

National research on the postgraduate student experience

Case presentation on the first year postgraduate student experience (volume 1 of 3)

Hamlin, Gary; Kinash, Shelley; Crane, Linda H; Bannatyne, Amy Jean; Judd, Madelaine-Marie; Stark, Ashley; Eckersley, Bill; Partridge, Helen; Udas, Ken

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National research on the postgraduate student experience: Case presentation on the first year postgraduate student experience (Volume 1 of 3)

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National Research on the Postgraduate Student Experience: Case Presentation

VOLUME 1

► FIRST YEAR POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

<http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com>

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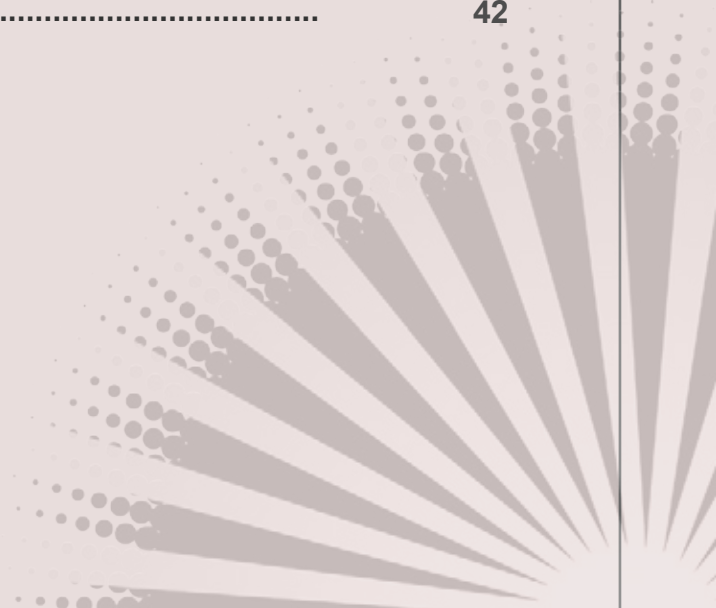
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CONTENTS

Preface	3
Executive Summary	4
Project Keywords & Definitions	7
Case Study Aims & Objectives	9
Positioning Challenges/Issues	11
Narrative Descriptions	17
Application to Practice	23
Exemplars of Good Practice	29
Recommendations	33
<i>For Postgraduate Students</i>	33
<i>For Educators, and Learning Support Staff</i>	35
<i>For University Leaders</i>	37
References	39
Acknowledgements	41
Discussion Questions	42



PREFACE

This is volume one of three volumes of case studies to enhance the postgraduate student experience. The theme of this case study is:

⊕ **First year postgraduate student experience**

The other two case studies in this series are:

⊕ **Volume 2** - Postgraduate student diversity

⊕ **Volume 3** - Career development and employability

This case presentation on the *first year postgraduate student experience* is based on experiences derived from student engagement breakfasts, interviews, and focus groups with 366 people across the stakeholder groups of postgraduate students, educators, and university executives from 26 institutions.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case presentation on the first year postgraduate student experience is grounded in Australian national research on postgraduate student experiences. This is not a typical or traditional case study, in that the pages that follow present perspectives, stories and proposed solutions from a large number of people. To bound the case presentation to one or two narratives or 'cases' would severely limit the impact. This case presentation is therefore thematic, interweaving many stories, quotes, descriptions, and perspectives on the first year postgraduate student experience.

The reported research was conducted as a strategic priority project of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching between February 2015 and August 2016. Bond University was the lead institution, with partner institutions – University of Southern Queensland, Victoria University, and partner peak body organisations – Australian Council for Educational Research and Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations. All types and levels of postgraduates were considered (i.e., course-based, research, Masters, Doctoral). Secondary research was conducted using data from three different national surveys. Results of the secondary analysis were specifically probed through primary research. Notably, the secondary analysis of national survey data painted a much 'rosier' picture of postgraduate student experiences and perceptions than did this research, whereupon in-depth conversations were held with and between numerous postgraduate students and the university staff who work with them. In total there were 366 primary research participants from across 26 Australian universities (319 students and

47 staff). Among the three methodological approaches of engagement breakfasts (7), interviews (82) and focus groups (9) there were 223 students, 38 students/44 staff and 58 students/3 staff research participants respectively.

Through the course of this work, an understanding of the 'postgraduate student experience' emerged and was conceptualised to describe the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment. The term encompasses students' (and their supervisors/educators) appraisal of, and engagement with, their methods of learning, affective response toward their course, interaction with the institution, sense of identity and belonging, support system (within and outside the university), and the contextual factors that assist or disrupt their progress – personally, academically, and/or professionally. The definition evolved from earlier work with research students (e.g., Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker, & Evans, 2006) to incorporate all forms of postgraduate study, whether that be research, coursework, or a mix of both. Notably, it reflects the journey of a student in multiple domains (e.g., academic, personal, professional, and social), and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of experiences cannot be synthesised into a universal definition.

Has the higher education sector been too focused on the first year undergraduate student experience and perhaps assumed that as more experienced learners the transition issues for postgraduates do not require strategic and proactive intervention?

Has the boom in postgraduate enrolments, particularly in coursework Masters programs, caught the sector by surprise? Certainly some educators have been lobbying for more attention on the postgraduate student experience. The outcomes identified by the wide range of participants in this study clearly support calls for a strategic and comprehensive focus on the postgraduate student experience. This seems to be particularly poignant when considering the postgraduate coursework student experience, which appears to be caught in limbo between undergraduate programs and higher degree research (HDR) programs.

Postgraduate students describe their first year experience in predominantly emotive terms across the spectrum of feeling stressed and isolated to feeling empowered. Of significant concern is the finding that postgraduate students and staff have a predominantly negative view of the postgraduate student experience, with 53 per cent ($n = 44$) of all study participants interviewed, reporting a degree of dissatisfaction with some aspect of their universities' postgraduate programs or experience.

Even more notably, only 11 per cent of staff and 21 per cent of student responses were identified with a positive sentiment.

Three overall recommendations emerged from the research and are detailed in this case presentation, and sub-divided into specific recommendations for postgraduate students, educators and university leaders. Overall, it is recommended that:

- The 'value proposition' of postgraduate training (particularly coursework Masters) be elucidated and communicated to students, the education sector, and governing bodies, to ensure the place and role of postgraduate training is 'visible' and supported at all levels
- The transition pedagogy framework developed for first year undergraduate students be redefined to guide the development of a 'systematic, joined-up, whole of institution or whole of student approach' (Kift, 2009 & 2015) to the first year postgraduate student experience. Immediate focus should be on transition issues, particularly orientation, student study supports, and support for work-study-life balance.
- Student support services must be aligned to the identified program and graduate outcomes, particularly English language supports for International students and the methods used to assess English proficiency.

