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Research Article

Postgraduate student perceptions of the transition into postgraduate study

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Abstract

There is a predominant view that not much adjustment is required when going into postgraduate study, however recent literature has suggested that this is not the case (West, 2012). The article presented here confirms the latter, with evidence taken from focus group discussions with postgraduate students. The findings indicate that students experience difficulties with the transition into postgraduate study. These difficulties relate to their external commitments and with the university course itself. The findings revealed that there is much that can be done within the university to aid students in their postgraduate transition. Furthermore there is much that can be learned from conducting focus groups on student perceptions. It is hoped the findings presented in this article can contribute to further discussions into the difficulties experienced in postgraduate transition.

Introduction and literature review

The current study is interested in the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study especially in focusing in on what makes a successful transition and student experiences in balancing study and academic adjustment. This transition may include, moving straight from undergraduate to postgraduate study in the same institution, moving on to study at a different institution, having a period of time away from study, even those who have never studied at university before. Such transitions are made evident by surveys conducted on postgraduate students such as the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (Hodsdon and Buckley, 2011)

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and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) (Bennett and Turner, 2012). Therefore the background of students studying a postgraduate degree can be very diverse. In the past, there has been vast amounts research into transitions from college to university (Macaro and Wingate 2004). However, little research has been conducted on the transition into postgraduate study. Furthermore research in this area has been focused more towards doctoral students (Larcombe and McCosker, 2005), giving little attention to taught masters postgraduates. Researchers have suggested that perhaps it is assumed that little adjustment is involved in transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate study (West 2012). Perhaps there is a taken-for-granted assumption that postgraduate students are already experts in the realm of higher education and learning and that there is not much change in environment (Tobell, O' Donnell and Zammit 2010). However this may not be so when an individual is transitioning into vocation postgraduate studies rather than following a strictly academic route, as the change in environment may be quite significant. For example more vocational postgraduate studies have been found to put more emphasis on different areas such as skills development and professional development (Hodsdon and Buckley, 2011). Often it is assumed that the transition will be natural to them (West, 2012), as they are progressing from one step to the next. However there are few students who follow a traditional route to from undergraduate to postgraduate study (O' Donnell et al. 2009). For example students may be classed as mature, international, or may not have studied a particular subject at an undergraduate level. Cluett and Skene (2006) carried out a survey and found that 80% of students found their first-year of postgraduate coursework study to be overwhelming. Even those who do follow the traditional route from undergraduate to postgraduate do not always find the transition easy, as West (2012) found that 64% of students with an undergraduate degree found the transition difficult. Therefore there is a need for more understanding of difficulties faced in a postgraduate students' transition experience (Tobell, O' Donnell and Zammit 2010).

Recently more research is being conducted on postgraduate transition in order to fill the gap in the literature and understand the difficulties associated with this realm of study. Previous research into postgraduate student transition experiences data that challenges previous assumptions was conducted by Tobell, O' Donnell and Zammit (2010) who found that transitions can be affected by external commitments and experiences outside of the university. For example, they found the transition to be difficult because of their complex lives in which employment supports their studies. However some even struggled with the transition in terms of understanding what is required of them. Therefore it is evident that the transition is not one to be taken lightly. Additionally they found almost all lectures to be delivered in a traditional way with almost no student engagement whatsoever. Alongside the transition being difficult, it appears that not enough support is being given to students to facilitate their transition. As a result of such lack of support, some students were left feeling isolated and struggling to understand what they had to do to succeed in their studies. Suggestions for improved support included more interactive discussions with other students, perhaps to relieve their isolation in studying. The researchers suggest that this area is definitely one worthy of further investigation.

Another study which explored the transition into postgraduate study was conducted by O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom, and Zammit (2009) who wanted to help explain postgraduate transition in terms of learning, identity and participation. Their main finding after conducting student interviews was that students' personal experiences of teaching and practices within the university do not always reflect what is expected in terms of teaching practices at a postgraduate level. In their study they found that the heterogeneity, especially in terms of the needs of each student was vast. They argue that current universities who treat students as a homogenous group are overlooking many individual needs of students. Therefore it is clear that university practices need to be addressed in terms of catering for the individual needs of students.

