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Transitions from Undergraduate to Taught Postgraduate Study: Emotion, Integration and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

The notion and terminology of 'transition(s)' have long dominated discussions of pathways from youth to adulthood and have increasingly come to characterise the educational journeys people make, with a strong emphasis on the shift from schooling to undergraduate study. However, the transitional experiences of postgraduate students have been significantly overlooked with powerful presumptions around postgraduate students being educational 'experts' and 'naturals' obscuring the often highly challenging nature of their transitions. The lack of literature in this field is most pronounced around the taught postgraduate (PGT) population, about whom the least is known. This is due in part to ambiguousness around PGT study itself (Glazer-Raymo, 2005) which falls between the clearly-defined undergraduate and doctoral degrees, and has been declared as the "forgotten sector" (Millward, 2015) of higher education.

This paper addresses this gap in understanding by synthesising the available literature on PGT transitions, and on postgraduate transitions more generally, alongside qualitative focus group data from a small-scale project with Masters students and supervisors conducted at a Scottish university. It finds that transitions to PGT education are complex, emotional and challenging for most students, and highlights some institutional practices that can isolate, confuse and hinder the progress of Masters students.

Thus, the paper argues that, contrary to conventional assumptions, transitions from undergraduate to PGT education are not inevitably straightforward and can be characterised, at least initially, by anxiety, self-doubt and disorientation. Key challenges for Masters students do not necessarily relate to the higher learning materials, but the lack of clarity around what PGT level study entails and the limited opportunities for integration and sense of belonging. Greater clarity of expectations and earlier feedback, alongside peer support, can help to smooth transitions to postgraduate study. The paper also highlights the particularly difficult transitions of students unfamiliar to the university and identifies challenges specific to funded and non-funded students.

Keywords: taught postgraduates; educational transitions; institutional practices; integration

Introduction

In the UK, the last few decades have witnessed a shift from an 'elite' to a mass system of higher education (HE) (Scott, 1995; Reay, 2002), resulting in increasingly prominent discourses and policies around 'widening participation' (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003; Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2004; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAAHE], 2004). The subsequent exponential rise in the HE student population is well documented and there is an extensive sociological and educational literature around the often challenging transition to undergraduate study (see, for example, Mattanah et al., 2010; Briggs, Clark, & Hull, 2012).

Much less well understood or acknowledged, however, is the increasingly prevalent and arguably more complex transition between undergraduate and postgraduate study. This is a surprising oversight as the postgraduate student body dramatically expanded in the UK between the mid-1990s and 2010 and now stands at approximately half a million students (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013; Morgan, 2015; Universities UK, 2016a). Postgraduates have proportionally represented the largest growth area in HE in the UK, United States, Australasia and Europe since the late 1980s (Wisker, 2012), with Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010, p. 12) describing the growth of the postgraduate sector in this time period as a "quiet revolution". The number of full-time entrants to postgraduate study has continued to rise steadily in the UK, with research indicating that the number of entrants to taught postgraduate (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) education have risen by 33.7% and 37.9% respectively between 2005-06 and 2014-15 (Universities UK, 2016b). The same research shows that after peaking in 2010-11, then declining by 12% until 2012-13, postgraduate student numbers have remained broadly stable since 2013 (Universities UK, 2016b).

Postgraduate study has thus become a prominent 'hot topic' within HE policy discussions (Clarke & Lunt, 2014), not just because of the expansion of its student body, but because it is progressively perceived as vital to the sustenance of today's 'knowledge economy', which depends on the production of workers with specialist knowledge and training (Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005). A number of commentators have noted growing state involvement in the performance of the postgraduate sector, with universities under

increasing pressure to improve their completion and retention rates (Goluvshkina & Milligan, 2012; Kallio, Kallio, Tienari, & Hyvonen, 2016).

