RESEARCH PAPER

Supporting postgraduate coursework students through their time of transition

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The efficacy and success of enabling programs in transitioning students to undergraduate university study is well documented. There are many examples of first year undergraduate orientation and transition activities to help students understand higher education expectations and systems. However, while many universities may provide research and study skills to support students once postgraduate study has commenced, there is little evidence of programs that transition incoming Postgraduate Coursework (PGC) students. This paper reports on the implementation of a transition program tailored for Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) students at Edith Cowan University (ECU). Many in this student cohort are returning to study after significant time away from university and for many of them, to a new field of study – Education. Held in the induction week of the first semester, the Postgraduate Preparation (PGP) course, consisted of two full days. Developed in consultation with School of Education academics and conducted in a supportive university environment, the course aimed to assist PGC secondary education students to develop their new postgraduate identity, by building efficacy and confidence through the refreshment of academic and research skills and supporting the development of help-seeking behaviours that may contribute to a successful transition to postgraduate coursework. A survey to measure the effectiveness of the transition program indicated that students identified participation in the PGP course as beneficial to preparing them for their postgraduate coursework studies. An outcome of the findings was the development of a design model for short postgraduate transition programs based on the identified key areas of self, skills and support.

Keywords: postgraduate coursework; student support; transition; confidence-building; learning community; study preparation

Introduction

There are an increasing number of postgraduate coursework courses, such as graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and Masters by coursework, being offered in higher education institutions in Australia and elsewhere (Symons, 2001), due in part to workforce demands which require employee upskilling, personal changes in career direction and changes to government policies. The Postgraduate Coursework (PGC) student cohort may have different needs and requirements compared to postgraduate research masters or doctoral students, yet they remain a

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largely under-represented student group in the literature (Crane et al., 2016). There is evidence of a widely held assumption that PGC students do not require support during transition (Heussi, 2012; Parkes, 1989; West, 2012), at least to the same degree as that which is offered to commencing undergraduate students. Whilst there is wide acknowledgement of the diverse and real needs of the undergraduate cohort, there is a paucity of research on PGC students' experience of support (Jancey & Burns, 2013), particularly at the point of transition into study. PGC students differ from Research Higher Degree students in that their study may not primarily be undertaken as a precursor to research. Their return to study is often career driven as shown in the 2012 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Bennett & Turner, 2012), sometimes to advance within a particular profession and at other times because of an inability to find work in their desired profession or to change professions altogether. Regardless, the needs and feelings of PGC students returning to study may be similar to those felt by first year undergraduate students. This is often due to the significant break between the completion of their undergraduate degree and the commencement of their postgraduate study. Postgraduate students continue to need foundational academic skills and support structures like those commonly embedded into first year undergraduate and enabling programs (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014). Despite previous undergraduate study, PGC students' have expressed anxiety over time management, the ability to successfully balance life, work and study demands, IT and technological changes, and course requirements and assessments (Clegg, Bradley, & Smith, 2006; Heussi, 2012; Symons, 2001; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Because the skills needed to complete postgraduate coursework build upon those needed to complete undergraduate work, there is a common false notion that PGC students do not require transition support (Symons, 2001; West, 2012). Cluett and Skene's (2006) study identified that a majority of their PGC student participants found the first year overwhelming, demonstrating a real need for transition programs for this student cohort. There is very little literature that addresses the transition needs of PGC students and provision of these early support structures for PGC students is historically low.

In recent years, there has been a focus in Australia and around the world on widening participation in higher education (Devlin, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). In particular, the breadth of enabling programs around Australia attest to the importance of providing both a pathway to university but also preparing students for success in university courses. There are many defining purposes attributed to enabling programs, including preparing students for higher education through general study skills such as literacy, numeracy and critical thinking, research skills and discipline-specific knowledge. Specifically, building student confidence in their ability to complete studies successfully is a common focus as is building student identity. As a transition pathway to university there is much research to indicate that enabling programs do this well (Hodges et al., 2013; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Sharp, O'Rourke, Lane, & Hays, 2014). Taking guidance from enabling pedagogy, we set out to develop a supportive, skill- and community-building course for students returning to study through postgraduate coursework programs as there was a clear 'support gap' identified with this student cohort. Despite not knowing the equity backgrounds of these particular students, supporting students to achieve their educational goals at whatever stage of the student lifecycle is, in its broadest sense, valuable. Though more students from under-represented groups are enrolling in postgraduate study (Eckersley et al., 2016), there continues to be under-representation of students from equity groups. As with undergraduate students, PGC students are a diverse cohort with differences "in age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status" (Crane et al., 2016). Students from equity backgrounds are perhaps even more vulnerable in these transition periods because of higher rates of attrition.

