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Exploring practice and participation in transition to postgraduate social science study

February 2008

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Contents

Executive summary

1.   Background

An understanding of educational transitions is becoming increasingly important in constructing learning environments, because the nature of individual students' transitions can shape their study experience and may impact on their eventual level of success. While there has been a research focus on transitions in schools and transitions to undergraduate study, postgraduate study has, largely been ignored. It is the purpose of this project to address this oversight and to set in motion discussion and research surrounding such transitions.

The project partners, the University of Huddersfield, the University of Glasgow and Manchester Metropolitan University, are committed to a widening participation (WP) agenda, and it is intended that this project will be a useful contribution to understanding the processes of inclusion in postgraduate education, which has not, to date, featured strongly in the WP agenda.

The project includes the voices of both staff and students in generating data that has enabled the formulation of practical recommendations to HEIs surrounding the design of postgraduate learning environments and, importantly, recommendations for students and staff for managing learning and ensuring inclusion. Notions of inclusion are important because one of the fundamental goals of transition is to become part of the new organisation, which in distributed learning theory is conceptualised as inclusion. The research begins with an assumption that learning is a distributed process. This means that in place of the traditional transmission model of learning (teacher speaks, learner absorbs), a distributed model emerges. That is, learning is seen as participation in the practices of the learning community through which individual identities are shaped by processes of inclusion or exclusion. In this model, the every day activities of the learning environment are conceptualised as important data in understanding student performance, and student participation in such practices is neither seen as inevitable nor understood as an individual responsibility.

The stated aim of this project is to improve the quality of the postgraduate student learning experience. We focus on the postgraduate environment and investigate the experiences of postgraduate students in different social science environments. It has been established in the literature that transition into an educational setting is an important process because it shapes the educational trajectories of individual students (Tobbell, 2003). While there is a body of work that looks at transition to undergraduate study (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2007; Reay, 2002; Knox, 2005), there is very little work that examines the transition to postgraduate study. It has been suggested in the literature (Tobbell 2003; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005) that

educational transition has been under-theorised and that much research, while providing useful descriptions of student experiences, does not address the fundamental aspects of institutional practice and student participation that shape transition trajectories. Tobbell and Lawthom (2005) and O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007b) have suggested that a more useful theory for understanding educational behaviour is the distributed notion of identity suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the form of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. From this point of view, learning shifts from having an individual focus, where it is the student's responsibility to negotiate and enter the study environment, to having a distributed focus, where inclusion in the study environment is the responsibility of all members of that environment. From this theoretical perspective, effective environments can be conceptualised with reference to the practices that serve to promote or discourage participation of both students and teachers.

Given the distributed model outlined above, it follows that the research gaze should fall upon all stakeholders in the postgraduate education system. We have identified these as: the postgraduate students; the degree course teams; university management; Government agencies; and the Government. The identified research aims reflect all these groups.

2. Aims

- To explore the practices that constitute the study environment in social science postgraduate study.
- To explore the participation of students in transition to social science postgraduate study.
- To explore which practices serve to enhance inclusion in the postgraduate study environment.

3. Method

Because of the paucity of research surrounding postgraduate transition, this research is designed to investigate the practices that shape participation in study and to understand participation in those practices from a student and staff point of view. This suggests a qualitative design, where factors and experience will be allowed to emerge from the data. At the outset, it was not possible properly to predict what the practices might be and how students and staff might experience them. The research design is further shaped by Sayer's (1998) argument for different ontological levels:

- the empirical – that which we experience
- the actual – that which happens that we do not experience
- the real – the existence of generative mechanisms, which result in tendencies.

Acceptance of such a framework dictates an ethnographic approach in that the actual and real require data that go beyond the immediate experience of the students and staff, and investigate the wider frameworks (institutional, political and societal) that shape postgraduate environments.

4. Analysis/(Results

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data inductively. A number of themes emerged:

- Postgraduate study versus undergraduate study – in this theme we examine the continuities and discontinuities (policy, academic status, university systems, academic home, pedagogic practice and participation) between undergraduate and postgraduate study and discuss them in relation to student transition.

- The processes and profile of students entering postgraduate study – this presents and analyses data that demonstrate the heterogeneity of the postgraduate student body. We argue that processes and systems should reflect the different skills and experiences of postgraduate students in order to ensure inclusion.

- Postgraduate teaching, learning and academic competence – in this theme we present findings that emerged surrounding the learning environments of postgraduates. These were not always as positive as students expected. However, certain practices emerged that result in more beneficial learning experiences and so student success.

- Identity and aspiration in transition to postgraduate study – this theme gives an overview of the psychology of transition to postgraduate study. This is conceptualised as being fundamentally embedded in individual (albeit distributed) student identities. Practice and participation are examined in relation to student trajectories.

5. Conclusions

The conclusions consider the data in relation to the project aims. They suggest that:

- macro policy is more facilitative for undergraduate study than postgraduate study
- the financial imperatives that govern university policy may serve to undermine the study experience of postgraduate students
- while there is clear differentiation with regard to policy between undergraduate and postgraduate student bodies, academic staff tend to employ the same methods of teaching, in taught postgraduate courses, for both student types
- at the outset of study many postgraduate students experience difficulties in finding out about and understanding the structures of their studies. Experience at undergraduate level does not seem to assist in understanding postgraduate programmes
- there is great emphasis on independence in postgraduate study, but students sometimes found there was little assistance in becoming independent
- success, defined in relation to student trajectories, tended to reflect personal actions rather than university systems.

6. Recommendations

The recommendations that emerge from this report are discussed with regard to the widening participation agenda. A general recommendation is that the WP agenda is systematically extended to postgraduate study at both policy and practice level.

More specific recommendations (relevant stakeholders indicated in brackets) are:

- ➢ the facilitation of the application to postgraduate study (university management, Government and Government bodies)
- ➢ the facilitation of access to student funding sources for postgraduates (university management, Government and Government bodies)
- ➢ consideration of the availability of facilities for postgraduate students at all times (postgraduate students, degree course teams and university management)
- ➢ recognition of postgraduate student heterogeneity in the design and implementation of programmes of study (degree course teams)
- ➢ agreement between programme teaching teams, in principle and practice, of the pedagogic philosophies that underpin postgraduate teaching (degree course teams)
- ➢ the provision of a structured personal tutor system for postgraduate students (postgraduate students and degree course teams)
- ➢ focus on programme design and university facilities provision that allow for the formation of social relationships (postgraduate students, degree course teams and university management).

## 1.	Background

Educational transitions signify a move from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one. They might, for example, involve a change of institution or a shift within an institution. The essential point that makes them worthy of research focus is that any such shifts require an individual to make adjustments, and the nature of these adjustments influence the educational experience. The assumption that underpins transition research is that in understanding the adjustments and the individual experiences of them, support can be given to maximise educational success.

There is a significant literature surrounding educational transitions at nearly all levels (entry into formal schooling: Dockett & Perry, 2004; shifts between schools: Hargreaves & Galton, 2002; Tobbell, 2003; school to university: Cassidy & Trew, 2001; non-traditional transition to university: Raey, 2002; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007a/b). The one significant omission is transition between undergraduate and postgraduate study. While a number of people (Boud & Lee, 2005; Pearson & Brew, 2002) have written on the PhD student-supervisor relationship there is very little (in English – we cannot say otherwise), if any, literature that seeks to understand the experiences of becoming a postgraduate student. Leonard *et al.* (2006) conducted a systematic literature review of the postgraduate research student learning experience and found that the existing literature tends not to focus on the students' perspective, noting that little research carried out included their views.

It is the intention of this research to address this research gap and also to start a debate surrounding postgraduate study and student experience. The importance of this is based in the notion of 'credential inflation' (Van de Werfhorst & Anderson, 2005). This idea suggests that as one qualification becomes more usual, a pressure builds to achieve the next level of qualification to differentiate oneself from the competition. As participation in undergraduate study increases it makes sense that attainment of first degrees will increase. Indeed, this is already the case. Langlands (2005) reports a 24% increase in undergraduate study between 1997 and 2003. We are suggesting that as a result, uptake of postgraduate study will increase. It is difficult to know if this is already happening.

Because of the paucity of postgraduate transition literature we are relying on the more general educational literature to underpin our research, and the following review outlines the findings from this literature. However, we are also interested in stimulating discussion and research around the theory of transition. We have argued (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005; Tobbell, 2006; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) that educational transitions have been under-theorised to date. So, while we have a wealth of rich, descriptive material of experience and practice, an overarching framework for understanding this has yet to be developed. Elsewhere (Lawthom, O'Neill, O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007a/b), we have suggested that socio-cultural theoretical perspectives provide a

useful framework for transition research, and the following section introduces these and explains their utility.

Literature review

Transition to undergraduate study

The literature has identified a range of factors that might influence individual transition trajectories. In her work with non-traditional (in the language of universities standard entry students are under 21 years old, with traditional qualifications such as A-levels) groups entering university, Raey (2002) has identified as significant wider social issues such as class and economic advantage. She connects these to individual identity, arguing that because formal education is largely an affluent, middle-class domain, students who are from working-class backgrounds may feel marginalised. Bamber and Tett (2003) suggest that such students may feel a 'crisis of entitlement'. This means that they may question their right to participate. Such feelings may emerge from past negative experience in the educational system. This is an important notion if we are considering participation in postgraduate research. If students experience marginalisation at undergraduate level, then it may follow that postgraduate study is positioned as unattainable. The economic profile of postgraduate students remains unexplored, and this may be worthy of future research.

Other studies have compared students' preceding educational environment to that of the transition target. Student preparation for academic study at university level has been identified as an important issue (Rhodes, Bill, Biscomb, Nevill & Bruneau, 2002; Haggis & Pouget, 2002). University learning and teaching strategies are significantly different to those of schools and further education colleges. At undergraduate level there is great emphasis on individual endeavour, whereas schools and colleges tend to adopt more interventionist approaches. Both staff and students have identified appropriate study skills as a key factor in successful transition. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007b) have found that familiarity and mastery of academic practice enables students to feel more connected to the HE community and enhances their sense of entitlement to study.

The discontinuity in pedagogic strategy can lead to the undermining of student self-efficacy in university study (Macaro & Wingate, 2004). Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is the personal competence an individual experiences surrounding a particular task. For example, at university it has become increasingly important for students to manage the wealth of information resources available to them. This requires an ability to manipulate electronic databases and to judge the worth of available information. Students therefore require computer literacy and information evaluation skills. Those students who do not perceive themselves to be skilful in information technology will be less likely to use such resources, less likely to keep trying in the face of difficulty and less creative in their work. Studies have shown that self-efficacy makes a significant contribution to the variance in performance between individuals in a given task (Pajares

& Miller, 1994). Self-efficacy beliefs are built on successful performance, so if students come to university and find it difficult to manage the skill discontinuity, there will be a concomitant reduction in academic self-efficacy and thus in performance.