Two exemplars from education research and program development are presented to provide ideas about pedagogy, structures, and programs that can support the first year postgraduate student experience.

- ⊕ The first year undergraduate student experience and the development of transition pedagogy provides a compelling framework that can be readily explored and adapted to frame and guide enhancement of the postgraduate student experience.
- ⊕ Two postgraduate induction and/or preparation programs that are either embedded, or in development, in a number of institutions.

Four multilayered discussion questions emerged from conversations with postgraduate students, educators, study support/assistance staff, program and faculty administrators, and education leaders. These questions are designed to stimulate further discussion in the area, suggest future research directions, and to guide practice improvement.

- ⊕ Is the first year experience an important consideration in the postgraduate student journey?
 - ➔ Does this depend upon the context of the program such as; coursework versus HDR and professional/vocational versus general?
 - ➔ Are there discipline-specific differences in the first year postgraduate student experience?

Do the dimensions of the first year undergraduate student experience significantly overlap with the dimensions of the first year postgraduate student experience? If there is overlap, can we adapt existing validated frameworks such as the third generation transition pedagogy, in the first year postgraduate student experience context?

- ⊕ What are the generic academic skills and attitudinal sets for postgraduate students, and are these the same as for undergraduate students or different?
 - ➔ Regardless of whether the generic skill set is the same or different, how do we make academic supports that assist in the attainment of generic skills accessible to postgraduate students?
- ⊕ What are the graduate attributes for postgraduate programs, especially coursework Masters programs?
 - ➔ How are these attributes embedded in the curriculum, and how do they relate to the desired outcomes for these students and the desired outcomes of the workforce and society?

PROJECT KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS

Citizen Scholar is 'a student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society.' (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 1)

Diversity refers to implicit and explicit understanding that each student is unique. It is the notion that all postgraduate students have individual learning preferences, backgrounds, needs, and capacities, which need to be respected and valued to provide excellence and equity in higher education (Morgan, 2013).

First Year Postgraduate Experience describes the totality of students' experience with, and transition to, their higher education. Consistent with previous definitions of the FYE, which largely focused on the undergraduate context, it is acknowledged that this transition is often affected by social, cultural, and situational factors, resulting in a multiplicity of first year experiences, with no common end-point to the transition (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kift, 2009).

Graduate Employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition, and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011, Holmes, 2013, Kinash et al., 2015a; Kinash et al., 2015b; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Loneliness is defined as a lack of contact with families (personal loneliness); loss of networks (social loneliness); separation from preferred culture or linguistic environment (cultural loneliness) (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

Learning Management Systems (LMS) is a software application or web-based technology used to plan, implement, and assess a specific learning process. Typically, a learning management system provides an educator with a way to create and deliver content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance. A learning management system may also provide students with the ability to use interactive features such as threaded discussions, video conferencing, and discussion forums.

Postgraduate Student Experience describes the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment.

Student Experience can be defined as '...a phrase that encompasses not only the academic aspects of teaching, learning, and curriculum but also student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences' (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009, p. 84).

Student Voice is conceptualised as students' feedback and perceptions about their learning as essential in determining what support needs to be offered to them (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004).

Transition Pedagogy is ‘a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and supports the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts’ (Kift, 2009, p. 2).

Work-study-life balance is defined as a complex triad in which students simultaneously manage their occupational roles and obligations (paid or volunteer/ internship based), academic commitments (both research and/or coursework), and personal life responsibilities.



CASE STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aims of this research project were to collect, collate, and disseminate postgraduate perspectives on their broad student experiences and the relationships of these experiences with learning. The project engaged students and higher education personnel to derive and disseminate good practice and practical strategies to impact and enhance Australian postgraduate student experiences.

The specific aims and objectives of this case study are:



FOR STUDENTS

To empower postgraduate students to recognise and voice the central and crucial role of the first year experience in their context, acknowledging the key nuances and enablers of their experience in comparison to the undergraduate first year experience in higher education.



ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF

To ensure the deliberate and planned development of the first year experience in postgraduate programs, enabling developers and adopters of best practice to effectively translate and adapt understanding of, and interventions for, the undergraduate first year experience to their postgraduate programs.



HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

To identify the value of the first year experience in postgraduate higher education, thereby informing and mandating a whole of sector and whole of institution strategy to unlock the potential of students and staff in the postgraduate higher education sector, enabling substantial contributions to the advancement of the postgraduate student experience and outcomes.



POSITIONING CHALLENGES / ISSUES

The 21st century has seen significant evolution of the undergraduate student experience in higher education to now encompass the broad world of students, inclusive of their experiences, inside and outside the classroom, on and off the campus, and in their social, personal and work engagements (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009).

Extensive research into the first year undergraduate student experience advocates the curriculum, as the glue of the student experience, be conceptualised, framed, scaffolded, implemented and managed as ‘the totality of the undergraduate student experience of and engagement with their new program of tertiary study’ (Kift, 2009, p. 9).

The development, and continued refinement, of third generation of first year student transition pedagogy by Kift and colleagues (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009; Kift, 2015; Kift, Nelson, & Clark, 2010) has significantly enhanced the experience of first year undergraduate students, but has perhaps shielded our attention from the growing postgraduate student sector.

Canvassing the substantial body of work on the first year experience in higher education, Nelson et al. (2011, p. 9) stated there has been an ‘almost exclusive preoccupation by investigators with [undergraduate students] with minimal reference to postgraduate students.’

The following quotes from educators in this study highlight some of these issues.



‘We operate on the assumption that they [postgraduate students] know how to study, but somebody who has got their first degree 15 years ago

hasn’t ever used the internet to study. So it is not always straightforward. We do think about the student – supporting the student needs, but we probably make the mistake of thinking too much about the undergraduates.’



‘One of the things that we found is that very few of the students who come into the coursework program have any learning skills. We are talking about people who have probably completed an undergraduate degree somewhere between five and 40 years ago. Even those that have done an undergraduate degree fairly recently, find now they are coming back to university and the digital environment is totally different to what they had before.’


It is likely that traditional university course structure, dominated by the framework of the undergraduate degree followed by the postgraduate research degree, contributes to the *invisibility* of the significantly growing body of postgraduate coursework students.

Comments from staff that mainly practice in the postgraduate coursework space echoed the sentiment that coursework students can be *lost* in the traditional program mix.





‘what I find is soon as I talk to people about postgraduate students they immediately think of doctoral students, they immediately think of research students, nobody thinks of postgraduate students as coursework students and if they do, they discount it, and say they are just doing a coursework thing so they are not really important.’

The *tension* surrounding the definition of what constitutes 'undergraduate' and 'postgraduate' is likely to increase even further with the sector starting to turn towards modernisations of tertiary education such as badging, credentialing, and microcredentialing. The following comment from a student highlights the current *tension*, evidenced by increased offerings in graduate certificates and diplomas within postgraduate coursework structures.