The development of the Postgraduate Preparation (PGP) course at ECU was in part due to the

enthusiasm for an earlier implemented program for the Western Australian Police (WaPOL) and acknowledgement from academic staff that PGC students may benefit from a tailored transition program. The Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) is a short and demanding course and has a student cohort that includes many students returning to study after some time who might benefit from a course that eases the transition of re-entry into the tertiary context. Most research in the area of enabling students or transition has focused on the first year undergraduate experience or the postgraduate research student experience. This paper aims to provide preliminary data to help better understand PGC students' needs at the time of transition back into study. The implementation and evaluation of the PGP course discussed in this paper sought to address the following research questions:

- Do PGC students see value in participating in a transition course such as the PGP course, during their induction into postgraduate coursework programs?

- What aspects of the PGP course do PGC students perceive as most and least valuable for their current knowledge and skills base?

The findings from the anonymous, evaluative survey administered to students in the course, give sound evidence of the need for and benefit of a tailored program of transition for PGC students. The PGP course outlined here is perhaps a way of better meeting this particular cohort's anxieties and aiding in a smooth start to their studies through a focus on their emerging identities as postgraduate students (self), identification of university wide support networks and development of a learning community (support) and the revision of academic and learning skills (skills) needed to successfully complete their program.

One of the key factors in preparing students for university is building self-efficacy. Feeling academically competent is one of the most important factors in student motivation and perseverance as it enhances self-belief (Cullity, 2006; Kift et al., 2010; Krause, 2005; Lane & Sharp, 2014). Through surveying students involved in the initial delivery of the PGP course and by reviewing literature around transition and enabling, a 'Transition Course Design Model for Postgraduate Coursework Students' with a focus on the identified key areas of self, support and skills, is discussed in this paper as a possible framework for other postgraduate transition courses.

Literature review

Educational transition has been defined as the change from one learning environment to another (Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010), although it may also include transition from a work or domestic environment to an educational one. Transition may not be a clear, sequential, homogenously experienced time for some students but a complex, personalised process. Successful transition for PGC students may not be accomplished by the independent checking off, of a 'to-do' list but through supporting them in their development of the necessary skills and knowledge as they acclimatise to this change (Gale & Parker, 2014). An important factor in this transition could be the development of a new learning community. Additionally, the length of time away from study gives rise to changes and challenges for PGC students around study requirements and institutional systems (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom, & Zammit, 2009), even when, in some cases, they are returning to their original place of undergraduate study. Although this time away from study can allow for the development of greater clarity and purpose around life goals and study foci, it may also heighten student anxiety regarding their competencies in mastering new systems and schedules. The sacrifice of time, money and family/social commitments required for educational pursuits can be harder to make as return to study, typically

at a more mature stage in the lifecycle, might also impact partners, children, families and businesses (Tobbell et al., 2010). Furthermore, worry about course expectations and a change in accepted standards from when they last studied or the change to a new discipline area (Symons, 2001), may cause anxiety despite successful previous experience and skills. As a result of the implementation of our PGP course to PGC secondary education students and a comprehensive review of the literature on postgraduate transition and preparation, the key themes of "Self" (efficacy, confidence, identity), "Support" (access and help seeking behaviours) and "Skills" (context specific academic, IT and library skills) emerged as core transition attributes.

Ability to cope with demands of study (support and skills)

There is much silence around and assumptions made regarding postgraduate students' ability to cope with the demands of study. One of the assumptions made by academics and institutions being that as the students have already successfully completed undergraduate study, they are more experienced and thus will be more successful (Symons, 2001) with fewer challenges to overcome (Heussi, 2012; Tobbell et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2009; West, 2012) during transition back to study. Further, the very assumption that students have already mastered the required skills could lead to greater student anxiety around possible perceptions that they are not 'meeting the mark'; leading to feelings of isolation and a reluctance to access support (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). In Cluett and Skene's (2006) study, these anxieties led to a number of PGC students experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed.

The impact of the affective domain upon students' capacity to learn has been highlighted in First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) research (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014) and could be taken into account when transitioning PGC students. Importantly, students' ability to cope emotionally and implement help seeking behaviours is used to explain retention rates and student satisfaction ratings in the first year experience literature (Kift et al., 2010; Lang, n.d.; Lane & Sharp, 2014). Transition to university study – whether undergraduate or postgraduate – is a process, which when successful, allows for the development of confidence and self-competency in using university systems and requirements, clarity in study goals and how these relate to life or career goals. Yorke (2004) identifies that it is not only postgraduate students' perception of their ability to cope academically that impacts their completion of the course but also their feelings of self-belief, ease with academic environment, outside commitments of family and employment and financial demands. Further research into the affective domain of PGC students around these areas at the time of transition would therefore be of value.