The literature has also highlighted the importance in transition of social experience. Evidently, entry into a new institution results in a shift in social networks. Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) note that university involvement in developing peer networks facilitated relationships that enhanced study and improved levels of enjoyment in university life. Feelings of inclusion and belonging are in some ways predicated on personal relationships. The shifts in student profile have now made this a less straightforward process. In the past, students tended to leave home and live in student communities. However, with increasing participation of non-traditional students and students studying in their home town, entry into the social network may be more problematic. Christie, Munro and Wager (2005) cite the competing demands on personal resources that adult students experience (family, finance, study) as a key factor in determining such students' constructions of themselves as 'day students'. As a result, these students may not be able to connect to the informal network that provides a vital informational resource. This is important with regard to postgraduate study, because such students tend to have left the student, social community and may, therefore, experience more isolation.

Notions of belonging are not just confined to participation in social networks. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007b) found that physical location impacted on student transition experience. Courses that took place in discrete locations, separate from the university campus, impacted adversely on self-constructions of membership of the student group. This was particularly salient for non-traditional students, who doubted their student identity.

The existing literature on transition to undergraduate study conceptualises the process and experience of transition as embedded in individual, dynamic identities. Further, identity emerges as a distributed phenomenon. Factors within the individual (academic preparedness, self-efficacy, feelings of entitlement) combine with socio-cultural factors (social class, economic advantage, university practice) to make transition complex and essentially non-predictable. The fact that individual transitions are non-predictable, however, does not mitigate the need for understanding the process. It is clear that the practices that construct participation in HE exert influences that result in mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1998) that shape behaviour. To be financially disadvantaged and feel socially excluded from HE is unlikely to result in a positive transition trajectory. Institutions acting in ways that undermine personal self-efficacy are unlikely to engender effective learning identities. Thus a knowledge and understanding of the practices and issues that shape participation becomes key in identifying pedagogic strategy.

Other educational transition research

There is a huge body of literature from all over the world that has investigated school transitions. Many of the same themes discussed above emerge as important, suggesting that there are underlying commonalities in transition experience, irrespective of age, institution or cultural setting. This is an important insight because it indicates the possibility for an underpinning transition framework. However, because of the lack of postgraduate transition work, to date it has not been possible to know if this transition can also be included.

Lahelma and Gordon (1997) carried out ethnographic research in two Finnish schools and discuss the task of the transition process as that of "learning to be a professional pupil". By this they mean that in starting at a new institution success is predicated on the extent to which an individual behaves in ways valued in that institution. In the case of schools, this may be wearing the correct uniform, arriving on time, paying attention to the teacher etc. In the case of universities, this may be conforming to academic practices such as using original sources and correct referencing.

Tobbell (2003) found that becoming accustomed to *new* practices presented challenges for children moving from primary to secondary school. Some children found the expectations of more adult behaviour at secondary school difficult. They felt secondary school demanded too much of them and that essentially they still felt like children who did not welcome the burdens of adulthood. The work of transition seems to concern managing previous experience in light of new experience. In moving to secondary school and in moving to undergraduate study new responsibilities for self-management surface, be they remembering to bring the correct books to the classroom or identifying the appropriate information to include in an essay. How students manage this process is a function of their past and present. This is an important issue for transition research in general, because it suggests that understanding student behaviour necessitates knowledge of historical experience.

Williams and Jephcote (1993) and Stables (1995) have made the point that pedagogic approach is very different in primary and secondary schools. In the former, ideas and knowledge tend to be distributed across subject disciplines. For example, design and technology might be embedded in a history project, whereas in the latter design and technology would be a discrete study topic. This is also the case in transition from school or further education to higher education. In higher education staff activity is divided between teaching and research, and as a result students are not the sole focus, hence perhaps the emphasis on individual responsibility. The important point is that staff may communicate and move within a given educational level (from one secondary school to another, for example), but they rarely overlap between educational levels (primary teachers to secondary schools, or secondary school teachers to universities). The result is that the staff who control practices in the transition institution have little or no knowledge and understanding of the historical institution. This

presents an interesting aspect for consideration in postgraduate transition. In progressing from undergraduate study students may shift institutions, but they remain within the university sector, and they are taught by the same people who have worked on undergraduate degrees. This suggests that staff knowledge of historical experience might facilitate postgraduate transition.

Economic advantage and social class have been identified as significant factors in adjustment to school per se. Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta and Howes (2002) have found that the more advantageous the socio-economic situation of a child, the more successful their transition to school was likely to be (with regard to relationships and academic success). Indeed the evidence that high socio-economic standing underpins educational success is almost incontrovertible. McKay's (1999) research indicates an almost perfect positive correlation between success at GCSE level and provision of free school meals (an often used measure of economic status in research with school children).

Teacher-student relationships and friendships have also been found to contribute to transition experiences. Tobbell (2003) found that pupils in the first year of secondary school felt more distant from their teachers because of their tendency to stay at the front of the class and deliver information. In later research (Tobbell, 2006), she found that some pupils felt secondary school to be a more hostile community (although not all pupils felt this) where teachers took less care of pupils. Birch and Ladd (1997) suggest that the nature of the child-teacher relationship is key in transition to school, and Burchinal *et al.* (2002) found that high quality child-teacher relationships at the start of school can provide alternative pathways to success for children of low socio-economic status. Multiple studies report the importance of friendship and social groups in transition between schools. Hargreaves and Wall (2002) and Morrison (2000) show that the main concern that children experience prior to starting secondary school is making friends, and that more successful transitions are made by those children who establish friendship networks.

This is akin to notions of belonging discussed in relation to university undergraduates above. Socio-cultural models of learning argue that learning is an essentially collaborative endeavour. Lave (1997) posits that education is not solely about the internalisation of knowledge, but can also be understood with regard to the range of self- and other-arranged activities in which an individual is involved. She terms this the 'learning curriculum' and argues that learning trajectories are fundamentally shaped by such experience. Thus, social connections within and outside the educational institution may influence participation.

Once again the transition literature indicates the importance of identity and identity shifts in understanding the process. Transition involves the management of change from old practices to new practices. How an individual manages such change is a function of past experiences. The extent to which such experience may be useful in the new institutions

reflects the actual practices in the new institutions and the sense of belonging that these engender together with wider experiences outside the institution.

Evaluating the literature

While a range of themes can be identified from the existing literature, it is interesting to note the lack of specificity surrounding what constitutes good practices that might engender successful transition trajectories. Traditional psychological theory might argue that successful transition is about individual intelligence. The argument would go that those students who are more intellectually able are more likely to succeed (success here being understood as regards performance in examinations) and, crucially, that since this intelligence is located firmly within an individual, success is a direct function of that individual. Following this argument, the onus for performance rests on students themselves, and further suggests that only the most intelligent are suitable for university study. We would suggest that this notion of performance represents the implicit theorising that underpins a great deal of pedagogic practice in formal education, but particularly at university level.

However, the literature does not support such a notion. There is an almost total absence of intelligence explanations in the transition literature. The vast majority of research suggests that the actual content of the curriculum (by this we mean the 'facts', such as how to apply a particular statistical technique or an understanding of the theories of behaviour) does not present a problem per se. Rather, it seems that the activities and practices in which that curriculum is embedded present the challenges that must be negotiated in transition. Galton and colleagues (2002) have conducted a range of studies in primary-secondary transition and make very little reference to basic, individual intelligence. Instead they note the differences in practice that shape life in the educational spheres.

In interviews where children have been invited to talk about their transition experience, little or no reference is made to the school work itself (Tobbell, 2006). Instead children talk about issues of control, pedagogic practice and social integration. This is also the case in the transition to university (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007a; 2007b), where, given opportunity to speak, students discussed university bureaucracy, personal feelings of entitlement and academic practices as important.

The research then demands an understanding of transition that takes these findings into account. The data call for an understanding of why the practices (which could be thought of as the rules and values that support an institution) of education are so influential in shaping transition experience. The data suggest that learning is a much more complex process than the internalisation of knowledge presented by a teacher to a student group, and that transition is much more than simply understanding the new curriculum in the transition institution. Rather, it is about the interaction between

individual and practice, and the resultant shifts in learner identity that might allow successful participation.

Theorising transition – communities of practice

In recent years transmission theories of learning have been increasingly challenged (Tobbell & Lawthom, 2005). The notion of learning as a process of stimulus (in the form of knowledge presentation) and response (in the form of student internalisation of that knowledge), mitigated by individual levels of intelligence, has little currency in the face of evidence demonstrating that context has huge influence on performance. Donaldson's (1978) research in the 1970s demonstrated that alterations in assessment tasks resulted in improved ratings of competence in children. Research by Nunes, Dias Schliemann and Carraher (1993) shows that Brazilian street children, who largely fail at mathematics within the school system, can perform sophisticated calculations in their interactions with tourists. Reformulating assessments in state examinations in the UK (the shift from assessment by unseen examination to a mix of coursework and examination) has resulted in increasing levels of success (Elwood, 1999).

Such evidence demonstrates that learning is a distributed process and involves the interaction of person, task and context. Lave and Wenger (1991) are particularly prominent in arguing for this. They suggest that learning is never free of the context in which the learning and the performance surrounding that learning take place. Learning is reconceptualised as process rather than as a time-limited event. The process involves the whole person (the range of past and present experience of that person) in interaction with the task or activity, which is in turn embedded in a particular context (one, moreover, that is not free of outside influence). To illustrate this, consider a PhD student who is making his or her first presentation at an academic conference. Successful completion of this task is much more than simply writing a paper and delivering a presentation. Conferences are particular contexts, governed by particular (not always explicit) rules. A given student may have attended a number of conferences as a delegate and seen a range of speakers, while other students may have little or no previous experience of conferences. At some conferences contentious questioning is the norm, while at others latitude is given to postgraduate students. Some students may have experience in giving successful presentations and understand how to structure and deliver information successfully. Some universities might provide workshops to help postgraduate students acquire presentation skills in a friendly atmosphere, while other students may have been given very little support. Actual performance at the conference, then, is dependent on many more things than just inherent skill, and simplistic notions of being good or bad at presentations are redundant.

