

University Alliance submission to the Postgraduate Review December 2009

1. University Alliance represents 22 major, dynamic, business-like universities at the heart of the sector which deliver world-leading research with impact and are actively business-focussed.
2. Alliance universities educate 26% of all UK students and achieve some of the highest graduate-level employment rates. These universities offer a research-informed, academic learning environment and a culture of entrepreneurialism, equipping graduates for the 21st century.

Postgraduate provision at Alliance universities

A significant part of the sector delivering postgraduate education

3. Postgraduate provision is vital to the health of the UK economy, society and its research base. It is an essential component in achieving the Government's vision of a knowledge-based economy and delivers the 'added value' needed for the UK to compete with other leading economies.
4. Postgraduate education provides:
 - opportunity for students to enhance their expertise and develop specialist knowledge
 - access to some of the professions and particular career paths
 - high-end skills needed to shape the new economy
 - an engine-room for innovation and research, driving new ideas and discovery within universities
5. Alliance universities deliver nearly **20% of all postgraduate education** in the UK - around 95,000 students¹ - as well as considerable trans-national provision with international partners around the world. In many regions in the UK, Alliance universities are the largest postgraduate provider, for example Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Northumbria University and the University of the West of England.

¹ Based on 2007/08 HESA data

Delivering access – including access to the professions

6. Alliance universities are major providers of professional postgraduate education delivering access to the professions. Significant proportions of our qualifications are accredited by the professions – up to 70% in some institutions (University of Bradford).

7. Alliance universities are committed to widening access to both postgraduate taught and postgraduate research provision – both of which are essential for achieving a fair and prosperous society. A significant proportion of our postgraduate provision is delivered on a more flexible basis than other universities and in areas that are critical to the UK economy.

Delivering excellence with a strong ethos of engaging with employers

8. Alliance universities are some of the leading universities for business engagement and enterprise – Hertfordshire, Plymouth and Liverpool John Moores University included. These universities have well-developed partnerships with a huge range of businesses from international blue-chip companies to networks of local SMEs. These are business-like universities that are experts at near-market research and work closely with new industries and rapid growth areas in the economy.

9. As a result, much of the postgraduate provision has close links to industry and a culture of innovation and enterprise runs throughout. Employers are closely involved in the design and the accreditation of courses in many cases. For example:

The University of Plymouth has a long-term relationship with Orange / France Telecom which has included the full sponsorship of three PhD research projects, as well as partial funding support for two others. Further sponsorship has also been provided for a small number of MRes project students, who were given internship positions within the company during their research activities. In parallel with this, the wider research relationship has included a number of commissioned studies, which have also provided opportunities for PhD research student involvement (see **Annex A** for further details).

Employability skills embedded within programmes resulting in high employability

10. Alliance universities have strong employability records, for example the postgraduate diploma in journalism at De Montfort University achieves an employment record of 100%. These universities also offer proactive support to students in helping them plan their future careers.

At Liverpool John Moores University hundreds of postgraduates are benefiting from the 'World of Work' (WOW) initiative. Key transferable skills, known as Graduate Skills, have been developed for every subject and all students – including postgraduates - are able to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and how they want to make the transition into the world of work through the unique WoW process, which can culminate in employer-validated WoW certification.

At Hertfordshire University 'Graduate Futures' is a service which works with students – including postgraduate students, employers, alumni and staff to:

- support students and alumni to find jobs and develop their careers
- support and encourage employers who want to recruit students and graduates
- help staff to develop students' employability.