Developing a student identity (self)

According to Gale and Parker (2014), the formation of a new identity, that of postgraduate student, is of importance to successful transition along with an understanding of how past practices and identities translate to this new learning community. Developing this new student identity could be the cause of great anxiety for some students in this cohort. Postgraduate students tend not to separate personal, work and study identities rather these multiple contexts are merged (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014) as a work-study-life balance is attempted. As mature aged students, most are further along the life cycle of family, financial and employment commitments than they were at undergraduate entry perhaps and these ongoing demands need to be maintained while meeting the new demands of study. The inclusion of study requires a transition (perhaps not upheaval but definitely change) in all areas of their lives. Kinshuck's (2002, cited in Lang, n.d.) definition of an adult learner as, "at the same time independent and dependent, motivated and distracted by multiple responsibilities, and rich in life experience" (p. 5), encapsulates the difficulty for many individuals in developing a PGC student identity. What is clear is that the

transition of this student cohort is similar to undergraduate transition or change in institution transition in terms of competently mastering new systems and schedules.

Comparatively short course lengths mean PGC students need to 'hit the ground running' (Wozniak, Mahony, Lever, & Pizzica, 2009). Time away from study can heighten student anxiety over their own competencies (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Additionally, there can be added pressure on PGC students to succeed as they are typically studying to enter a specific profession and have often taken on financial losses and costs to do so (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). PGC students cannot therefore be viewed solely through an academic or institutional lens, but rather a more holistic view needs to be taken when providing support at the start of their course and throughout their program. The merging of identities may not be a smooth, quick process as Tobbell et al. (2010) explain: "Transition identities are not linear and 'clean'. Rather they are the work of internalising and enacting change in the face of contradictory emotion and experience" (p. 266). The past experience, knowledge and skills that PGC students bring to their study impact on the interactions they will have with their learning and the institution in which they are completing the study (Tobbell et al., 2010). This highlights the importance of institutional awareness in considering the whole student experience and not just the students' ability to complete the course content.

Help seeking behaviours (support)
Another common theme in the literature around postgraduate study is students' hesitancy in asking for help (Symons, 2001). There can be an assumption on the part of the institution and perhaps the students themselves, that they should already have developed the coping skills needed to deal with the change associated with entering postgraduate study (Clegg et al., 2006). This then emphasises the importance of validating and recognising the students' prior experiences and skills to counteract any hesitancy they may feel as a result of this assumption. Help seeking should not be viewed as deficit or an indication that problem solving and coping skills are ineffective, but a legitimate part of the process of transitioning into a new context by both the students and the institution. For even the most proficient of students may not independently transfer skills to new contexts or content settings (Perin, 2011).

Diversity of cohort (self) and point of need (support)
The diversity amongst the postgraduate cohort and the challenges that this brings for academic staff, course designers and institutions in the building of a cohesive community needs to be acknowledged (Jancey & Burns, 2013). Recent Australian data shows that of 733 postgraduate students from 33 institutions, 44% were enrolled in coursework postgraduate courses, with 57% being female, 38% international and 84% studying fulltime (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2014). Further to this, the motivations of postgraduate students differ from undergraduate cohorts (O'Donnell et al., 2009) and within the cohort itself. This distinction has implications regarding how students are supported throughout their study as well as during the period of transition. Greater focus could be given to supporting PGC students at their individual points of need. This level of personalised, flexible support may positively affect student retention and level of PGC students' satisfaction (Crane et al., 2016).

The initial period of transition for PGC students is particularly important in terms of retention as students may be struggling to work out what support is available and where resources are located, meeting academic staff and fellow students and determining course expectations (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Symons, 2001) as well as making the personal adjustments that coincide with undertaking study. Arguably, if this initial transition period is not supported, problems could intensify (Wozniak et al., 2009) and students may decide that postgraduate study is not for

them (Symons, 2001). With high competition in the Australian university market (Jancey & Burns, 2013) as elsewhere, effective support during this first point of contact or transition-in period may both attract and retain more students.

The development of a learning community (support)

Effective community of practice allows for the sharing of contexts both present and past, and shared understandings important to developing a sense of belonging (Lang, n.d.), increased engagement (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011) and building a shared identity. Connection with staff and peers in both an academic and social community can develop a sense of belonging and unity within the cohort, a shared focus for study and an arena to share the postgraduate coursework experience. Previous study at an institution does not negate the struggle to connect with the new postgraduate community (O'Donnell et al., 2009). If students struggle to find their place in this community during transition some students may experience anxiety. The building of a learning community could therefore be a point of focus during transition postgraduate courses. Beard, Clegg, & Smith (2007) state, "that student success is heavily dependent on aspects of social integration which involve the affective domains of their engagement with higher education" (p. 236). Clegg et al. (2006) also found that students valued relationships with other university workers, not only academic staff and student peers, and that a relationship with a wider university circle allowed for a greater sense of belonging in their new learning communities. Cluett and Skene (2006) concur with this widened sense of community, finding that nearly half of their survey participants accessed help from outside the immediate course community.

