TRANSITION TO
POSTGRADUATE STUDY

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Overview of literature
- Outline methodology
- Preliminary findings
- Next steps
Transition:

- A movement from one educational context to another, in this case, from undergraduate to postgraduate.
- A dynamic and ongoing process experienced throughout the whole degree, as opposed to transition beginning and ending with induction week.
- A smooth transition into academic study has emerged as a key element of a successful postgraduate degree.
- Large expansion in the number of PG students in the UK with increasingly diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.
- PG students represent over 20% of the student body in the UK and make a significant contribution to the HE academy.
The PGR population

- Overseas: 30%
- UK: 52%
- EU: 18%
- M level: 11%
- Visiting Research Students: 10%
- Doctoral: 79%
The PGR population

- Arts and Law: 22%
- Engineering and Physical Sciences: 32%
- Life and Environmental Sciences: 19%
- Medicine and Dental Sciences: 16%
- Social Sciences: 12%
The PGT population

Home/EU 29%

Overseas 21%

Total 50%
The PGR population

- CoSS: 61%
- CAL: 11%
- EPS: 14%
- LES: 7%
- MDS: 7%
The University of Birmingham Graduate School
Project aims:

- Understand how students make choices regarding postgraduate study.
- Identify opportunities to overcome barriers.
- Support progression to postgraduate study.
- Safeguard mental health and wellbeing.
- Enable students to make informed decisions.
- Issues of fair access, social mobility and widening participation.
Current literature:

- “There are distinct aspects to PG transition which require greater breadth of research with both successful and unsuccessful PG students” (Tobbell and O’Donnell: 2013, p.123).

- Subject specific lectures and tutorials for students. Such as, course information, expectations of tutors, tutorials on how to be effective independent learners, and advice and support on specific assignments and required skills.

- A personal tutor system and contact with academic staff.

- The creation and maintenance of a sustainable and enduring academic community, both university/graduate school-wide and within specific disciplines.

- An inclusive and accessible approach to transition for those considered as part of minority groups and those who cannot access facilities provided on campus.
Methodology: Focus Groups

- Invited via email:
  - 354 PGRs transitioned from PGT to PGR
  - 361 PGRs transitioned from UG to PGR
  - 399 PGTs transitioned from UG to PGT
  - Only incentive is opportunity to share experiences and lunch

- Pre-focus group:
  - Project Information Sheet
  - Consent Form
  - Pre-focus Group Questionnaire

- 1-2-1 also offered
Methodology: Focus Groups (cont)

- Limited number participants/focus group

- Pre-agreed questions divided into five sections:
  - Deciding to progress
  - Pre-induction
  - Induction
  - Ongoing support
  - Supporting a diverse and inclusive postgraduate community

- Mixed approaches: ice-breaker, post-it notes, discussion
Methodology: Staff Survey

- Bristol Online
  - Pilot (10 staff)

- Email sent to 1,740 academic staff

- Questions:
  - Barriers
  - Areas students need most help with when progressing to PG study
  - Most important resources for students considering PG study
  - Examples of best practice re. induction
  - Staff training needs
Preliminary findings:

- Initial data analysis of focus groups:
  - 35 PGRs attended focus groups or 1-2-1’s
  - 10 PGTs attended focus groups or 1-2-1’s

- Full analysis of staff survey results needs to be completed
  - 147 responses (8%)
Funding:

- ‘As early as possible, it takes a long time to prepare an application and get referees’
- ‘Students need to be made aware that AHRC and ESRC exist’
- ‘Specific scholarships and funding streams need to be signposted’
Challenges to transition:

- ‘It was a bit of a shock at first...being dumped in the deep end. It was abrupt...and I didn’t know what to do or who to ask for help’

- ‘Felt like I wasted a few weeks/month at the beginning’

- ‘It’s a big jump and very intense...it’s a very big transition’

- ‘Talking definitely helps with imposter syndrome’
Suggestions from students:

- Talking about imposter syndrome with fellow PhD students
- Confidence workshops
- Generating more mental health awareness
- Increased departmental collaboration
- A Buddying system
Induction:

- ‘Would have been much better to have a frank discussion about the emotional challenges of the PhD, ways to deal with it, and who to go to for help’

- ‘Need core aspects of the PhD that are integrated into every single induction’

- ‘Need opportunities for honest conversations about the emotional challenges of the PhD...and PhD students in inductions to talk about their experiences’
Academic Culture:

- ‘Culture of if you’re not depressed, you’re not working hard enough’

- ‘Toxic atmosphere and expectation to work very long hours’

- ‘Need to challenge the expectation that doing a PhD means going into academia’

- ‘Staff are stressed...and expectations for staff and students are very high, but it’s hard to change the culture if it’s already deeply embedded’

- ‘High expectations stem from the pressure of the job market... it’s a bleak landscape. On one hand there’s the expectation of high workload to the point of burnout, and on the other, we’re told self-care is the most important thing. There’s no happy middle-ground.’
Academic Community:

- ‘Talking to more PhD students would have been really helpful’

- ‘The most valuable thing was talking to others...its nice to have a wider academic community to talk about experiences’

- ‘I love the idea of being involved in a an academic research community’

- ‘Attending research seminar groups and student organised events are really useful’
Diversity and Inclusion:

- ‘People of colour are expected to do ‘BAME’ events for free, its taxing and emotional labour’

- ‘Don’t just need representation but *actual support* for the people that are here at the moment.’

- ‘Events need to be made accessible for those with caring responsibilities and distance learners’

- ‘Equality and diversity training in the UK has only just caught up with California’s training I experienced in the 1990s.’
Next steps:

- Complete analysis of focus groups and staff survey
- Share findings with key stakeholders within the University
- In collaboration develop short, medium and long term actions.
- Conduct further focus groups in 2-3 years time to measure impact and effectiveness of actions