

## Coping, critical and confident: transitions for part-time postgraduate students (0067)

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### Introduction: part-time taught postgraduates

In the UK the recent Smith report (2010) concludes that postgraduate study in general is under-researched and under-valued. Studies of part-time student experiences are also limited. In the UK more than half of postgraduates are part-time, and while there have been some recent reports which focus on the experiences of part-time both undergraduate and postgraduate students with some distinction made between the two (e.g. Yorke & Longden, 2008), the emphasis is on undergraduates.

Part-time students are expected to have demands on their time which impact on study. To further complicate matters, exploring experiences of part-time students who work is inevitably problematic because a full-time /part-time distinction cannot be drawn. Many full-time learners work and are for practical purposes part-time, while some of those taking part-time courses may be able to devote much of their time to study depending on work and other arrangements which may change over time. It is therefore helpful to think of learners as engaging in complex learning careers.

In a 'learning career' all aspects of a learner's past and present life are relevant and learning cannot be separated from identity (Bloomer, & Hodkinson, 2000). Barnett (2007) explores similar themes in his 'ontological turn' in Higher Education in which being a learner at more advanced levels is about living with intellectual uncertainty and involves an identity transformation which impacts upon all aspects of life. Within a learning career, transitional 'stages' can be identified: the first year undergraduate experience, for example. Transitions are not clear-cut and uniformly experienced, but likely to be fluid and variable. Nevertheless, embarking on Masters level studies could be viewed as a key transitional 'stage' of a longitudinal learning career in which particular intellectual and emotional challenges are likely to arise.

An assessment career might also form a significant part of such a learning career (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003). Peelo (2002) suggests that learners are often overloaded with assessments at key transition points. Large scale surveys often indicate that learners request better quality and timely feedback (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Simpson, 2003). However, the role of feedback in enabling students to persist through transitions seems under-developed.

Other themes in the literature concerning part-time students, mature students, postgraduates and undergraduates in transition are also relevant. These include motivation and persistence (MacFadgen, 2008; McGiveney, 1996; Simpson, 2003;), social and academic integration or 'belonging' (Beard, *et al.*, 2007; Gourlay, 2009) and some interesting work on coping strategies (Kember, *et al.* 2005; Kember, 1999). Yorke & Longden's (2008) report on UK part-time students indicates that they may be highly critical of course arrangements such as timetabling. Self-direction

is paramount for part-time learners, but (Li *et al.* 2000) showed that while such learners expect to be autonomous, they are not always successful at self-management, although this ability develops over time.

Approaches to assisting mature learners with their studies include working with employers to arrange study release time (Tait, 2003), helping learners develop strategies for coping with study and understanding the personal and social sacrifices that may be required (Kember, *et al.*, 2005), helping learners respond to critical feedback and peer feedback (Burke, 2009; Crossouard, 2008) and improving learner support mechanisms (Simpson, 2002). However, the practice of helping taught postgraduates with transitions is under-researched: we do not know which of these strategies are currently being successfully deployed and if any intervention is indeed desirable for postgraduates.

Most of the studies cited above take snapshots and do not give a sense of transition because there is no longitudinal element to explore the journey learners undertake as part of their learning careers. The research presented here, however, is part of a longitudinal study *Facilitating Transitions to Masters-level Learning through Improving Formative Assessment and Feedback* which was undertaken at the Institute of Education, London and funded by the UK Higher Education Academy.

## Researching transitions

Part-time Masters students volunteers were recruited across several programmes to take part in this strand of the project to look at experiences of transition from work to working plus part-time study.

Fourteen students kept were invited to keep a journal for a year on their experiences of this transition, with a particular focus on assessment, and students were interviewed at three stages during the year, either in a small group or as individuals, or as a combination of these, to fit in with travelling and complex lives.

At each stage participants were asked to reflect on what had helped and what had hindered their transition to part-time Masters study. Interview transcriptions and journal text was uploaded to NVivo and themes emerging from the data recorded at nodes. Nodes were grouped to establish overarching themes.

## Findings

A number of themes emerged as significant and further develop previous work. Firstly, these postgraduate students were particularly determined to self-manage their learning careers by making sacrifices and were highly motivated. During the year these learners consolidated their unique study patterns around their busy lives and the institute's pedagogic and bureaucratic processes.

Secondly, and perhaps as a consequence of the above they were also highly critical of unhelpful organisational arrangements and bureaucratic assessment practices. Learning careers are fragile and confidence in progress was easily undermined by negative or unhelpful feedback.

Thirdly, those who were able to create synergy between their work and assessments were very grateful for this and opportunities to work with peers on assessments were also helpful.

## Conclusions

While the study suggests that such postgraduates emerge as coping, critical and mostly confident, and so needing little help, there are some improvements which could be made by institutions. A

certain amount of bureaucracy and rigidity is inevitable on these kinds of courses, but more respect and understanding of the sacrifices that part-time working students are prepared to make might enable more of a climate for negotiation between the needs of students and the needs of the university. Formal acknowledgement of learner progress and offering negotiation around published schedules are proposed as examples of showing such respect to these learners.

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