Many postgraduate students will seek help from each other rather than academic staff (Symons, 2001), further emphasising the importance of community for this group of students in successful completion of their course (Lang, n.d.). Seeking this peer support involves a level of self-confidence as well as the desire and necessary skills to participate in a more collaborative approach to study (Clegg et al., 2006, p.106). This sense of belonging to a learning community could impact positively on the affective factors of student confidence and self-esteem and may assist PGC students to meet the often more restrictive and numerous time lines they face as opposed to their research-based counterparts (Pike et al., 2011; Stagg & Kimmins, 2014; Symons, 2001). The 'Community of Practice' approach discussed by O'Donnell et al. (2009) underscores the importance of any new learning building upon prior knowledge and learning, and teaching being a collaborative responsibility rather than individual one. This approach is compatible with the postgraduate context, emphasising the need for early development of and focus upon community building from transition, for this cohort.

Design and purpose of the PGP course

The PGP course outlined here, and delivered to ECU Graduate Diploma Education (Secondary) students in 2017, was developed from four two-day courses delivered to Western Australian Police Officers (WaPOL) in 2014-2015. Like many people returning to study, the WaPOL participants were diverse in their experience of university, ranging from a position of recognised prior learning but no higher education experience or holding qualifications from a distant past, to recent degree qualifications. The completion of further university postgraduate study was for educational extension and/or a pathway to promotion. As a result of the success of these short courses, it was decided in consultation with School of Education staff, to pilot a contextualised PGP course for Graduate Diploma Education (Secondary) students. This cohort was targeted because many of the students have not been involved in tertiary study for some time. Students were invited to attend as part of their course induction with their offer of a place in the Graduate Diploma Education course. Though some students were not able to attend the full two-days due

to personal reasons such as previous work commitments, 46 of the 76 students (60% of students) were present in the final session to complete an evaluative survey. The PGP course was free for students and part of the wider induction activities offered by the School of Education and ECU. Lunch was supplied to welcome the students, allow for an informal time of getting to know fellow students and staff members, and as a way of demonstrating how much these students and their success and enjoyment in the course matter to the School of Education.

During the PGP course, students were introduced to ECU academic expectations, course requirements and to the support services offered. This overall framework aimed to support students to start their postgraduate course with a sense of confidence and some surety about what to do from the beginning of the semester. Building a learning community was an intentional focus of the PGP course. Practical sessions throughout the two days gave students the opportunity to become familiar with the learning management systems used at ECU, such as Blackboard and Turnitin, and the navigation of university communication and library research systems. Seminar sessions focused on independent learning techniques and the skills of critical reading, note taking, assessment planning, time management and referencing. A focus on academic writing included the skills of paraphrasing and synthesising and the development of research skills through a series of collaborative, practical sessions and lectures. Support was also provided to help students understand the requirements of study and how to access course advice in their study area of interest and to assist the development of self-help behaviours. The PGP course allowed students to hear from and meet key support staff such as the Education Librarian and Academic Learning Advisers, effectively making contact with those who would be of help to them during their postgraduate course.

Providing students with the opportunity to form connections with each other, allowed them to begin feeling part of a learning community. Results from our survey indicated that this was effective in negating the sense of anxiety and isolation that some students felt at the prospect of returning to study and for a career in which they may have no experience. Academic staff introduced themselves and a past student now working in education shared their experience of the Graduate Diploma of Education course, employment opportunities and their first teaching experiences in the classroom. Underpinned by a philosophy of promoting student wellbeing (Sharp et al., 2014), sessions utilised materials on resilience, mindfulness and happiness. Building student efficacy and confidence to undertake postgraduate coursework study was a key focus of this transition course.

In the PGP course, a holistic student transition approach was adopted by giving value to and validation of their past skills, training and experience. This was important to students entering the course who may have felt unskilled and anxious in the new learning environment, with new discipline content and in the balancing of the demands of study with their other life commitments. An important aim of the PGP course was to validate prior experiences and frame realistic time schedules to allay some of these commonly held fears, prior to commencing study. A further goal was to counteract the absence of or assumptions around appropriate information (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010) in relation to university and course structures, systems and available support with the provision of clear, actionable, supportive practices.

Symons (2001) reported that 69% of coursework students at Glasgow University in 2000, in the first stages of their study had issues with understanding what was expected. Of these students, 58% stated they were worried about work and time management, 46% were anxious about using the library and 43% envisaged challenges in writing assessments. Library workshops included as part of the two-day intensive PGP course were particularly well received, aligning with

literature that highlights PGC students' concerns over changes in library systems, use of electronic data bases and online literature searches due to technological changes since this cohort last studied (O'Donnell et al., 2009), with many experiencing anxiety over their ability to use these systems effectively and efficiently.