Lave and Wenger (1991) compare learning to apprenticeships. Newcomers work with or beside more expert others, and in so doing observe the practices that are valued in the relevant context (which can be thought of as a community of practice). In the beginning of the apprenticeship the

learners are only able to carry out simple tasks, but with experience they participate in more complex activities until they themselves become the expert. The new learner is conceived as a legitimate peripheral participant in a community of practice. For example, on entering university, students have little knowledge of what they must do to be successful (given that there is great discontinuity between pre-HE and HE, as discussed previously), and so the goal of their first year is to learn the practices (correct referencing, independent research etc) that are valued in academia. In many degree programmes this is acknowledged, in that the student's first-year results do not contribute to their final degree classification. As the student progresses through their degree, expectations rise. They may be expected to shift from description of theory and research to critical evaluation, and from reiterating received ideas to generating more original ones.

However, while peripherality is always legitimate, it does not necessarily result in participation. The very fact of being a first-year student ensures legitimacy, but if the activities and context of the first-year student do not enable them to enter into the valued practices, they cannot learn appropriately. For example, referencing sources in academic work is highly valued. For skilled academics this is almost an automatic process; referencing is useful because it facilitates research and establishes authority. To make it easier, disciplines tend to agree on a style of referencing, and this becomes a practice that constructs that community. If students do not engage in activities that allow them to understand this practice, they are unlikely to perform appropriately.

Communities of practice theory argues for a very complex conceptualisation of learning. A community of practice (CoP) is a collection of people bound together by location, purpose, activity, values, desires etc. It is an informal or formal group that shares and develops understanding of, and behaviour surrounding, its proximal and distal interactions and contexts (Wenger, 1998). For example, a community of practice might be psychologists or educationalists; it might be first-year or final-year students, or funded PhD students. Everybody is part of a range of CoPs that overlap personally or in practice to greater or lesser extents. It is argued that individual identity is a function of not only the CoPs with which a person is connected, but also the nature of the participation in those CoPs.

Eventual full participation is not a given, although it may serve as a means of constructing success. Wenger has identified different participatory trajectories, which provide interesting insight into students in transition. They are:

- peripheral trajectories – trajectories that do not lead to full participation but do involve identity shifts. This might be a student who comes to view themselves as a poor student, through lack of success in academic study
- inbound trajectories – trajectories that suggest a goal of full participation, even when the participant is peripheral in the beginning

- insider trajectories – even when a full participant, practice and meaning, and so identity, can shift
- boundary trajectories – those that span a number of communities of practice, linking them and brokering practices between them
- outbound trajectories – trajectories that clearly enable participation in a future community of practice. These are particularly useful in understanding how undergraduate study might prepare a student for postgraduate study.

The nature of participation across the range of CoPs with which an individual is connected is a determinant of individual identity. Participation is complex and idiosyncratic because it emerges from individual interactions with the meanings that underpin practice in CoPs. For example, many first-year students may not understand the need for proper referencing. They may use two or three introductory textbooks for an essay (recommended by the tutor), and the point of referencing may not be clear. While tutors may see the practice of referencing in all work as apprenticeship in scholarship, if students do not connect with this meaning, they are unlikely to participate fully in the practice. Wenger summarises this as: "in the pursuit of enterprises we engage in all sorts of activities with complex bodies that are a result of millennia of evolution. Still in the end it is the meanings we produce that matter" (1998, p51). The negotiation of these meanings is a result of the individual's interaction with the current context and activity. In negotiating meaning participatory trajectories are formed and identity shifts made. The nature of the identity shifts can be thought of as the individual psychology of transition.

A key factor in understanding transition, then, is identity and its trajectory in the new community of practice. Identity is not, in this theoretical perspective, a stable or static notion. Instead Wenger proposes that:

- identity is fundamentally temporal
- the work of identity is ongoing
- because it is constructed in social contexts, the temporality of identity is more complex than a linear notion of time
- identities are defined with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories.
  (1998, p154)

In the pursuit of successful transition, then, attention must be paid to the nature of the participants' identities and trajectories. This calls for an understanding of individual constructions of collective meanings and participation in relation to those meanings. The goal of education must be to enable students to participate fully in those practices that are valued and lead to success. If the activities and context do not enable students to participate then identity trajectories are unlikely to be inclusionary.

Such a theoretical perspective demands the following focus for transition research:

- to observe and access the practices that shape the different communities of practice of which students and staff are members
- to analyse practice that serves to include students and that which serves to exclude them
- to review the different levels and contexts that shape those practices
- to understand how these contexts work together to create individual contexts
- to examine the learning relationships and how these relate to the educational experience of students.

From this the following specific research aims emerge, which are outlined in the next section.

2. Aims

Following on from the identified focus above, and as a result of the paucity of research surrounding postgraduate transition, this research is designed to investigate the practices that shape participation in study and to understand participation in those practices from a student and staff point of view. This suggests a qualitative design, where factors and experience will be allowed to emerge from the data. At this point it is not possible to predict properly what the practices might be and how students and staff might experience them. The research design is further shaped by Sayer's (1998) argument for different ontological levels:

- the empirical – that which we experience
- the actual – that which happens that we do not experience
- the real – the existence of generative mechanisms, which result in tendencies.

Acceptance of such a framework dictates an ethnographic approach in that the actual and real require data that go beyond the immediate experience of the students and staff, and investigate the wider frameworks (institutional, political and societal) that shape postgraduate environments. It is argued that individual trajectories are a result of the interaction of a multiplicity of factors, which can be understood in relation to practice and experience of such practice. Moreover, given the distributed model adopted, it follows that the research gaze should fall upon all stakeholders in the postgraduate education system. We have identified these as: the postgraduate students; the degree course teams; university management; Government agencies; and the Government. The identified research aims reflect all these groups.

As such, the aims for this research were:

- to explore the practices that constitute the study environment in social science postgraduate study
- to explore the participation of students in transition to social science postgraduate study
- to explore which practices serve to enhance inclusion in the postgraduate study environment.

3. Methods

Rationale

Due to the paucity of research surrounding transition to postgraduate study, this research was designed to investigate the practices that shape participation in postgraduate study and to understand participation in those practices from a student point of view, a staff point of view and within the broader context of academic, social and political institutions. The research therefore used a qualitative approach, where factors and experiences were allowed to emerge from the data, rather than being imposed upon the data using a predetermined set of hypotheses or expectations.

This methodological approach was underpinned by Sayer's (1998) argument that there are three different 'levels' of human reality: the empirical; the actual; and the real. The level of the empirical concerns that which we, as human beings, experience. The level of the actual concerns that which happens, but which we do not directly experience. The level of the real concerns the existence of generative mechanisms in the world, which result in general tendencies for individuals to feel, to react or to behave in predictable ways. Accepting this framework then implies the need for an ethnographic approach to data collection. This is because the immediate experience of students and staff will only provide data at the level of the empirical. Exploring the levels of the actual and the real requires an investigation of the wider frameworks (institutional, political and societal) that shape postgraduate environments and postgraduates' experiences in ways of which the students themselves may not be directly aware. In addition to Sayer's (1998) theoretical position, another reason for employing an ethnographic methodology was that it is the dominant research method used in the communities of practice literature (Lave, 1997; Wenger, 1998), and so was most suited to the theoretical framework within which this research project was located.

Ethnographic research involves collecting data using multiple methods (which may be referred to as triangulation) over a period of time in a specified context. It may involve data collection methods such as observation, interviews, document analysis, and quantitative methods such as questionnaires or demographic data (MacDonald, 2001). The data are then analysed and presented. Key features of ethnography are the detail of the data, which are collected over a long time in the field, and the use of participant observation (Rock, 2001). The specific methods used within the present research project were interviews, diaries, focus groups, classroom observations and document analysis. The research was conducted by three researchers over a period of one academic year.

Participants, recruitment and ethical considerations

Participants were drawn from five UK higher education institutions (HEIs). A decision was made to include students who had undertaken undergraduate degrees in the UK only. Inevitably international students will deal with additional issues and, while we in no way deny their complex transition experience, this project was not sufficiently large to include this additional data. These included the three project partner institutions (Universities of Huddersfield and Glasgow, and Manchester Metropolitan University) as well as two other UK HEIs (Universities of Leeds and Bradford). In total, 39 individuals participated in the research. Twenty of these (14 students and six staff) took part in interviews, and 19 took part in focus groups. In addition, the five classroom observations involved a total of 180 students and six members of staff. Student participants were from a variety of different types of postgraduate programmes, including taught Masters programmes, research Masters programmes and doctoral research programmes. The student participants included part-time as well as full-time postgraduates.

Student participants were recruited via emails sent to postgraduate mailing lists and notices on postgraduate noticeboards, inviting interested individuals to contact one of the researchers. Researchers then provided details of the aims and objectives of the project, as well as what would be required of participants. Staff participants were recruited using targeted sampling techniques. These participants were members of staff who were involved in the teaching of postgraduate students, the supervision of postgraduate students or in the co-ordination of postgraduate programmes, and they were approached directly by one of the project's four co-investigators with details of the project, and invited to participate.

All four of the project's co-investigators are psychologists and members of the British Psychological Society. The British Psychological Society's published *Code of Conduct: Ethical Principles and Guidelines* was adhered to throughout the research, and ethical approval as required by each of the individual partner institutions was sought and obtained before the recruitment process began. All participants were volunteers, were provided with written information about the project at the outset, and gave their informed consent to participate in the research by signing a consent form.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Original recordings were destroyed at the end of the project. Transcripts, diaries and observation notes were anonymised and all original documents, including emails, were deleted at the end of the project.

Interviews

All interviews were conducted by one of the four co-investigators on the project, and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and ten minutes. Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants to drive the interview. Such interviews are an accepted part of educational research, and have been used previously in adult educational research specifically exploring communities of practice and social learning theory (Merriam, Courtenay and Baumgartner, 2003). Students who participated in interviews were interviewed initially as close as possible to the beginning of their programme of postgraduate study. The precise dates of these interviews varied between students because of variations in the individual institutions' term or semester dates. Students were then asked to participate in a second, follow-up interview towards the end of their academic year. Topics that were explored in the students' initial interviews included (see Appendix 3):

- biographical data (qualifications; educational institutions attended; employment; family context)
- postgraduate study (decision-making process to enter postgraduate study; expectations for the programme; aims in doing programme; university structures that have enabled/disabled registration and progression thus far)
- studying (confidence/emotions surrounding postgraduate study; perceived relevance of undergraduate study)
- overview of involvement in research (contribution to literature).

Students were interviewed a second time towards the end of their academic year. Over the course of the year they had completed email diaries in response to a predetermined set of questions (see *Diaries* section below) at regular intervals. Each student was sent a copy of their own diaries to read prior to their follow-up interview, and it was these diaries that formed the basis for discussion in the follow-up interview, which centred upon their experiences over the course of the year and their reflections upon their own experiences.

