been used.

---

[16] See Collins, D. (2014) *Cognitive interviewing practice.* Sage; also Willis, G.B. (204). *Cognitive interviewing: A tool for improving questionnaire design.* Sage Publications.

Annexe one: Literature review bibliography

1994 Group (2012) The Postgraduate Crisis, Policy Report.

Arambewela, R. and Maringe, F. (2012) 'Mind the gap: staff and postgraduate perceptions of student experience in higher education', *Higher Education Review*, 44(2), pp. 63-84.

Archer, L. (2007) 'Diversity, equality and higher education: A critical reflection of the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5-6), pp.635-653.

Archer, L. and Hutchings, M. (2000) ' "Bettering yourself?" Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 21(4), pp.555-574.

Archer, W. (2016) *International Taught Postgraduate Students: The UK's Competitive Advantage,* The UK Higher Education International Unit Research Report.

Ball, C. (2016) *Learning from Futuretrack: Deciding to undertake postgraduate study,* Research Report for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Barnes, T., Huttly, S. and Macleod, G. (2015) *UKCGE PG Student Experience Working Group Pilot Study of PGT Programme Directors – June 2015,* UK Council for Graduate Education Research Report sponsored by the Higher Education Academy.

Bennett, P. and Turner, G. (2012) *PTES 2012 - National findings from the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey*. The Higher Education Academy (available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-ptes-final-report-2012).

BIS, White Paper (2011). *Students at the Heart of the System*, www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/h/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

Canning, J. (2014) *Prospects and pitfalls of extending the UK National Student Survey to postgraduate students: An international review*, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton.

Carrivick, J.I. (2011) 'Exploring the Value of Professional Body Accreditation for Masters Programmes', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 35:4, pp 479-497.

Clarke, G. and Lunt, I. (2014) *International comparisons in postgraduate education: quality, access and employment outcomes*, HEFCE.

Collins, D. (2014) *Cognitive interviewing practice.* Sage

d'Aguiar, S. and Harrison, N. (2016) 'Returning from earning: UK graduates returning to postgraduate study, with particular respect to STEM subjects, gender and ethnicity', *Journal of Education and Work*, 29:5, pp 584-613.

DfE (2017) *Graduate labour market statistics 2016,* DfE Statistical Publication.

Dillman, D. A. (2017) 'The promise and challenge of pushing respondents to the Web in mixed-mode surveys', *Survey Methodology*, 2, 12-001.

Donaldson, B. and McNicholas, C. (2004) 'Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students: a review and empirical study', *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 9:4, pp 346–360.

Griggs, J., Green, S., Pollard, E. and Williams, M. (2014) *Appendix C The Student Strand,* The UK Higher Education Funding Bodies.

Grimes, A., Medway, D., Foos, A. and Goatman, A. (2017) 'Impact bias in student evaluations of higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:6, pp 945-962.

Higher Education Academy (2017) *Postgraduate taught experience survey briefing note.*

Higher Education Commission (2012) *Postgraduate Education: An independent inquiry by the Higher Education Commission.*

HEFCE (2016) *Intentions After Graduation Survey 2016: Breakdown of responses by questions and characteristics of students,* HEFCE Data Analysis December 2016/37.

HEFCE (n.d.) *Overview of postgraduate education: Postgraduate entrants to English HEFCE-funded HEIs between 2005-06 and 2015-16*, Online interactive data http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/postgraduate/lterm/ [accessed 27.07.17].

Hinton-Smith, T. (2016) 'Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The experience of lone parent students', *British Educational Research Journal,* 42(2), pp. 207-222.

HM Government (2017) *Building our industrial strategy,* Green Paper*.*

HM Treasury (2014) *Autumn Statement 2014* (https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/autumn-statement-2014).

HM Treasury (2015) *Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015* (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-and-autumn-statement-2015-documents).

i-Graduate (2013) *Research into understanding the information needs of postgraduate taught students and how these can be met*, HEFCE.

Jancey, J., Burns, S. (2013) 'Institutional factors and the postgraduate student experience', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 21(3), pp.311-322.

