

What is happening to the UK graduate student in economics?

Karen Mumford*

on behalf of the RES Women's Committee


Introduction

There has been much talk recently as to the relative demise of UK nationals amongst the graduate student body in leading economics departments. In 1996, the Royal Economic Society Women's Committee (RESWC) conducted the first of an ongoing process of biennial surveys of academic economics in the UK. The results of this survey have been used to examine, amongst other matters, the gender breakdown in students and staff numbers. The survey covered some 90 academic departments (members of CHUDE) and a further 22 research institutes in economics. The response rate was 92%. The data from this survey can be used in combination with the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) data (supplied by HESA for the Women's Committee) to shed light on the trends in the UK graduate population. The HESA data are for the 1994/95 academic year, the RESWC survey covers the 1996/97 academic year.

Given the comparability of these two data sources, we have undertaken analysis of grade 5 and all economic departments separately. The results are given below. In summary, they indicate a fall in UK students, matched (for full-time study) by a rise in non-UK, EU students.

Students in the 5 ranked 'economics' departments¹ (see table 1):

Full-time research only students

 In 1994, there were 542 full time research only (PhD) students enrolled in what are now the top ranked economics departments, 142 (or 26%) of these students were British. By 1996 this figure had fallen to only 93 British students out of a total of 548 (some 17%). Thus, despite the total number of students remaining stable, the body of

¹These departments are Birkbeck, Bristol, Cambridge, Essex, Exeter, LSE, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Southampton, Warwick and York.

UK students declined by some 35%.

✎ This decline was greater for female UK full-time PhD students than for males: females declined from 32 to 16 (a drop of 50%), males fell from 110 to 77 (30%).

✎ Non-EU students declined by 8% (246 to 227).

✎ It would appear that the fall in UK and non-EU students was fully compensated by increases in other-EU students (going from 28 to 42% of this student body). UK females now make up 10% of the female full-time PhD body, UK men now make up 20% of the male group.

Part-time research only students

✎ The absolute numbers of UK part-time PhD students in the top departments stayed remarkable stable (females fell from 19 to 18 and men fell from 52 to 51), there was a minor increase in the number of other-EU students and a reasonable decline in the non-EU students (from 56 to 27) bringing the overall numbers of these students down 15% (from 168 to 142).

Full-time taught (masters) students

✎ There has again been a decline in the numbers of UK students, from 269 to 202 (or some 25%) and a rise in the numbers of other-EU students (from 227 to 271, or 16%). This other-EU rise has not fully compensated the UK loss and, in the face of stable non-EU enrollments, total numbers have fallen slightly (3%).

✎ The decline has been more dramatic for UK males doing full-time masters than for UK females (30% fall compared to 7%).

Part-time masters students

✎ The numbers of part-time master students has fallen dramatically with little compensation from the slight absolute rises in other-EU and non-EU students: total student numbers have fallen from 48% from 191 to 100.

✎ UK females have borne the greater proportion of this fall (from 55 to 11 students, a decline of 80%). UK males have dropped from 125 to 63 (50%).

All graduate students in the 5 ranked 'economics' departments

✎ Total students numbers show some minor decline (from 1771 to 1636, or 8%).

✎ UK students have fallen 34% (from 662 to 438).

- ✎ Female UK students have fallen 40% (162 to 97).
- ✎ Male UK students have fallen 32% (500 to 341).
- ✎ Other-EU students have increased by 24% (from 429 to 563).
- ✎ Non-EU students have decreased by 6.5% (from 680 to 636).
- ✎ It would appear that part-time masters courses are becoming dramatically less popular in grade 5 departments and that UK students are being replaced in full-time doctoral programs by other-EU students, especially so for female UK students.

All students¹ (see table 2):

Full-time PhD

- ✎ Total student numbers have shown a slight rise (from 992 to 1106) increasing 10%. Yet UK students have fallen some 17% (from 298 to 246), with females again falling the most (28% compared to 13% for UK males).
- ✎ There have been major increases in the numbers of other-EU students (rising 38% from 224 to 362) and some increase from non-EU students (up 6% from 470 to 498).

Part-time PhD

- ✎ A 20% fall across all student enrollments most of which is made up of 33% drop in UK numbers.
- ✎ UK females declined 27% (from 71 to 52), UK males by 34% (231 to 152).
- ✎ Other-EU enrollments rose 21% (from 69 to 87), non-EU enrollments fell 8.5% (115 to 96).

Full-time masters

- ✎ Total students numbers fell from 1892 to 1718 (10%), but UK students declined 23% (614 to 474).
- ✎ Male UK student enrollments fell 23%, females fell by 22%.
- ✎ Other-EU students increased their numbers (8% from 484 to 528), non-EU numbers fell 10% (794 to 716).

Part-time masters

- ✎ Total student numbers fell 73% (1253 to 388): UK fell 50% (667 to 332), other-EU

¹The data sources are less comparable when considering total student numbers: HESA data includes many smaller departments who are not members of CHUDE whilst the RESWC data includes graduate students registered in Research Institutes.

fell 27% (although their numbers were small in absolute terms, 51 to 37), and non-EU students fell 96% (from 535 to 19).

