Stuart M, Lido C, Morgan S, Solomon L and Akroyd K
‘Widening participation to postgraduate study: decisions, deterrents and creating success’ (April 2008)

Summary by: CHERI (June 2009)

Overview
This report analyses the barriers and deterrents that affect ‘widening participation’ students when considering continuation in higher education to study at postgraduate level.

Aims and background
This report presents the findings of research on the factors that affect students’ decisions to undertake postgraduate study. The research explored any significant differences between student groups and students’ intentions and experience of studying at postgraduate level. In particular, it focused on whether there was any under-representation of particular groups in postgraduate study, why students decide to continue to study at postgraduate level and what their experience is once they take on postgraduate study.

Methodology
The study involved two new universities in England and entailed a questionnaire survey and a small number of interviews. The universities were chosen because though they had a similar subject profile, each of them had a different student profile. Overall, 1,200 students were surveyed and, because students were asked to complete the questionnaires in their lectures, there was a high response rate (1,073 respondents). Of the respondents, 47% were male and 53% were female with an average age range of 18-63. Seventy per cent had entered higher education at the traditional age of 18 and around 75% had studied A levels. Ninety-six per cent of the respondents had studied full-time. The ethnic make-up of the students was different at the two universities. (see pages 20-23).

Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 20 respondents after they had completed their undergraduate studies and involved both students who had decided to continue on to postgraduate study and those who had not. The interviews were undertaken to provide more in-depth explanations from the findings of the quantitative phase.

Key points
• Questionnaire data revealed, unsurprisingly, that UK domiciled students, those who studied practical/applied courses, those who were more worried about debt, those with no children, White/non-minority ethnic students and those from families with no previous higher education experience are less likely to intend to undertake postgraduate study. Whilst, overseas students, those on theoretical/non-applied courses, those who are less worried about debt, those with children, minority ethnic students and those who have family with higher education experience are more likely to intend to undertake postgraduate study.
• For students not intending to go onto postgraduate study, the two main reasons were to ‘enter employment’ and need ‘a break from study’.
• Age, occupational class or actual debt did not produce any significant effects on students’ intentions to study at postgraduate level.
• Data from the interviews provided more in-depth explanations of the findings from the survey. Students who had studied vocational/applied courses were able to find work in their chosen professional with their undergraduate qualification and so did not feel the need to continue on to postgraduate study. They wanted to go into the workplace quickly and use the knowledge they had gained at undergraduate level and to give them a break from study, which they found stressful and challenging. They also believed that employers would value work experience more than further study. Some of the students indicated that they would return to gain further qualifications in the future which might possibly be paid for by their employer. Students on theoretical courses felt that a postgraduate qualification would give them an ‘edge’ in the workplace. Career prospects were important to all interviewees.
• The importance of emotional support from family and friends was highlighted to succeed in what many students saw as ‘the stressful environment of higher education study’. Setting a good example to their children also had an impact on the intention to undertake postgraduate study.
• Incurrence of debt was accepted as part of studying and many did not regard the cost of postgraduate fees as prohibitively high.

Link to full report
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/WPtoPG_Stuart.pdf