 'postgraduate student experience, umm, well postgraduate is not undergraduate. I guess one of the things that always frustrates me with the phrase 'postgraduate' is it always assumes that you are not doing postgraduate until you're doing Masters or PhD. I have three qualifications that are Grad Dip, Grad Cert, Grad whatever, to me that is still postgrad, not undergrad.'

Orientation has always had a focus on welcoming new students to the University and encouraging new students to explore services, facilities, and social and sporting clubs. Studies on first year retention and first year experience (Kerri-Lee Krause et al., 2005; Kift, 2009) have guided tertiary education providers to offer greater assistance with administrative processes and requirements, in addition to emphasising the implementation and growth of services and facilities that support transition to the tertiary learning environment. The student voices below are clear in identifying the perceived value of program *orientation*, while also highlighting the vexed issues of *communication* and the downfalls of the 'one size fits all' approach.

 'I think I would've really benefited from a course orientation, you know if the course coordinator had sat us all down in a room at the beginning of the semester and said: 'welcome to the 2015 cohort, this is the structure of the courses, this is how it works, these are the expectations, etc' that would've been great. I didn't get any emails regarding that, so I'm assuming it didn't happen but it would've been good if it had.'

 'In O-week before I started there were quite a few things offered but they were offered more for the undergrads. There wasn't a lot that was really pitched to postgrads and it would've been good if that had been the case.'

Research into the undergraduate first year student experience has also identified the key importance of learning support programs and staff. Stagg and Kimmins (2014) reported that University learning support staff noticed similarities in the requests for support from undergraduate and postgraduate students, particularly in respect to a lack of confidence in generic skills such as locating and evaluating information sources, which are cornerstone skills of information literacy. Stagg and Kimmins (2014) also revealed postgraduate students were more likely to lack confidence in their abilities to find relevant information than undergraduates, with 47 per cent of postgraduates surveyed disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement that they were confident.

A similar trend was reported with respect to confidence in evaluating literature sources. The comments below from an educator in this study draw attention to many of these issues.

“I don't think much learning support is provided for postgraduate students at all. There is a lot of rhetoric about learning support but it is mainly focused on undergraduate on-campus students.’

“we have different expectations of a postgraduate student than we do of an undergraduate student, and learning support is not really structured to provide postgraduate learning support and development of learning skills, particularly for those who are off campus. To me, there is a huge gap in the learning support services that are provided for coursework postgraduate students.’

In each of the main data collection activities of this national project (engagement breakfasts, focus groups, and interviews)

the participants were asked to discuss or describe their conception of the postgraduate student experience. Postgraduate students at the engagement breakfasts frequently became engrossed in animated discussion in response to the prompt ‘*What do the words postgraduate student experience mean to you?*’

Analysis of the responses provided in the form of a wordle (a pictorial representation of their discussion expressed as key words in different text sizes and shapes) revealed a highly emotive experience with the words *challenging*, *uncertainty*, and *stress* featuring prominently, as well as *networking* and *isolating*. In contrast, the word *fun* also featured quite frequently.

The figure below is a pictorial representation of the major themes emerging from the 216 postgraduate students seated across 39 tables at the engagement breakfasts that were staged in 6 of the 8 states/territories.



Figure 1. A synthesis of postgraduate students' perspectives of their experience

Analysis of the interview transcripts provides further insight into the most prominent themes that emerge from the perspectives of students at the engagement breakfasts. Interviews with postgraduate coursework students, particularly those in their first year, clearly demonstrate that most of these students are struggling not only with the challenges of work-life balance, but rather the triad of *work-life-study balance*. This provides an interesting and important context to our understanding of the prominence of the terms *challenging*, *uncertainty*, and *stress* in Figure 1.

Below are three comments from postgraduate coursework students in different programs, studying at different institutions that emphasise the issues around *work-life-study balance*.



'it is quite full on, but I knew what I was signing up for so I cut out a lot of commitments like the clubs and societies I used to be involved in, which has reduced the time commitment. I'm also working as a tutor at my university, so trying to achieve that work, study, and family balance is hard.'



'study is part of your life and you do your personal and daily tasks while you are studying. For example, I might be reading a paper while having dinner or reading something important while checking emails - it all gets mixed together.'



'my course isn't supported by Centrelink, so I work part-time and study. Additionally, I recently became a student rep, I do internships, and I volunteer a lot. Basically, I have a lot of things going on and it's very hard having to rely on working part-time as my

only source of income. I have had, and continue to have, a lot of housing stress because rent in my area is very high and not having government assistance means I am in inappropriate housing which I pay a lot of money for in terms of my income. It's not ideal.'

Importantly, while not as prominent in interviews with postgraduate research students, the issue of work (study)-life balance still emerged. However, with many research students receiving some scholarship support, the issue of outside work to provide an income was not raised as frequently.



'it's not really a balance, it's more like a seesaw - there are times when I have to work all different things, all at once. In fact, a couple of weeks ago I was working literally about 18 hours a day, getting 4 to 5 hours sleep, but that only lasted a short period of time, and it's not sustainable. However, there are other times, and this is one really good thing about my PhD and it isn't the same for everyone, when my time is quite flexible. I am really conscious of when my PhD is taking up a lot of my time as I have a family too. I love what I do but sometimes it does intrude on family time, and when that happens I tend to pull back a bit and say 'no' to things. To me, life is a seesaw, not a balance.'

Just as the descriptors of *challenge* and *stress* arising from the engagement breakfasts have a deeper resonance with first year postgraduate coursework students, the descriptors of *isolation* and *networking* have a deeper resonance with postgraduate research students.

The comments below from two higher degree research students in different disciplines highlight some of the key issues.



'Higher degree research is a bit of a different kettle of fish; I would say key words that spring to mind are individuality and certainly isolation. If you are doing your own project that no one else really understands, then it is quite a lonely and isolating experience. Even within a larger discipline like where I am, we probably make up 10% of the university's postgraduates, not bad for a School that probably makes up point something percent of undergraduates. Critical mass is another thing – when you don't have that critical mass, it's hard to develop a sense of community per se and the postgraduates can be left rather isolated and lonely, hovering on the fringe of the staff sort of community.'



'I mean the real problem is the isolation because I am not on campus all the time and so when groups have started up, I haven't been able to be part of it because it might be one of the days where I have my son and I can't take him to something like that. I struggle a lot with the fact that there is no one to talk to about my research or what I'm doing.'

Notably, concerns about *isolation* and opportunities for *networking* are not unique to the postgraduate research student experience and, in fact, may resonate even more deeply with a subset of postgraduate coursework students, those that study predominantly online. A comment from an online student illustrates this point.



'I think support and networking; especially for me because I am an online student so I feel a bit isolated starting on my own. You do have discussions going on with some students but we don't really create a group to say "hi my name is... how are you?". The online discussion boards are not a chatty place, more of a formal discussion so I guess that should be improved for online students to help with engagement.'

