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Mapping the challenges in making the transition to taught postgraduate study in Psychology.

Running Head: Transition to taught postgraduate study

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#### Abstract

The paper presents a model of the challenges facing undergraduates transitioning to taught postgraduate studies developed from a Grounded Theory analysis of interviews with current and prospective taught postgraduates from a range of Psychology programmes. The model reveals the importance of the visibility of current and recent taught postgraduates in influencing the decision making practices of prospective students. The process of transition to taught postgraduate studies is characterised by early decision making as for many students graduation is no longer seen as the natural end point of their educational careers. Analysis also reveals that in spite of expectations of heavier workloads and increased intensity, the reality exceeds expectations. Key areas for support identified by participants include tailored study skills support and more clarity around what constitutes 'masters' level work.

Key Words: Taught postgraduate, transition, Grounded Theory, peer support

#### Context

The need for understanding the challenges of transition to Postgraduate study in Psychology has never been greater as institutions increase their portfolios of Masters programmes to attract students who can now access tuition loans for Taught Postgraduate (PGT) programmes. In the recent Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) (Leman, 2018), 4589 Psychology students on PGT programmes signalled worrying levels of concern with unmanageable workloads (34%) and significantly higher than sector averages for students considering leaving their programmes (30%). The current paper explores the challenges faced by Psychology students pursuing Postgraduate study.

#### Transition

The literature on transition in Higher Education has focused on developing strategies to support students to 'succeed' in achieving a new level of study and has therefore constructed transition as an outcome linked to academic success rather than a process through which students experience a multi-faceted process of change and growth (Bamber, Choudhary, Hislop & Lane, 2019). This outcome based approach enables the measurement of 'successful' transition in terms of completion rates and assessment scores and therefore benefits institutional systems in demonstrating and showcasing 'effective practice' and enhancement programmes. For students engaged in the 'process' of transitioning the challenges and opportunities they encounter are more complex and go beyond

adapting to their new programme of study and include changing identities and relationships with staff. This paper will utilize what Gale & Parker (2014) refer to as the third model of transition as 'becoming', a perspective which rejects the notion of transition as a measurable shift in academic and organizational ability occurring over a fixed point in time and redefines transition as "the capability to navigate change" (Gale & Parker, 2014, p.737). This construction of transition recognises this process as part of the multiple transformations which characterise human development across the lifespan and which are not necessarily marked by anxiety and stress.

This conceptualisation of 'transition' as a multi-faceted process and part of continuing growth and skills development is particularly relevant for Psychology. The motivations for studying Psychology are often driven by the aspiration to work in one of the registered professions which not only requires Postgraduate study but also continuing professional development and reflective practice. The 'Psychology' career can and should be characterised by continual growth and adaptability to the continually changing and evolving discipline.

Transition between levels of study has been widely studied at Undergraduate level (Adam, Skalick & Brown, 2011). Equally the progression to Postgraduate Research (PGR) degrees has also been well documented (Ampah & Jaeger, 2012). The literature on transition to Taught Postgraduate (PGT) programmes however is limited partly due to the assumption that the challenges are similar to those encountered at transition to degree level and also by the expectation that the achievement of 'graduateness' incorporates preparation to study at Postgraduate level (Peterson & McLeod, 2014). Recent evidence suggests that having an Undergraduate degree in a related discipline does not facilitate transition to PGT programmes and indeed Undergraduate perceive their lack of preparation for Postgraduate study as a source of stress which impacts on their success (West, 2012). The lack of research and empirical study of the experiences and needs of this particular population has led to the characterisation of PGT students as the 'forgotten ones' (Peterson & McLeod, 2014). This

apparent gap in the literature on student transition has meant that there are currently relatively few interventions to support PGT students.

#### Taught Postgraduate experience

Unlike the three year transition to Graduate and Doctoral levels which both incorporate an initial year of foundational and skills learning, full time students on PGT programmes are expected to achieve 'Mastery' in a single year (McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017). As such, the challenges in transitioning for this group of learners are distinct in that there is a relatively short time period in which to adapt to and thrive in the new level of study (Bownes et al, 2017). The structure of the typical one year Masters programme leaves little time for induction and skills development meaning that students on these programmes are expected to 'transition' and adapt to new working and assessment patterns within the early stages of their course. Research suggests that on average students perceive that the transition to working at Masters level takes approximately six months (McClure, 2007) underpinning perceptions of stressful and unmanageable workloads reported in recent Postgraduate Taught Experience Surveys (PTES) (Leman, 2018; Bradley, 2017). Although students acknowledge and recognise that they will experience more difficulty at Postgraduate level, the reality of what is required of them still leads to difficulty in coping and the desire for enhanced pre induction activities and information (Evans, Nguyen, Richardson & Scott, 2018). The impact of this perceived lack of preparedness and pressure to adapt and thrive rapidly at Postgraduate level is of concern for Psychology Postgraduates as the inclusion of PTES questions assessing 'retention vulnerability' reveal that 31% of psychology postgraduates had considered suspending and leaving their programmes.