Heussi's (2012) research identified that students wanted more support at course commencement. This is the initial point of student need, that in conjunction with other university wide orientations, the PGP course hoped to meet as "support systems are as important as the delivery of courses" (Jancey & Burns, 2013, p. 312).

Methodology

When developing the PGP course we questioned whether there would be sufficient student interest in a transition course for the Graduate Diploma Education (Secondary). This question was answered by 76 students self-enrolling in the PGP course. To further evaluate the students' perceived value of participating in the transition course, as well as understand what aspects of the course they regarded as most and least valuable for their current knowledge and skills base, a survey informed by the literature was developed to collect both quantitative and qualitative responses. Questions related to their evaluation of the efficacy of the course, development of their academic skills, confidence and efficacy and the perception of the development of a learning community. The intent of the survey aimed to evaluate the students' perception of the PGP course in supporting their transition to the postgraduate coursework context.

The survey was administered by the tutors in the final session of the PGP course in hard copy format. It comprised of a series of 27 statements about the PGP course such as "I feel more confident about PG expectations" and "I feel more prepared for PG requirements" to which the students were able to respond using a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Agree. Additionally, there were three open-ended questions: "What part of the workshop did you find most valuable and why?", "What part of the workshop did you find least valuable and why?" and "Are there other areas that you would like to have covered in this PGP course?" These questions gave students the opportunity to give more detailed, individualised comments on the course and feedback on possible improvements to better meet student needs in future deliveries of the course. Participation in the anonymous survey was voluntary.

The cohort on day two of the PGP course was the expected sample and of the 76 students enrolled across the two days, 46 students completed the survey, equalling 60% of the participants. The final sample represented a sound selection of students with most enrolled as full time students and from a wide range of the offered major subject courses offered in the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary), including English, Design & Technology, Science, Maths, Humanities, Health and Physical Education, Drama and Media. The gender ratio of the students aligned with recent Australian data, which suggests that postgraduate students are predominantly female (Jancey & Burns, 2013) with females in the PGP course accounting for 54 of the 76 students. However, in contrast to Jancey and Burns' (2013) findings that postgraduate coursework students are typically enrolled part-time, the majority of the 76 students were studying full-time, with only 12 enrolled part-time.

Consistently positive results from the survey showed that all 46 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements: "I feel more confident about PG expectations"; "I feel more prepared for PG requirements"; "I am more likely to access the support as a result of this course" and "I feel more ready to start the semester as a result of this course". From these findings, it is

clear that the PGC students in our study see value in participating in the PGP transition course during their induction into a postgraduate coursework program. Additionally, due to attending a transition course such as this, it is apparent that they start the semester feeling more prepared and willing to access support as the semester progresses. Based on the survey data and the literature review, the authors developed a Transition Course Design Model for Postgraduate Coursework Students which places emphasis on three key areas that can be seen as important in transitioning students – self, support and skills.

Discussion of findings

The literature highlights the paucity of research in the area of PGC students' experience of study support and reveals the assumption that PGC students do not need targeted transition and preparation is unfounded (Jancey & Burns, 2013). Our experience of delivering the PGP course validated these assertions as it was clear from the number of students who responded to the course invitation that support at the time of transition was desirable. Many of these students were unsure of what to expect in their course and what changes may have occurred since they were last at university. Acknowledging this uncertainty, the students who participated in the PGP course wanted to give themselves the best chance of success through an informed transition. Of the 76 students who participated in the course, the majority completed their Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) at the end of 2017, with seven continuing on as part time students and only five discontinuing/deferring their studies.

Results from our survey of participants indicate that student perceptions of the effectiveness of the structure and activities provided in the two-day course were effective in developing academic skills, efficacy, and confidence, and in reducing their anxiety over transitioning to postgraduate study; with most students agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt more ready and prepared for the start of semester and the requirements of postgraduate study, as shown by the following student comment:

> I felt quite anxious, overwhelmed and worried on Wednesday (which isn't like me usually) but by Friday afternoon I felt like I had a handle on how I can cope this year. The semester planner and weekly planner was a great help in this. I have prepared both and feel a little more 'in control'.

This comment highlights the importance of preparation for PGC students in terms of their perception of confidence borne from readiness and academic efficacy.