A global analysis of the sentiment of all interviewees perceptions of the postgraduate student experience revealed a concerning trend. The dominant sentiment was one of negativity, reported by both staff and students, with 53 per cent of all study participants reporting a degree of dissatisfaction with some aspect of their universities' postgraduate programs or experience. Perhaps even more alarmingly, only 11 per cent of staff and 21 per cent of student responses were identified with a positive sentiment. A detailed breakdown of the sentiments of these experiences is presented in Table 1.

This strongly supports the increasingly loud voices of students, educators, and commentators on tertiary education that the sector needs to focus substantial attention on enhancing the experience of postgraduate students in general. Undoubtedly, the first year postgraduate student experience will need to be a key focus area. As such, understanding the complexity of this experience from the diverse profiles of postgraduate students is crucial to obtain robust insight and develop potential remedial solutions.

Table 1

Overall Sentiment of the Postgraduate Student Experience.

Overall Sentiment	Staff (n = 45)	Students (All) (n = 38)	Students (First Year) (n = 11)
Positive	5 (11%)	8 (21%)	2 (18%)
Negative	22 (49%)	22 (58%)	6 (55%)
Neutral	18 (40%)	8 (21%)	3 (27%)

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of responses from the interviewed staff and student groups.

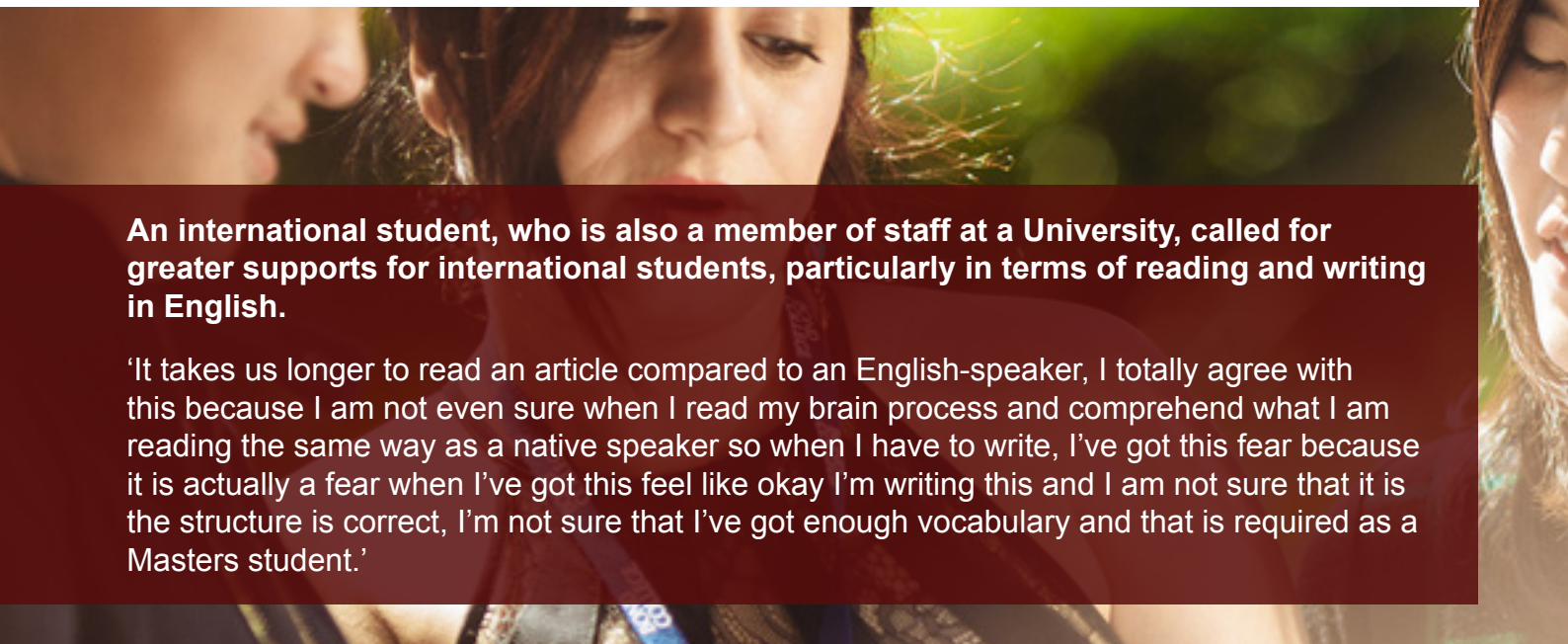


NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

In this section, narrative depictions related to three significant themes that emerged from the study are explored. The themes are: i) international students, ii) diverse pathways to postgraduate study, iii) the work-study-life triad.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Many of the international students interviewed described a complex and highly emotive first year experience. Delight at being in a country that has a reputation for a high standard of living and a good education system, often contrasted with despair about convoluted or ineffectively communicated administration requirements (enrolments, schedules, and LMS's), and the challenge of communicating in English, often not their primary language. The most persistent voices were about English language proficiency.



An international student, who is also a member of staff at a University, called for greater supports for international students, particularly in terms of reading and writing in English.

'It takes us longer to read an article compared to an English-speaker, I totally agree with this because I am not even sure when I read my brain process and comprehend what I am reading the same way as a native speaker so when I have to write, I've got this fear because it is actually a fear when I've got this feel like okay I'm writing this and I am not sure that it is the structure is correct, I'm not sure that I've got enough vocabulary and that is required as a Masters student.'

Another international student, from a different program and a different tertiary provider, provided confirmation and offered an interesting solution.

'Okay, so one thing is that they have... well to me is an unreasonable requirement for international students to stay full-time while I get that they don't want international students to work at the same time as they do their schoolwork but full-time for domestic students or full-time for an English native speaker is actually more than full-time for international students who don't speak English before they came here and so say, for example, I think my English level can handle my work, barely but I am there, I am struggling but I do have classmates who are also Chinese and French or from Taiwan and they don't really speak English and they are struggling with this full-time policy because it is too much. Every course involves a lot of readings and essays and everything and so they feel like if they could reduce the workload to three courses maybe or even two that would be much better so I just think this requirement is unreasonable.'

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS



One last quote from a brave international student in one of the focus groups, where issues of IELTS testing and English language proficiency were being hotly debated by native speakers who perceived declining education standards, and international students who raised concerns about the misalignment between English language proficiency tests and the skills required to communicate in English in academic settings.

‘There is a little difference between your experience [domestic students] and ours [international students], it is the language as well because we undertake the study in our second language or foreign language so we have to put in more effort in writing, even reading, the other day I was watching someone else from the class reading a paper and I compared to my speed of reading it and it was like six times so there you go, I am six times slower than my colleague who is reading the same paper so that much time we need... we need that much time, and even writing a paragraph would take forever to finish with the correct grammar and correct spelling and the structure, that is the most important thing, the structure, to bring in that paragraph structure and it is really very hard for us who are not English.’