✎ UK males fell by 50% (455 to 229) and UK females by 49% (212 to 103).

All graduate students

✎ Total student numbers have declined 22% mainly due to the virtual elimination of non-EU students enrolling in part-time masters courses.

✎ UK students have decreased enrollments in graduate degree categories, in total their numbers have fallen 37.5% (2009 to 1256).

✎ UK males have fallen 37%, UK females by 39%.

✎ Other-EU enrollments have increased except in part-time masters: in total they've risen 17%.

✎ Non-EU students have shown modest changes in enrollments numbers in all degree types except part-time masters where their dramatic decline is leading to a fall in their total numbers of 35%.

Is this decline in UK numbers a problem?

It is obvious that the numbers of UK graduate students is in decline and that - particularly in the top (grade 5) economics departments - there is a substitution taking place with rises in other-EU students enrollments. Given that the European market for graduate students was opening up during the time period considered and that the UK probably offers the best quality graduate degree programmes in Europe, why should we care? This result could simply be the outcome of the schools taking the best quality candidates across a now broader pool of applicants.

Insufficient numbers of suitable graduates to fill jobs in UK academia.

Using the student numbers from the RESWC survey for all students and assuming that all research students are doing doctorates, that a full-time PhD takes 4 years, and that part-time PhD takes 6 years (and that enrolments have been constant over the last few years) would suggest that there were 98 female students completing their PhD each year and some 243 males. In contrast (according to the RESWC survey) there were 49 new hires made last year at the permanent lecturing level, 13 of these jobs going to females. There were also 36 new hires at the fixed term lecturing level, 10 going to women.

Comparing graduating numbers with the numbers of new hires amongst fixed term lecturers (thereby ignoring the possibility of graduates going straight into permanent

lectureships) we find that 10.2% of the female and 10.7% of the male PhD graduating class took up standard full time academic appointments in the UK (17% and 18.3% respectively if we ignore students who are not from the EU).

Adopting the other extreme by assuming that all the new fixed term and permanent lecturers were hired directly from the pool of new graduates (although such an assumption could be expected to lead to some double counting since many of the permanent lecturers may have been previously employed in fixed-term appointments), some 23.5% of female and 25.5% of male graduating PhD students are found to remain in academia in the UK (or 39% and 43.7% respectively excluding the non-EU students). The inflow rate for women relative to the stock of potential applicants is slightly lower than for males. It is clear that the majority of recent PhD graduates are not employed in standard full-time academic jobs in the UK: there are not too few 'potential' applicants for academic jobs.

Graduate student attitudes to jobs in academia.

To find out why many students do not stay in academia, the RESWC have carried out a pilot survey of some 80 currently enrolled female PhD students in the UK. About half the students expressed a desire to work in academia on completing their studies. The expressed desire to be an academic was not more common amongst UK than other-EU students. The reasons why students did not want to work in academia were diverse but did not appear to be gender or nationality specific. It was clear that students perceived jobs to be hard to get; it was also clear that they were aware other jobs for economists paid better. It would seem that our PhD students recognise that an economics PhD trains them for tasks besides just academia. This is an obvious area of further investigation amongst both male and female graduate students.

The needs of UK academic departments for PhD graduates.

Our data clearly indicates that there are many more PhD graduates than there were filled job openings in UK academia. It may be possible, however, that we should ignore the possibility of other-EU students amongst the pool of suitable applicants for UK jobs (although they are clearly legally permitted to work in those jobs). Similarly, overseas PhD graduates may be less likely to apply for academic jobs and/or be less likely to stay in the long term if appointed. These are empirical issues which should be addressed in future surveys.

Alternative sources of employment.

The decline in postgraduate numbers may obviously also be an issue to non-university

employers, especially those interested in Masters graduates where the fall-off has been greater. We have very limited evidence as to the employment destinations of graduate students in the UK other than by major industrial classification (published annually by HESA). If for some reason employers favour UK graduate students over other-EU, the consequences of the decline in suitable applicants will have been exacerbated.

Funding and completion.

It may be that carrying out graduate studies have become more expensive for UK students especially if the competition for scholarships has increased (for example, with other-EU students). This may have resulted in an adverse shift in the composition of the student body with graduate students being drawn from a narrower band of backgrounds (the decline in UK female numbers may be indicative of this is happening). Departments' expectations of what is a satisfactory course work component and/or thesis may have also risen. As far as we know, there are no data comparing completion rates/times for doctoral programmes in the UK (although HESA are collecting data on students' expected completion times for doctorates). Actual completion rates would be very useful information that further department surveys could address. Similarly, when surveying students, funding questions could be included. Seeking this information directly from departments would reveal scholarships and formal employment (class teaching, research assistance, etc) but may lead to underestimates of actual outside employment due to students carrying out unreported employment (bar work, etc) or unauthorised employment (which might breach their scholarship agreements).

Ongoing analysis.

The RESWC will shortly be distributing its second survey of academic economics in the UK. In combination, the results from our surveys will generate fully comparable stock and flow data. These will enable us to address an extensive array of issues, including more complete answers for many of the questions posed above.

* Karen Mumford

Department of Economics and Related Studies

University of York

Heslington, York YO1 5DD

kam9@york.ac.uk