A consequence of the changing HE climate and growing attention around the postgraduate sector has been the reconceptualisation of PGT study as a compulsory 'training ground' for doctoral education, with a Masters qualification now largely considered a prerequisite for postgraduate research (PGR) participation (Backhouse, 1997; Morris & Murphy, 2011). However, whilst information has grown around the doctorate, transitions to, and experiences of, PGT study remains relatively poorly understood, leading to it being described as the 'forgotten sector' of HE (Millward, 2015). This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by synthesising what little is known about PGT transitions, by discussing three key issues identified as challenging to students making the transition to PGT study.

Background

One of the possible reasons for the limited literature on the transition to postgraduate education is the construction of postgraduate students as 'experts' of HE, for whom the transition is presumed to be a 'natural' one (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom, & Zammit, 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2008, 2010). However, a growing number of studies challenge this presumption, not least because it homogenises a highly heterogeneous student population, but because undergraduate and postgraduate education are very different. Experience and achievement at undergraduate level does not inevitably translate into successful postgraduate scholarship (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Hussey & Smith, 2010).

As Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton and Warnes (2003, p. 93) have suggested, transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate study represents a "leap of learning behaviours as great at least as that from pre-university to university study". Much is known about the often difficult transition from school to HE, in which students must learn to work more independently and critically, and with a much stricter adherence to deadlines and institutional conventions (Haggis & Pouget, 2002; McMillan, 2014). Postgraduate study, though directly following on from undergraduate study in the educational ladder, embodies a much more complex amplification of these skill requirements, alongside a significantly higher workload and more intellectually demanding learning materials, as well as considerably less direction from staff (Sastry, 2004; Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills [DIUS], 2008).

There has been a pervasive assumption within HE that making the transition to more independent working and critical thinking simply represents a natural, manageable step-up for intelligent, capable students who, by dint of their previous successes, will likely thrive in a more challenging academic environment (O'Donnell et al. 2009). However, Cluett and Skene (2006) reported that 80% of postgraduate respondents found the first year to be 'overwhelming', whilst 64% of postgraduate students surveyed by West (2012) described the transition as 'difficult'.

O'Donnell et al. (2009) have argued that the transition to postgraduate study is often considered to be primarily about the ability to engage with learning materials at a higher level, and not the mastery of new practices. However, their research, echoed elsewhere (see Symons, 2001; West, 2012; Higher Education Academy [HEA]/National Union of Students [NUS], 2013), has challenged this assumption, with few postgraduates indicating difficulties with the higher learning materials, but the majority expressing difficulties with writing, reading, doing assignments, library usage and/or time-management (O'Donnell et al., 2009); struggles conventionally presumed to be confined to undergraduate students. In Symons' (2001) study, 43% of surveyed postgraduates identified difficulties in understanding and writing assignments, whilst a survey of further education, undergraduate and postgraduate students conducted at the outset of their respective courses found PGT students were the most likely to feel 'unprepared' for their studies (HEA/NUS, 2013).

Furthermore, there is a common perception that because PGT courses are taught and in other ways retain traces of the undergraduate degree (i.e. lectures, essays, culmination in a dissertation), that transition to Masters level is comparatively straightforward and unproblematic (Symons, 2001). However, a number of commentators have argued that whilst the problems faced by doctoral students are better known, they are not only often shared by PGT students but are exacerbated by their "greater inexperience in research and dissertation writing and by the imposition of severe time limitations" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987, p. 93; see also Symons & Samuelowicz, 2000; Symons, 2001). In Symons' (2001) survey, full-time PGT students recorded more anxiety and concerns than doctoral students, citing the pressure of quickly identifying a research topic and supervisor for their dissertations, their research inexperience and the 'step up' in academic standard and workload in such a short timeframe.

Full-time PGT courses are typically intensively delivered and assessed over the course of one year (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2015). In contrast, many PGR students, especially those with funding, approach their much lengthier doctoral degree with a topic already established and some already have a supervisory dialogue in place. PGT students thus tend to have comparatively little time, and considerably less experience, to transition to and efficiently negotiate their new academic environment and its expectations (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987; Symons, 2001).