Staff interviews were also semi-structured. The staff participants were the postgraduate co-ordinators in social science departments. Topics which were explored included:

- postgraduate context (in university; in faculty; in department)
- structures for postgraduates (funding; resources; policies)
- university systems; faculty systems; departmental systems
- recruitment (how and where students are recruited)
- facilities for postgraduate students in the university/faculty/department
- participation in postgraduate level study across department (number of staff; type of staff; perceptions of staff)

- approaches to postgraduate teaching versus undergraduate teaching.

Observations

Observations were carried out in introductory postgraduate research methods classes or postgraduate induction classes in three of the participating HEIs at the beginning of the academic year, and then again in research methods classes towards the end of the academic year. The participants were the staff and students attending those classes, which included some of the interview participants and some of the staff interviewees. Background information was noted regarding the context of the particular session that was being observed; for example, the course or programme of which the session was a part. Any handouts or other materials that were distributed were collected and formed part of the document analysis for the project. During the session, behavioural notes were made under the following headings (see Appendix 3 – Research protocols):

- the environment
- the participation of students and staff in the session
- practices observed within the session
- actions taken by students or staff
- reactions of students and staff
- conversations.

Diaries

Following their initial interviews, students who participated in the research were asked to complete email diaries in order to follow the progress of their transition to postgraduate study over the course of the academic year. A set of five pre-set questions was used as the basis for these diaries. These were (see Appendix 3):

- Please outline any new tasks you have undertaken or activities in which you have been involved in the past two weeks relevant to your study (would include new procedures learned, books/papers read, lectures, seminars attended etc).
- Was there anything that helped you in undertaking the task or activity (clear explanation from tutor, discussion with other students, reading handbook etc)?
- Was there anything that hindered you in undertaking the tasks or activities (e.g. assumption of knowledge of terminology, no responsible person to ask for help, lack of know-how)?
- Could you suggest any ways in which your ability to do the tasks or activities could be improved (different types of explanation, written instructions, more time etc)?
- Has anything in your non-study life changed that has helped or hindered you in your studies?

Following their initial interviews, for a period of around three months students responded by email to these five questions at roughly fortnightly intervals. Subsequently, students responded at roughly monthly intervals until their second interview. As indicated above, these diaries formed the basis for that second interview.

Focus groups

Four student focus groups were conducted during the second half of the academic year, and each one was facilitated by two of the project's four co-investigators. Focus group participants were recruited through email requests via the university email systems. All social science postgraduate students in the given institution were invited to attend, irrespective of their involvement in other parts of the research. The final groups comprised students who had been part of observations, interviews and students who had not taken part hitherto (see Appendix 1).

General questions used to promote discussion were:

- What helped you get to grips with postgraduate study?
- What didn't help, or hindered this?
- What could have been done to make things easier?

More specific topic areas were identified to promote discussion where necessary, based on themes that had already emerged from preliminary analyses of the interview data, observation data, diary data and documents collected up to that point. These were:

- accessing information about postgraduate courses and programmes
- accessing funds
- postgraduate teaching and learning practices
- personal preparation for study
- students' identity trajectories.

Documents

The documents collected for analysis ranged from the macro to the micro level. These included government policy documents concerning higher education (including: QAA (2004) *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 1 Postgraduate Research Programmes*; QAA (2006) *Report on the Review of Research Degree Programmes: England and Northern Ireland, QAA144 01/07*; Naylor, W. (2003) *Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Progammes*, *HEFCE 20031/1*), applications and admissions, postgraduate study, widening participation and funding. Institutional policy and practice documents were collected from the three partner institutions, which included those concerning postgraduate education, postgraduate students, postgraduate supervision, applications and admissions, and learning support. At the level of individual postgraduate programmes, documents collected included programme handbooks, course or module

handbooks and student guides. In addition, documents were collected from specific teaching sessions. These included class handouts, reading lists, teaching and discussion exercises, assignment guidelines and excerpts from texts.

Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data inductively. Specifically, data were analysed using a constant comparative technique in which all transcripts, observation notes, diaries and documents were read and coded individually by at least two of the four co-investigators, each of whom sought to identify key emergent themes (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Comparisons were made between the different interpretations within and between the data, and within and between the researchers, and the themes were revised and refined in the light of these. The analysis took a focused problem approach, rather than an open problem approach (Anderson, 2002) since the communities of practice framework within which the research was positioned informed the analysis as it took place. This allowed for a meeting of the incoming data and analysis with the existing body of literature as discussed earlier in this report. In this way, the data were disassembled, but subsequently reassembled taking into consideration underpinning meanings and theoretical insights.

4.   Analysis/results

Postgraduate study versus undergraduate study

In the first section of this report we made the point that transition to postgraduate study might differ from other educational transitions in that while there might be shifts between institutions from undergraduate to postgraduate, the staff members comprising the community of practice remained the same. This is in contrast to, for example, transition to undergraduate study, where students come from schools or further education colleges and so experience a shift in institutional communities and staff communities. It is therefore useful to examine continuities and discontinuities in the light of this. Moreover, because undergraduate study is a precursor to postgraduate study, the nature of the discontinuities and continuities shape student participation in postgraduate study and so allow a picture of the student experience to emerge. The identified discontinuities and continuities have emerged from analysis of the range of data sources that frame this project.

Policy

At a macro (e.g. Government policy, funding councils, societal understandings) level there is a clear difference in approach to undergraduate and postgraduate study. Within the UK there is a Governmental finance framework to support undergraduate students (student loans, fee framework, grants for less advantaged students). Moreover, institutions benefit financially from meeting agreed targets for undergraduate student recruitment. In contrast, postgraduate students are responsible for identifying their own sources of funding. The Government, in conjunction with some financial institutions, operates a favourable loan scheme, but the student negotiates these loans with that particular financial institution rather than with a Government organisation. Here we do not include certain courses (e.g. clinical psychology, PGCEs), which do attract Government or local authority funding.

Postgraduate programmes emerge from the individual university, and they can be established and withdrawn on the basis of individual staff members' interests and expertise. Universities are not given targets or limits for postgraduate recruitment or retention from external bodies. As a result postgraduate programmes are under pressure to be financially self-sustaining.

Application to undergraduate study benefits from an established and largely efficient national system within the UK, known as UCAS. Schools and colleges take responsibility for facilitating student applications through this central system, and the student needs to complete one form, which serves for multiple applications as regards numbers of institutions and/or different programmes of study. Decisions about how the system will be managed are made at Government level. Because of the particular nature of postgraduate programmes, there is no central body for the organisation of

applications (this does not apply to the externally funded courses, and UCAS is currently piloting such schemes for taught postrgraduate courses). This may result in a student completing multiple, differently organised application forms and seeking numerous references. UCAS imposes deadlines on students and universities alike for receipt, acknowledgement and acceptance of applications, but this is not the case for postgraduate application. Indeed, evidence suggests that some postgraduate programmes continue accepting students right up to (and sometimes beyond) programme commencement dates.

Academic status

The postgraduate students in this study reported feeling an enhanced sense of their academic status within the university in contrast to their undergraduate experience. For example, many students felt that they were treated by staff as junior colleagues rather than as students. As a result their relationships with staff were more collegiate and more informal. However, while academic status was higher, their power in influencing university systems to their advantage was less, because their numbers are much lower relative to undergraduate students.

University systems

Universities are very large organisations, which must cater to a range of different needs. Perhaps because the majority of funding and the majority of students are undergraduates, postgraduate students report that university facilities reflect full-time undergraduate patterns of study. Undergraduates are normally present between 9:00 and 18:00, Monday to Friday, September to June, and as a result the availability of facilities, such as catering, shops, IT and administrative support, academic staff presence and study spaces, reflect this and may not be available outside these times. Postgraduate patterns of study differ. Programmes do not necessarily run between 9:00 and 18:00; evening and weekend classes are not unusual, indeed some postgraduate programmes are taught exclusively at evenings and weekends to accommodate the fact that postgraduate students are often working full-time alongside their studies to finance them. Programmes tend to run across a full calendar year and PhD students do not have extended vacation periods.

Academic home

Undergraduate students are normally clearly identified with a particular faculty and department within that faculty. For example, they are 'politics students' or 'history students'. Academic identity tends to be more diffuse for postgraduate students. Many universities have graduate schools, and these may function at institutional level or faculty level. Postgraduate connection with graduate schools tends to reflect the numbers of postgraduates in a department. In those departments where there are a large number of postgraduates, interactions and physical location tends to be confined to that department. However, for some students location and

interaction is based in the graduate school and social networks reflect a wide range of subject disciplines. For PhD students, the academic home may be difficult to identify because their major teaching relationship is with a supervisor in a particular department, while their physical location may be removed from that department. It is common for taught Masters programmes to be multidisciplinary, and so a student may belong to the Masters programme but may not be affiliated with one specific department.

Although undergraduate students may belong specifically to a particular department, they are rarely permitted physical space to work and socialise in that department. In most cases, postgraduate PhD students (this does not normally apply to Masters students) are allotted specific study space, and there is often a dedicated postgraduate space for socialising.

Pedagogic practice and participation

In recent years, the participation in undergraduate study has dramatically increased to the extent that now the possession of a first degree is almost a pre-requisite for a career. As a result, entry into university is less of an active choice and more an expectation. This contrasts with postgraduate study, participation in which requires active desire and considerable motivation. The postgraduate students in this research reported increased levels of motivation and active participation in their studies than they had experienced as undergraduates.

The active participation in taught postgraduate study is further facilitated by smaller class sizes, where there is opportunity for interaction and activity. This is in contrast to undergraduate study, where the sheer numbers of students in lectures militates against active participation and may even encourage passivity.

Interviews with staff and analysis of postgraduate documentation reveals a pedagogic rhetoric designed to differentiate postgraduate study from undergraduate study. More emphasis is placed upon autonomous learning, learning through discussion and activity, collaborative learning and independence from staff ideas and approaches. However, in practice this may not always be the case. It would appear from our data that not all staff members adopt a different approach for postgraduate teaching, and that didactic teaching styles are prevalent. This is often experienced as disabling by postgraduates who are intent on developing an autonomous learner identity.

Progress through an undergraduate degree is marked by regular assessments and feedback, which provide students with information regarding their progress. While this is the case for taught Masters programmes, it is not for PhD study. Participants reported difficulties in assessing the progress they had made, often doubting their ability and academic development in the absence of structured tasks. Assessment is clearly linked to learning support for undergraduate students, but PhD

students in this study reported an absence of academic support, which undermined their self-efficacy and performance.

Further, postgraduate participants in this study reported experiencing different levels of staff expectations regarding academic standards when compared to the standards that seemed acceptable at the end of their undergraduate degrees. Often, they could identify no clear strategies for attaining these higher standards. The meanings of terms such as 'critical analysis' appeared to have shifted from undergraduate to postgraduate level.