During the course, academic efficacy was built by providing contextualised, collaborative workshops across the two days. One student commented, "*I feel more confident in starting the course knowing what would be expected of me*". An added benefit of the academic workshops was not only the clarification of academic skills but that students also felt "emotionally prepared" (Symons, 2001) for the study journey ahead. The work of "internalising and enacting change" (Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010, p. 266) was enabled allowing the important building of self-efficacy. The data also showed that the theory and practical application embedded in the PGP course was beneficial for student understanding on a range of concepts including what is expected, work and time management, anxiety about using the library and challenges in writing assessments (see Figure 1).
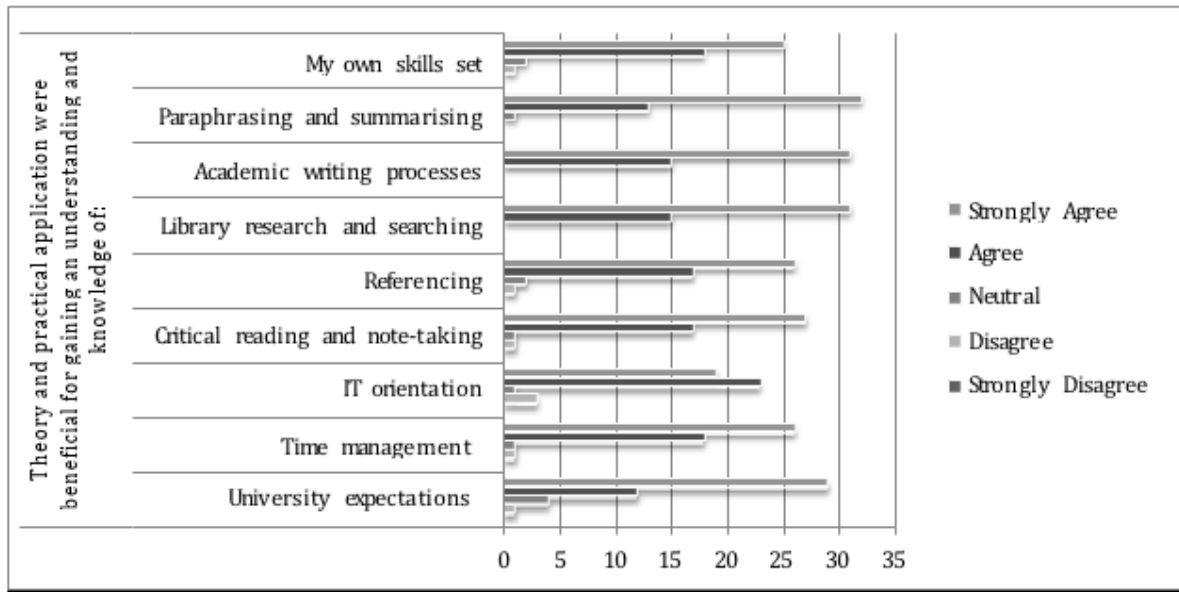
Figure 1: Student perceptions of the effectiveness of the PGP structure and activities as appropriate for building postgraduate student efficacy

The aim of the course, to allow students to start from a place of perceived competence rather than deficit, was met, exemplified by the following comment of one participant: "*They increased my confidence in my abilities*". There was very strong agreement from students that academic skills covered in the PGP course, such as paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising and library searching, were beneficial in refreshing prior academic writing skills (see Figure 1). In response to a question about the most valuable part of the workshops, students commented, "*Academic writing – never had it broken down so well, I will know how to approach it better now*" and "*Revising academic writing processes because I was feeling particularly unsure of the expectations*". This allowed the research question of "What aspects of the PGP course do PGC students perceive as most and least valuable for their current knowledge and skills base?", to be considered further by the authors and will inform future delivery of the PGP course.

A contextualised school-based approach appears to have aided in developing a sense of community for this diverse cohort. Given the results show that there is very strong agreement that the course was beneficial for gaining an understanding and knowledge of multiple academic and personal skills, highlights the range of needs in this cohort and validates the choice of the contextualised course structure. Many students when asked about the most valuable part of the workshops, commented "*All of it*", demonstrating that they could perhaps not differentiate or prioritise their learning needs at that time or that they perhaps viewed all of the course content as important during the time of transition. This supports the literature (Heussi, 2012; Lang, n.d.) that PGC students do perceive a need for academic preparation. The challenge for a postgraduate transition course is to offer a wide range of academic preparation but still maintain a contextualised and personalised content. It seems from the survey data, that the PGP course could be evaluated as effectively meeting students' needs when transitioning into postgraduate study (see Figure 2). The complicated nature of the postgraduate cohorts' personal, work and study contexts (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014), the demands on their time, multiple responsibilities, and life experiences, meant that staff recognised the responsibility to deliver and provide resources that met students' expectations.