Additionally in the past some students received no introductory sessions whatsoever at the beginning of their course and as a result found the transition into postgraduate study to be difficult (Symons 2001). Through interviews and focus groups, Symons (2001) discovered that students had a desire for more information about the course they were going to be studying and wanted to know what would be expected of them in terms of academic requirements. From such research universities can implement changes that will aid the transition into postgraduate study for future students. Despite students suggesting such introductory improvements, Cluett and Skene (2006) found that 62% of students did not attend their orientation. This could be because it was placed at an inconvenient time or that students were not clearly made aware of the orientation. This may also be that students are not making the effort to attend such help services. However certain university help services admit that the university staff had a limited understanding of the problems that postgraduate students experienced during their transition (Symons, 2001). Furthermore as Symons (2001) suggests it may be that academics hold the view that postgraduate students do not need an induction as they are already experienced as students.

Furthermore, more recent research has explored postgraduate transitions. West (2012) found that 63% of students found the transition difficult. They comment on the assumption that undergraduate study providing a student with the necessary skills to succeed at a higher level of study may not be true as 63% of those who already had a degree found the transition stressful. When offered the opportunity to feedback on their experiences students offered suggestions for improving the support on offer in the future. Students had a preference for support offered towards specific modules delivered by a course tutor, whereas workshops and learning support officer sessions were viewed not to be helpful as it was too general. Furthermore it was suggested that more support be given to prepare students for the level of work at a postgraduate level, especially in guiding students around how to write academic papers. The researchers propose that students and staff may hold similar beliefs that postgraduate study does not involve much adjustment. This may be why many students struggle with the transition. The researchers conclude that timetabled workshops could be the way forward in helping students to work their way up to a postgraduate level of achievement.

Despite this work, research into those studying a postgraduate master's course is still scarce. It is clear that more understanding is needed into why students seem to struggle with the transition into postgraduate study as well as more of an understanding into what support

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is helpful, where it could be improved, and how transition is impacted by balancing study with external commitments. In the current study, results from the annual, national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) highlighted the difficulties that postgraduate students were having in engaging and adjusting to studying in one particular postgraduate course at a university in the UK. Students expressed low satisfaction with their transition experience. Due to this, a deeper investigation into these difficulties was needed. With backing from the course leader, the aim was to gain rich, in-depth student data via focus groups within the course. The aim was to find out more about students perceptions on how they have found the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. The plan was for a couple of focus groups to be conducted to acquire the student voice on what makes a successful transition. This was to capture student reflections on how they have adjusted to the academic demands of the course as well as acquire thoughts on the current support and services on offer and how these could be improved. Such data could help to guide improvement of services to aid this transition for future postgraduate students. Moreover, it will provide rich in-depth data to go alongside and complement existing institutional data from the PTES.

Methods

Students were selected to take part via opportunistic sampling in which the first available students that met the criteria and volunteered to take part were selected from one particular postgraduate course at a university in the UK. Participation was by no means compulsory but was encouraged by the course leader. Overall nine participants took part in the two focus groups.

In order to lead the discussion in a general way, topics and questions were given to act as prompts. For example participants were initially told that the main topic surrounding the focus group was that of the transition into postgraduate study. Firstly they were asked how they have found the transition into postgraduate study, as the focus group progressed they were also asked how they found balancing studies with other commitments and how they found the current support on offer at the university as well as how they think it could be improved. Prompts in the form of conversation fillers such as "mmm" and "yes" were given throughout the discussion to maintain the flow of conversation. When each focus group was completed, participants were asked whether they had anything further to say, then the recorder was switched off.

When the audio recordings of the two focus groups had been transcribed they were then analysed using NVivo.

Results

More support needed at the start of the course

This was the centre for discussion in the focus groups with most group members expressing that they would have benefited greatly from more support at the start of the course. For example additional modules would have been more beneficial. One member of the focus groups expressed his views concerning appropriate modules at the start of the course:

How about doing a module on academic management or something which is actually going to help you obtain the grade which you're going to get and throw that right at you, frontload the programme and put that right at the start.