Recent efforts to better understand the PGT sector has led to the emergence of the term 'postgraduateness', used to describe the various ways in which PGT education differs from previous learning experiences, including in its emphasis on criticality and independence, the nature of assessment, changes to student-student and staff-student interactions, and the short, intensive study period (see McEwen et al., 2005; Treby & Shah, 2005). All of these characteristics of PGT education can present real challenges to students, and this has been insufficiently acknowledged both in the literature and by universities themselves, which tend to rely on the problematic assumption that Masters students are HE 'experts'.

Methodology

In addition to reviewing the literature, this paper is based on a small-scale qualitative research project with Masters students and supervisors from a university in Scotland between October 2015 and March 2016. Ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee. Funded by the Stirling Enhancement of Learning Fund (SELF), the research project was concerned with the transitions of PGT, PGR and international students, but this paper draws specifically on data from focus groups and email reflections of PGT students, supervisors and postgraduate tutors. The contributions of staff have been included because of their importance and proximity to postgraduate transitions and experiences. This paper considers the reflections of eight PGT students and 15 supervisors and tutors. Three focus groups were held: one with four PGT students, another with four supervisors and one with five postgraduate tutors. Focus group data and additional email reflections were collected by a postgraduate student to allow the students the opportunity to freely voice their thoughts and concerns.

Case studies of the students' experiences of their transitions were presented to staff during focus groups, with all identifiers removed, to initiate their own reflections and responses to these. Transcripts of all recorded data were anonymised and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. An in-depth thematic analysis was conducted. Data was organised initially in separate categories – students/supervisors/tutors – identifying key themes and sub-themes for each category in order to explore similarities/differences. Whilst this exploratory, small-scale study is limited in scale and scope, it nonetheless highlights certain trends found in one institution and offers interesting insights into the PGT experience.

Barriers to PGT transitions

Workload and confusion

The heavy and densely coincident workload of PGT programmes has been identified as a significant challenge for students transitioning to Masters level study (Symons, 2001; HEA, 2015). In the course of one (full-time) or two (part-time) years, students are typically expected to complete numerous modules, each with several intellectually demanding assignments, and a lengthy and original dissertation, alongside preparing PhD proposals or job applications and attending to their personal lives (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2015). This can not only cause postgraduate students to become stressed, anxious and depressed, but often has the concomitant effect of producing substandard work, and even more worrying, 'surface level' thinking; the antithesis of postgraduate education and its emphasis on critical, immersive engagement (Lue, Chen, Wang, Cheng, & Chen, 2010).

Compounding this workload stress, a major barrier to the development of the criticality and independence coveted at PGT level is deep-seated confusion about what Masters level work represents and demands (Wisker et al., 2003). Most of the anxiety experienced by the students in the Scottish study was rooted in this confusion, with all of the students describing feeling unsure of what was expected from them in assignments. Having successfully mastered the undergraduate formula, the PGT students suddenly felt like novices again, which tended to cause anxiety:

> It has been stressful in terms of trying to adapt to what a Masters is like compared to undergraduate. In my undergraduate I knew what was expected of me in terms of coursework whereas at postgraduate level I am less sure. (Louisa)

> Right now I am reading books from the reading list and thinking it is okay. But then I'm thinking is it okay? Is this what I'm meant to be doing and am I going to get it back with a 54 with this could be better?... It's scary. (Tara)

That the PGT students in this study were unclear about coursework expectations aligns with the literature that has shown that postgraduates still struggle and become stressed about issues typically associated with the undergraduate population – how to do assignments, how much to read, time-keeping and organisation skills (O'Donnell et al. 2009). This needs to be better acknowledged and structured into the operation of Masters degrees, which often proceed with the assumption that PGT students are 'experts' unlikely to be struggling with the 'basics' (Symons, 2001; Heussi, 2012).

As one member of staff commented, most of the anxiety amongst PGT students stems from a "lack of knowledge about what Masters level actually is" (Cheryl, supervisor). This finding illustrates the need for HEIs to dedicate more time and resources to clearly defining and explaining Masters level study, which remains confusingly positioned between the well-defined undergraduate degree and the coveted research doctorate. It also underlines that instructors on PGT programmes should not presume that their students naturally understand what is expected of them.

