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Teaching at Master's Level: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Teaching at Master's level: Between a rock and a hard place?

The considerable focus on capturing the 'student experience' has not been matched by investigations into the views and experiences of those teaching and managing programmes. This study aims to contribute to redressing the balance. An online survey of staff responsible for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes in the UK elicited 382 responses from staff in 60 different institutions. Findings relating to perceptions of challenges their students face, students' preparedness for Master's level study and the influence of institutional culture are reported. PGT students were seen as dealing with complexity and juggling multiple demands. A gap between PGT students' readiness for study at this level, the QAA's vision of Master's study, and institutional assumptions about student support required was identified. For this gap to be closed, we suggest a review of institutional practices is required.

Keywords: postgraduate taught; master's; programme directors;
institutional culture; mastersness

Introduction

This paper reports findings from a national survey of staff responsible for postgraduate taught programmes which was carried out over 2015/6. The survey was the work of the *PGT Identity and Expectations* sub-group of a UKCGE working group on Postgraduate Student Experience, set up in 2014¹. It was designed to provide an overview of the PGT landscape from the perspective of those working most closely with students. This

¹ <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/the-postgraduate-experience.aspx>
A full report of this survey is available on the UKCGE website

perspective adds to the literature on PGT student experience which, to date, has generally focused on one or two programmes, or has considered macro-level issues such as overall patterns and trends in PGT (e.g. Morgan 2015). This article reports on the section of the survey that elicited programme directors/administrators' views on the abilities of their students and the challenges their students face. We highlight a gap between universities' expectations of PGT students, and staff perceptions of students' abilities and preparedness for achieving 'Mastersness' (QAA, 2013). Our findings suggest that many PGT programme staff feel they are caught between the expectations of the university and the reality of the students. We consider the role of institutional culture in shaping how staff experience their work on PGT programmes.

The PGT sector in the UK

Research in the area of postgraduate taught provision frequently refers to the challenge of the diversity of the sector. Not only are the types of programmes varied in purpose (research, specialised/advanced study, professional/practice [QAA 2015]), but also institutions are increasingly looking to blended and online delivery to complement on campus provision (Smyth et al. 2012). The students who access PGT programmes are similarly diverse. Three-quarters (75.4%) of PGT students in 2015/16 had an undergraduate degree or equivalent as their highest prior qualification, but one in five (20.5%) already had a postgraduate qualification of some kind (Leman 2016). In 2015/16, 41% of PGT students were aged 25 or younger, in comparison, the undergraduate sector is much more homogenous, with 83.4% of first year students aged under 25 in 2014/5 (HESA 2016).

The growth of the postgraduate taught (PGT) sector, particularly since 1990 is well documented (e.g. Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013; Morgan 2015).

However, since a peak in 2010/11 the numbers of enrolments on PGT programmes has declined: in 2011/12 by 5.2% and in 2012/13 by a further 7.0%, showing only very slight upturn in 2013/14 of 0.1% (UUK, 2015). Behind these headline figures lies changes in student profiles. Looking at figures for full and part-time students combined, over the ten years to 2013/14 the % share of UK domiciled students at PGT level fell from 72.4% to 63.3%, the % share of EU students rose only by 0.2% whilst that of the non-EU domiciled students rose by almost 9% to 29.2%, this compares with only 9.0% of those studying on their first degree (UUK, 2015). In 2014/15, 59.1% of all *full-time* PGT students were non-EU domiciled. The changing demographic of PGT students in the UK can be summarised as: fewer part-time, fewer UK domiciled with an increased proportion of non-EU, in an overall context of rapid increase until 2010/11 with more recent decline.

Research on PGT

Despite the importance of Master's level study for the economy, universities and the individuals who access it, until recently, researchers largely ignored it. It was assumed either that PGT students were no different to undergraduates or, that because of their previous study they were experienced (e.g. Spearing, 2014) and therefore did not require special attention. More recently these assumptions have been problematised and PGT students and their experiences have become a focus of research.

