


STARTING A COURSEWORK POSTGRADUATE DEGREE: THE NEGLECTED TRANSITION

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The focus of most research into student transition relates to the important transition that students face when they move from high school to first year at university. This particular transition is also the focus of much support given by LA units, both in terms of workshops and academic preparation programs offered, and individual consultations. From my experience of working with postgraduate students over a number of years it has become apparent that the transition to higher degrees (both coursework and research) can prove to be just as daunting a transition. The problems faced by students making the transition to a coursework postgraduate degree were examined in 2000 at Glasgow University and are currently being compared to those faced by postgraduate students at the University of Queensland (UQ). A questionnaire, interviews and focus groups were used to gain a picture of this transition at Glasgow University and similar methods are being conducted at UQ. The results suggest that students face significant problems when beginning a coursework degree related to the worry about expectations, the 'step-up' in standards, the break from



study they have had due to time in the workforce, and in some cases because they are moving into a new discipline area.


Keywords: *coursework degree, transition, induction*

Introduction

Students moving from high school to start a university course face an important transition and can encounter many significant problems. What these problems are and how students can be supported through this transition have been the focus of much research (eg McInnis et al., 2000), conferences (eg 4th Pacific Rim, First Year in Higher Education Conference 2000 and 14th International First-Year Experience Conference 2001), Discussion Forums (eg The University of Sydney, Improving the First Year Experience 2000) and also an important part of most of the work of Learning Assistance Units. At the same time there has been a growing awareness by universities of the need to train new research (PhD) students to improve their research experience, increase completion rates and reduce time to completion.

The problems faced by research students are well documented (for overview see Symons & Samuelowicz, 2000; Higher Education Series Report No 37, 2001; Ainley, 2001). Some problems relate directly to the work (eg unsuccessful experiments, restricted access to important equipment and other unexpected hitches to the research), while others relate to isolation (Conrad & Phillips, 1996), supervision (Rudd, 1989; Cullen et al., 1994), and general personal problems which may be either brought on or exacerbated by the degree process (Denicola & Pope, 1994).

Zuber-Skerritt (1987) argues that many of these problems, while documented for research students, are actually worse for coursework students because of 'their greater inexperience in research and dissertation writing and by the imposition of severe time limitations' (p.93). It can also be argued that they are worse for part time students, for mature-age students returning to study after a break or for international students who may be studying in English for the first time and have to make the transition to a different academic culture.



Coursework master degrees aim to improve expertise in particular professional areas and can allow a person to increase their specific skills or be used to move into a new professional area. They are often undertaken on a part time basis. For example, of the approximately 3000 coursework students enrolled at Glasgow University for the 99/00 academic year, 50% were part time. Similarly, at the University of Queensland (UQ) just over 50% of the 3113 students enrolled in postgraduate coursework in 2001 are part-time.

The number of coursework postgraduate degrees offered by Universities world wide and the number of students attracted to enrol are increasing, so more and more students are facing this transition. And this transition may be made more problematic by the course being undertaken on a part time basis, be undertaken after a number of years away from study, be in a field quite different from undergraduate training and may be at a different university (or country) than previous study.

Purpose of this Study

From my experience of working with postgraduate students I have come to realise that for all the reasons already mentioned this group of students do appear to suffer significant transition problems and in the main do not receive support to negotiate them. There appears to be a general belief that since coursework students have completed an undergraduate degree they already know all they need to know about undertaking university study. However, there are postgraduate degrees where an undergraduate degree is not mandatory, a number of years experience is sufficient to gain a place. Transition issues for these students can be severe.

This study aims to gain a better understanding of the transition problems faced by coursework students, firstly at Glasgow University and then at UQ. It will also ascertain if students seek help with their problems and whether they find the help they receive to be sufficient.




Methods

The results from Glasgow University were collected as part of a larger research project carried out in 2000 – an audit of the help services available to postgraduate students at the university. The focus was on obtaining the student perceptions of their problems and the help they received. The importance of obtaining the student perception to truly assess the effectiveness of introduced ‘help’ strategies cannot be over-emphasised (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987).