Unlike their other anxieties, the Scottish students' concerns about how to do Masters level work were enduring because they were unable to access feedback until the very end of their modules. All of the students, and some of the staff, expressed the need for an assignment early in semester, in order to give students a sense of their progress and adaptation to PGT level work. The uniquely 'in-between' nature of Masters study, and the coincident nature of its workload, generated confusion and stress amongst students about what was expected of them, which, in turn, often had a negative effect on their emotions.

Anxiety, integration and belonging

Contrary to dominant assumptions about a smooth, 'natural' progression, many of the PGT students in this study had found the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study a difficult and ongoing process, characterised by feelings of anxiety, inferiority and self-doubt. One participant, Sophie, two weeks into her Masters course, described "feeling a host of conflicting, strange and occasionally rather debilitating emotions" about being in a "much smaller, much more able" group than she had experienced during her undergraduate degree. Concerns about being able to keep up or fit in with the PGT student body were echoed by other students:

> Anxiety is a problem for me anyway and I was worried that I would not be able to sit in class without having anxiety attacks, or that people would think I wasn't worthy of being at university if I was so anxious… I also worried I'd be in a class of really intelligent people and that my views wouldn't be up to scratch. (Louisa)

> The Masters course also felt a lot more intense and there were times when I questioned if I was intelligent enough to complete it. There were definitely a few tears during the times when I felt a bit overwhelmed. (Mary)

These testimonies hint at self-perceptions of inferiority, and suggest that PGT students can be just as vulnerable as doctoral students are to the effects of 'imposter syndrome'; a "crisis of entitlement" (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 313) where students believe they are undeserving and incapable of their role at university. These feelings were typically temporary, however, with Louisa remarking:

> The reality was that I was in a class of intelligent people with interesting things to say, and I was one of them.

Much of the anxiety felt by students both in this study and elsewhere in the literature is associated with concerns around how to integrate with fellow PGT students or identify with their universities. Unlike at undergraduate and full-time doctoral level, PGT students generally do the majority of their studying off-campus, with relatively few scheduled classes per semester (McCormack, 2004). PGT students are also less embedded in their disciplinary departments than full-time doctoral students, who are allocated office space and often adopt a 9-5 approach to their studies (Tobbell et al., 2010; Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). The comparatively little time spent by most Masters students on campus can make it difficult for them to bond with and support one another, or to feel integrated into the wider, often highly beneficial, academic community of their respective university (Menzies & Baron, 2014). This is important because many scholars have highlighted the influence of a student's identification with, and integration into, their HEI for individual academic progress and retention (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Ruud, 2015).

These themes from the literature were reflected in the experiences of many of the students in the Scottish study, which confirmed the difficulty of integrating PGT students into supportive social networks, and some wondering how to make friends or extend socialising beyond the classroom:

> I am concerned that there are fewer organised opportunities to socialise as a postgraduate than as an undergraduate so it takes extra effort to build up contacts and friendships among the cohort. We have introduced ourselves around tables at the beginning of lectures but there hasn't been an opportunity to do this independently outside of class. (Fern)

These anxieties were particularly prevalent among those students who had completed their undergraduate degrees in a different institution from their current HEI. All of these students expressed concerns about being 'outsiders', identifying a difference between themselves and those PGT students in their group who were transitioning to Masters level study within the same institution, and who were thus embedded to some extent in peer and staff networks. This generated concerns about not only peer and staff integration, but also about being disadvantaged by a lack of knowledge and experience of university systems and operations:

> As a postgraduate who has not been an undergraduate at this uni, I have a slight apprehension of being an 'outsider' and falling behind due to being less familiar with systems (library systems, IT systems) and staff. This is particularly as all of the other individuals… are already embedded in the university having recently finished their undergraduate degrees here. (Fern)

These feelings of being an outsider seemed to begin at induction, with several students describing feeling secluded and overwhelmed by not knowing any of the staff or their fellow students. Some expressed a desire for an opportunity to meet and socialise with other students prior to being formally inducted, suggesting there might be value in incorporating a better balance between social and academic integration into inductions. For example, this may include an informal campus tour led by PhD students on the same day as induction.