Jepsen, D. M. and Neumann, R. (2010) 'Undergraduate student intentions for postgraduate study', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 32(5) pp. 455-466.

Kalafatis, S. and Ledden, L. (2013) 'Carry-over effects in perceptions of educational value', *Studies in Higher Education,*, 38(10), pp1540-1561.

Kember, D., Ho, A. and Leung, D.Y.P. (2016) 'Evaluating taught postgraduate awards from the student's perspective', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 40(2), pp 147-169.

KPMG LLP (2014) *A Review of the Cost of Postgraduate Taught Provision: Report to HEFCE,* HEFCE.

Krosnick, J. and Presser, S. (2010) 'Question and Questionnaire Design' to appear in the *Handbook of Survey Research* (2nd Edition) James D. Wright and Peter V. Marsden (Eds).San Diego, CA: Elsevier.

Leman, J., Turner, G. and Bennett, P. (2013) *PTES 2013: Findings from the postgraduate taught experience survey*, The Higher Education Academy (available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-ptes-2013).

McCulloch, A. and Thomas, L. (2013) 'Widening participation to doctoral education and research degrees: A research agenda for an emerging policy issue', *Higher Education Research and Development,* 32(2), pp.214-227.

Mellors-Bourne, R., Hooley, T. and Marriott, J. (2014) *Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study: Report to HEFCE*, HEFCE..

Mellors-Bourne, R., Mountford-Zimdars, A., Wakeling, P., Rattray, J. and Land, R. (2016) *Postgraduate transitions, Exploring disciplinary practice*, Higher Education Academy.

Moreau, M-P. and Leathwood, C. (2006) 'Balancing paid work and studies: Working (-class) students in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(1), pp. 23-42.

Morgan, M. and Direito, I. (2016) 'The employability expectations of applicants, students and employers at Master's level', Presentation to the NUCCAT Annual Conference "Managing curriculum change in a consumer-driven university sector" 24th November 2016.

NatCen Social Research (2013) *The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students: A report to HEFCE*, HEFCE.

Pollard, E., Gloster, R., Hillage, J., Bertram, C., Buzzeo, J., Marvell, R., Griggs, J., Drever, E., Kotecha M. and Rahim, N. (2016) *Understanding mature entrants' transitions to postgraduate taught study,* Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Research Report.

Ramsden, P. and Callendar, C. (2014) *Review of the National Student Survey: Appendix A: Literature Review*, NatCen Social Research, the Institute of Education, University of London and the Institute for Employment Studies for UK Higher Education Funding Bodies, HEFCE.

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) 'Challenging Cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' at a Post-1992 University', *Studies in Higher Education,* 28(3), pp. 261-277.

Reay, D. (2002) 'Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students', *The Sociological Review,* 50(3), pp. 398-418.

Saris, W.E., Revilla, M., Krosnick, J.A. and Shaeffer, E.M. (2010) Comparing Questions with Agree/Disagree Response Options to Questions with Item-Specific Response Options, *Survey Research Methods* 4(1) pp. 61-67.

Stuart, M., Lido, C., Morgan, M., Solomon, L. and Akroyd, K. (2008). *Widening Participation to Postgraduate Study: Decisions, Deterrents and Creating Success*, Higher Education Academy.

Tobbell, J. and O'Donnell, V. (2013) 'Transition to postgraduate study: Postgraduate ecological systems and identity', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(1), pp. 123-138.

Tobbell, J., O'Donnell, V. and Zammit, M. (2010) 'Exploring transition to postgraduate study: Shifting identities in interaction with communities, practice and participation', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), pp. 261-278.

UK Higher Education International Unit. (2016) *International Taught Postgraduate Students: The UK's Competitive Advantage,* UK Higher Education International Unit

Universities UK (2009), *Taught postgraduate students: market trends and opportunities,* Universities UK (available at http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2009/taught-postgraduate-students-market-trends-and-opportunities.pdf).

Universities UK (2014) *Postgraduate Taught Education: The Funding Challenge Universities UK Research Report: Higher Education in Focus,* Universities UK.