Educators are clearly aware of the issue and many of its dimensions, as illustrated in the following quote from a senior educator who also voiced concern about study load requirements for students for whom English is their second language.

‘A decrease in the study load would be a big help but I suspect that is something outside of the university. I think ‘universities’ see international students as cash and anyone who is basically breathing and has the qualification is allowed in. We have pressure from administration to lower the IELTS scores which we have managed to resist ... so they were taking in people they probably shouldn’t take in, they should’ve required probably better English abilities. I know it’s a problem because I’ve previously had international students in my class who could not speak English very well. These students are often quite intelligent, but gosh when you got their essays it was hard, it was really hard going. I think they need more work with that.’

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

DIVERSE PATHWAYS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY

The increasing diversity of students taking up tertiary studies has been a topic of discussion for many years particularly informed by the focus on student retention and the first year undergraduate student experience (Kerri-Lee Krause et al., 2005; Kift, 2009). Importantly, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the large growth in postgraduate students, particularly in coursework Masters programs, and the diversity of student backgrounds this growth subsequently entails. Comments from students that illustrate the wide continuum of this diverse student group are presented below.

The student returning to postgraduate studies to change profession

One reason for the increasing number of mature age students seeking postgraduate studies is to change careers. The student, whose voice we hear below, has just finished her first year of an MD, a doctorate of medicine, after establishing a career in legal practice. The first comment provides an interesting insight into some of the drivers of student choice of institution of study.

'I got accepted here, Medicine is very competitive, having said that there is a 10 year rule that most of the postgraduate medical courses have where you have to have completed your undergraduate degree within 10 years of starting, so I was really very limited as to who I could apply to in terms of doing the course. The university I chose didn't have that rule.'

When asked to pictorially describe their student experience, a very evocative picture emerged that visualises the challenges of not just returning to study after a significant period of time away, but also the impact of changing disciplines.

'So I love my course, love what I'm doing but a huge challenge, like I can draw a picture, I am going to draw a mental picture for you. There is this picture that somebody sent to me the other day of a tennis player on a court, like he is hunched and there are 1000 balls being thrown at him and that is my post graduate experience, I think that is very specific to my course coming from a non-medical background, it is a condensed course, six years down to four and extended semesters, literally just go, go, go, I am constantly getting sick, constantly sore throats because I am just constantly run down, I love it, I am not complaining, that is just the reality of it all but that is how I feel I just feel there is constant information being thrown at me and there is no let-up but I do love it and I love the challenge and that is what postgraduate courses do, I think, and it is delivering that for me so that is my response.'

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

The same student also provides insight into conceptions of the difficulty of postgraduate studies, and the challenges when the depth of one's prior knowledge base is exposed and challenged.

'for me it is higher expectation, compared to the undergrad, having said that, I think, because I have done some postgrad courses in Law, I think just for me, the sciences rolled in with the detail that you have to learn in science is so much more, in Law there is a lot of reading and that sort of thing but it is just, yeah and everyone says it, there is just so much more detail in science, so much more information, don't you think?'

Finally a quote from a different student returning to study, following 20 years of experience in public service and then as a small business operator, describes key aspects of the transition back to study.

'It took, I suppose, a little bit to transition, like, learning again about how to study and thinking again about how to organise my time and things like... a lot of things have changed. Not just because it is a different discipline and a different university but technology has advanced so quickly. When I did my undergrad, journals were accessed in the library using paper, things weren't available online, so that brings a lot of new opportunities but also challenges as well because you can sort of get inundated with information a lot more this way but it is good.'

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

DIVERSE PATHWAYS TO POSTGRADUATE STUDY

The student straight from undergraduate to postgraduate studies at the same institution

Perhaps at the opposite end of the continuum to the student who enters postgraduate study after a significant period in the workforce, is the student who enters University straight from high school and moves straight into postgraduate study at the same institution. The student below describes why he chose this institution for his postgraduate study.

'When I finished year 12 I was living actually really near Uni with my family so it was really natural to go to my university because of its location. My sister also enrolled in my university too. I think my university is quite prestigious, and I think it matters. I think it matters, you know, Uni reputation would affect your career pathway, career opportunities in the future so that is why I chose my Uni.'


When asked about choosing to go straight into postgraduate study, a different perspective to the student who is changing careers emerged again.

'I finished my Bachelor of Science majoring in Mathematics and Statistics last year. I also actually did a diploma in modern language, I majored in Italian so I did two undergraduate degrees concurrently for four years. After I finished, I was actually offered many different postgrad opportunities. I was offered to do Honours in Math and Italian, or to go straight into my Master. I chose Masters purely because all of my friends are there and I know to survive Engineering and to get through the course you need to have a group of really close friends together to work through assignments. Whereas Honours to me was more like individual research so I thought I can do it by myself in the future after I finish my postgrad, so that is why I have decided to do my Masters in Chemical Engineering first.'

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

THE STUDENT BALANCING THE WORK-STUDY-LIFE TRIAD

An all too common reframe was heard in many of the student comments regarding 'life' balance, which was nicely framed as a triad of work-study-life balance by one of the postgraduate coursework students in their first year of study. Two comments below from this student provide a clear picture of the complexity of the postgraduate student life and, at least, in this case, some strategic decision making about managing workload and expectations.



'Many of my fellow postgraduates have family commitments so your priorities and focus are different so as a consequence university should tailor their supports and services and their fostering of that student experience to those differences.'

'A picture of my postgraduate experience, well this probably connects some dots from my earlier response, it would be me finishing at the office at a 5:45pm, driving home, reheating some leftovers before spending the next three hours doing the assignment I neglected for the past week. There are so many different priorities and demands of a postgraduate student, or at least in my position. When I was undergrad I was so committed to plan ahead, work hard, and aim for the HD. As a postgrad I have resolved... not to say that my studies are an afterthought but to note that they are not my number one priority and that as our criteria for marking in this course is competency based, I am content with competency rather than higher-level performance and that has been the goal for me. So the illustration I'd draw, the picture I'd paint, is one of balancing competing demands but unfortunately one where study is not priority number one.'

APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

What is an outstanding first year postgraduate student experience, particularly for coursework students? Throughout the course of this project concerns have been raised from student and staff groups about the place of postgraduate coursework programs and students within the Australian higher education sector, and the strategic and operational management of student transitions into and through postgraduate education.