Positive agreement by students regarding the facilitators' knowledge and preparedness, use of appropriate resources and well-aligned lectures and workshops showed in comments like "*so glad I did this*" and "*the tutor was very patient, knowledgeable and the academic writing refresher I know will definitely help me*". These comments also attest to the students' perception that the course and its delivery met their needs.
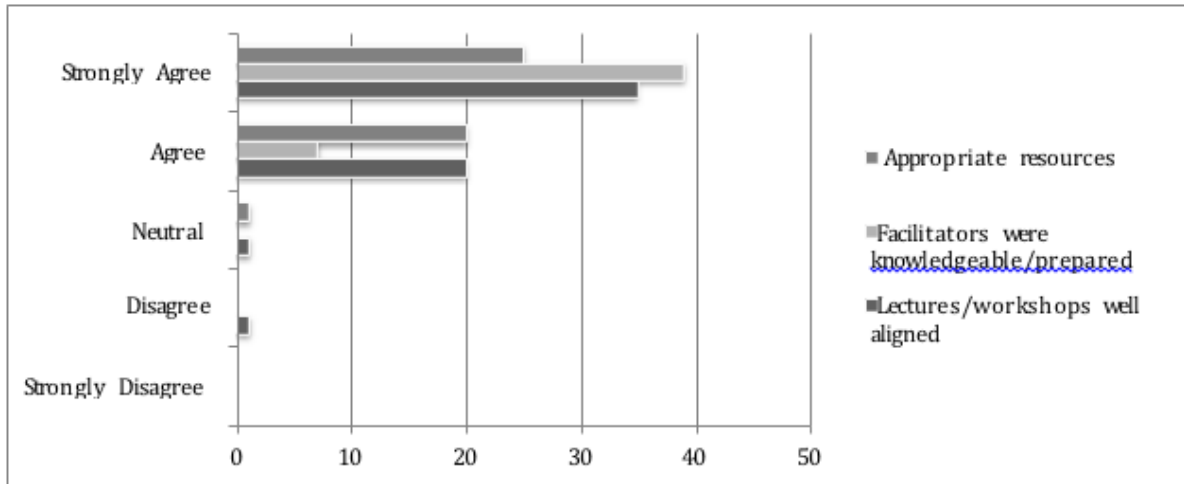

Figure 2: Student perceptions of the effectiveness of the PGP course organisation and delivery on learning

Figure 3 demonstrates that at the conclusion of the two-day PGP course, participants felt ready, confident, prepared for postgraduate coursework requirements and expectations, and were both more aware of the support available and more likely to access it during their studies. Interestingly, while there was very strong agreement that they now feel ready to commence postgraduate study, they are still less confident regarding postgraduate expectations. This might be an area for developers to consider in future transition courses.
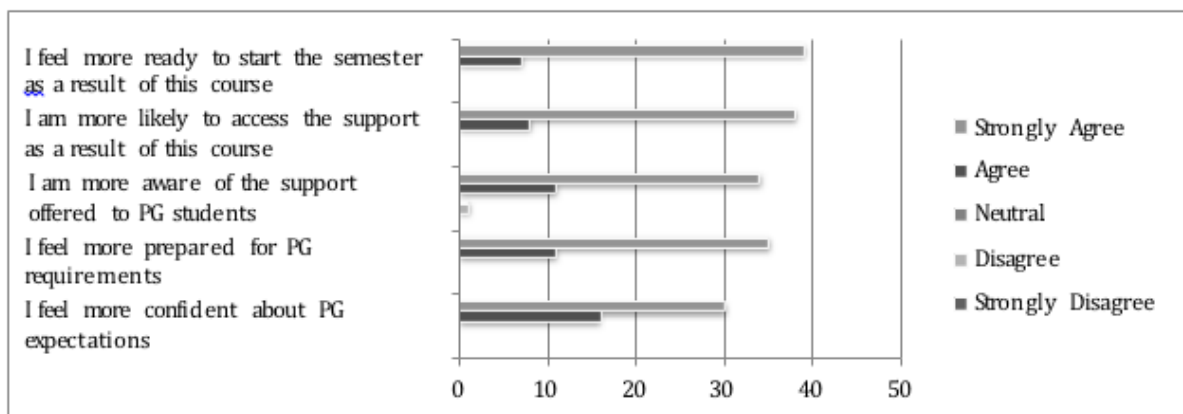

Figure 3: Student perception of confidence, readiness and efficacy in starting postgraduate study

Regarding the research question about what students perceived as least valuable in the PGP course, the majority of students stated that it was "*all valuable*" or left this question blank, perhaps indicating that there was nothing that was of little perceived value in the course. Student comments such as, "*It was all valuable – I'm so happy I did it*" and "*It established connections*

and culture", highlight the importance of building community early for this cohort and the link that this sense of belonging has to confidence and self-efficacy. A similar finding from the data was revealed in the addressing of "what else" students would like covered in the course. Overwhelmingly student responses stated that the course was comprehensive in addressing their needs. One student mentioned, "*So much to learn, would have liked it to be an extra day long!*" which debunks the common institutional assumption that PGC students do not want or need transition preparation.