It is critical to recognise the additional anxieties and challenges being faced by those students who are new to their institutions, and to be aware of the potentially major differences between their transitional experiences and those of the students moving from undergraduate to postgraduate study within the same university. The difference between the transitional experiences of students new and familiar to their postgraduate institution is clear in the Scottish study, with those students transitioning within the same environment describing much less anxiety and far smoother transitions to PGT study:

> Going from undergraduate to Masters was not particularly scary for me… I was still living at home and I always knew my classmates well. (Mary)

> It is also nice to have a group of people on my Masters who I did my undergraduate with as this provides a sense of stability and support. (Louisa)

These contributions reveal the importance of peers, and their continuity, in countering anxiety and smoothing transitions, and suggest that those students who shift to postgraduate study within a familiar institution may begin their courses on a significantly surer footing than those who previously studied elsewhere. Other students staying within the same university also described the advantage of this in terms of their relationships with staff, with many of them having worked closely and been mentored by their supervisors and tutors since their undergraduate degrees.

Different PGT pressures and experiences were also identified amongst those students in the study who were externally funded – typically on '1+3' scholarships, which fully fund a student's participation in both a Masters degree and a doctorate – and those who were self-funded. The funded students tended to feel pressure to maintain the high standards of their previous work, in order to prove their funding was justified:

> *As a fully funded ESRC student, I have found these thoughts to be increasing in the last two weeks… and I've felt a lot of pressure to live up to the scholarship.* (Sophie)

Nevertheless, the funded students experienced less pressure when looking ahead to their doctoral studies, having already submitted successful PhD proposals and secured funding in the final year of their undergraduate degrees. For one of the students, this translated into a more relaxed PGT experience:

> *I feel in such a privileged position. I could just pass the Masters by the skin of my teeth and it would be okay because I have got that secured funding… It is a lot more chilled.* (Rachel)

Most of the students in this study were fully funded 1+3 students, but a number were unfunded, and these individuals faced different pressures and struggles. Many felt an acute pressure to perform well and achieve distinction grades, and worried about the consequences of not doing this for their chances of securing future funding:

> *There is definitely pressure to get a distinction. It is unlikely that I would get funding for a PhD without a distinction. I need a distinction. I want a career in academia really badly.* (Tara)

These pressures were compounded by the challenge of working on rigorous and competitive PhD funding proposals alongside the demands of their PGT studies. Beyond these issues, the study revealed a perception amongst some of the unfunded students that their funded peers were treated favourably by staff:

> *I feel that 1+3 students are more of an investment in the university; are more important in that sense. I tend to think as PhD students, they are given a lot of opportunities to do research projects… to publish stuff; whereas if you don't have that, if you are self-funding, you are not given those opportunities.* (Tara)

Whilst the scale of this study rightly places limitations on how broadly its findings can be interpreted or extrapolated, the perception of a hierarchy between funded and non-funded students is an important reminder of the diversity and complexity within the PGT population, and what the implications of this diversity can be for student experiences and transitions. Moreover, in the drive to more efficiently link PGT with PGR study in the current HE climate, these issues seem likely to grow rather than recede, and HE staff need to be better informed about non-funded PGT students' perceptions and experiences.

Whether by dint of their lack of funding or being newcomers to the university, the data suggests that PGT students can feel excluded, inferior and differentially treated and valued within their HEIs. There is potential for this to impede the development of an academic identity for PGT students, who, like the education they participate in, occupy an ambiguous space between the well-defined and supported undergraduate student body, and the departmentally embedded and coveted PhD student population (Tobbell et al., 2010).