A research-led and entrepreneurial learning environment

11. Alliance universities are research engaged, providing a research informed, academic and entrepreneurial learning environment for students. These universities contribute valuable insights through peaks of excellent research which are recognised as world class, as demonstrated in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise and in our recent publication 'Concentration and Diversity: understanding the relationship between excellence, concentration and critical mass.'²

12. These universities are adept at combining research excellence with impact and this can be seen to directly contribute towards the postgraduate student experience. For example:

Allied Health Professions at the University of the West of England was judged to comprise 65% world leading or internationally excellent research in the 2008

² http://www.university-alliance.ac.uk/UA%20Concentration%20and%20Diversity_for%20publication.pdf

RAE. As a result, UWE had proportionately more internationally excellent research in this UoA than any other university in the UK (equal with Kings College London). The submission comprised a group of 13 staff specialising in biomedical research, much of it in collaboration with health services and healthcare industries with direct application to the quality of healthcare.

In terms of the research environment, a crucial element of which is the research training environment, 30% was rated as of world leading quality (4*), 80% was considered to be at least of internationally excellent quality (3*+) and 100% was of internationally recognised quality (2*+). Over the RAE2008 assessment period (2001-2007), this group was responsible for 42 research degree completions (39 PhDs and 3 MPhils). This amounts to 0.5 completions per member of staff per year, or 50 completions per 100 members of staff per year (or 325 per 100 members of staff across the whole RAE period).

Postgraduate research provision

PhD provision and value for money

13. In 2007–08 Alliance universities awarded nearly 1,200 PhDs in comparison to just over 3,000 from 1994 Group universities³ - with many delivered on a more flexible basis and in areas that are critical to the UK economy.
14. In terms of value for money of public investment in PhDs, on average Alliance universities award twice as many PhDs per funding council research allocation as either the 1994 Group or the Russell Group research-intensive universities according to the HEFCE performance indicators.⁴

Response to calls for a greater concentration of PhD funding

15. We do not believe that there is sufficient evidence on which to restrict PhD funding to a particular group of universities. Evidence put forward by the 1994 Group regarding completion volume in relation to research and teaching staff is a helpful contribution but it is a measure of research-intensity rather than quality or efficiency and tells us nothing about economic impact or value for money.

³ Based on 2007/08 HEFCE performance indicators

⁴ Op cit

16. As with research funding, the principle of funding excellence wherever it exists remains the best policy to ensure the future health of the UK research base and the most efficient use of public investment.
17. It is essential to look at the relationship between PhD quality, output, employability and completion rates but further work would be needed to understand this more fully. University Alliance would be more than happy to contribute to such a study.
18. What is clear from existing data is that on the basis of quality alone, the appropriate unit of measurement is not the institution. The UK system measures excellence at the discipline level and to change this to the institutional level would mask areas of world-leading research and PhD provision. RAE 2008 results proved that there are many well-managed research centres outside the research-intensive universities that are making a significant contribution to both the UK research base and the economy.
19. The Faculty of Technology at the University of Plymouth, for example, has a 90% completion rate within 4 years and is helping to drive a rapid growth area in the new economy. At Northumbria, Business and Management research degree completions in 2008/09 indicate that 85% of full time researchers completed their award within four years; similarly 75% of those studying part-time completed within their target of seven years.
20. In addition we have strong concerns about the potential unintended consequences of proposals to restrict provision on an institutional basis. At this time it is not possible to predict the impact that such a move may have on important issues such as the accessibility and participation of under-represented groups in postgraduate education and the future supply of academics.

Response to calls for greater collaboration and regional hubs

21. We are supportive of moves to encourage greater collaboration and regional hubs (as called for in Professor Paul Wellings' submission to the Higher Education review) so long as this is coupled with a policy of funding postgraduate research based on excellence rather than concentration by institution.
22. There are many examples of where Alliance universities are providing access to PhDs on a more flexible basis and sometimes in cooperation with a local research-

intensive university - for example, providing part-time access where this would otherwise not be available in a particular city or region.

23. University Alliance recognises the importance of a common standard of provision of postgraduate research training but there are proven, successful collaborative models through which this can be delivered. Graduate schools can successfully operate across a number of institutions and for a range of disciplines.

24. We would be interested to see the proposal for regional hubs developed further and would wish to be involved in any future consultation on this.

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