Perhaps modules which are more tailored towards specific assignments at the start of the course would be helpful in order to give students the grounding they need in a topic area. It may be that some students actually need more background knowledge regarding the overall degree. It is important to realise perhaps that students come from different backgrounds and may not have the knowledge necessary to equip them on the course. This applies especially to international students, for example one international student within one of the focus groups stated:

There's not everybody that has [had experience in the subject area]... the fact that there is a common interest, we are all hear to learn, they should be able to maybe put in a kind of introduction to what we're supposed to do... they should introduce it to the students then take it from there really... I'd certainly say a bit more of an introduction into the [subject area], the procedures, the development management, how the process works... It was like whiz-stop tour here and then it was kind of finished.

It seems that even if there was an introduction to the course that it was not sufficient enough for many students. An in-depth introduction was needed to support students transitioning onto the course. Without this, it seems that they struggled when settling into the course, getting to grips with the contents of the course and knowing what was required of them. This seems especially so for international students and this comment here offers just a glimpse of the transition experience of it.

Despite many of the students saying they found the transition easy in the second focus group, they hinted that perhaps more could have been done to aid students in an academic sense:

I think the modules that we had where the lecturers gave a really brief presentation on what the modules were, you could have that at the beginning as well, that would be really nice, just an overview of what the course was going to involve because I read the bit on the website and phoned up and spoke to as many people as I could and sent as many emails as I could and spoke to the course leader on that day. But it just didn't give me any idea of what I was going to be study.

Here it seems students need more support at the start of the course so that they know what to do to succeed on the course and anticipate academic challenges. Despite this particular student's efforts, sufficient support was not received.

Quality of support

Another main theme was the quality of support on offer. Some students believed that support was not as helpful as it could be:

It's quite easy just to point everyone to Blackboard to do their own research but it's just, yes, everyone's an adult, nobody wants to be treated like a child but at the same time it is a totally new, different

experience going to university when I've not been to university before. The other thing was, the lecturer kept saying 'Well you're the academic, you need to get on with it' which wasn't very helpful at all and very standoff-ish as well.

In this instance we can see that the support on offer was not of the best quality. This also leads back to the subtheme that perhaps more support is needed for students coming from different cultural or non-academic backgrounds. This student makes it clear that she had not been to university before. A very serious point discovered in these focus groups is that sometimes the quality of support was so bad that it was enough to discourage people from carrying on with the course entirely, as one respondent stated: 'And, to be honest, being truthful, it was enough to put me off, I really felt like, I can't do this and I'm not going to continue it, if I'm truthful.'

It is clear that the quality of support given to postgraduate students and the number of support services on offer needs to be improved. It seems that on occasion even when students try to appeal for extra support that their concerns were not always heard or replied to 'And then sometimes when you actually send an email they don't get back to you.' In addition, one student suggests that more support is needed in terms of providing awareness of employment opportunities, 'I think there needs to be a bit more of an opportunity for students just to know what employers are taking on, what things are available...'

Across both focus groups the general feeling was that support was adequate at times but requires vast improvement. For example in the second focus group complaints emerged:

Yes. I think the support is adequate, I wouldn't say it was good personally but I think it's adequate, it could be better, but I just get the impression that tutors are very, very stretched because of the amount of students, especially I think potentially the undergrad students.

It just feels a little bit impersonal as well I think. I think because of the fact that it's so stretched, I don't know what I'm expecting I just think it could be nicer if it was just a little bit more personable...

An 'adequate' level of support for postgraduate students does not seem optimal. When talking about access to tutors for support, two students highlighted:

That's not very personal is it?

It's not personal. They don't have time to see us all, if we knocked on their door it would be like 'We don't have time to see you' which is a shame because it makes anybody's lives easier if you know somebody and you know how to help them as well.

Students seem to be disheartened by the fact that there is not always somebody there to support them and emphasise the fact that even if someone where there that they may not have the time for them. This also applies to personal dissertation tutors, as one student recognised: 'Also things like, we've been given dissertation tutors and some of them just like disappear for research projects for a certain amount of time... he just disappeared for two weeks.'

More support needed on assignments

Another theme across the two groups that was discussed in terms of affecting student transition was that more assistance was needed on assignments. Once again, this may be linked to students hailing from non-traditional routes on to the course, as one student recognised:

...a little bit more information about the key things to look for, for me would have been useful having not had experience, having had a lot of experience at all within [subject area] when reaching that assignment. That would definitely have been useful.