Specifically, the research at Glasgow University related to this study includes:

1. a web-based survey, with the questionnaire being sent to all student email addresses. The responses were submitted anonymously to a central address. The questionnaire contains mainly tick boxes but there are some questions which called for free responses. Apart from general demographic information the survey listed various areas of postgraduate work that have been identified by the literature and through experience as potential sources of concern and the students were asked to acknowledge if they had experienced problems in that area or were worrying about it, whether they had sought help or might seek help and whether the help had been sufficient. (The number of responses = 65)
2. in-depth interview of four students
3. two focus group discussions
4. collection of information relating to what induction and training programs are offered to postgraduate coursework students through interviewing academics (11) and administrative personnel (6)
5. discussion with ‘help’ personnel including counsellors, learning advisers, librarians, chaplains, etc.

The results collected at Glasgow for coursework students are compared with the overall results of all postgraduate students (both coursework and research – total number of survey responses was 278, and 25 students were interviewed). Currently, similar research is being carried out at UQ but has been held up. The questionnaire



has not yet been administered but 6 students have been interviewed and focus groups are planned.

Glasgow Participants

The 65 respondents to the survey represent a fairly good selection of students. Fifty percent are female and 50% are non-UK students. Thirty-five of the respondents are under 28 years of age, 22 are between 28 and 40 and 8 are over 40. Most of them are full time students and there is a good cross section of stage of degree (24 classified themselves as just beginning, 7 mid-way and 34 as near the end). Eleven of the 12 faculties are represented.


The interviewed students include 2 males, 2 non-UK students, 2 part timers, 2 midway through their degree, one at the beginning and one near the end. Both focus groups contained a mix of students.

Results of the Glasgow University Research

In the main, the results for the coursework students at Glasgow University mirror the results obtained for all postgraduate students, that is, the transition to coursework postgraduate study is no easier than the transition to research.

Perceptions

The majority of students rated their overall experience at Glasgow University as good or very good but 29% of coursework students rated their experience as average or worse (compared to 21% for research students). However, if the students are divided by whether they are UK or non-UK students, a marked difference is revealed. Forty-two per cent of non-UK students rated their experience as average or worse compared to 16% for UK students. Non-UK students face many problems as they undertake their degrees in a new country, new academic institution and maybe new language. They often have tremendous pressure on them from family, home government or funding body to do well.



Students aged 28 – 40 also rated their experience worse than the other age groups (36%). Such students usually have specific career goals and are making sacrifices to achieve them (for example, leaving well paid jobs, studying part-time, etc). Therefore they have high expectations of the institution to deliver the service (the course).


Survey Results

The beginning period of a postgraduate degree includes finding out about the institution, getting to know what is available and where it is located, settling into the department, meeting fellow students and staff, and gaining an understanding of what is expected of one as a student and what one can reasonable expect from one's lecturers and supervisors. This period also includes actually starting the degree – going to lectures, attending tutorials, etc – and may include settling into a new city and new accommodation, and helping family members adjust to schools and work. For some it may include getting used to living on a more restricted income than previously.

Transition issues for some students also include concerns about writing (assignments, the research proposal and dissertation), organisation (such as using the library, computers and statistics, the availability of resources and time management), the supervisory relationship, and other general academic and non-academic aspects of doing the degree.

The results of the survey can be seen in Table 1. Problems with most items in the *Induction Issues* and *Getting research started* clusters were acknowledged by over half the respondents with 69% having problems with understanding expectations. Approximately 75% of students with these problems sought help and between 20 – 40% were not satisfied with the help provided.

With all items in these clusters, the coursework students recorded more concerns than did the research students. This initially may appear surprising but the students wrote about the pressure of completing in such a short time, the need to find a supervisor and settle on a topic quickly, their complete lack of experience of doing



research, and their general worries about what lay ahead and what they called the 'step up' in standard. Many research students start their degree with a topic already well thought out either for themselves through interest or previous experience, or by their supervisor and it may even be attached to a scholarship. This is not usually true for coursework students who have a very short period of time to do the research component and no luxury to 'try out' ideas before finally deciding what to do. The non-UK students also recorded more problems than UK students in these clusters.

Organisational issues caused problems for some students (for example, 58% had problems with time and work management and 46% with using the library). These percentages are very similar to those recorded for the research students. Similarly, the *Supervision* items caused problems for approximately one third of the students, slightly higher than for research students. Students wrote about the short time available to build up a 'decent relationship' with their supervisor, the number of students their supervisor has, and that they 'don't feel as important' to their supervisor as the PhD students. Non-UK students experienced slightly more problems with these items than UK students. Between 50% and 90% of students sought help, but many were unhappy with that received.

