

Evaluating the Transition Experience of Former Foundation Year Students to Postgraduate Studies

HELGA BARTELS-HARDEGE
Hull University

Usually literature on transition in Higher Education focusses on transition from school or college to undergraduate programmes, whilst the transition to postgraduate study is mostly overlooked. This pilot project concentrates on the experience of students who came through the Hull University Science Foundation Year and have been transitioning to postgraduate studies, mostly to research Masters and subsequent PhD scholarships. In small scale focus groups we aimed to explore whether the participants felt that the Foundation Year experience makes a difference to them in preparedness for postgraduate life and study. The results suggest that, whilst the Foundation Year meant an advantage for transition into the main undergraduate degree, there is no direct advantage for their postgraduate studies. However, the students highlighted that, indirectly, the Foundation Year enabled them to do well in their undergraduate studies and subsequently enabled them to follow the postgraduate route. The focus groups also highlighted a general lack of confidence in their own academic ability, which is still traceable in their transition to postgraduate studies. The results show that there is a clear need for further research on this lack of confidence, especially looking at the support for postgraduate transition available in Higher Education institutions.

Introduction

As a rule research on transition in Higher Education focusses on the transition from college to university, whilst the transition to postgraduate study is mostly overlooked. According to recent HESA data, about a quarter of all students in the UK obtaining a classification were on postgraduate courses with the majority (90%) on taught Masters and 10% on postgraduate research programmes (HESA, 2016/2017). The income institutions gain from this is significant, which makes improvements to the experience of postgraduate students valid for retention and recruitment of students into these programmes.

Briggs et al. (2012) describe undergraduates' transition to Higher Education as a significant "social displacement" where support is needed to bridge the gap between these different stages in their lives and education. Although the move to postgraduate education is

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not quite as dramatic in their social life, the educational transition still needs to be acknowledged and dealt with. Institutions assume that postgraduate students are competent, independent learners (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013), and the students themselves also feel that, after graduating, they have obtained a very different status to that of undergraduate students (Humphrey and McCarthy, 1999). According to survey data however, students often lack a clear understanding of the requirements for postgraduate study, and feel a lack of confidence and an increased need for personal support (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013).

The diversity within the postgraduate student community is another challenge for support and transition programmes. It is important to acknowledge that “[l]earning is not a contained event; instead it is a process which is influenced by a learner’s past and present experiences and perhaps future aspirations” (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013: 1058). A significant number of postgraduate students are from a widening participation background, for example mature students. According to Pollard et al. (2016) 58% of students on postgraduate research programmes were aged 26 and over, 39% were 31 and over. In addition to academic challenges, this group have to overcome barriers relating to access to finances, childcare needs and low confidence, with white working class students being the most at risk category. This shows that widening participation support should not stop at undergraduate level, but that more advice and work is needed to conserve the aspiration and confidence of this group (Stuart et al., 2008).

The aim of this research is to learn more about the motives, obstructions and enablers that shape how students may, or may not, progress from the Foundation Year through their undergraduate study to postgraduate degrees. More understanding about this potential route, and its possible benefits, could inform future provision and policy. This small scale pilot project concentrates on a small group of students who have progressed through the Hull University Science Foundation Year route and are currently participating in postgraduate studies, mostly research Masters and subsequent PhD scholarships. The Science Foundation Year is part of a variety of integrated four-year programmes that include environmental, physical and life sciences. The cohorts on these programmes are very diverse and consist of students with a variety of backgrounds, including widening participation and international students, as well as students with alternative qualifications and A-levels in non-science subjects. Focus groups have been used to explore whether the students feel that the Foundation Year experience makes a difference to their preparedness for postgraduate life and study.

Methods

To address the above aims of this pilot study, all postgraduate students in the School of Environmental Sciences who had previously completed the Science Foundation Year were identified and approached via e-mail. Seven students agreed to take part in focus group discussions and sticky note paper exercises. All participants were mature students (two female, five male) on postgraduate MSc (one student) or PhD (six students) research programmes in the School of Environmental Sciences. Of the PhD students, two were in their second year, two in their third year and two had already submitted their theses. The students entered the Foundation Year between 2009 and 2013 and finished their undergraduate studies with a first class or higher second class degree.

The focus group discussions and sticky note paper exercises were run by a member of the Foundation Year teaching team. The students were asked open ended questions to discuss how they felt transitioning from their Foundation Year to their undergraduate programme and how this compared to the transition to their postgraduate studies. The focus group discussions were anonymously transcribed and, together with the sticky notes, sorted by question topics. The

contents of student quotes were also qualitatively analysed to find evidence for additional emerging themes.

Results

During your undergraduate years, did you feel that you had advantages or disadvantages when compared to other, mainstream students?