The introduction in 2009 of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey has made a considerable contribution to our understanding of the PGT student experience, but the diversity of provision, and students, makes generalized discussion of the student experience problematic. Kenway and Bullen (2003) concluded from research with 22

students, that the heterogeneity in background and experiences made talk of a ‘community’ nonsensical. Similarly, the main finding from Stacey, Smith and Barty’s (2004) study of 7 students was that individual students experienced things differently. The majority of studies are similarly small-scale. There are some exceptions, such as the work on transitions by Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013), however, it remains the case that what we have is snapshots of different areas of activity rather than a coherent overall view of the sector.

The importance of the PGT sector for the economy (HEC, 2012) has led to a focus on the ‘output’ of PGT (Morgan, 2015). The PGT student experience is presented as journey (QAA, 2013), with a set of skills and attributes as the destination. The QAA ‘Mastersness’ framework suggests Master’s level study has seven facets: abstraction, complexity, depth, research, autonomy, unpredictability and professionalism (QAA, 2013). The degree of autonomy expected is said to be a distinguishing feature of study at this level. Whereas undergraduates are told how to apply techniques, postgraduates are expected to question those techniques; undergraduates are given materials to work with, postgraduates are expected to search out their own (QAA, 2013). The framework presents PGT students as confident, independent, co-constructors of their learning, working in partnership with lecturers.

This expectation of the outcomes of Master’s level study is in tension with findings on the experiences of staff and PGT students. Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) exposed as myth the idea of postgraduates as ‘expert students’. One challenge is that they are likely to be negotiating multiple identities, e.g. in their professional work, as a partner or parent, as well as developing their new academic identity as a learner. Hallet (2010) identified problems arising where institutions did not grasp the challenges presented by the diversity of students, noting the limitations of study skills support to

facilitate transition into membership of the academic community. A break between undergraduate and postgraduate study may be a source of difficulties if universities assume familiarity with new learning technology: something as fundamental as being able to find resources in an electronic library can be a problem (Brown, 2014). Further challenges are associated with the high proportion of non-UK domiciled students in the PGT population. Those who have not previously studied in the UK education system may experience academic culture shock (Goodwin, 2009) taking time to adjust to different academic norms and expectations. This is in addition to the challenges of adjusting to living in a new country whilst being at a distance from support networks (Brown and Holloway 2008).

Previous small-scale studies have suggested that academic staff are aware of the tension between encouraging their students to become independent learners, and some students' lack of readiness to learn independently. Skyrme and McGee (2016) reported staff finding it difficult to ensure fairness in assessing the work of non-native speakers, and to achieve balance between offering support and assuming autonomy. Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2006) interviewed 13 experienced Master's dissertation supervisors and found that the dual role of supporting but also developing student agency was a common theme. A similar study in the Netherlands found staff conflicted between not wanting to support too much but also not wanting the student to fail, and knowing that without additional support some would indeed fail (Kleijn, et al. 2016). While staff in these studies were actively seeking the best way to support their students towards the goal of 'Mastersness', other research paints a less positive picture. Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) found that postgraduate students experienced the transition back into study as much more difficult than their institutions realized. They observe, "the data suggests...the practice of independence is encouraged by an absence

of information rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices” (2010: 274). These students heard ‘independence’ but what they experienced was a lack of support.

The difficult balancing act required of Master’s programmes is to support students to become independent without them feeling ignored and overlooked. Relationships with others – both peers and staff are important for developing a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993) which has been shown to be a predictor of successful learning and retention (e.g. Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006). Vallerand (1997) emphasised the need to feel connected while Deci and Ryan (1991) also focused on involvement in the social world. Johnson et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of interaction with academic staff for students to feel both academically and socially supported.

Humphrey and McCarthy (1999), in their study of one university, found that PGT students felt less involved with the university than any other student group. They argued that there were insufficient tailored services for the particular needs of PGT students who saw themselves as different to undergraduates, but continued to require support. Importantly they also found that where PGT students *were* involved and felt that they belonged, this was mostly at programme level. This suggests that activities and contact at the programme level (staff, curriculum and social events) may have a key role to play in supporting the PGT student experience in terms of sense of belonging.