It seems that the coursework given provided problems for those who felt they did not have the background knowledge to complete such a task. The university may not realise that perhaps for some students a lot more support and information is needed before they reach a certain assignment. One student provided specific advice on what could be done to aid students with assignments:

So for me what would have been useful is a more in-depth look at how the [professional] sector actually works initially, before beginning an assignment, that would have been useful for me and maybe for a couple of others I spoke to who were in a similar boat, they'd not had a lot of experience of [subject area] and they were given this assignment and it was a bit like 'Well what do we do?'

It seems that the course does not realise that it is open to a variety of students from different backgrounds. This theme of assistance on assignments comes up frequently with other students mentioning the topic, as evidenced in the following:

But from an assignment point of view I think it would have been helpful if a couple of, I know they're on Blackboard but I think it would have been helpful if the lecturers would give a bit more of a clear indication as to how you expect you to write, set out your assignment.

It seems that some students feel that they are left on their own, without much assistance when it comes to assignments. This links into the overwhelming theme of this focus group discussion in that the level of support is not good enough and needs improvement, especially for those students who do not have relevant background experience to the course. However as one student highlights, this may not be a universal thing that everyone needs:

So I think that might have been useful for them but then you have on the course people, who've got more experience of [subject area] already and are probably want to move one stage ahead or wanting to move off in a different direction.

Some teaching and support is seen as irrelevant on the whole as it does not apply to everyone. Whereas the second focus group is in line with the first focus group in that more support should be offered especially on assignments like dissertations. They argue that not all students need basic extra support. This is where the differences in the focus groups become apparent, and the effect of transition for different types of students. For example the first focus group is mostly compiled of older students who have had gaps between their studies. Whereas the second focus group is comprised entirely of younger students who had gone straight from undergraduate to postgraduate study. It seems that some support is being delivered to the masses which may not always be appropriate for others. One student puts emphasis on this matter:

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We've had a lot of lectures on, not so much lectures, but the lecturers are talking about referencing all the time and we've spoken about how tired we are listening to it, to be honest, they're just constantly reiterating aren't they? I think it's alright to mention is and they put emphasis on it each time but perhaps they should have a workshop for people who don't understand referencing very well.

Maybe an optional lecture so if you didn't understand it, you could go along to it and if understood it you could leave it.

According to the views here, perhaps support in some cases should be directed towards only those students who need it. Support in cases where it is thought that some students may already have the knowledge could be more individually tailored. This point is highlighted by one student within the focus group:

Yes and then that's your decision and if you didn't go to it then that's your own fault. I understand that people come from different backgrounds, especially the international students, that kind of thing, and people who haven't been to uni before like some of the older students but, again, I just think it would be useful and less frustrating for people that have been using referencing systems for years and years, just not to listen to that. Potentially that time could be spent teaching something that you've signed up for and are paying for.

This is similar to what was said in the first focus group regarding the balance of support. Students from different backgrounds need to be catered for, as touched upon here. However, as indicated from some student respondents, it was suggested that those from different backgrounds could be catered for separately. Perhaps a separate class could be ran for them which is what is being suggested here, as at the moment classes are being run at the expense of other students who may become frustrated at covering material they already know. It may be difficult to find this balance, but it seems that support needs to be aimed more individually to please all students.

Poor organisation of the course

Another theme particularly evident in the second focus group was that of poor organisation of the course. It seems that one of the main things students believe to be hindering them in their transition is the organisation of the course and the university in general. One student highlights organisation, particularly at the start of the course:

...but I think the university struggles with, it's organisation and it seems to be really messed up some things. Like that could have been told, you could have had information, Blackboard sites didn't go live until two or three weeks after we'd started unit.

The student emphasises it is the university's problem. It is this particular organisational problem that holds back students when wanting to actually start the course:

We had a problem, we couldn't enrol on, even though we were continuing with the [postgraduate course] and we've been there three years, we couldn't enrol and so I talked with some of the students on my course, you know, former students and they had the same problem. So we got in touch with someone and it took them quite a while to sort it out and I think I enrolled the week before we started or something and it's only a simple online system.