During the discussion relating to this question, the students were in agreement that they had clear advantages during the transition from the Foundation Year to their undergraduate programmes. These were mainly in terms of academic skills and readiness for Higher Education. The students felt it helped them in their academic writing, understanding and acting on feedback.

“My first ever memory is getting written feedback for an assessment. Prior to the foundation year I had never ever done anything like that and I was utterly gutted by what I received... So she [the lecturer] gave me some really detailed feedback, and every time I write something now, I got the feedback from that time still with me, but not in a bad way, it's a case of 'don't write like that' – yeah, that's still stuck.”

They also found it important to get familiar with the campus, the academic staff and the general level of work required in Higher Education. The social side of academic life was also highlighted as being a positive factor, for example through finding new friends from a variety of backgrounds and other students to form working groups with and to be inspired by.

“You get to know the lecturers well, so like in your practicals, you know, you realise, they're not terrifying people, so you can ask for help. And most of the time they [the lecturers] won't belittle you.”

“Advantages, definitely, absolutely ... all our friends ... in first year still had no idea how university works, so they spent the first semester sorting stuff out, when we were completely used to it.”

“At the beginning it was really difficult, I felt really out of depth, but then, I became part of quite a small group, so I thought we were all kind of supporting each other, and that sort of inspired you to do better.”

However, a trend emerged of a lack of confidence when it came to academic ability and background knowledge when they compared themselves to their peers who came directly from A-level education. The group of postgraduate students participating in the focus groups were academically very able, but still felt a sense of not being quite good enough and that the direct entry student were academically superior to them.

“... but I feel that they [direct entry students with A-levels] were still sort of ahead of us academically You still kind of feel inadequate in comparison, but then did better ...”

“I still felt that some of the people were a lot smarter. Not sure whether that was actually true.”

Did you consider postgraduate study to be an option when you were in foundation year?

All participants came from a widening participation background, mostly mature students, had been working for several years in non-skilled work and saw the Foundation Year as a chance to improve their career prospects and prepare for a career they would care about. However, none

of the participants had seen themselves progressing to postgraduate studies at the start of their time in Higher Education, supporting the above mentioned lack of confidence in their ability.

“It was a pie in the sky dream, follow it as far as you can go.”

“I didn’t believe myself to be good enough quality.”

“I never had seen me having a chance to.”

If you compare yourself and your skills with other postgraduate students (who have not done Foundation Year), do you feel that you have any advantages or disadvantages?

In discussing this question, all participants agreed that by the start of their postgraduate studies the differences had evened out, especially with the postgraduate community being very diverse anyway. Many postgraduate students come back into education after having worked away from Higher Education for a number of years, so would have a similar background to the Foundation Year students. The different experiences of different research projects was also highlighted.

“... at this level I feel like it kind of evens itself out.”

“I just think people in postgraduate study, in my opinion, are diverse, so people have come from all kinds of different backgrounds and countries.”

“... everyone does different things in their project.”

However, the lack of confidence in their ability, coming from a widening participation background is still traceable.

“I kept thinking ‘oh my god, I don’t stand a chance – they [the other postgraduate students] are far greater scientists than I am.’”

“... at the moment I feel like completely at the bottom of the pile.”

What one piece of advice would you give an undergraduate before embarking on their postgraduate studies?

This question was discussed in order to try to find out about the potential support needs for this group. The answers revolved around confidence and the differences to undergraduate studies, and the importance of seeking advice from the supervisor when needed.

“Have confidence in your ability to learn something new and everyone learns in their own time – you get there in the end.”

“... it’s also a very, very different environment to undergrad, so the change up [to postgraduate studies] will be a very big challenge.”

“Ask for help. Don’t think just because you’ve got a bachelor degree, you know everything.”

Further contributions

When asked for further contributions the main emerging theme was the appreciation for the Foundation Year that enabled the students to embark on this journey to postgraduate study.

“... there’s a big issue with the foundation year which is on how beneficial it is for the undergrad years I feel ... more appreciative of doing postgraduate.”

“I felt I was very lucky that I got the opportunity to do a degree, I felt with the foundation year, you do better at your undergraduate degree, [the foundation year] improved my undergraduate degree hugely, which I think set me up there.”

“I had purposefully come to do something, so I was making more of an effort, I was basically more engaged in it.”

The appreciation of the chance the Foundation Year provided was felt throughout the focus group discussions and was summarized well by one of the participants:

“If you get a chance to demonstrate, and you can put your own feedback back to those Foundation students, you can see them, almost follow in your footsteps. That makes you smile and feel good. Little bit of a glow inside seeing the students that technically came from nothing, through the Foundation year, through their degree, and coming out with showing off the degree that made you do the postgrad stuff, it’s like – yeah that’s good. Knowing you were that student as well.”