Conclusion

As a result of the survey findings from students who undertook the PGP transition course, a Transition Course Design Model for Postgraduate Coursework Students was developed using self, support and skills as core aspects of the curriculum with the express aims of assisting in building community and the successful transition-in of PGC students (see Figure 4).
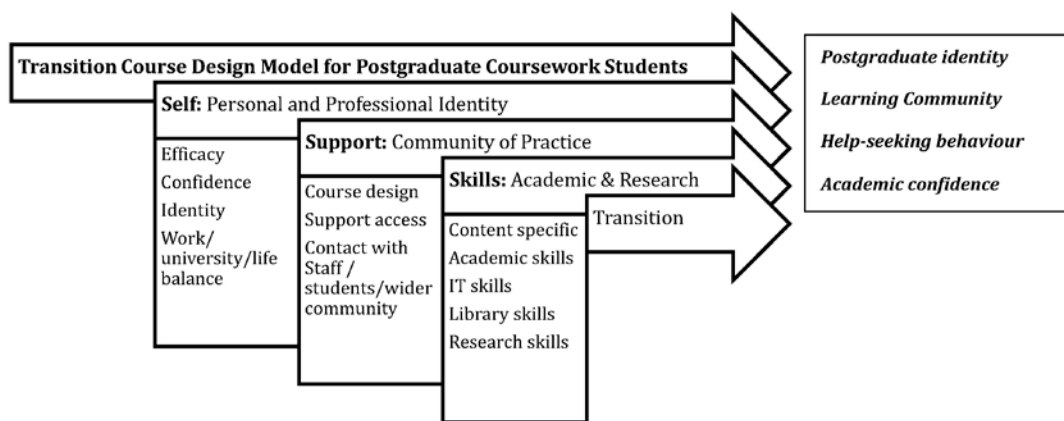

Figure 4: Transition Course Design Model for Postgraduate Coursework Students

The Transition Course Design Model for Postgraduate Coursework Students is based on the literature, which informed the transition curriculum, and the initial findings from the pilot of the PGP transition course. Key themes of self-efficacy, confidence, support in identifying and encouraging a community of practice and key academic and research skills emerged as core aspects of transition course design that supports a confident transition for PGC students.

"Self" relates to building a new personal and professional postgraduate identity. The students through their high level of self-selection for a voluntary two-day transition course demonstrated a need to support them in this identity change from undergraduate to postgraduate student. The results of our survey indicate that this two-day intervention, overwhelmingly increased student efficacy and confidence to move into postgraduate coursework study.

"Support" was incorporated to build a community of practice or learning community within the cohort. Course design supported a community of practice through connection to peers, academic staff, learning advisors and library staff. Assistance in understanding the postgraduate learning environment and the benefit of using help-seeking behaviours to support their postgraduate coursework was a focus.

"Skills", or perceived lack of, was the area that caused most student anxiety. Course design supported understanding new or different learning and information systems, library resources, and research and writing skills. The course design offered a wide range of academic preparation

while still maintaining a contextualised and personalised content. This allowed students to see the application of skills to their new coursework study.

Together all three elements in this model form the foundations for the design and implementation of a transition course, regardless of cohort. The literature (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014; Symons, 2001; Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010) and our findings both suggest that PGC students do indeed benefit from initial preparation during their period of transition back into study to alleviate the common feelings of anxiety, lack of confidence in the possible loss or lagging of academic skills and concern over changed university processes and expectations.

Our research highlights a strong perception by the Graduate Diploma Education coursework students that provision of an initial PGP course was of significant benefit. We suggest that a holistic approach is important to the design of future PGP courses, one that builds an academically confident, help seeking student identity, embedded in a new community of practice. We found, as Tobbell et al. (2010) have also suggested, that transition identities are not linear and 'clean' and therefore argue that this needs to be taken into account in the design and delivery of transition courses for PGC students.

We are hopeful that the findings of our postgraduate transition study will benefit PGC students at ECU and beyond, in terms of transition outcomes and increased retention. However, we acknowledge the limitations of our study, such as the small sample size. For subsequent cohorts, we see value in interviewing the PGC students at the completion of their studies to further evaluate how the PGP course helped in their transition to study. There is value in supporting the transition of students in and out at all stages of the student lifecycle. The model presented here has application to all these stages, but it is noted that postgraduate students (not just postgraduate coursework students) are frequently overlooked by higher education institutions, and therefore vulnerable to attrition, because of assumptions about their skillset and prior completion of study programs.

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