The process and profile of students entering postgraduate study

As discussed previously, the process of applying for a postgraduate course is very different to that of applying for an undergraduate course. There is no central clearing house for postgraduate courses (excepting those for professions, such as postgraduate certificates in education or clinical psychology), therefore students wishing to undertake postgraduate study must negotiate their own place, approaching universities individually. However, when considering educational transitions, there is often an assumption of linearity with regard to both policy and social expectation. For example, Te Riele (2004) discusses the assumption that students experience a linear pathway through educational transitions, and that students are free to choose their own pathways. This assumption is particularly problematic when considering transitions to postgraduate education. While postgraduate qualifications leading to professional or chartered status have a clear pathway, this is not the case for non-vocational subjects, which may be rather more fluid. Thus, variability exists in students' motivation for undertaking postgraduate education, and in individual experiences with the decision to embark upon postgraduate study. One student explained that the reason she chose to undertake postgraduate study was that it was the:

…quickest way to get qualified in psychology and decided that this MSc [name of programme] was the best way.

Another student, studying towards a doctorate, explained that she was:

…motivated by a desire to manage a project, but not motivated by a desire to gain a PhD.

The heterogeneity in the application process for postgraduate study represents a barrier to postgraduate education, requiring students to seek information that is not readily available. Difficulty in gaining funding for postgraduate study creates a further barrier to postgraduate study. A high proportion of postgraduate students in our study were self-funding, particularly Masters students. In fact, one student told us that she had embarked upon her PhD in part because she:

…was advised by family that looking for PhD funding would prove easier than seeking other funding.

Financial concerns loomed large in students' experiences, with many students commenting on the need for greater information about funding opportunities. One student commented:

I've no funding for my PhD and therefore have to work. Maybe something that would be helpful would be some guidance on funding possibilities.

The paucity of information about and access to funding for postgraduate education might disadvantage students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds such as those whose families did not attend university, because they would not have access to advice from, for example, parents or siblings about sources of funding. One student, quoted above, indicates that the advice of her family regarding funding opportunities was instrumental in her undertaking a PhD. Many students from non-traditional backgrounds are also following non-linear pathways to postgraduate study, many returning to study from the workplace. It is likely that the paucity of information about and access to funding further disadvantages those students who are not following direct linear pathways from undergraduate to postgraduate study, because often they have limited opportunity to hear about funding opportunities. For example, one research student reported that the relationship with her supervisor formed as an undergraduate was key to her securing funding for her studies.

The past and present learning experience of students constitutes Lave's (1997) learning curriculum as discussed in the first section of this report. Inevitably, some sections of society have a more enabling learning curriculum with regard to entry into postgraduate study, and within these sections of society, prospective applicants to postgraduate study will benefit from the knowledge and experience of family and friends. The idiosyncratic nature of the application and funding processes for postgraduate study means that in contrast, some groups may never know about the opportunities that exist for postgraduate study, and will therefore be excluded even without their knowledge. Entry to undergraduate study through the UCAS process is facilitated by schools. This contrasts with entry to postgraduate study, which is predicated upon extremely high levels of personal motivation and access to information, or upon students having the good fortune to have a personal relationship with an enabling other.

The implementation of the widening participation agenda by UK HEIs in relation to undergraduate students has required an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of students, and responsiveness to their diverse needs and abilities. Our data suggest that this applies equally to postgraduate as to undergraduate students, and that difficulties may arise when the practices of the higher education community reflect an incorrect assumption of homogeneity among postgraduates. This inaccurate assumption may arise from the idea that having an undergraduate degree means that students are skilled in the practices necessary for success in higher education, and thus

that there is little (if any) further transition to be made by that stage. This may account for the paucity of previous research about transition to postgraduate study as mentioned previously, as mastery of the practices of the community is often key to successful transitions. If moving to postgraduate study is assumed not to require mastery of new practices and is simply about engaging with learning materials at a higher level, then postgraduate transitions might well be expected to be less problematic.

In fact, in none of the student data were there a sense of their primary concern being with the content of the learning materials. This is analogous to findings in other research on educational transitions (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005). For all of them, difficulties in the transition to postgraduate study were experienced as difficulties in the mastery of key skills or academic practices, suggesting that postgraduate students do not come 'equipped' for their studies in higher education. One Masters student said:

I am a very slow reader and I have to take my time writing.

When asked what had helped him with undertaking tasks or activities in the last few weeks, another MSc student reported in his diary:

Learned some IT skills, tips and word processor tips from college website.

When reporting in their diaries things that had hindered their progress or that they were experiencing as problematic, some examples of students concerns were:

Striking the balance between work and study has been the main problem. (PhD student)

I need to speak to someone about using the library in a more systematic way. (PhD student)

Personal barriers to writing essays, e.g. poor time management and lack of skills in structuring essays.
(MA student)

Another Masters student, talking about what would help her in her studies, provided an interesting narrative, which represents views that were expressed by many of the students interviewed:

Lessons on how to write an essay. There is perhaps an assumption that post-grad students know how to go about tackling essay questions. This is not necessarily the case. I would find it helpful to be given some guidance, perhaps in the form of a separate lecture. The lecturer could run through some sample essay questions and explain how they would go about tackling the question. I don't mean in terms of essay content, but in the process they expect to go through in gathering information and formulating a response. What are some good techniques for taking information from

articles? At what point do you construct the essay plan? Perhaps a seminar would be useful, where students can share their methods with each other.

All of this suggests that, in fact, academic practices may be excluding postgraduate students from full participation in the community of higher education. By assuming that postgraduates are a homogenous group, skilled in the practices of higher education and fully prepared to participate in that community, institutions may be overlooking what are, in fact, a diverse set of needs in this group. Such data necessitates a reconceptualisation of traditional notions of intelligence, as mentioned within the first section of this report, where the continuum of academic success is attributed to cognitive structures inherent within the individual student, which underpin their success or otherwise. Thus, the question ceases to be whether a student is intelligent enough to succeed in postgraduate study, and becomes a question of whether the institutional practices are flexible enough to include students who wish to participate in postgraduate study.

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the uptake of undergraduate level study (24% from 1997 to 2003: Langlands, 2005). This will probably increase the uptake of postgraduate study, as the status of undergraduate degrees drops due to 'credential inflation' (Van de Werfhorst & Anderson, 2005), where the social and economic value of undergraduate degrees decreases due to the increasing numbers of people who are entering the workforce educated to degree level. Therefore, to improve employability and to avoid downward social class mobility (where a level of education declines in value when compared with the parents' generation), postgraduate qualifications are likely to become more and more important. Given these increases in participation in undergraduate study, and the likely increases that will bring to postgraduate level student numbers, it seems even more important to ensure that erroneous assumptions about postgraduate students are addressed and discussed.

From the data collected in this project, other key issues emerged that may help to explain the apparent diversity found in the postgraduate student body. The vast majority of the participants in this research were adults returning to postgraduate study after a long gap since they completed their undergraduate degrees. As mentioned previously, the traditional notion of a postgraduate student might be one who is progressing in a linear fashion straight from completion of their undergraduate study, but this was not commonly found in this participant group, and data published by the UK Higher Education Policy Institute support this:

A majority of entrants to all types of postgraduate courses are older than 22 suggesting that the student who progresses from sixth form through undergraduate to postgraduate education is relatively rare. There are, in fact more first-year postgraduates above the age of 30 than below the age of 25. Part-time students tend to be older than their full-time equivalents, a majority being over 30 … the over 30s are a substantial majority amongst part-time students commencing every type of postgraduate course.

(Sastry, 2004, p14)

Having a gap between completing undergraduate studies and commencing postgraduate studies brings with it a number of associated problems. Firstly, students' skill levels may have dropped in the years since they last studied, and practices that were once familiar are experienced as new and unfamiliar again. One Masters student interviewed said:

I think there's sort of an assumption that you know how to critically review articles… and I am quite concerned about the whole writing thing, and so I've been in touch with the [names effective learning adviser] to get some additional help.

In addition, several participants struggled with the changes in technology that had occurred since they were undergraduates. For example, the use of PowerPoint in lectures was novel for several participants, and the increasing use of virtual learning environments meant that new ways of teaching and learning had to be mastered. Libraries are increasingly becoming virtual environments, journals and books are available electronically, and literature searches are conducted online. Even the process of researching an assignment had changed drastically for many participants. As undergraduates, students' main task in researching a topic area may have been to track down relevant information, but new technologies mean that the task for students now is to filter out relevant information from the vast quantities of potential information available. Another Masters student interviewed said that one of the most difficult tasks she had to master in transition was:

Searching e-journals…the first week we had a, in the research thing, she had given us a task to go and find an article with just a very general topic area, and I had been online for about six hours trying to find it, and I was just at the end of my tether, but when I came in the next week, everybody was kind of saying the same thing. I think there's an assumption that we've been using e-journals all along.

In addition, for many of the participants, the postgraduate programme upon which they had embarked represented a move away from the academic discipline they had studied as an undergraduate, and meant they were encountering practices that were completely new to them. This may be because the postgraduate programme provides a more vocational qualification to their original academic discipline, or because they are deliberately seeking a change of career and direction following several years in a particular occupation. One student wrote a PhD proposal based on the area of employment in which she had been working for a number of years, but this was not an area in which she had previous academic experience. The proposal was successfully funded, but she explained that the assumption that she already knew her subject area well had hindered her in undertaking the academic tasks required during her first few months of doctoral study, and that she *"felt a bit behind the others* [students] *in terms of reading".*

In contrast, a Masters student who was undertaking postgraduate study in the same discipline as her undergraduate degree explained when interviewed, that she had experienced difficulties because of overconfidence in her level of subject-specific knowledge as compared to the knowledge of others in her class who had not previously studied that discipline:

For the first week I was like, "Whatever! I've done all this, so I'll be fine for the first few weeks!" And I think we actually knew less, because it's been two years, than the people who haven't done it, because they were putting a bit more effort in.

In sum, the increasing numbers of postgraduate students, the changing face of postgraduates from highly skilled students taking their favoured discipline to the next educational level, to adults who are returning to study following a large gap or for the purpose of a deliberate change of academic direction, all present us with a new understanding of postgraduates as a diverse group, with different levels of ability with regard to academic practices, and varying degrees of familiarity with the skills necessary for success at postgraduate level in higher education.

Postgraduate teaching, learning and academic competence

Another interesting theme that emerged from the data concerned the approaches to teaching and learning associated with postgraduate study. From staff and from student data, there emerged an understanding and an expectation that methods of teaching and learning should be 'different' at postgraduate level, as compared with undergraduate level. At postgraduate level, students, staff and programme documentation expressed the view that there should be more independent study and more interactive workshop-style teaching, leading to knowledge and understanding that is socially constructed rather than passively received.