Discussion

The aim of this research was to learn more about the motives, obstructions and enablers that shape progression to postgraduate degrees, specifically looking at former Foundation Year students. Most of the emerging topics revolved around an appreciation for the academic skills and familiarity with Higher Education acquired during the Foundation year and how this resulted in a clear advantage for their undergraduate studies. Typically students that enter directly into the first year are required to reorganise their lives, both in terms of social and family life, but also academically (Huong and Sankey, 2002). The students also want to be treated individually, rather than as a number within a big institution (Briggs et al., 2012). For students transitioning from the Foundation Year into the first year, these issues have already been resolved, as they have gained a familiarity with the campus, academic staff and how Higher Education works.

However, the study also picked up an underlying low confidence in the students’ own ability, which is still detectable during the transition to postgraduate studies. The reason for this is most likely the experience of perceived ‘failure’ during their academic career. As a consequence, at the start of their Foundation Year, the students do not expect to have a chance to progress to postgraduate studies, and even at the start of their postgraduate programme they can still feel like “the bottom of the pile”. This is in line with a study by Tobell and O’Donnell (2013), whose data show, more generally, that postgraduate students still lack confidence and feel uncomfortable with their studies. As in the case of the participants of this study, this lack of confidence seems to be particularly problematic among mature undergraduate students, who, according to a HEFCE report from 2013, are less likely to transition to postgraduate studies.

The idea of ‘imposter syndrome’ has previously been mainly described in high achieving women (Clance and Imes, 1978), but can also be applied to adult learners. Gardner and Holley (2011: 87) found that among students who are the first generation in their family in Higher Education, “individuals, despite their academic credentials and praise from peers, do not always experience an internal sense of success. Instead, they maintain they are not intelligent”. Bowman and Palmer (2017) conclude that this imposter syndrome can negatively influence mature students’ learning and that they need to be supported in confronting this problem and developing their own coping strategies.

The participants in this study agreed that during their postgraduate studies the differences between them, as Foundation Year entrants, compared to direct entrants, had evened out. For them the main reason for this was the diversity of the postgraduate student community. The 'typical' postgraduate student does not exist and it would be problematic to ignore the different backgrounds of the postgraduate student community (Tobell and O'Donnell, 2013). School leavers who directly transition into undergraduate studies with subsequent direct transition to postgraduate programmes are in a minority (O'Donnell 2009). However, the participants also agreed that, although the Foundation Year did not have a direct influence on their postgraduate studies, it enabled them to do well in their undergraduate degrees, which made a progression to postgraduate studies possible.

Asked about the advice they would give new postgraduate students, the participants agreed that confidence in their own ability and the courage to ask for help were most important. Here again, confidence emerges as a central topic, as highlighted previously. The example of former Foundation Year students as a sub group of widening participation students shows that in supporting the postgraduate community, institutions need to ensure that they take the students' background into account and the impact this has on their learning and subsequently on progression and retention (Tobell and O'Donnell, 2013). Recruitment of widening participation students is an important issue for Institutions with some of the drivers being social justice, corporate responsibility and the opportunity to tap into an extra pool of talent, with the potential benefits of providing equal opportunities, social and economic contributions and maintaining high academic standards (Shaw et al., 2007). The heterogeneity of the postgraduate student community needs to be understood and addressed and the support for widening participation students should not stop once they enter their undergraduate studies to make sure aspirations can be upheld, increasing retention and upholding academic standards (Stuart, 2008).

Conclusion

The results suggest that coming through the Foundation Year was a clear advantage for the students transitioning into their main programme, but a direct advantage for their postgraduate studies was not identified. However, the students felt that the Foundation Year enabled them to do well in their undergraduate studies, enabling them to progress to postgraduate programmes. A general feeling of a lack of confidence in their own academic ability also emerged during the transition to the main undergraduate programme and subsequently to their postgraduate studies. This small scale pilot project shows clear scope for further research to explore this lack of confidence. Further studies should examine the wider postgraduate community and the educational backgrounds of learners to better understand how students could be supported more effectively during the transition period. The former Foundation Year group used in this study demonstrates the need for targeted support for postgraduate students and how an increased understanding of diverse social and educational backgrounds could inform future provision and policies.

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About the Author

Dr Helga Bartels-Hardege is a marine biologist working at Hull University, who is mainly concentrating on workplace and problem based learning and who creates authentic science projects in schools and public engagement events. Her main research area is the impact of ocean acidification on the chemical communication of marine invertebrates. She has been involved in a leading role with the Hull University Science Foundation Year for ten years and as part of that role has developed an interest in the support of widening participation students.