Writing was a concern for just over 40% of the students. Although *writing in English* seems of less concern, of course for many non-UK students it is a major worry. For all the writing items, non-UK students recorded higher and were less able to find the help they needed. Most students sought help with writing but variable numbers were happy with the help received. Personal, accommodation and money concerns were acknowledged by a number of students with many asking for help and some not receiving it.

Academic problem & non-academic problem (n=65)	Problem encountered or envisaged	Help sought or will be sought	Help not sufficient
<i>Induction issues</i>			
Understanding what's expected(1)^	45 (69%)*	32 (71%)#	7 (22%)**
Knowing rights & obligations(6)	28 (43%)	22 (79%)	7 (32%)
Knowing available resources(9)	36 (55%)	19 (53%)	6 (32%)
<i>Getting research started</i>			
Finding a supervisor(2)	24 (37%)	18 (75%)	7 (39%)
Deciding on a topic(7)	42 (65%)	37 (88%)	10 (27%)
Conceptualising the research(4)	42 (65%)	31 (74%)	5 (16%)
Planning the research(14)	39 (60%)	28 (72%)	8 (29%)
<i>Organisational issues</i>			
Work & time management(5)	38 (58%)	20 (53%)	8 (40%)
Using the library(11)	30 (46%)	18 (60%)	5 (28%)
Using statistics(17)	27 (42%)	17 (63%)	4 (24%)
Using the computer(21)	16 (25%)	9 (56%)	3 (33%)
Lack of resources(26)	29 (45%)	19 (66%)	16 (84%)
<i>Supervision</i>			
Communication with supervisor(15)	30 (46%)	27 (90%)	13 (48%)
Feedback from supervisor(22)	25 (38%)	22 (88%)	11 (50%)
Meetings with supervisor(27)	18 (28%)	14 (78%)	6 (43%)
Other problems with supervisor(28)	13 (20%)	6 (46%)	3 (50%)
<i>Writing</i>			
Writing assignments(10)	28 (43%)	22 (79%)	1 (5%)
Writing in English(8)	19 (29%)	15 (79%)	7 (47%)
Writing the research proposal(16)	28 (43%)	23 (82%)	8 (35%)
<i>Other academic issues</i>			
Exams(13)	31 (48%)	23 (74%)	6 (26%)
Giving presentations(18)	29 (45%)	14 (48%)	2 (14%)
Participating in tutorials(24)	18 (28%)	11 (61%)	4 (36%)
<i>Non-academic problems</i>			
Money(31)	33 (51%)	19 (58%)	8 (42%)
Accommodation(32)	15 (23%)	12 (80%)	5 (42%)
Personal(33)	22 (34%)	16 (72%)	8 (50%)
Other non-academic problems(34)	10 (15%)	6 (60%)	2 (33%)

^The number in bracket is the number assigned to the problem on the questionnaire.

*The percentage is of the total number of respondents.

#The percentage is of the number of students who identified with the problem.

**The percentage is of the number of students who sought help.

Table 1: Survey responses for coursework students at Glasgow University



Interview and focus group discussion

The students in the focus groups talked about having 'no idea of what lay ahead', 'no idea of what it really means to do research in this field', 'no idea how to pick a topic that hasn't been done to death', and wondering how different things would be in Scotland compared to back home. One student said she would 'love to ask questions, really trivial things, and not feel stupid'.

Many students found the very beginning difficult. Most said there had been no induction into their department or faculty besides a social gathering. They all felt they needed more information.


There was no induction. It was assumed we knew everything. It must have been terrible for anyone from another university. (non-UK student, did undergraduate degree at Glasgow)

System completely different from my home country and I don't know how to cope with the new system and what to do.

I just keep crying. (non-UK student, survey response)

Students wanted to understand what the course was going to be like, where the various resources such as the library and computer rooms were located, what would be expected of them, what standard of writing and research is required, and what were the likely problems and where they could get help. They also wanted to understand their position in the department, for example, could they get a cup of coffee from the staff room or student common room, what are the rules about photocopying, ordering supplies, is there any administrative, computer or statistical help, and much more.

Interviewed students and survey responses expressed surprise and grave concerns about the lack of adequate resources. Some non-UK students felt they were paying a lot of money to do degrees and should get better facilities. Some departments cater for the coursework students very well, supplying dedicated computer rooms for postgraduate coursework students, common rooms, and regular seminar series.