It seems that even though this problem had affected students in the past that nothing has been done to address this problem. Perhaps the university has not realised it had been a problem previously. Therefore it seems that problems like this really need to be addressed as transition is being made difficult before it has even fully begun. Additionally it seems that most of the time it seems it is just simple things:

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I think that's another thing, our assignment dates have been changed by about a month I think, we've got an assignment due in June but it's still on the assessment diary as May. So is it going to be late when we hand it in or, so they just need to address that really...I think our problems have more been the organisation of the course rather than academic problems.

We can see that transitions here are really being affected by the organisation of the course. Therefore it is not students' personal issues or background that is preventing them from making a successful transition, but rather problems with the course in general.

Positive support

Despite a mostly negative discussion of the support on offer, the discussion was not entirely negative as students also highlighted the positives of support. Overall students agree that the most beneficial time for increasing support is at the beginning of the course and that other time periods do not necessarily require additional support. On occasion where students have had problems they note that support has been positive in helping them to resolve this problem:

Here was only the one, we had a, there's a lecturer, I'll not mention the name, but we brought up in the student rep meeting where some people struggle to understand what he was trying to get at and I think by the sounds of it it's the same problem every year with every student, and the course leader in the meeting understood that point of view and said she would address that, so that was, for me that was a good intervention that we were able to bring up that concern quite early on in the course and she said that she'd look at addressing that. So that was quite helpful. He's not taught since; he's not been scheduled to teach things.

It seems that things have been done to implement change and improve the situation, as one respondent stated: 'The lecturers since we've had that meeting have been very involved in more practical and more helpful for learning rather than just talking at you.'

Students do acknowledge support which has been helpful in guiding them through their postgraduate transition. For example one student comments:

I thought it was good in one of our modules last year actually, they had, we had an assignment map and you then go to a class after that and some of the international students did that and if they hadn't referenced correctly they were shown where they'd gone wrong"

This shows that there are services in place which are affective already. Additionally one student in the second focus group comments:

I think the support is really good, I think we know who to talk to now as well to get answers... the course leader, she was very good, she listened to our views and she said that she was going to make a couple of changes from the things we suggested.

The problems which are brought to the attention of staff are being addressed.

Suggestions for improving support

Student respondents were very forthcoming with suggestions for support and with every negative comment came a suggestion for how a particular area could be improved. When referring to the quality of support one student suggests:

I guess and just pointing us towards Blackboard but, you know, it's all very good doing that but it's not, you know, to learn often many people need to rebound off someone don't they? ...you know, time is money and you need like a two-hour session or something, or even a whole module.

This student is commenting on suggestions that perhaps there should be more support on offer, or even a whole module in support of academic performance and writing. They even have ideas of what can be done to address these problems in the future in order to bring it to the attention of the university: 'So it just might be an idea to have a student rep meeting earlier so that issues can be addressed sooner.'

Students are already trying to address problems themselves. They want to see immediate changes in improving their experience. As indicated earlier, students have made suggestions in improving support given on assignments, as one of them clarified: 'So for me what would have been useful is a more in-depth look at how the [professional] sector actually works initially, before beginning an assignment.' It seems it would be more beneficial to give students grounding in a specific subject area before beginning an assignment even though it may be assumed otherwise.

They also suggest ways in which tutors can prepare students for the world of work, as one student said: 'I think there needs to be a bit more of an opportunity for students just to know what employers are taking on, what things are available.'

Many of these suggestions could go a long way in improving the course and thus the future transition experience for postgraduate students at the university.

Limitations

The diversity of the focus groups was not ideal as only one international student was recruited as well as only two mature students. Suggestions for future directions would be to look further into the postgraduate transition experience of international and mature students. Nevertheless even those students who had followed the traditional route from undergraduate to postgraduate still suffered difficulties in their transition which shows the transition can be challenging no matter what the students background. Furthermore due to time constraints there was only time to conduct two focus groups with student respondents. Future research should aim to collect more data through follow-up one-to-one interviews and further focus groups if possible to gain more in-depth data on student perceptions.