The implicit recommendations were that:

1. The ‘value proposition’ of postgraduate training, particularly coursework masters, be elucidated and communicated to students, the education sector and governing bodies to ensure that the place and role of postgraduate training is ‘visible’ and supported at all levels

From interviewed senior education leaders of two different institutions



‘I think we need to be able to explain to potential postgraduate students what the value proposition in studying a postgraduate degree at our university. It is a bit of a crude analogy, but the McDonald’s training we often put young kids through, which is generally acknowledged to be pretty good by many employers. McDonald’s run a good program because they thought explicitly about what does the program is, what they want young people to get out of it, and what are the potential future opportunities people may receive. I think universities need to do need to be able to do the same. The most successful

postgraduate courses are the ones that can most clearly announce that value proposition, but then directly draw the line to the places in the curriculum and the delivery experience that shows this isn’t just words on a page, you were doing this for this reason because we promised you this.’



‘I think in some cases the... within the faculty student body, the postgraduate coursework students are kind of invisible, not to themselves but as a distinct body. We [universities] have to make a big effort to kind of quarantine them out and say ‘you are our postgraduate coursework students’ because, I guess, they are blending in the same corridors and classrooms as the undergrads. Our research higher degree students are kind of marked out by having their own graduate research office which enrolls them and looks after them, the faculty does the supervising and any teaching that is involved, but the graduate research office is mostly responsible for ensuring everything runs smoothly. But, I think the coursework students tend to fall between an undergraduate and the research higher degree ... there blurred boundary that isn’t really clear and I think they feel that.’



APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

2. The transition pedagogy framework developed for first year undergraduate students be refined to guide the development of a ‘systematic, joined –up, whole of institution or whole of student approach’, (Kift, 2009 & 2015) to the first year postgraduate student experience. Immediate focus should be on transition issues and in particular orientation, student study supports, and support for work-study-life balance.

From an interviewed postgraduate student



‘one week is very long for some student to attend orientation because they have to work so I recommend universities maybe make a video about orientation. Then they can send that orientation to students who can’t attend the physical orientation, but ensure they receive the important information they need when starting their postgrad degree.’

From an interviewed educator



‘for postgraduate students there may be greater emphasis upon people having to balance work, family and university study. Although I think increasingly this is becoming less and less of an argument as undergraduate students face the same problems, so the onus is on us [the university]. I suppose in simplistic terms, we have to provide them with the student experience of the future, not the teaching experience of the past, and that means using all of the devices we can including good use of technology. More importantly though, well designed

and well delivered curriculum to help them to be able to access and progress their education postgraduate experience’

From two interviewed senior education leaders



‘I think we need to consciously and explicitly consider the differing support needs of the postgraduate community. It is hard because they are very diverse, with very different needs. The one thing they have in common is they are graduates. Notably, one of the assumptions we [universities] have been operating from is that they know how to study; they have been successful in study before so probably the area in which they should need the least support is around study skills, research skills and so on because they have got all of the skills. Having said that, it is not always the case, it is really quite interesting, particularly when they are shifting disciplines a little bit or returning to study after many years away from higher education. I mean somebody who got their first degree 15 years ago hasn’t ever use the Internet to study and I find that really quite stunning but they need support. Supporting the postgraduate cohort isn’t always straightforward’



‘If you can provide those supports to them, predominantly the pedagogical ones but even the more pastoral ones, at the time and place where they first realize the problem, you can lead them more overtly to those support places. I think you provide a better student experience and I know we are looking very seriously at the ways that we can embed that kind of support in the curriculum.’



APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

3. The requirements for English language proficiency, the methods used to test English language proficiency, the applicability of these tests to the actual skills and competencies needed to succeed in a postgraduate student academic context, the supports available from the institution and those imbedded in the curriculum, be aligned to ensure students achieve the identified program and graduate outcomes.

From an interviewed international student, who is also a staff member at a university

“it takes us longer to read an article compared to an English-speaker ... I am not even sure when I read that my brain process and comprehend what I am reading the same way as a native speaker so when I have to write, I've got this fear that my structure and grammar are incorrect. I'm not sure that I've even got the vocabulary required of a Masters student.’

From two interviewed senior education leaders

“I mean one area where we could certainly do a better job would be for our international students who come in to do postgraduate coursework study. They [international students] have achieved their required English entry requirements but they need some additional focus and ongoing support throughout their studies so we could

certainly offer something. We could do some real focus teaching in late January or February, just before the semester starts for the year, to help them to feel more confident and supported with their English language.’

“I think there's a lot of work to be done with support services. The weaknesses will be English language. We have a large number of international students, and the most debated topic is the level of support they receive in terms of English language. Numeracy tends to be less of a problem, particularly in Engineering Science where I am. Granted, their numeracy skill level might be slightly less developed in some cases, but the need for support is lower. There are really great examples of English language policies and supports across the sector. I've been told the English support at the university is improving, but I doubt it's applied systematically to every international student that gets here at this stage. But the structure is there for that to happen in the future, so that's getting better.’



EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

In 2005, seminal work commenced in Australia identifying the need for a 'systematic, joined-up, whole-of-institution or whole of student' approach to the management of the first year undergraduate student experience in higher education, which subsequently resulted in the development of the 3rd generation transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010; Kift, 2015).

Transition Pedagogy is framed around the identification of six first year (undergraduate) 'curriculum design principles' which are directly quoted below (Kift, 2008, p. 16-17). Curriculum, in this context, is broadly conceptualised as 'the totality of the undergraduate student experience of and engagement with their new program of tertiary study' (Kift, 2009, p. 9).

1. Transition

Good first year curriculum design aids transition from a student's previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education and their new discipline as part of their lifelong learning journey.

2. Diversity

Good first year curriculum design acknowledges student diversity because diversity may exacerbate transition issues and, in the current massified sector, few assumptions can be made about students' entering knowledge, skills and attitudes.

3. Design

Good first year curriculum design is student-focused, explicit and relevant, and provides the foundation and scaffolding for learning success.

4. Engagement

Good first year curriculum design enacts an engaging and involving pedagogy; includes student-teacher interactions and peer-to-peer contact.

5. Assessment

Good first year curriculum design aids students' transition to higher education assessment and provides early feedback on student progress to students and staff.

6. Evaluation and Monitoring

Good first year curriculum design is itself evidence-based and evaluated, and desirably includes mechanisms to monitor for student engagement, the latter allowing then for timely intervention in aid of students who are at risk of not being successful.

EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

To support the curriculum design principles, four strategies to enhance the first year experience transition have been developed (Kift et al., 2010):

- 1 A curriculum that engages students in learning;
- 2 Proactive and timely access to learning and life support;
- 3 Intentionally fostering a sense of belonging; and
- 4 Sustainable academic-professional partnerships

The integration of strategies and principles as transition pedagogy is represented diagrammatically as follows (Kift et al., 2010, p. 11).

In 2015, Kift reflected that the call to arms for the first year experience and the need for the third generation of transition pedagogy had been well received and enacted in the undergraduate student context. Kift noted the first year postgraduate student experience had, however, received minimal attention.

