What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need?

Guidance for PGT recruitment teams

Meeting the wide variety of information needs of prospective postgraduate taught (PGT) students can be extremely challenging. Despite great efforts made by many providers to support PGT students, their information needs are not consistently met across the sector. The four UK higher education funding bodies have commissioned research[1], including a survey of 1,800 current and prospective PGT students, analysis of provider case studies and a literature review which has highlighted information types and delivery methods which these students find useful.

We are inviting you to use this guidance to enhance any areas of your prospective taught postgraduate information that could be improved, with particular reference to web-site material.

Case studies of good practice are available as part of the research report which can be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/pgtinfoneeds

[1] CRAC and iCeGS, 2014, 'Understanding how people choose to pursue taught postgraduate study'

Finance

Career prospects ahead

Information to provide

Make available course-specific information that is consistent, accurate and up-to-date, as well as accessible or searchable by a range of means. Exploring what courses are on offer is at the heart of the decision to undertake further study, once reassurance is available that study is possible and can be funded. In addition to A-Z lists of course titles, access to course information via course title clustering, broader subject groupings, career sector or study mode are all useful entry routes.

Make available information about costs and funding. Understanding both the cost (fees including extra course costs) and the potential sources of funding are crucial to deciding if study is possible. Searchable funding databases – including by course subject – are recommended where feasible.

Provide information that details the level of expected engagement with the course and how it is distributed across the year. Prospective PGT students are often balancing a broad range of commitments so information regarding expected attendance and assessment periods, if any, will help them assess whether study is possible for them.

Develop several types of information about the career outcomes for graduates of each specific PGT programme. Many prospective PGT students seek career progression or change, not entry to a first job, so employment destination statistics alone may not give them the evidence they seek. Stories from graduates of the specific course, through which they share their experiences and career outcomes, can provide the qualitative evidence prospective students are looking for. This could be supported by facilitated contact with PGT graduates.

Explain admissions processes clearly including the timescales expected for communications and decisions. Providing this information up front helps to manage prospective student expectations and allows them make related plans, such as visa applications.

Information delivery

Consider the way that information is provided for prospective PGT students in light of decision-making models such as the example at Figure 1. The decision-making journey for many prospective applicants is not linear; prospective students

Figure 1: How prospective PGT students decide whether to apply for a course
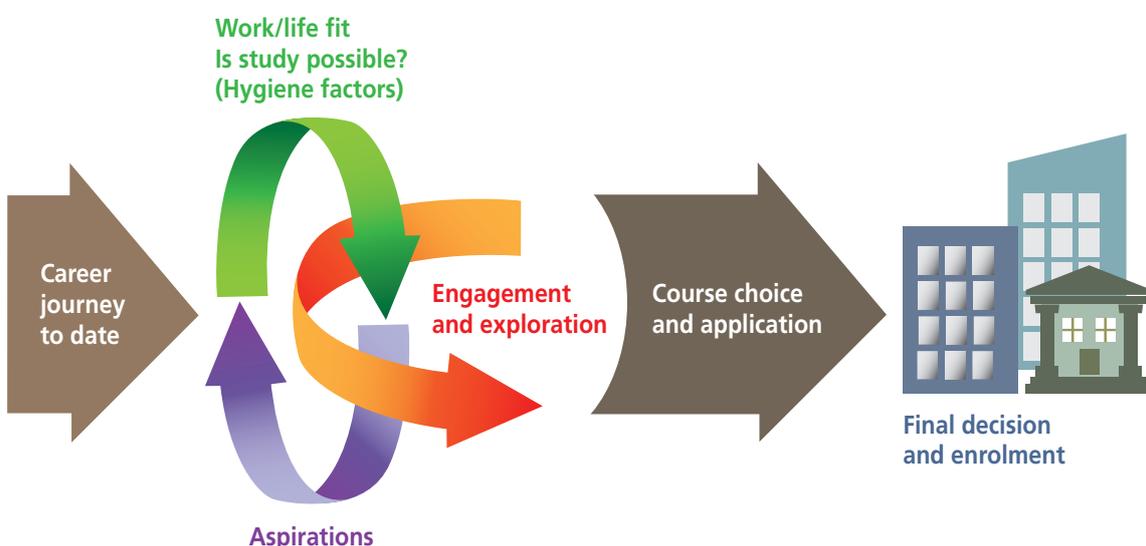
take a variety of routes through the model. As a result web-sites need to enable users to move quickly between different types of information, the practical details which answer the question 'Can I study?' and the course-specific information which answers the question 'Do I want to study this here?'

Facilitate direct contact between prospective students and staff who have programme-specific knowledge. Access to tailored responses from staff (administrators or academics) with programme-specific knowledge is a high priority for prospective PGT students. It is important that systems which support direct contact ensure a timely response.

Develop rich resources (including social media) to inform prospective students and to create dialogue between potential, current and future students. Increasingly, prospective students regard personal narratives as relevant, important and potentially as reliable as corporate information.

Develop segmentation of marketing information that reflects the diversity of the PGT market. Segmenting information for prospective postgraduate students in a way that reflects applicant need, for example distinguishing between UK, EU and international applicants, will assist them in finding the information they want when they need it.

Consider how providers could work with their current students in ambassadorial roles to support prospective students. Engagement will support prospective students' progress towards application and decision prior to enrolment. Experience in ambassadorial and engagement roles could also develop current students' employability skills.

Seek opportunities to continue to engage with the prospective students after application. This is partly to raise the chances of the student actually enrolling, but also reflects the fact that the final decision to study a PGT programme may be very late, i.e. up until enrolment.

In 2015 an online tool is due to be launched. The tool will be designed to help prospective students identify questions they may want to ask and who they may need to speak to during their decision-making journey. Providers will be invited to link to the tool in spring 2015 and we hope that they will choose to promote the tool to prospective students as part of their PGT recruitment practice.