Universities UK (2017) *Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education.* Research Report, Universities UK.

Universities UK International (2017) *The UK's Competitive Advantage: 2017 Update,* Universities UK.

Urwin, P. and Di Pietro, G. (2005) 'The impact of research and teaching quality inputs on the employment outcomes of postgraduates', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59(4), pp 275-295.

Wakeling, P., Hampden-Thompson, G. and Hancock, S. (2017) 'Is undergraduate debt an impediment to postgraduate enrolment in England?', *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(6), pp 1149-1167.

Wakeling, p. and Hampden-Thompson, G. (2013) *Transition to higher degrees across the UK: an analysis of national, institutional and individual differences*, The Higher Education Academy.

Wakeling, P. (2005) 'La noblesse d'état anglaise? Social class and progression to postgraduate study', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(4), pp.505-522.

Wakeling, P. (2015) *Programme Analysis of HEFCE's Postgraduate Support Scheme, Final Report to ESRC and HEFCE,* HEFCE.

Wakeling, P., Berrington, A. and Duta, A. (2015) *Investigating an age threshold for independence at postgraduate level,* HEFCE.

Wakeling, P., Hancock, S. and Ewart, A. (2017) *Evaluation of the Postgraduate Support Scheme 2015/16: Report to HEFCE,* HEFCE.

Wambach, A. (2016) *Online Student Evaluations: Determinants of Response Rates and Possible Solutions*, Newcastle University.

Warring, S (2011) *An analysis of learning levels within and between a degree and a diploma: New Zealand case study*, Quality Assurance in Education, Vol 19, issue 4, pp 441-450

Webber, M., Lynch, S. and Oluku, J. (2013) 'Enhancing student engagement in student experience surveys: a mixed methods study', *Educational Research*, 55(1), pp 71-86.

Wilkins, A. and Burke, P.J. (2015) 'Widening participation in higher education: The role of professional and social class identities and commitments', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 36(3), pp. 434-452.

Willis, G.B. (204). *Cognitive interviewing: A tool for improving questionnaire design*. Sage Publications.

Yorke, M. (2016) 'The development and initial use of a survey of student belongingness', engagement and self-confidence in UK higher education', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(1), pp 154-166.

YouthSight (2016) *HE research snippet 23 – For PGT, the importance of reputation is only intensifying,* Youth Sight HE Snippet Web Publication (available at https://www.youthsight.com/research-snippet-23-pgt-importance-reputation-intensifying/) [accessed 27.07.2017].

Annexe two: Expert stakeholders consulted

- Jane Artess, former Director of HECSU; Visiting Fellow of Career Development, International Centre for Guidance Studies (ICeGS), University of Derby; Fellow of the Higher Education Academy; Fellow of the Career Development Institute; Fellow of the National Association of Careers Education and Counselling; Chair of NICEC.

- Professor Paul Ashwin, Professor of Higher Education, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University.

- Julie Blant, Postgraduate Careers Service Manager, University of Nottingham; Chair of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Postgraduate Students Task Group.

- Dr John Canning, Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, University of Brighton.

- Professor Claire Callender, Chair of Higher Education Studies, Deputy Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education, Institute of Education, University College London.

- Charlotte Cooper, Head of Planning, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

- Professor Rosemary Deem, Chair of the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE), Professor of Higher Education Management, Royal Holloway University of London

- Dr Jim Gazzard, Director of the Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge.

- Professor Sharon Huttly, Pro VC (Education), Lancaster University.

- Dr Charles Jackson, Stakeholder Research Associates, Visiting Professor Kingston Business School, Survey Director for Career Innovation Group, Senior NICEC fellow.

- Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson, Senior Lecturer in Higher Education, Academic Head of Student Engagement, King's College London.

- Dr Gale MacLeod, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

- Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne, Research Director, CRAC.

- Dr Michelle Morgan, Associate Dean, Student Experience, Bournemouth University.

- Hazel Partington, Senior Lecturer, School of Community Health and Midwifery, University of Central Lancashire.