Importantly, the 'positioning issues and challenges', 'narrative depictions', and 'recommendations' in this case study can all be positioned within the transition pedagogy framework. As such, the seminal work of Kift and colleagues serves as an essential exemplar of good practice in not only managing the first year undergraduate student experience, but also in articulation and management of the first year postgraduate student experience.

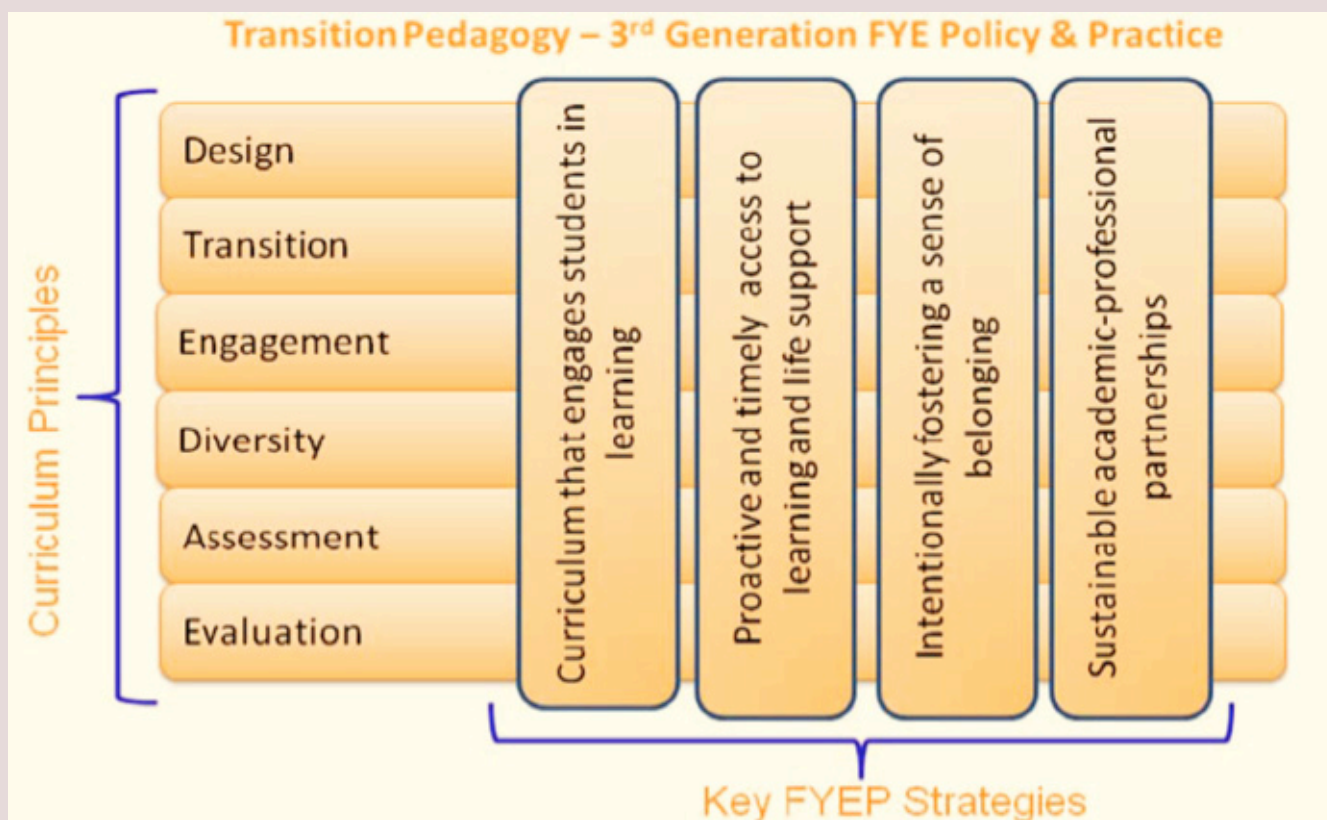


Figure 2. Diagrammatic representation of first year experience transition pedagogy.

EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

POSTGRADUATE INDUCTION AND/OR PREPARATION PROGRAMS

A number of institutions have identified and responded to the needs of the diverse and growing postgraduate coursework student group, particularly with respect to transition issues. Recommendations from this current study suggest that programs that explicitly differentiate and engage postgraduate students, particularly postgraduate coursework students, are likely to have the most positive impact on the first year postgraduate student experience.

The “getready” program at the University of Sydney

The “getready” program (Wozniak, Mahony, & Pizzica, 2009) identifies three key phases for commencing postgraduate students as “before you arrive”, “orientation”, and “your first semester”.

This program explicitly attempts to provide support for on-line postgraduate coursework students, easing their transition through application, enrolment, orientation, and program commencement.

“Upgrade” at the University of Southern Queensland

“Upgrade” is specifically designed for postgraduate coursework students. It engages diverse postgraduate cohorts by flexibly offering essential postgraduate coursework training on a Saturday, and engaging industry partners in its delivery. The program has received an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching Award for outstanding contribution to teaching.

“MARS” at Monash University

“MARS” (Mastering Academic and Research Skills) is an initiative that conceptualised student learning at the core of the transition to postgraduate studies. Utilising an integrated approach, MARS encompasses 4 overlapping support strategies in the form of workshops, moodles, and imbedded curriculum support resources.

Collectively, the strategies increase accessibility to expert support and program staff, thereby building capacity in the generic educational skills of postgraduate students to enhance outcomes in capstone experiences embedded in programs. The program has received recognition and awards at Faculty and University levels.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

- ⊕ Use your student voice. Let the institution know you are there, and have concerns and ideas to contribute to the discourse about student experience. Always approach these discussions with a value add and action orientated intent.
- ⊕ Even before you have enrolled, ensure you are aware of and use the institutions preferred methods of communication, which are frequently the institution website and the institution email system. There is no value in missing important opportunities because you are only monitoring your personal preferred methods of electronic communication.
- ⊕ Avoid making instant judgements, for example:
 - ➔ *Orientation seems to be more for undergraduates why am I being asked to attend.* Rather, take the initiative and determine which parts of orientation are likely to add value to your experience, and then attend with an open and enquiring mind.
 - ➔ *Study supports seem to be more for undergraduates why am I being asked to attend.* Instead, be proactive in identifying which study supports may add value to your experience. Being a postgraduate does mean performing more like a mature learner, it is a process of reflecting on your skill set (both strengths and deficits) and seeking opportunities to develop these.
- ⊕ Just because something is labelled as a *generic* skill, do not assume that means it is a low level skill just for undergraduates. Be aware that even the most successful individuals sometimes contract professional 'coaches' to provide guidance in developing interpersonal skills and skills associated with task orientation and time management.
- ⊕ Actively look for and seek advice on finding the right balance in your approach to learning. While a postgraduate degree is a higher level qualification, often characterised by self-directed learning, it does not mean you need to do it all on your own. Rather, it is a collaborative approach between you (as the learner), your educators, and the university, to work constructively on building your strengths and developing capacity in areas of weakness.
- ⊕ Work-life-study balance is arguably the most significant challenge you will face. Remain cognisant of this, and take proactive actions, such as;
 - ➔ planning before you commit;
 - ➔ developing interpersonal skills;
 - ➔ obtaining a mentor to provide guidance – this could be a senior student, a recent graduate, or a trusted advisor;
 - ➔ making careful, considered and planned decisions about workload, percentage enrolment, and social activities;
 - ➔ remembering that social activities are a vital component of success, abandoning these as a sign of commitment to your studies is often counterproductive.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR EDUCATORS, AND LEARNING SUPPORT STAFF