One member of staff, who was the programme leader for a taught Masters programme, said:

The philosophy of this course is of the student as the active learner, so workshops and assessed coursework are more the norm than lectures and exams.

This view was shared by many of the staff members who were interviewed. For a member of staff at another institution, the nature of teaching and learning at postgraduate level was something that was explicitly discussed with the course team. It was agreed that there should be a lot of activity-based learning, and that teaching should be more about facilitating students' understanding of material, rather than just giving out lots of information.

This understanding of the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate level teaching and learning was shared by students. One student, studying towards a taught Masters degree said of the classes she had attended:

Sessions are often too structured and there is not enough time for discussion. I'd be better off reading solidly for two hours on my own… tutors say things like, 'make it simple, write the right answer', but that doesn't fly with me, not on a Masters. It should be more than regurgitation.

Another student said that initially she was surprised at how little class contact time there was in the course, but that another student pointed out to her:

…it is a Masters course and so you are supposed to "master" things for yourself.

As discussed within the first section of this report, traditional models of learning suggest that learning occurs within the individual, through a process of internalisation of knowledge, and this is what has led in the past to exclusion from the community of higher education of those who are not 'intelligent'. As Merriam and Caffarella (1999) explain, "cognitively oriented explanations of learning encompass a wide range of topics with a common focus on internal mental processes that are within the learner's control" (p256). For example, Piaget's (1966) early work on cognitive development suggested that internal cognitive structures are the locus for learning, which occurs as an internal mental process. Research in intelligence such as Gardner's (1993) work on multiple intelligences suggests that each individual possesses a unique set of capacities (and thus a unique set of constraints) in domains such as language and spatial ability. These traditional approaches suggest that those who will succeed in higher education are those who are already possessed of the abilities necessary for success in higher education – i.e. those who are already competent, confident and metacognitive. In contrast, socio-cultural accounts of learning, such as communities of practice theory, do not locate responsibility for learning within the individual learner, but distribute it across the community. Such accounts instead allow for an understanding of learning that is built on prior knowledge and experience through interactions with other members of the community – tutors and peers. It is this kind of understanding of learning that is compatible with the views expressed by staff and students in this research, as to how teaching and learning should occur at postgraduate level.

However, the data reveal a tension between the rhetoric of how teaching and learning occurs at postgraduate level as expressed by participants, and how that is then translated into practice. Observations from several institutions illustrate this. One observation (which was made within a research methods class that occurred as part of the Masters programme referred to by the member of staff previously) noted that:

The member of teaching staff leading the class outlined for students at the beginning of the session the format and structure which the class would take – that there would be some formal input followed by group work and shared references. In response to this many of the students looked puzzled.

It is clear, then, that the philosophy of teaching that the programme leader is working with is not being implemented as a matter of course by teaching staff 'on the ground'. In another institution it was noted that:

A research methods class for taught Masters and new PhD students was observed to consist of a lecturer literally reading out notes which he had distributed to students at the beginning of the class.

In another observation:

The class was team-taught by two members of staff. There was a tangible change in students' level of engagement when the second staff member took over. The first member of staff had facilitated group discussions and small-group exercises. Following a break the second staff member took over and simply read out pre-distributed notes to students. One student was observed filing her nails during this part of the class.

Clearly it will be difficult for postgraduate students to engage in the level of independent study that is expected and required of them, and that they themselves desire to attain, when the academic practices they encounter do not assist them in the development of such skills. We therefore run the risk of returning to a situation where the students who will succeed at postgraduate level are those who were already competent, confident and metacognitive, and this is fundamentally at odds with the socio-cultural theories of learning discussed above. Previous studies have pointed out other such paradoxes that exist in higher education. For example, Thompson (2006) points out the many ways in which UK Government policy on widening participation and social inclusion are set against a pervasive belief that higher education must be exclusionary in order to demonstrate quality. In many ways, then, it is clear that structural or systemic changes are necessary within higher education if the rhetoric about the nature of learning at postgraduate level is to be translated into practice.

In addition to this tension between rhetoric and teaching practice, reviewing student narratives revealed a perception that students were expected to arrive with the necessary skills to cope with their new role, and even an overestimation by staff of students' level of abilities in some of the key areas of study. This links to the issue of postgraduate student heterogeneity discussed within the first theme above. One Masters student interviewed said:

There is perhaps an assumption that postgrad students know how to go about tackling essay questions. This is not necessarily the case. I would find it helpful to be given some guidance…

Another student, when asked what had proved problematic to her, responded that it was the:

...assumption [by the university staff] that I already knew my subject area well [and] that I knew what was on offer at the university. There is a lack of clearly defined role in terms of what is expected of you in workload, and participation.

One student commented that upon beginning her postgraduate studies, following a break from higher education of around 14 years, she was suddenly aware of the advances in technology. She said that nobody was using PowerPoint when she was last at university, and accessing journals online was a whole new world to her:

It felt as if I'd been away for ages and ages and ages. There was still a big part of me that wanted to go up to the library and photocopy them. The first week I thought, I don't like this. I don't want to do this if this is the way it's done. I wanted a traditional university life. I really felt like I was in a foreign land. I think there's a slight assumption, which is understandable, because most people of a certain generation are quite au fait with computers, and it's a part of their growing up… so the fact that perhaps there are some people who are less aware of how to do what seem like really basic tasks.

This same student describes going to the library and making a conscious decision to approach a librarian who looked about the same age as her, and 'confessing' that she was new so did not know how to do certain things, and asked the librarian to demonstrate. She asked questions such as "*How do you get into Athens?*" and "*What is Athens anyway?*" Although the student commented that these things are now "*a doddle*", her initial lack of knowledge of these practices of the community represented a barrier to her participation in, and sense of belonging to, the community.

Despite expressing concerns about different aspects of their study skills, the majority of students reported feeling that there was support available enabling them to overcome any problems in this area. Observations of induction events at each university confirmed that, in each case, information was provided to students about the support services available to them. In addition, at one university students were provided with a list of suggested workshops or training sessions that could be provided for them if required, and were asked to indicate they would like to have, as well as allowing them to suggest any other sessions which they might find helpful. Students were also asked to indicate what times might suit them for such sessions.

A subsequent interview with the co-ordinator of a taught Masters programme revealed that in previous years attendance at such training events had been low, and that therefore in that particular year it was decided to ask students which sessions they would like, instead of just offering sessions as had been done in previous years. Unfortunately, many students simply ticked 'yes' to all of the possible sessions, and made no

other suggestions. She suggested that it may simply have been too early on in their courses for students to "*really know what they need*", suggesting that their academic competence may be low at the beginning of their studies. However, our data reveal that this view of Masters students contrasted with views about the readiness of PhD students to know what they needed with regard to training at the commencement of their studies. For example, the graduate school at one institution was PhD-student-led, and training needs were identified and then organised by the students themselves. Our data reveal some differences, then, between judgements of academic competence made about taught postgraduate students, as compared to research postgraduates.

The taught postgraduate students who participated in this research did not report feeling unsupported or patronised by the training and support offered. In fact, the more information, material and advice they received, the more they reported this as helping their studies, and this lends further support to the notion that assumptions of academic competence in postgraduates made by staff, should not be too strongly held. One student reported in her diary that in relation to a class test she had taken:

…*we were given recommended reading and guidance as to what topics to study.*

In a further diary entry, she noted that:

The new statistics we learned in the research methods class were quite hard although calculating them was made relatively easy by a step-by-step handout/guide we were given by the tutor to help us get through the exercises.

This is quite different to the experience of one research postgraduate at the same institution, who explained that she recently had to write an abstract for submission to a conference, something she had never done before. She completed this task herself, but used an online word-processing facility to allow her supervisors access to what she had written, so that they could read it and provide feedback quickly. This reveals a more independent approach to tackling a new task, mastering an academic practice through engagement in that practice with guidance from more experienced peers. In contrast, the taught postgraduate students made frequent references to how helpful additional classes, handouts or materials had been to their progress. Their study skills, or at least their own confidence in their abilities may have been lower upon entering postgraduate study than was assumed by staff, but resources were available to enable them to overcome difficulties and develop skills, albeit in a different way to that which seemed to work well for research students.

Identity and aspiration in transition to postgraduate study

In the introduction, we highlighted the importance of individual student identity in understanding transition to postgraduate study. Following

Wenger (1998), we argued that identity is not bounded within the individual, as traditional psychological theory might argue, but rather that it is fundamentally and profoundly embedded in the social world. Above we have discussed the practices that students must negotiate in order to participate. This process of negotiation can also be applied to identity. On entry into a new community of practice, there will be an inevitable confrontation between what has been previously experienced and that which is now being experienced. This process will be further complicated by the 'nexus of multimembership' (Wenger, 1998, p150) that each student inhabits. By this we mean that all of us belong to a wide range of communities of practice and to a greater or lesser extent our identities have been negotiated in interaction with the practices of those communities. In entering a new arena, we must search for ways to behave by reference to our previous experience and by attention to the present context. However, very few postgraduates have the luxury of concentrating totally on the new postgraduate community of practice. They must negotiate their new identities in parallel with existing and complex ones. The following quote is taken from a diary entry midway through the year:

I need to continue to work as a freelance trainer. This means that my studying is always affected by the level of work I have on. This past month has been very
busy. This has affected my study life.

Another diary entry, made at the beginning of the study year, said:

New domestic routine demands a bit more time with the children but less for study. Too many distractions for me to read during the day.

The following entry was made midway through the year:

My partner's family disapprove of my studies; they think I should be working full-time. The resulting tension is difficult to endure.

The next quote is from a diary a few months into the year:

Having a new baby has really affected my study pattern. I'm finding it difficult to think, but I'm getting there slowly. Having broadband at home helps. I also work full-time and have another toddler. It is workable, just, but I find doing the work for the MRes and PhD difficult.

These demands are part of each of the individual students' identities and cannot be left behind at the boundary of the university campus. Instead the student must negotiate ways to enable the emergence of an academic identity alongside these home identities. This requires effort. As Wenger (1998) states, "identity exists – not as an object in and of itself – but in the constant work of negotiating the self" (p151). So transition is not just about participating in new practices, it is also about managing existing meanings and practices, and managing the development of such meanings in light of participation in postgraduate study.

It is therefore interesting to understand the process by which individuals manage their evolving identities over time and how this process sits within the practices of the postgraduate community of practice. To this end, the comments and behaviours of postgraduate students at the beginning of their studies are revealing. Surprisingly few report confidence and understanding of their new environment, as the following interview quotes reveal:

I think there was a certain kind of guilt feeling, wondering if I should be here at all, due to my background.

I felt a little lost really, that was the overall feeling of being on the course.