However, some students talked about being ‘like a gypsy’ and ‘carrying everything in my backpack and trying to find a desk in the library to call home’.

Supervision came in for as much comment and complaint from coursework students as from research scholars. The complaints are well known – not enough direction initially, insufficient feedback or too many demoralising corrections on drafts that are given only to initiate discussion, not enough understanding and/or sympathy for individual situations and supervisors who are too busy and have too many students. A common complaint brought up by the interviewed students, the focus group participants and also written on the survey was the problem of getting a supervisor. One student wrote ‘it took far too long to get my supervisor appointed for my masters dissertation’. Another student was in the final stages of writing and had never had a supervisor appointed.

Feedback in general (from supervisors and on essays and exams) came in for criticism.


I don't worry about my writing but I never get enough feedback. Usually my essays come back with just a mark and one comment – it doesn't matter if it is positive or negative there is no explanation, nothing I can work with.
(UK student)

I would like some feedback on my essays and exams. I eventually got one essay back but there were pages missing. I also got no feedback on my presentation. I've no idea whether I did a good job or not. I thought these sorts of things were supposed to help us learn. (UK student)

Students wanted to understand expectations and by not receiving sufficient feedback they had a more difficult transition.

University help with transition issues

There is little university-wide induction for postgraduate students at Glasgow University. A half-day informal postgraduate student orientation was held at the start



of the 2000/01 academic year with 'stalls' providing information on available services. While this is a good initiative it in no way addresses the main concerns of student. More detailed induction is left to the faculties and departments and what is offered varies markedly.


Many of the academics and administrators interviewed believe that postgraduate students do not need induction as they are experienced students. Some reported that no students had ever told them of problems or said 'they can always ask for help'. On the other hand, students typically don't ask academics or administrative personnel because they 'don't want to bother' them, feel their question is 'too trivial', don't want to create a bad impression, or just feel too overwhelmed by everything new. Some students reported what they classified as 'bad experiences' when they had sought some clarification or taken a problem to university personnel. Most reported getting advice from other students.

Interview with 'help' services personnel

The 'help' services personnel, in the main, were well aware of the transition problems faced by postgraduate students. The counsellors, learning advisers, international support officer and chaplain all reported that they regularly saw students who wanted to ask advice about the issues discussed above. They all agreed that there was no real understanding of the problems associated with this transition by university staff and no university wide approach to help students navigate this transition. In most cases they felt overwhelmed by the number of students seeking help with problems and under-resourced to tackle them.

UQ research

The initial analysis of the six interviews at UQ reveals that the situation at UQ is very similar to that at Glasgow. Students felt 'thrown in at the deep end' and really struggled to 'get a handle' on what they were doing. Once again a common theme is 'everyone expects me to know what I'm doing and I feel that I must be the only dumb one'. Worries were expressed about many aspects of writing (being critical, 'correct' structures, referencing and being 'academic enough'). The research component of



the degree and the relationship with supervisors were also concerns of the six students. Even at the beginning some were wondering if they had made the correct decision coming back to university.

Conclusion

While there is a genuine desire by academic and non-academic staff for students to succeed and to enjoy their time at university, there appears to be a general lack of appreciation by staff of what it is like to be a postgraduate coursework student in today's economic and competitive environment. There seems to be a mismatch between how students feel about their induction (whether formal or otherwise) and what they feel they need to be told, and what academics think students need. Nevertheless, a good induction and training program is important to help students have a good beginning period (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Youngman, 1994).

There appears to be a belief at Glasgow University (and perhaps at UQ) that it is only 'bad' students who experience problems. Therefore it follows that if the selection process was better, only 'good' students would be allowed to enrol and there would be fewer problems (MacKay, 1996). As Golde (1998) writes, 'it is tempting to explain away attrition in this way; not only does it allow for individual variation and nuance, but it removes responsibility for attrition from the institution or department' (p.55). For international students, 'good' refers to level of English language competence (Jurgs et al., 1995).

In recent years Glasgow University and UQ have made significant changes in the area of postgraduate induction and training and these have improved the beginning period for many students. However, as this research shows there are still students who are experiencing less than ideal starts to their coursework degrees. Youngman (1994) argues that the content of training courses should be more specific with targeted topics and they should present strategies of immediate use to students. Therefore, university wide, faculty, graduate school and departmental induction and training programs should be formulated to specifically spell out what the course is going to be like and take into consideration what the students themselves want to know and see as their needs.



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