#### Peer mentoring

Transition between levels of study has been widely studied at Undergraduate level and key challenges to effective transition have been used to underpin the growth in Undergraduate peer mentoring programmes (Adam, Skalick & Brown, 2011). Indeed, peer mentoring programmes have been successfully evaluated at Undergraduate level and shown to increase resilience and enhance the

student experience (Chester, Burton, Xenos & Elgar, 2013). In recent years this model had begun to be applied to Postgraduate transition in programmes recently developed at London Metropolitan University; Trinity Laban institute and Middlesex University. These programmes have been based on Undergraduate rather than PGT experience and therefore it is not clear whether adapting models of peer mentoring designed for Undergraduate cohorts can be transferrable to Postgraduate experience (Menzies, Baron & Zutshi, 2015). Research on peer mentoring programmes for PGT students is beginning to emerge in particular in relation to the experience of international students. Although findings would appear to support the social psychological impact of peer mentoring in providing opportunities for social interaction and acculturation, the effectiveness of these relatively new programmes on academic transition is still unclear (Menzies, Baron & Zutshi, 2015). Although the transition for PGR students from student to staff community has been well documented, the transitional identities of PGT students are more complex and their short lived cohort lifespan provide no lasting community of practice for new students to link to and identify with (James, 2018).

The apparent gap in the literature on student transition to PGT programmes has meant that the few peer mentoring programmes which have been developed for these programmes lack an effective underpinning in a pedagogically driven understanding of the challenges experienced by this group of Postgraduate students. Although academics may perceive independent learning as a core feature of 'Mastery' for students this 'independence' is constructed as isolation and an absence of both contact and appropriate support which is mitigated by interactions with peers (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammitt, 2009). Postgraduate students resistance to the notion of independent learning as a 'hostile practice' (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammitt, 2009) can be linked to characterisations of the type of support students perceive they need at PGT level. Recent research not only identifies critical thinking and academic writing as key areas where students perceive they need further guidance but this support is framed in ways which tangibly link to the familiar rhetoric of undergraduate study skills support

(McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017). Recurrent themes in the recent literature around Postgraduate perceptions of support centre around the types of study skills support received during their Undergraduate degrees including pre induction information and a greater emphasis on personalised learning and individualised support (Huessi, 2012).

In order to begin to develop more targeted interventions to support transition to PGT level, the project aimed to explore expectations of and reflections on transition to taught Postgraduate study by students engaged on British Psychological Society (BPS) accredited Undergraduate and Masters programmes.

## Method

### Design

The project used a Constructivist Grounded Approach (Charmaz, 2006). The Constructivist Grounded Approach moves beyond exploring participants accounts to extrapolate patterns of action and behaviour to actively engage with the meanings and values which participants bring to phenomena.

### Participants and sampling strategy

An initial purposive sample of PGT students was recruited from five Psychology Masters programmes (n=7). In line with a Grounded approach, initial coding of these interview lead to Theoretical sampling of final year undergraduate students from six Psychology Undergraduate programmes (n=8). All postgraduate students (n=7) had completed their first semester at the time of recruitment. All final year Undergraduates (n=8) had recently completed applications for taught Postgraduate programmes. In total 15 interviews were conducted by the research team and interviewees were recruited through University portal announcements.

### Materials

Separate semi structured interview schedules were developed for Postgraduate participants which enabled them to reflect on their experiences of their first semester studying on their postgraduate programmes. Interview schedules for Undergraduate students focussed on expectations and understandings of studying at Postgraduate level which had emerged as initial themes from Postgraduate interviews.

#### Method of analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Charmaz' 2006 model of Grounded Theory analysis. A preliminary set of categories developed through line by line 'initial coding'. Although Grounded Theory analysis has a focus on gerunds as a primary source of codes, eclectic coding (Saldanas, 2016) was used to enable participants' meanings and emotions to be included. Once theoretical saturation had been reached and when no new lines of enquiry could be identified, 'focused coding' was used to identify recurring themes through the process of constant comparison. Finally 'theoretical coding' enabled researchers to construct categories into the final narrative (Charmaz, 2006).