The first few months was just torture.

[Students] are wrapped in cotton wool a lot at undergraduate level.

I'm hoping there's going to be a light bulb switched on somewhere, enlightenment.

Moreover, perhaps due to the complexity of multimembership, many participants did not self identify as students, and this was in contrast to their undergraduate experiences, where social and study life were experienced as intertwined. These issues raise important questions surrounding postgraduate identity. Many participants started off feeling unsure and lacking in confidence, and as their study progressed did not feel part of a postgraduate community. This suggests that their membership in the academic community is somewhat opaque. Undergraduates are clearly defined and looked after; academic staff are full members and powerbrokers in the community, but many (though not all) postgraduates feel out on a limb, and their experience is of being neither students nor staff.

This is important because identity encompasses more than self-image: it is not just what people report about themselves, it is essentially how people live and behave. Identity is produced by the constant layering of experience, that which is done or not done, the ongoing reactions of others and the practices in which we participate. It is from this that trajectories develop. Given the lack of clarity surrounding the postgraduate students' participatory legitimacy (from both a personal and institutional point of view) the nature and development of participatory trajectories becomes a relevant analytical point. It is not surprising that at the beginning of postgraduate study, students feel that they do not know what to do or what is expected of them – this is the nature of peripheral participation. However, it is important that as their participation in the postgraduate community progresses, so their identity trajectories should develop along inclusionary lines. For a number of participants this did not seem to be the case. Even after nearly a year of study, they did not construct their identity as integral with the community, as the following quotes reveal:

I've had a bit of a mental block. I do, I have a block and I do feel lower, I feel I could be helped with that. I guess it's for me to go out to get that help really… It's not as fun, … I don't feel as big really, as much as I have craved this course.

And I've stressed over it for months and I can't see the jump to Masters and they say it's not about seeing it's about feeling, you will feel it but I don't really … I'm still trying to see where I've benefited, I must have benefited this year.

So it's been a really peculiar year… It's kind of made me question my own knowledge and understanding of something I actually do know quite well.

It would seem that there were initial problems and issues for all students, but for some the struggle was worth it:

You've got to be determined and I think it made me more resilient to be honest.

I think I was just born to do a PhD to be honest.

From the data here an interesting point emerges. Many students observe over time that in order to participate they must become independent, because, unlike many endeavours, formal education values individual effort as opposed to collaborative effort. This notion of independence is apparent in the lack of imposed structure experienced by many postgraduate students. In one email diary, a participant reports that to help study he would need:

More guidance at the beginning to help get a work structure and provide small manageable tasks. Feel quite adrift and self-reliant.

This point is reiterated in several student interviews:

I think postgrad can be quite isolating can't it? Much more so than undergraduate, in terms of the level of independent study that's required.

I thought I knew about it until I turned up to these lectures in the EdD and I came out every time more confused than when I went in… and when I look back now I think I have learned a lot, but I've learned a lot because I've had to go away and really, really engage with the stuff that's in there. I don't feel it's been facilitated by the teachers.

From teaching observations, it was clear that staff also put great value on independence:

The session was set up like a lecture but there was much discussion, with [tutor name] often pointing out that students would become independent researchers.

The notion that in order to be a full participant one must learn to work alone is perhaps a problematic one for many students. With regard to identity shift it requires a negotiation of the two seemingly mutually exclusive trajectories of participation and independence. While many of the participants seemed to be searching for relationships and to belong to groups in order to locate themselves in the new community of practice, a few were comfortable with independence from the beginning, and there is some evidence that their trajectories were more inbound than others. The following participant was doing a PhD and started the year by going to the office every day, but realised this was not an efficient method for her:

… really I found it more constructive to just stay at home, keep my jammies on all day and just type seven days a week. And I can really work just solid, without any time off because I don't, I let myself sleep until 8:00 instead of 6:00 to get myself out of the house. It's a lot more constructive… I never seem to leave the house.

She had been offered office space with other students, but had refused it and opted for an office alone. She felt a very strong identity as a student and was passionate about her subject:

A lot of people, when I did my BA, a lot of people said, oh thank goodness it's over, and I said no, I'm going off to do my MA and they were all like, how weird and I said I can't help it, I just like it.

I read an article in the Guardian and it's really patronising about disabled people I go angry, I might go depressed about it for two days, but then I pick myself up and go back to my work and I think well I can actually change something here. So it's very much about, I'm doing a PhD in social policy and I'm very much trying to influence social policy so that's my whole, well I know that's very naïve because it's not just going to change because I say so but I still want to believe I can change things.

It could be argued that this approach to work mirrors the practices of traditional academic staff and so would enable full participation. It follows that the community would reflect the practices and identities of the full participants (the full-time academic staff); however, in view of the multimembership of students it is unlikely that such practices reflect their jobs or social situations. This means that for many students the identity shift involved in full participation within the community of postgraduate students represents too great a shift.

5.   Conclusions

The aims of this research were:

- to explore the practices that constitute the study environment in social science postgraduate study
- to explore the participation of students in transition to social science postgraduate study
- to explore which practices serve to enhance inclusion in the postgraduate study environment.

We now address our conclusions in respect of each of those aims.

To explore the practices that constitute the study environment in social science postgraduate study

Macro policy

Postgraduate study is embedded in very different practices to that of undergraduate study and requires more work on the part of the student firstly to identity potential programmes of study, and secondly to identify funding. While undergraduate students carry government funding with them, postgraduate students do not, and so universities need to run courses that are financially viable (the same is true for undergraduate study, but the financial imperatives are different).

University policy

The financial implications shape the day-to-day experiences of postgraduate students and contribute to their participation in student life. University facilities are largely designed for undergraduate timetables. Students who attend out of normal hours tend to experience a diminution in service, which may engender feelings of exclusion.

In some universities, policy enables postgraduate students in the form of graduate schools, where postgraduates from across university faculties or from a single faculty join together. There is evidence that some graduate schools' practices encourage postgraduate students to build a community and work together to generate their own practices.

Pedagogic practice

While there is rhetoric of collaboration surrounding postgraduate teaching practice, in many cases the reality tends to reflect traditional undergraduate 'chalk and talk' approaches. So, on a policy level, postgraduate students experience greater constraints on entry to study, in some cases are provided with a reduced facility service while studying, and the academic staff do not differentiate between postgraduates and undergraduates in their approaches to teaching. However, in some programmes students identified that staff held different expectations of performance when compared to

undergraduate study, but did not facilitate students in 'unpacking' what these expectations might be or how to achieve them.

To explore the participation of students in transition to social science postgraduate study

In this research we have identified participation as an engagement with the practices that constitute a community, and the negotiation of meanings that underpin those practices and result in identity shifts.

Student participation is a personal as well as a social endeavour. The complex interaction of identity and community make an understanding of participation challenging: that which one student might find difficult, presents no problem to another student. Notwithstanding this, the findings of this research suggest that at the outset of their study nearly all students find participation difficult because of a lack of clear information and structure. While all students were provided with induction programmes, they were not always in a position to take advantage of the information provided. As a result, even after many months of study, a large number of students were still struggling with basic practices that disabled participation.

The notion that undergraduate study might facilitate easy transition to postgraduate study does not seem to be borne out in this research. Many students experience a gap between undergraduate and postgraduate study, and do not come equipped for participation. Moreover, the personal lives of postgraduate students tend to be complex and finely balanced between paid work, family and study. Such complexity requires great management skill on the part of students, and it takes many people a long time to achieve a balance (if indeed they manage to do that at all). The nature of participation for many postgraduate students represents a discontinuity with undergraduate study. Many of the participants in this study did not self-identify as students. Their studies were a part of who they were, rather than who they were.

Participation in an academic community of practice requires a shift to an independent identity. Great emphasis is put on achieving independence, and while students understood this, many found it difficult to achieve. Independent study techniques tend not to be taught, but are implicit in practice.

To explore which practices serve to enhance inclusion in the postgraduate study environment

Participation is enhanced in those students who make the identity shifts that allow engagement in the valued academic practices. So those students who master access to information systems or who identify staff members who can help them are at a great advantage. However, such achievements tend to reflect personal action rather than university systems. By chance a student may have an enabling relationship with a supervisor, who takes responsibility for more than knowledge transfer. A student may identify that librarians are an excellent source of support in accessing information effectively and work with that person.

Other students form enabling social relationships with fellow postgraduates either as part of ad hoc gatherings after teaching sessions, or as part of study or work groups. The practices of postgraduate programmes often tend not to focus on enabling social contact between students.

Nearly all participants report that more help with the techniques that underpin successful undergraduate study would help. Again, the practices in universities do not tend explicitly to enable study, and the processes and goals can be obscure and sometimes impenetrable. The data suggest that on those occasions where students are given clear structure and time and space to discuss and consider the demands made, they feel more powerful and effective. Perhaps because of the assumptions of competence that underpin staff practice and the emphasis on independence, such experience tends to be the exception rather than the rule.

Limitations and further research

This research included the voices from students from five universities in the UK. We do not claim that these voices represent all postgraduate student experiences. The methodology identified allowed us to gather a great depth of data, which provided insight into individual experience and institutional practice. To the extent that we found variations in our relatively few (compared to the UK postgraduate population) participants and universities, we acknowledge that this variation would be the case throughout the postgraduate context. Moreover, the data were collected at a certain time, and explicit in the methodology and implicit in the analysis is the assumption that all experience emerges from and is inextricably linked to context. We acknowledge this and argue that such limitations are inherent in all research endeavours, and as such data and analysis should be read and used with this in mind.

Such limitations demand that further research be carried out. We have pointed out that there is very little research concerning the transition to postgraduate student, and we are aware that in this work we are at the beginning of any debate. Further research, from different institutions, taking different approaches would clearly expand and enrich the area.

6.   Recommendations

This research project has explored the transition of students to postgraduate study in relation to community, practices and participation, and the principal recommendation here is that the imperatives generated by the widening participation agenda ought to translate to practices that can be applied to postgraduate as well as to undergraduate study. The increasing numbers of postgraduate students, the changing face of postgraduates from highly skilled students taking their favoured discipline to the next educational level, to adults who are returning to study following a large gap or for the purpose of a deliberate change of academic direction, all present us with a new understanding of postgraduates as a diverse group, with different levels of ability with regard to academic practices, and varying degrees of familiarity with the skills necessary for success at postgraduate level in higher education. Understood in this way, postgraduate students should be viewed as an ideal group at which to target widening participation initiatives – an opportunity that may have been obscured by previous incorrect assumptions of their homogeneity.