- + Develop strategies and implement plans to manage the diversity of postgraduate students in your courses and programs, and seek avenues to utilise this diversity to enrich the experience for all students.
 - + Explicitly identify the mode of study for each course, provide mechanisms to explain this to students, and how this differs from other modes of study within the institution. Adopt common language, structures, and processes across the institution, or at a minimum, within the same Faculty or School.
 - + Specifically plan, develop, and implement orientation activities and processes that support the diversity of postgraduate students, inclusive of online students. Details of orientation programs should be specifically communicated to postgraduate students, clearly identifying the benefits for these programs.
 - + Be cognisant of the structure and scheduling of postgraduate orientation programs to ensure students can access the information and support they need, without the distraction or annoyance of less relevant information. Only take the time required to achieve the objectives.
 - + Collaborate to identify the specific study support requirements of postgraduate students and develop support resources that are deliberately tailored to the needs of diverse postgraduate students in diverse modes of study.
- + Incorporate more sophisticated generic skills like managing uncertainty into student support programs and clearly communicate the benefit of such skills to postgraduate students.
 - + Develop a communication strategy about the support programs to ensure postgraduate students are able to understand the intended value and applicability of the programs to their study.
 - + Increase access and acceptability of support programs by developing flexible support programs.
 - + Acknowledge and communicate that work-life-study balance can be a concern for postgraduate students. Encourage proactive self-care, develop skills workshops tailored to graduates, and embed these experiences in curricula (where appropriate).
 - + Develop flexible and accessible supports tailored to these learners who may already have significant education and life experience.
 - + Look for technology based solutions to minimise isolation felt by online students. Create program time and space in learning management and other communication systems, for online students to share experience, preferably without the gaze of the educator.

- ⊕ Implement or further refine existing frameworks to support multiple supervisory models for HDR students. Explore cross institutional opportunities, inclusive of research intensive organisations, for HDR students.
- ⊕ Develop opportunities for cross program engagements that not only provide opportunities for socialisation, but also important skill development in learning and working in multidisciplinary teams and environments. This activity will address postgraduate coursework student calls for more networking opportunities.
- ⊕ Be conscious that although sometimes poorly attended, face to face events are often highly valued by students. Remember that often lack of attendance can be due to inappropriate scheduling and or lack of communication about the purpose and value of the interaction, rather than an intrinsic lack of student interest. Consider using the student voice to identify and explain the value.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR UNIVERSITY LEADERS

- ⊕ Develop, enunciate, and enact the value proposition for postgraduate training, particularly postgraduate coursework training programs.
 - ⊕ Identify the place for postgraduate coursework students within the institution, the sector, and within debate about reform and enhancement of the sector.
 - ⊕ Develop and embed best practice frameworks to support the postgraduate coursework student experience across the sector, particularly the first year student experience.
 - ⊕ Develop flexible systems and processes enabling all aspects of administration to be completed after hours and off-campus. Ensure that processes are intrinsically robust and not just working because of the dedication of a small group of staff who are going above and beyond their position description.
 - ⊕ Ensure administrative requirements are clearly communicated, and that necessary information is accessible, understandable, and meets the applicant/student needs.
 - ⊕ Lobby for an investigation into the utility of current testing methods of English language proficiency with respect to testing for readiness for tertiary and, in particular, postgraduate tertiary studies.
- ⊕ Lead discussion about the appropriate fulltime load for international students for whom English is not their first language.
 - ⊕ Review institutional language support centres and study support programs to assure services and supports are:
 - ➔ appropriate for the diverse mix of students;
 - ➔ robust and sufficiently tailored to meet requirements for English language proficiency across the diversity of postgraduate offerings;
 - ➔ clearly and consistently communicated to all students;
 - ➔ safe, flexible, and accessible;
 - ➔ appropriate and accessible for online students.
 - ⊕ Ensure that University study supports are funded and developed to meet the needs of diverse postgraduate student cohorts to ensure a transformative experience that supports attainment of high level postgraduate outcomes.
 - ⊕ Investigate the dimensions of a fulltime study load for postgraduate coursework programs and the issues associated with work-life-study balance to develop pathways for recognition of extracurricular activities and graduate competencies that are being enhanced by these extracurricular activities.

- ➕ Develop enabling language and discourse, and genuinely flexible delivery, to ensure the accessibility of study support programs to students. Remember that generic skills are actually sophisticated, and whilst requiring foundation in first year, should be scaffolded throughout the student experience. After all, these are often the skills that experienced professionals encounter in continued professional development programs, usually for a good reason.
- ➕ Rethink scholarships for HDR students to expand on opportunities to contribute to academic work, such as sessional teaching, by including roles associated with developing and managing student networking and engagement activities.



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For further information & resources:

 <http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com/>

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The many postgraduate students and staff (366 from 26 Australian universities) who so generously volunteered their time and energy contributing to this student experience research.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions are derived from conversations with the 366 research participants. The research team did not commence the inquiry into first year postgraduate student experience with these questions in mind and therefore did not specifically ask or probe these questions. The questions emerged out of the research and thus serve as recommendations for further research. They can also be used to lead discussions, focus groups and task-forces to further investigate and determine strategic action improvements to enhancing the first year postgraduate student experience.

- ⊕ Is the first year experience an important consideration in the postgraduate student journey?
 - ➔ Does this depend upon the context of the program such as; coursework vs HDR and professional/vocational vs general?
 - ➔ Are there discipline specific differences in the postgraduate student first year experience?

- ⊕ Do the dimensions of the undergraduate first year student experience significantly overlap with the dimensions of the first year postgraduate student experience?
 - ➔ If they do can we use the frameworks, like the 3rd generation transition pedagogy, validated for first year undergraduate student experience in the first year postgraduate student experience context?

- ⊕ What are the generic academic skills and attitudinal sets for postgraduate students, and are these the same as for undergraduate students or different?
 - ➔ Regardless of whether the generic skill set is the same or different how do we make academic supports that assist in the attainment of generic skills accessible to postgraduate students?

- ⊕ What are the graduate attributes for postgraduate programs, especially coursework Masters programs?
 - ➔ How are they embedded in curriculum and how do they relate to desired outcomes for these students and the desired outcomes of the workforce and society?