Discussion and conclusion

From the themes discovered in the focus groups we can see that there is a lot to be done in terms of helping students to experience a smooth transition into postgraduate study. The most predominant theme was that of receiving more support at the start of the course. The start of the course could obviously be a very difficult time for students as they are being faced with lots of new material and perhaps even ways of learning. Symons (2001) found similar findings in that many students found the beginning of the course very difficult and wanted more direction to begin with. Students may need to know what is expected of them in terms of academic work and what the course will entail. This was predominant in the current research with most students expressing the need for more introductory support. More should be done to make sure that students are comfortable with the transition and that they know what they need to do to succeed. However it is also necessary to see that whilst students complain that there is not enough support on offer, that they may not actually be accessing all the available support. For example in West's (2012) research, he found that support services such as workshops and learning support officer services were poorly attended. Despite this it may be that such services do not take place at a convenient time and that time constrictions and negotiations between life and study affect postgraduate's ability to attend such things (Tobbell, O' Donnell, and Zammit, 2010). Therefore perhaps support services need to be delivered according to student suggestions or exist where students can incorporate them into their course. West (2012) found that there was a preference for subject specific support delivered by tutors. The students that West (2012) used also expressed a dislike for support services and workshops in describing them as too generalised and not much help. Students in the current study held similar views in describing some of the support on offer as irrelevant and should only be on offer to those who need it. They also suggested having a specific person for support as tutors were not always available. It seems that there is a need to make support more specific in steering away from generic support which aims to meet everyone's needs by offering more individual support tailored to certain groups of students. Such support however may only come with additional staffing.

A subtheme in the theme of quality of support was the discussion of more support needed on assignments. Similar again to West's (2012) findings in which the most discussed area was student's suggestions for more guidance on academic writing. This was similar to the current research. However whereas some students needed specific guidance on each piece of coursework, there are students who also generally need support on how to write an academic piece of work as they have been out of education for a number of years or have never been to university before. This was the case with a couple of students in the first focus group which brings truth to the idea from O' Donnell *et al.* (2009) who declared that not all students follow a traditional route from undergraduate to postgraduate. For example, some of the students needed to re-learn the basics of academia all over again. This highlights that a cohort of postgraduate students can be very heterogeneous. Therefore support which is delivered universally may not be so useful. Perhaps support needs to be tailored more towards individual groups of students. For example the needs of the international students were even greater. Unfortunately the current focus groups were unable to capture the entire picture of transition experience for foreign students and so more should be done in the future

to study this group of students. However the current focus group did give us a glimpse of what the transition may be like for international students. For example one student stated how she did not have much knowledge on how graduates from the course found employment and became professionals in the field within England and could benefit greatly with this awareness. With this in mind, it seems that students may require much more of an introduction to the course than other students as well as more support on the academic side of things. More depth to the understanding in this area is desirable and so further study should be conducted into the transition experience of international students.

Staff (as well as students) may assume that there is not much adjustment involved in going into postgraduate study (West, 2012). It is obvious from the research here that this is not the case. Adjustment involves something different for every student and there have been many issues raised here that require more attention to help improve every students transition experience. Their transition may be further hindered when they are further affected by lack of assistance on assignments and knowing what they need to do to succeed on the course. Donnelly (2008) stated how the university learning environment should stimulate the student through positive guidance so that learners can sustain improvement through challenging times in the course. The university course and its environment should be of optimum quality in terms of support in order to guide students through their transition. Tobell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) support the idea that postgraduate students do indeed have to cope with challenging environments in their bid to succeed in postgraduate study. Their findings were confirmed in this study, as evidenced here, student respondents struggled with the content of the course in terms of academic requirements. They also found that students felt that they did not receive enough support and that they often felt that things were often too independent. This goes alongside the current themes of the quality of support on offer and the theme that more assistance on assignments is needed. Students may feel isolated and that they do not receive enough support from staff.

Despite the limitations of the study, the results have provided valuable insight into student perceptions of their transition experience, views which are not attainable simply through survey data. Furthermore even though the findings do not necessarily reflect the PTES findings, they give a voice to the difficulties being experienced in the transition into postgraduate study. Nevertheless the PTES findings are still valuable in showing the difficulties experienced by different cohorts of students.

In conclusion focus groups which utilise postgraduate students can be very beneficial in gaining an inside view as to why transition into postgraduate study may be difficult. Despite the assumption that postgraduate students are experts at education and struggle less with the transition between different modes of study than other domains of students, it was found that there are actually many external and internal factors which can contribute to a difficult transition experience for postgraduate students. The suggestions that come from these focus groups were valuable in learning what support works and what supports is less useful, such information can go towards improving the transition experience of future postgraduate students.

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