It is important to note that the issues discussed in this section, and elsewhere in the paper, are only some of the transitional challenges that can arise for postgraduate students. Educational transitions can be particularly difficult for international students, who often have to struggle with cultural and language adjustments in addition to the more general transitional issues identified here (Menzies & Baron, 2014). Whilst it is important that these transitional experiences be acknowledged, in this case they fall outside of the remit of this paper.

Peer and staff support

Difficulty with integration generates not only anxiety but isolation amongst students, with loneliness a well-documented experience for many postgraduate students (Ali, Kohun, & Levy, 2007; Panda, 2016). Isolation can become a significant barrier for transitional and educational progress because of its considerable impact on self-esteem, confidence and mental wellbeing (Chester, Burton, Xenos & Elgar, 2013; Janta et al., 2014). The vital influence of social networks and friendships on individual educational outcomes has been well-established in the literature, including the important role it plays in providing a sense of relatability and emotional and instrumental support during particularly stressful periods (Brooks, 2002; Christie et al., 2005; Brown, 2009). Friends are especially beneficial for students who lack in confidence or experience, and who feel unable to seek institutional support, in that they provide an informal system of information, collective experience and reassurance (Harley, Winn, Pemberton, & Wilcox, 2007; Menzies & Baron, 2014).

As the literature suggests, establishing social networks within the student body was very important to smoothing the transitions of the students in the Scottish study. Peers were considered invaluable sources of support due to their facing the same, or very similar, transitional issues and academic demands:

> *It was important for me to have peers to chat to during this time because they knew what I was going through and how it felt to feel insufficient.* (Mary)

Others valued the light relief provided by the friendships developing in their small classrooms, and highlighted the significance of being surrounded by committed, supportive peers:

> *I enjoy the camaraderie that has formed in our modules, and having smaller classes in more informal settings than lecture theatres has really helped in generating connections.* (Louisa)

> *I feel genuinely excited and stimulated in a way that I often wasn't during my undergraduate, and now feel I am surrounded by people who are like-minded, supportive of one another and engaged in the course materials and goals.* (Sophie)

Support from staff was also identified as vital, with all of the students expressing the importance of their interactions with staff in overcoming transitional issues:

> *The staff have been incredibly supportive in guiding me through this transition.* (Louisa)

> *The staff have been overwhelmingly welcoming and quick to orientate… meetings were set up and held within two weeks of starting to settle any arising issues, which smoothed the transition.* (Fern)

Beyond attending to their pastoral needs, staff were also praised by students for the quality of their academic support, particularly when it involved reminding students of the progress they were marking or when directing them to useful resources, social networks or opportunities.

All of those students in the study who were undertaking PGT education at the same institution as their undergraduate degree described how their relationships with staff had changed significantly since the beginning of their transition to postgraduate study. Most of these students were continuing supervisory relationships with staff from their undergraduate dissertations, and many of them reflected on both how the staff-student hierarchy had flattened, and how conversation had expanded away from an explicitly academic focus:

> *Especially nearing the end of the 1+3 process and my fourth year, small talk turned into discussion about our own lives; kids, family and the juggling of our responsibilities… Although this process has just begun, it's strange to think that we are going from teacher and student to teacher and slightly less student.* (Rachel)

Although this shift in dynamic was initially disorientating for many of the students, the change in their relationships with staff was ultimately perceived as positive and empowering, with Daniella describing feeling like she was being "taken more seriously" by staff as a Masters student, and regarded as more of an "individual" by her supervisor.

It is worth noting in this study that this shift to more personal and enriching staff-student relationships, as well as the peer support, predominantly benefitted students who had attended the same university since their undergraduate studies. Their supportive relationships with staff and peers were thus built over many years, and it is important to remember the differing experiences of the many PGT students new to their institutions. All of these students described feeling like 'outsiders', and had to negotiate this additional difficulty on top of the other challenges of transitioning to PGT education identified in this study.