In order to ensure the credibility of the analysis several trustworthiness strategies were engaged with throughout the project. Case summaries were produced for each interview and interviewers and analysts used memos to reflect on their perceptions post interview and post coding. A framework approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) was used to enable constant comparison across interviews and to enable a clear audit trail of the stages of analysis. The dependability of categories and the final model was established through the use of multiple coders (n=3) and member checking with participants.

#### Ethics

The project was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) as well as the University Research Ethics Guidelines and Data Security policy. Ethical Approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were given Pseudonyms and their fields of study generalized.

#### Findings



### **Core category – The postgraduate community of practice**

From the interviews, the core category which underpinned all aspects of the process of transitioning to Masters level was the importance of peers as sources of information and support. The presence of current PGT students throughout all stages of the transition process from early decision making through to adapting to the reality of PGT study was identified as an intervening factor which facilitated transition. The notion of entering a PGT community informed all aspects of transition and the lack of visibility of taught postgraduates was identified as a barrier to effective information seeking.

Throughout the interviews the experiences of current and recent PGT students were constructed as a key influence in decision making and information gathering. It is clear from unpacking the expectations and experiences of both prospective and current students that that access to current and recent postgraduate provides not only the capability to ask those questions which may seem inappropriate for academic staff but also enhances the decision making process.

As the model of transition is presented, the potential impact of PGT students in shaping and supporting those intending to start PGT programmes can be seen throughout the process of moving to Masters level study

### **Deciding on transition**

#### Early decision making

All interviewees had considered routes through to postgraduate study early in their University careers. Their decisions to continue studying were made early in their Undergraduate degrees with the majority having decided before they entered their final year of study. For many interviewees the decision to continue on to PGT study was constructed as part of their educational career and a key driver in starting their degree programmes. As such their decision making process around PGT study was framed in their final year as a consolidation of pre-existing considerations. It was evident that their final year information seeking around programmes of study was constructed as preparation for their future pathway rather than a crucial factor in deciding to go forward.

*“Throughout the whole thing I was always going to do my masters that was the point of my doing my degree.”* (Diane, UG Forensic Psychology)

*“I knew that I was doing my degree from day one but I knew from my first day at Uni that I was going to go on to masters”* (Anita, UG Psychology)

#### Influencers & information providers

Throughout the interviews there were clear distinctions made between information gathering strategies and more holistic influencers who shaped students choices in the broader context of their future careers. Although interviewees acknowledged staff knowledge of programmes as useful and sought advice of programme structures from key contacts like dissertation supervisors and programme leaders, this was often to consolidate and confirm initial web based information from University websites. Information gathered on potential programmes was centred around module content and types of assessment.

*“I pretty much looked on the website and looked at all the modules in detail”* (Susan, PGT Forensic)

*“They were doing that and could relate to me wanting to be in a healthcare setting because they did experience that they could draw on and talk about that that they weren’t just academics and couldn’t advise or speak about anything else in lectures and seminars”* (Sandra, PGT Health Psychology)

The knowledge and experiences current and former postgraduate students was seen by interviewees as having more direct relevance to decision making around the content of programmes. In addition Undergraduate students constructed current students as already being on the path they had chosen and could therefore provide invaluable insights into the process of progressing with their chosen career which had immediate relevance to the current economic climate. Although the industry experience of academic staff was constructed as inspirational, the challenges faced by students trying to start careers were seen being more directly relevant to their contemporaries given the changing nature of industries like marketing.

*“You get more of the sales pitch from the academic tutor but you know you get more of what it’s like on the ground from the students.”* (Bryony, UG Psychology).

*“The students will give you their experiences and they will be more honest”* (Diane, UG Forensic Psychology)

### **Expectations versus reality**

All interviewees recognised that taught postgraduate study would involve a more intensive pattern of study and assessment however clear differences emerged between expectations of working and studying at Postgraduate level and the experience of PGT study.

#### **'Natural' Transitions**

Undergraduates constructed the transition to PGT study as simply another in a series of transitions they had made during their educational journey from School through College to Undergraduate degree. The construction of their educational journeys as a series of transitions leads to the expectation of starting taught postgraduate study as a 'natural' progression from final year Undergraduate experience. In particular the familiarity with institutional practices and academic staff were seen as facilitating this transition.

