

The transition from employment to full-time research student – backwards to go forwards? (0035)

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This study arose out of an on-going programme to improve the postgraduate research student experience at one STEM discipline focussed UK-based university. Survey responses of first year PhD students were analysed. Nearly all of the students in this study were full-time. The students had reported their activities prior to starting the PhD programme and we first explored whether the experience of those who had done only an undergraduate degree before the PhD contrasted to that of students who had completed postgraduate study. In the event, only very small differences were observable between these two groups, which was interesting in itself, given that the normal entry requirement for PhD study at this institution is a Master's degree. However, the differences which emerged between those who reported work as their previous activity compared to those who reported study (undergraduate or postgraduate) considerably exceeded those observed between the undergraduate and postgraduate degree holders.

Those who had worked were more likely to wish to pursue an academic career but were less confident of a timely completion of their degree. They were more likely to be self-funded, experienced greater financial strain and less support from family and friends. These differences could not be explained by age or other structural factors alone. Looking to the literature, we realised little was known about the reasons for these differences and decided upon a further investigation, taking into account previous work on educational transitions.

Transitions in education rightly attract much attention from policy makers and researchers (e.g. Schuller and Watson 2009, Ecclestone et al. 2009), but they often assume a uni-directional path, with learners advancing through the different stages of education towards work. Amongst the existing literature, there is also little specifically on doctoral students. However, it is known that many people embark upon a PhD degree after a period of working full-time. For example, the HEA (2008) report of a national survey shows that 27.4% of PhD students were working (in a different organisation to the one in which they were now doing a PhD) before commencing their PhD programmes. This was a similar proportion to that observed at our own institution. At present, the fairly large proportion of the PhD student body who make what may be considered a “backwards” transition, from work back to study, appears to have been somewhat neglected in higher education research.

As a result, we conducted in depth interviews with such students. The topic guide focussed upon the issues of the widening participation agenda and use of lifecourse research findings to try to understand better these students' experiences. In addition, as ex-working students are more likely than others to

wish to pursue an academic career, the issue of the development of academic identity was explored.

Regarding widening participation, Smith (2010) states that, compared to undergraduates, we know very little about the background of postgraduates, including whether those from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to participate. Wakeling (2005) carried out a preliminary investigation and found some grounds for a relationship between social class origin and progression to postgraduate study. He warns that if this relationship can be verified, there is a risk of undoing much of the progress made in the widening participation agenda at first degree level. It is plausible that those from less privileged backgrounds might be more likely to have to work for a period before undertaking the PhD. Stuart (2006) found that family experience of higher education combined with social class had an impact on who was likely to undertake postgraduate study. She also found that financial concerns were a major part of the decision making about pursuing postgraduate study. There are clear implications for the future diversity of the academic workforce (Thrift 2008) since, as has been stated previously, those who have worked before are more likely to wish to pursue an academic career.

Lifecourse research is also pertinent here – it suggests that, regarding transitions, there are “not only age-linked expectations but also age-linked sanctions and options” (Ecclestone et al. 2010). This offers a possible explanation for why some transitions, if they appear to be going against expectations, may be experienced differently and less favourably. The possible reasons for negative perceptions of family and friends were explored and contrasted with the views of the students themselves, who often did not see the transition as a real discontinuity in their career. Although arguably going “backwards” from being an employed person to becoming a student, the step was often taken with a clear purpose of going forwards again soon after. This was particularly true for those seeking an academic career who had previously been working in a research role. To some extent, their assumed identity as a researcher in their discipline may have been more important than whether they had staff or student status.

This links with the exploration of academic identity which was carried out with those subjects seeking an academic career. Considerable work has been done on academic identity as it applies to doctoral students (e.g. McAlpine et al. 2009). Those who were previously working as researchers may have travelled a considerable distance in assuming an academic identity and have thought of themselves as members of the academic community. The return to student status may create a tension as they feel less a part of this community. The students may have “unbecome” academics to some extent. This concurs with Ecclestone et al. (2010) who suggested that transitions become problematic “if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another”.

Much of the pedagogical research about supporting new PhD students focuses on the challenge of going from the relatively defined undergraduate or taught Master’s programmes to the far less defined and more autonomous region of postgraduate research (e.g. Lovitts 2005). In summary, the

investigations we carried out showed that the transition from work to PhD study is very complex and possibly more challenging. Nevertheless there are lessons that can be learnt about how to better support this group of students.

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