Conclusion and key recommendations

Transitioning to postgraduate education is a dynamic process which, over time, encompasses shifts in both emotions and relationships with staff and peers. Contrary to conventional assumptions, educational transitions from undergraduate to PGT level study are not inevitably straightforward or 'natural' for all students. Rather, the literature and research data presented here demonstrate that making the "leap of learning" (Wisker et al., 2003, p. 93) involved with commencing postgraduate study is a complex and often difficult process, characterised by confusion, anxiety and self-doubt. Whilst many of these feelings typically dissipate as the programme progresses, anxieties and lack of clarity about what Masters level work entails is often enduring. Hence it would be appropriate for institutions to recognize and address O'Donnell et al.'s (2009) argument that the difficulty for Masters students is not the higher learning materials, but the 'basics' traditionally assumed to exclusively trouble undergraduates: how much to read; how to do essays; and how to get good grades. As Wisker et al. (2003) suggest, PGT students, recently the masters of the undergraduate formula, uncomfortably find themselves to be novices again. The enduring nature of these practical concerns is rooted in two core issues within HE: the construction of PGT students as educational 'experts'; and the lack of clarity around what PGT education actually is. Thus teaching staff may need to move away from working with the assumption that Masters students know what is expected of them, and provide feedback much earlier in semester.

Both the literature and the focus groups revealed the importance of peer and staff support for PGT students in smoothing their transition to postgraduate study. Most of the students in this study had enjoyed positive and reciprocally supportive relationships with peers and teaching staff, and this had helped significantly in ameliorating their self-doubt, anxiety and confusion. However, the

study also revealed that integration *is* difficult to achieve at PGT level, with a number of the students noting the lack of opportunities to meet and mix outside of the classroom. Integration was particularly challenging for those students new to the university, all of whom described feeling like 'outsiders' with no existing relationships with staff or students. These students also felt quantitatively disadvantaged by their lack of experience with the university's systems, operations or layout. By contrast, those students transitioning within the same institution enjoyed much smoother transitions to PGT education. For the students without those important four years' worth of social connections, informal and formal resources of support and information, and an understanding of the absolute basics – how to submit assignments, loan books, get a coffee, etc. – the transition to PGT study was significantly harder. The additional challenges facing students new to the institution need to be better recognized by HEIs and academic staff.

Finally, the study revealed a further perception *and* dimension of exclusion amongst the PGT population, between funded and non-funded students. The unfunded students often felt less valuable to their university, and generally inferiorly regarded and treated. They also perceived that their funded peers were exposed to more opportunities and resources, leading to concerns about their own relative chances for academic progress. Whilst many postgraduate students are funded, a notable proportion are not, and the perceived hierarchy between these two cohorts has been underexplored in the literature and requires greater acknowledgement by HEIs.

Significantly, both of these examples of students feeling excluded – students new to the university and non-funded students – had qualitatively impacted upon these students' transitions to, and ongoing experiences of, PGT education, producing perceptions of inferiority and isolation. It seems important that these issues be prioritised by universities and researchers to further raise awareness of, and cater better for, the diversity of postgraduate experiences. This emphasis should be part of a broader commitment to an improved understanding of the complex transitions undergraduate students make to PGT level study, which remain poorly understood and overly informed by simplistic assumptions of student expertise.

Whilst postgraduate students may be capable, resilient and determined individuals, this is not always the case. The potential to display these attributes may need to be harnessed and encouraged. Furthermore, their previous academic achievements do not immunise them against the changes and challenges – academic and emotional – encountered in shifting from the structured, supported and clearly defined environment of undergraduate education to the ambiguously positioned and often forgotten middle ground of the PGT sector.

Biographies

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Professor Samantha Punch is Professor of Sociology and Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Stirling. Her research interests are within the sociology of childhood/youth and the sociology of development, including food practices in residential care; youth transitions and migration in Latin America and Asia; sibling relationships and, more recently, the sociology of Bridge.

Elizabeth Graham is a doctoral researcher exploring the experiences of support for pupils with an autism spectrum disorder in secondary school from a sociological perspective at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling. Her research interest are within the sociology of childhood/youth and the sociology of emotions. She recently conducted research on gender inequality and identity in the card game of Bridge.

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