Many countries around the world have widening participation to higher education as key to their educational policies (Eggins, 1999), yet there is no single definition of what 'widening participation' means. Instead it tends to be conceptualised as a set of principles, which can then be operationalised in different countries and institutions in a variety of ways. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has identified four principles (access to achievement; increased collaboration; recognising diversity; and targeting certain groups) from which specific measures seeking to widen participation in higher education in England can be developed (HEFCE, 2001). Osborne (2003) carried out a comparative study of widening participation initiatives in six countries and classified these into three distinct groups. Firstly, there are in-reach programmes, which focus on attracting potential students to the institution; secondly there are out-reach programmes, which involve partnerships with outside organisations such as schools, employers and the community; and thirdly there is flexibility, which involves systematic and structural reorganisation to include things like the accreditation of prior learning, open learning, distance learning and the use of information and communications technology. Underpinning all widening participation initiatives, then, is an ideal of enabling full participation in the community of higher education by all parts of society.

Implementing widening participation initiatives can also bring financial benefits to higher education institutions. In 1998, the UK's National Postgraduate Committee published a response (Hoad, 1998) to the *HEFCE Consultation on Widening Participation in Higher Education* calling for HEFCE to ensure that widening participation principles were extended to all students. In 2001, HEFCE published its document on *Strategies for Widening Participation in Higher Education: A Guide to Good Practice*, which emphasised that core widening participation funding in the UK is available to support students in part-time and postgraduate programmes, as

well as those in full-time undergraduate programmes (HEFCE, 2001). However, our analyses reveal that the principles and practices of widening participation are focused towards undergraduate rather than postgraduate students.

Communities of practice theory has been particularly useful when considering postgraduate transition in light of the widening participation agenda, because of the emphasis the theory places on the psychological mechanisms of individual participation. As a result, it provides useful definitions of what participation actually is, acknowledging that it is not just one thing, but that it can range from initial peripheral participation in a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to full participation, through to marginalisation. Shifts in identity that result in positive participatory trajectories can result in an individual learner moving from peripheral to full participation in the new educational community. Equally a rejection of, or an exclusion from, the valued practices of the community can produce a different educational trajectory.

For example, it has clearly been difficult for the postgraduate students who took part in this research to engage in the level of independent study expected and required of them, when the academic practices they encountered did not assist them in the development of such skills. We therefore run the risk of returning to a situation where the students who will succeed at postgraduate level are those who were already competent, confident and metacognitive, and this is fundamentally at odds with the principles of widening participation. Previous studies have pointed out other paradoxes that exist in higher education in relation to policy and practice in widening participation. For example, Thompson (2006) points out the many ways in which UK government policy on widening participation and social inclusion are set against a pervasive belief that higher education must be exclusionary in order to demonstrate quality. In many ways then, it is clear that structural or systemic changes are necessary within higher education if widening participation imperatives are to be implemented successfully, and this applies at postgraduate as well as undergraduate level.

In sum, the imperatives that the widening participation agenda generates, of inclusion in the community of higher education for all, are as compatible with postgraduate as they are with undergraduate study, but inaccurate assumptions of the homogeneity of postgraduate students may have obscured this. We recommend careful pedagogic management to ensure that academic practices reflect the dogma of how teaching and learning occurs at postgraduate level, if not opportunities for participation in the community of higher education will be denied to those who might otherwise have been included according to the principles of widening participation.

Specific recommendations:

Below we outline some more specific recommendations that reflect the our analysis of the data. We indicate the relevant stakeholders, in brackets, who may be in a position to consider these:

➢ The facilitation of the application to postgraduate study – it may be that a central system such as that designed for undergraduate degrees is not appropriate for postgraduate degrees. However, we would argue that a system that did not require application and search by individual university and by department would facilitate a wider range of students in applying for postgraduate study (university management, Government and Government bodies).

➢ The facilitation of access to student funding sources for postgraduate study – the funding system that underpins undergraduate study is clear and well supported. This is not the case for postgraduate study. It is clear from this research that funding represents a very difficult challenge not only prior to undertaking study, but throughout the study period. We would recommend a more accessible and central system (university management, Government and Government bodies).

➢ Consideration of the availability of facilities for postgraduate students at all times – universities need to observe financial efficiencies; however, this may result in a poorer experience for those students who attend the university out of normal hours. It may be that there is no university-wide agreement about when and where postgraduate teaching happens, and that because of this there are usually too few students to open cafes and bars throughout the university and ensure staff presence. It may be that attention to the scheduling of postgraduate teaching across the university might help address this issue (postgraduate students, degree course teams and university management).

➢ Recognition of postgraduate student heterogeneity in the design and implementation of programmes of study – currently there is an implicit assumption of homogeneity that underpins the structuring and delivery of postgraduate study. This study demonstrates that this is far from the case. This means that more flexibility is required with regard to programme design and delivery. It is essential, to ensure continued inclusion of all postgraduate students, that some flexibility is built in to programmes both in their design and their implementation year-on-year (degree course teams).

➢ Agreement between programme teaching teams, in principle and practice, of the pedagogic philosophies that underpin postgraduate teaching – there is evidence from this study that while the leaders of postgraduate programmes might have a certain philosophy that underpins delivery, this is not necessarily shared and implemented by

all the programme team. We would recommend discussion and agreement surrounding approaches to pedagogy in order to promote a culture that students experience as inclusive (degree course teams).

➢ The provision of a structured personal tutor system for postgraduate students – there was agreement among participants of this study that the personal tutor system common in undergraduate degrees was very useful. We would recommend that postgraduate programmes adopt the same system of support for students (postgraduate students, degree course teams and university management).

➢ Focus on programme design and university facilities provision that allows for the formation of social relationships – participants of this study reported that social relationships within the programme were enabling for learning and feelings of belonging. While on the surface this does not seem to be the concern of programme teams, timetable and curriculum design that allows for the formation of relationships would be advantageous to student achievement and experience (postgraduate students, degree course teams and university management).

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Exploring Transition to Postgraduate Study

> **Would you like to contribute to the literature on transition to postgraduate study?**
> **Would you like to talk about your experiences of postgraduate study?**
> **Would you like to hear about how other students have managed postgraduate study?**

As part of a project funded by the Higher Education Academy we are searching for participants to take part in focus groups to discuss their experiences of the transition to postgraduate study. The aims of our research are:

- to explore the practices that constitute the study environment in social science postgraduate study
- to explore the participation of students in transition to social science postgraduate study
- to explore which practices serve to enhance inclusion in the postgraduate study environment
- to explore the role of PDP processes within the transitions.

The project so far …

So far we have undertaken ethnographic work at three UK universities. In view of the very small body of literature around this topic we would like to include postgrads from these universities and surrounding universities and explore their experiences.

If you are interested …
Contact:

And you don't give up your time for nothing …

We will provide reasonable travel expenses, refreshments and a £10 book token for all participants. We will also forward our findings to you.

Dates, times, locations …

University of Huddersfield (exact venue to be confirmed)
Tuesday 8 May – 11.00am
Tuesday 8 May – 2.00pm

Invitation to participate in research
You are being invited to participate in a research project that seeks to explore the experiences of students and staff in postgraduate study environments.

The project is entitled: <u>Exploring practice and participation in transition to postgraduate social science study.</u>

Who is doing this research?
I am Dr Jane Tobbell. I am a Senior Lecturer in Psychology in the Department of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Huddersfield. This project is being funded by the Higher Education Academy.

Why are you asking <u>me</u>?
You are being approached because you are a postgraduate student at a local university.

What will I have to do?
If you agree to participate in this research, you will take part in a group discussion, called a focus group, with a number of other postgraduate students.

Will my data be kept confidential?
The discussion will be audio and video taped and afterwards the content of the discussions will be typed up. The discussions should be open and honest, and Freedom of Information means that there may be legal limitations to the confidentiality of the information provided. However, the original tapes will be destroyed at the end of the project (September 2007), and no one's name will be used in the written transcripts of the discussions, so you will not be able to be identified from them.

Do I have to take part?
No. Participating in this project is voluntary. Even if you decide to take part, you can change your mind at any time, and any data that you have already given can be withdrawn. Whether you participate or not will have no effect upon your studies.

RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

Postgraduate students – sample size and type

n = 15
Mix of taught postgrad and PhD

Initial Interviews – content and structure:

Topics:

♦ Biographical data
  ▪ Qualifications
  ▪ Educational institutions attended
  ▪ Employment
  ▪ Family context

♦ Postgraduate study
  ▪ Decision-making process to enter postgrad
  ▪ Expectations for the degree
  ▪ Aims in doing degree
  ▪ University structures that have enabled/disabled registration, progression thus far

♦ Studying
  ▪ Confidence/emotions surrounding postgrad study
  ▪ Perceived relevance of undergraduate study
  ▪ Personal Development Planning – expectations/understanding

♦ Overview of involvement in research
  ▪ Relevance to PDP
  ▪ Contribution to literature

Follow-up email diaries – content, structure and timing

Timescale: bimonthly October 06 – December 06
                 monthly January 07 – May 07

Please outline any new tasks you have undertaken or activities in which you have been involved in the past two weeks/month relevant to your study (would include new procedures learned, books/papers read, lectures, seminars attended etc).
Was there anything that helped you in undertaking the task or activity (clear explanation from tutor, discussion with other students, reading handbook etc)?
Was there anything that hindered you in undertaking the tasks or activities (assumption of knowledge of terminology, no responsible person to ask for help, lack of know-how)?
Could you suggest any ways in which your ability to do the tasks or activities could be improved (different types of explanation, written instructions, more time etc)?
Has anything in your non-study life changed that has helped or hindered you in your studies?

Final Interview

Time: Late May

Prior to interview provide participant with summary of initial interview and responses through the year

During interview ask participant to reflect on their transition to postgrad in light of their expectations and experiences

RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

Staff members – sample size and type

n = 6

One involved in taught postgrad
One involved in PhD

Interviews – content and structure:

Topics:

♦ Postgrad context
  ▪ In university
  ▪ In faculty
  ▪ In department

♦ Structures for postgrads (funding, resources, policies)
  ▪ University systems
  ▪ Faculty systems
  ▪ Departmental systems

♦ Recruitment
  ▪ How and where recruited

♦ Facilities for postgrad students in the university/faculty/department

♦ Participation of in postgraduate level across department
  ▪ Number of staff
  ▪ Type of staff
  ▪ Perceptions of staff

♦ Approaches to postgraduate teaching versus undergraduate teaching

RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

Observation – content and structure

Focus: initial methods lecture/workshop
                November lecture/workshop

Fieldnotes: behavioural notes that provide information on environment,
                participation, practices, actions, reactions, conversations

Documents: Copies of handouts

Documents - types

Examples of following document types:

➢ University postgraduate literature
➢ Faculty-level literature
➢ Department-level literature
➢ Module-level literature