- Professor John Richardson, Emeritus Professor of Student Learning, Open University (former chair of the Institute of Educational Technology).

- Dr Tony Strike, University Secretary, Director of Strategy and Governance, University of Sheffield.

- Dr Katy Vigurs, Associate Professor, ICeGS and College of Arts, Humanities and Education, University of Derby.

■ Professor Paul Wakeling, Professor of Education, University of York.

Annexe three: Questions for roundtable discussions

Content and potential themes

- What do institutions, senior management teams, department heads, course leaders and tutors need to know to develop PGT provision – to enhance learning and teaching, support for PGT, and improve the student experience?
- What are the current issues facing the sector in terms of understanding the success of its PGT activities/provision?
- What do students want to know about PGT study – institutions, subjects and possibly courses – to help them make decisions?
- What evidence do we currently have about PGT students? Are there any gaps in the evidence base? What do we want to know?
- What themes are currently explored in PGT surveys? Are these the right themes? Do they work for all PGT students? Do they work for all nations/funding councils?
- What themes are explored in surveys of other groups of students e.g. undergraduate students? Are any of these appropriate for PGT students?
- What is distinctive about the PGT experience?

Structure

- Should questions be grouped? How and why? How should the themes be ordered?
- Are some questions likely to be applicable to only certain student groups? If so, should they be included but with routing? What impact will this have on the usefulness of results?
- Which types of students may have issues specific to them only (and thus require filtered questions)?
- Would optional questions be desirable/useful? What are the implications of having optional questions? What are the benefits and drawbacks of optional questions?
- Should providers be able to add their own questions? Why? What are the benefits and drawbacks?
- What would be the best length to deliver sufficient data while maximising response?
- What are the best question formats for these themes/these individuals, to meet the survey aims? Should the survey include a mix of formats?
- Would it be useful/appropriate to seek to link responses to other data? What are the implications of this?

Criteria for inclusion

- What criteria must potential questions meet?

- What should be taken into consideration?

Annexe four: Participation in student focus groups

Table 1: Summary of participant characteristics (personal and/or study)

Characteristic	N
Gender	
Male	16
Female	27
Age	
<25	20
25 or over	23
Ethnicity	
BME	11
White	32
Disability/health condition	
Yes	3
No	38
Course type	
Master's degree	32
Other PGT qualification	11
Usual place of residence	
International domiciled	6
UK domiciled	37
Mode of study	
Full time	39
Part time	4
Subject	
Arts	12
Social sciences	18
Science, engineering, maths	13
Institution type	
Russell group	21
Specialist providers	2
Other	20
Country	
England	24
Northern Ireland	5
Scotland	7
Wales	7

Annexe five: Student focus group discussion guide

Factors affecting PGT study decisions

■ What did you think about when deciding to study for a PGT qualification?

■ What influenced the type of course you chose (i.e. type/level of qualification and subject/discipline)?

■ What influenced when you decided to study?

■ What affected the type of mode you chose (PT/FT/distance)?

■ What influenced your chosen HEP?

■ Did you take anything else into consideration when deciding whether/how/where to study?

■ How (if at all) did these factors/issues compare to those you considered when you were making your undergraduate course decisions?

Information needs

■ What information did you need to make your PGT study choice?

■ How easy/difficult was it to find the information you needed?

■ Where did you look for/and or find this information? Did you seek information/advice online or speak to someone? Who?

■ How important was being able to use data/statistics versus human experience/case studies/speaking to someone on the course in helping you to reach a decision?

■ How important is it to have comparable information across courses/institutions?

■ Do all prospective students have the same information needs? How might they differ?

■ Looking back at the process of deciding whether to study a PGT course and making your study choices, do you feel that you had all the information and support you needed about the options open to you? If not, why not? What additional information or advice you would have liked/where were the information gaps? What? Why?

■ What do you think about the quality of the information you found/received? What makes information good quality and/or makes information useful/trustworthy etc.?

Survey content priorities

■ Before applying, what would you have liked to have known from previous students?

