

WIDENING PARTICIPATION FROM UNDERGRADUATE TO POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREES

A Research Synthesis One page summary

Paul Wakeling and Chris Kyriacou
Department of Educational Studies
University of York

June 2010

A report by the Economic and Social Research Council and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement reviews what is currently known about widening participation from undergraduate to postgraduate research degrees. The report also highlights the gaps in knowledge and points to future research priorities.

Key findings:

- Socio-economic class has no direct effect on *immediate* progression to postgraduate research once academic factors are taken into account. However, class inequalities may re-appear in *later* entry to postgraduate research.
- Access to financial resources is a factor affecting access to postgraduate research degrees. However the available evidence does not suggest a clear link between lack of student debt and research degree participation.
- Postgraduate research students are very differently distributed across both subject areas and institutions to undergraduate patterns. Research students are overwhelmingly concentrated in pre-1992 universities.
- Attending a selective university as an undergraduate, regardless of other characteristics, has a positive influence on progression to postgraduate research.
- There is no initial participation rate statistic for postgraduate research. Such a statistic could be analysed according to the indicators discussed in this review.

Moving forward:

- Research is needed into the process of applying for research degrees. This should cover the factors affecting potential students' decision-making processes and any inequalities on the basis of social class, ethnicity, and gender.
- Research is needed on the mobility of students across subject disciplines and institutions between undergraduate and postgraduate research levels.
- Little is known about postgraduate research students' financial circumstances. Research is needed to establish the effect of financial factors on access and to understand the potential impact of student debt.
- There is scope for a better understanding of the reasons why women are less likely to enter a research degree than men, across all subjects.
- There should be further investigation of the influence of social class background on access to postgraduate research degrees, particularly on the implications of any inequalities observed for the diversity of the research workforce.
- Further research is required into ethnic inequalities in access to postgraduate research degrees, especially considering why any differences arise.
- A better understanding of the extent and nature of sub-doctoral research degrees is required, including the motivations of students taking such degrees.
- There is little research on the impact of other factors on take-up of postgraduate research, including family commitments, disability and sexuality.