*"Our transition from undergraduate to postgraduate will be easier you know how the whole University works...I don't think it will differ that much"* (Amy, UG, Forensic Psychology)

In reflecting on their prior assumptions of starting their courses, current PGT students identified these assumptions as naïve and problematic when first starting their PGT programmes.

*"We knew it was going to be the next step but some of my friends were like you know it'll just be like third year again cos third year was a nightmare and yet it was nothing like third year and again cos it was just a bigger nightmare"* (Sandra, PGT Health Psychology)

*"I would have like to have thought it was a natural progression that would have been lovely but I don't think it was I think it was quite a big jump and this has been a huge leap."* (Amy, PGT Forensic Psychology)

#### **Intensity & independence**

Although all interviewees identified that taught postgraduate education came with the expectation of higher workloads there were crucial differences in the reflections of Undergraduate and PGT students.

Undergraduates framed their expectations of higher workloads in terms of the increasing pressure of their Undergraduate degrees and the higher workloads in their final year of study. For both groups

'intensity' was the term most often used to characterize the differences between working at Undergraduate and PGT levels.

For current PGT students this transition to a more focused schedule of deadlines was marked by a sudden realization and immersion in a punishing schedule of study and assessment. Although all had recognised this change would happen, the reality of PGT study was still constructed as unexpected in the level of intensity and pressure the experienced.

*"There's a lot more work it's kind of like having your second and third years smashed into one so it was horrible so at undergraduate I feel like it more kind of relaxed though it didn't feel like that at time like I feel like you got a lot more support now you're just left to your own devices in a way on the masters" (April, PGT Psychology).*

*"It was a completely different way of doing things and a completely different expectation on us which I wasn't prepared for" (Sandra, PGT Health Psychology)*

Linked to intensity of workloads was the expectation that the level of direction of support and direction from academic staff would lessen at Masters level. All interviewees had expected more self-directed study however crucial to the difference between prospective and current postgraduate students was the demarcation between self-directed and independent learning. For current PGT students, independent learning included taking ownership of the direction of their studies with support and mentoring from academic staff. Whilst prospective students constructed PGT study as still bounded by the direction of tutors who would provide structure, 'teach' the course and enable students to work independently whilst still being directed by staff.

*"I expect the work to be harder the grade criteria to move up another level, I expect it be more independent I know the staff will be there to help but it will all have to come from me" (Candace, UG Psychology)*

*"You've got to decide what you want to do and where you want to go with it at undergraduate you're given a certain word count or you've got a certain criteria to follow for a piece of work but at masters level it doesn't seem to be as much about that." (Byron, PGT Sport Psychology)*

### **Supporting successful transition**

Interviewees described a number of potential targeted sources of support to ease the initial transition to postgraduate study. Whilst there was an awareness of generalized sources of support, targeted provision was seen as lacking. In particular the focus of interviewees' recommendations focused on

strategies to enable students to recognize what was expected from postgraduate writing and the expectations of tutors.

#### Pre induction

Current postgraduates felt unprepared for the experience of starting postgraduate study and in particular having to 'hit the ground running'. In spite of standard inductions and introductory sessions the majority of PGT students were expected to begin working on assessments during their first week and produce plans or outlines of assessments within the first two weeks of their programmes. Many felt inadequately prepared for the faster pace of taught postgraduate study and both current and prospective students felt that an earlier pre-programme induction would help to engage them with the realities of studying at this level.

*"I know when you're a masters you're an adult and you have to do things on your own and that's fine but when you've no idea what a masters is and what you're supposed to achieve and what you're supposed to do its quite hard to be just thrown in there and I think we need a bit more help and bit more support"* (Beth, PGT Business ).

*"If you done an induction like two weeks before you start but it was run by masters students I think that would be more beneficial than ran by academic staff because you can feel that you connect with students better because they've been there so they'll know what questions they had at that time and what they didn't understand"* (Anita, UG Psychology)

#### 'Soft skills' support

General study skills in particular research and literature searching as well as academic writing and the expectations of tutor's in regards to the level of critical evaluation and synthesis were the key concerns expressed by interviewees in feeling prepared for postgraduate study. Although induction sessions provided information on general sources of support current PGT students identified the need for tailored support to develop appropriate writing styles and research strategies.

*"I think a bit more support in the work on how you're supposed to critically write and write as a maters student "*(Beth, PGT Business)

*"If they had a postgrad specific like a workshop on developing a writing style for postgrads cos it's like the next level up"* (Brian, PGT Business)

#### Peer support

In discussions around their information seeking all interviewees spoke of the benefits of having access to current and recent postgraduate students. Although staff were seen as key influencers their impact and accessibility was tightly bound in terms of the potential scope for questioning. Both undergraduate and postgraduate interviewees constructed the impact of peer support both in decision making and in the process of learning to adapt to PGT study.