- What do you feel are the important dimensions of PGT study? What should we be seeking to measure about these?

- What is distinctive about PGT study, compared to UG study?

TEST for the following:

For each element ask:

- Participants to say what they think each dimension means/would cover (example themes are provided in the box below in case required for prompts)

- Whether other areas against each 'theme'/'dimension' would be (more) useful

- Relative importance of each theme and seek views on whether they are essential or optional

- Discuss similarities/differences in priorities between members of the group and the reasons for these.

Student motivations and initial experience
Past students' motivations for studying initial experience. Probe for:

Motivations for postgraduate study (specialisation/changing direction)

Reasons for selecting the course and HEP

Information provided prior to starting e.g. whether description of course was accurate

Experience of the application process

Experience of the enrolment process

Support to make the transition to PGT study.

The student experience

What affects your views of the student experience (at your HEP/of your course)?

Students' experience of funding/finance:

What do you think is distinctive about the finance information needs of PGT students compared with UG students? What would you have liked to have known from previous students with regards to finance/funding?

Value for money

Student views of teaching quality: What has influenced your perceptions of the quality of your course? Why/how?

What does 'teaching quality' mean to you? How might this be measured from a student perspective? Probe for potential question areas:

Amount of contact time and academic support

Mode of teaching

Experience of course resources e.g. online learning provision

Experience of course content (e.g. relevance to the 'world of work')

Whether student considers course content to be 'up-to-date'

Whether student considers course to be 'intellectually stretching'.

What does the term 'enhancement' mean to you? What do you think might be captured in feedback for HEIs to improve and enhance the work they do?

Student views of assessment and feedback

Is sufficient feedback provided?

Is feedback provided in a timely way?

Experience of the assessment process

Dissertation process.

Student engagement: What does 'student engagement' mean to you? What dimensions might this include? Probe:

views of extent of working with others

getting involved in research

having opportunities to make their voice heard

Feeling part of a community.

Student views of facilities and learning resources (e.g. library, computer resources)

Students' overall satisfaction with the course and student experience

Union and social activities. Probe for:

Was student made to feel welcome when they first arrived?

Experience of provision of social activities

Facilities in the Student Union

Sports facilities

View of the general 'student experience'.

Course outcomes

How might student views of the skills, opportunities and personal development gained from the course be measured? Probe for:

Whether the course clarifies career objectives

Whether the course improved career prospects

Whether course content relevant to the world of work

Did the course equip student with the skills they need/feel employers would value?

Experience of work placement (if offered as part of the course)

Questions for specific student groups

Questions for international students: What would you have liked to have known from previous international students? *Probe*:

> *Motivation for studying in the UK*
>
> *Assistance with immigration/visa applications*
>
> *Language assistance provision*
>
> *Anything else?*

Questions for part-time and mature students: What would you have liked to have known from previous PT/mature students? *Probe*:

> *Flexibility of study arrangements*
>
> *Anything else?*

Are there any other distinct groups of PGT students that you think have a specific experience?

Student motivations and initial experience

Student experience (funding, value for money, teaching quality, enhancement, engagement, assess

Course outcomes

Using the information

- How important is it to you to be able to benchmark/compare HEIs against key measures (e.g. student experience/satisfaction)? Why/why not?

- What level would this information ideally be at to be helpful to you? Why? What other levels of information might still be useful?

- What are the ideal student characteristics by which to break down information to inform decisions?

- Which of these areas would you prefer to have statistical information on (e.g. scores/ratings)?

- Which areas would you prefer to know more detail (e.g. have open text responses/qualitative data hear from students in their own voices)?

- What are the priority areas for you (bearing in mind the survey will be short)?

- If you had to answer questions on these topics are there areas you would find more sensitive than others? Which and why?

- How (if at all) would you have used survey information of this type from past students?

Survey structure

- What length of questionnaire might you be willing to participate in for a UK-wide PGT survey?

- How would you feel about being asked whether your responses to the survey could be linked to other data held about you by your provider/other organisations in the HE sector to be used for research purposes?

- What would encourage you to complete such a survey?