The relatively short pedagogic distance between prospective and current students also enabled interviewees to ask what they characterised as 'silly' questions, that is those fears and anxieties they were reticent to share with future tutors. The anxieties and concerns of prospective students ranging from balancing study and work through to the fear of starting a new programme of study were seen as areas which current or recent postgraduate students have a better and more effective contribution.

*"I usually finding chatting through it or chatting through ideas or something I don't understand with with someone else even not necessarily in that the same field of study is beneficial"* (Daniel, PGT Business)

*"I didn't speak to any past student which I think now with hindsight might have prepared me a bit better I think initially it would have been nice to get their take on it I think we went into it in a sense of we didn't really know what it was going to be like."* (Sandra, PGT Health Psychology)

*"I think it would have been good to calm me down cos I was really scared... I think the difference between speaking to a tutor and a student you're on the same level so you can ask silly questions like were you scared as well"* (Amy, PGT Forensic Psychology)

Both PGT and Undergraduate students emphasised the benefit of speaking to peers both in gaining a clear sense of the reality of PGT study but also in a broader sense of making contact with a relatively short lived community of practice. In addition to course knowledge, interviewees placed emphasis on the benefits of engaging with PGT students experiences as beneficial in feeling prepared for Postgraduate study.

### **Implications for Taught Postgraduate Programmes**

The model of transition presented from interviews with both current and prospective postgraduate students reveals that the decision making begins far earlier than expected with all interviewees making their applications early in their final year of study. For many students PGT study is now seen as necessary in equipping them in an increasingly competitive job market as well as being a crucial step in the route to chartered status in many of the registered professions (Bradley, 2017).

Graduation is no longer constructed by many students as the natural end point of University career and this is reinforced by a lack of graduate jobs and recent changes to postgraduate funding. As such for the transition to postgraduate study appears to be constructed as one of many in students' educational careers (Gale & Parker, 2014). Whilst traditionally the primary focus of information about PGT programmes is the final year of Undergraduate study it would seem beneficial for students to have information about postgraduate study earlier in their Undergraduate programmes. Indeed our findings reveal that the majority of participants had sought information about Postgraduate study well before entering their final year. The impact of the construction of the academic career going beyond graduation lead many of our interviewees to initially view the transition to PGT study as natural progression and extension of their previous degrees. For those students who continue their study in the same institutional, familiarity with University systems and learning and teaching practices may even act as a barrier in recognizing the change in study habits and academic practices which are required of them at PGT level (Peterson & McLeod, 2014).

The reflections of current Psychology PGT students supports the emerging themes in the growing literature around the transition from undergraduate studies. In common with the experiences of the broader PGT student community the tension between the expected difficulty and reality of intense assessment loads and increased independent learning, our interviewees did not feel that their Undergraduate Psychology programmes acted as a preparation for PGT study (West, 2012). In addition to greater pre induction information to mitigate anxiety and lack of knowledge with regards to the ways in which the reality of PGT study will match expectations, the importance of current Postgraduates as a source of information and guidance was apparent (Huessi, 2012; McPherson, Punch & Graham , 2017).

The current project focusses on student experiences and triangulation with staff perceptions of student transition may lead to a wider recognition of the potential gap between expectations of PGT study. In addition although no specific inclusion criteria was developed, all but two of the students

who volunteered to take part in the study were about to or had transitioned at the same institution. It would be interesting to explore the experiences of students who move institutions to study at PGT level and if the novel environment and unfamiliarity with study support and academic processes may enable students to engage more effectively or lead to further feelings of isolation. The current findings represent only a first stage in understanding the complexities of transition to PGT study.

It would be interesting for providers to consider the ways in which current PGT students could be involved in co creating, developing and disseminating pre induction advice and guidance to undergraduate students. Although the limited timescales of Masters programmes acts as a barrier to creating a visible and sustainable community of practice, involving students in pre induction activities would provide support and peer mentoring to potential students and help to manage expectations and anxieties (Bamber et al, 2019). The use of testimonials and videographies may enable legacy building of resources and over time highlight the trajectories of PGR students and practitioners from PGT programmes. This approach would also engage current postgraduate students in shaping the perceptions of future cohorts and increase engagement in course development which the current PTES identifies students' perceptions of the lack of voice and impact in shaping their programmes of study as an area for development.

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