Programme Directors and students' 'sense of belonging'

Programme Directors have been described as working at the 'frontline of universities' with the crucial strategic role of linking the institution to the students (Vilkinas and Ladyshevsky, 2011:110). However, despite the importance of the role, interest in it as a focus for research has been limited (Brainard, 2018). Mitchell observed that the role is 'unresearched and ill defined' (Mitchell, 2015: 713) and went on to describe it both as 'pivotal', but also 'fuzzy'. In his research in a pre-1992 university, Mitchell (2015) found that while working with students to offer enrichment activities or advocacy was missing from programme leader role descriptors, it was this part of the role that was most emphasised and valued by students. Similarly, Cahill et al., (2015) highlighted the increasing demands made on programme leaders to create positive learning environments, and noted the 'rising expectations of students' (2015:273). Programme directors differ from academic managers (e.g. heads of departments), in that their leadership relies on personal characteristics, and perceived expertise rather than organizational position (Milburn, 2010). The result is that while students look to their programme director for academic and social support (essential components for a sense of belonging), these 'coal face' staff, often do not have the authority to put in place what they believe is needed (Hatcher, Meares and Gordon, 2018). Given this context, our study sought to highlight the perspective of these front-line workers who are in an ideal position to comment on the challenges faced by students, whilst not always being in a position to do something about it.

Method

The aim of the study was to elicit the views of staff responsible for PGT programmes (hereafter referred to as Programme Directors). An online questionnaire, using a secure

external survey website, was selected as the method likely to reach the highest number of respondents.

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of conversations with student union representatives, academic colleagues and professional services staff, about issues relating to PGT students, in each of the home institutions of the authors. The areas to explore were further refined after discussion with the larger UKCGE Postgraduate Student Experience working group and drawing on relevant literature where available. The questions were grouped into sections, following Dillman (2010):

- demographic programme information (e.g. cohort size, mode of study);
- pre-arrival and induction support;
- on-programme support;
- common challenges facing PGT students;
- students' sense of belonging;
- student representation;
- engagement with alumni.

A full report on the survey's findings as well as the survey instrument is available (UKCGE, 2018 forthcoming). In addition to the predominantly closed questions (for analysis see UKCGE 2018 forthcoming) some sections invited respondents to provide open answers. This option to add further information was taken up by many (over two-thirds of respondents on some questions) and thus a rich, qualitative data set was generated. This paper focuses on responses to the open questions in the sections on 'common challenges' and 'sense of belonging' which were designed to generate data to answer the following research questions:

- What do PGT Programme Directors understand to be the main challenges faced by their students?
- What importance, if any, do Programme Directors place on student sense of belonging to their programme? And what do they believe can constrain or facilitate this?

The questionnaire was piloted with seven PGT programme directors from the authors' home institutions. On the basis of pilot feedback, additional guidance to clarify instructions was provided and some questions were rephrased. The final survey was made available using an online link in press releases, *The Postgraduate* (the UKCGE's online publication) and on the UKGCE website. Other approaches included requests for UKCGE Link members to forward the survey on within their own institutions, tweets from UKCGE and HEA, and inclusion in promotional materials for a PGT specific UKCGE event.

A final total of 382 responses (including 30 which were partially completed), from 60 different institutions, were received by March 2016 when the survey closed. Due to the lack of available information on the population (i.e. all PGT programmes offered by all UK HEIs) it is not possible to make any claims about the representativeness of the sample. For that reason, descriptive information is provided so that the reader is informed about the nature of the group under study.

Simple descriptive analysis of responses to closed questions was provided through the reporting features of the online survey. Free text comments were exported and analysed thematically. A provisional list of codes was not generated in advance, but our coding was informed by our reading of the literature (Saldaña, 2016), whilst

also allowing space for data-driven, emergent coding using the constant comparative approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Comments were coded (e.g. language skills, critical thinking, finances, university time-tables) and a final coding frame was agreed after checks to ensure all data were represented. Checks were made to ensure that comments were assigned to only one code, although some responses contained more than one comment. Codes were then allocated into categories (e.g. student issues; resource issues; institutional issues). We then looked across the categories to build themes. These were identified through reflection on our data in the light of our reading of the literature, acknowledging the active role of the researcher in the construction of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Because of the anonymity of the questionnaire, it was not possible to carry out ‘member-checking’ of our analysis (Thomas, 2017), which is a limitation of our study.

This paper reports the analysis of the qualitative data. However, given the diversity in the sector we also cautiously explored the relationship between respondent characteristics and issues raised. These findings are tentative due to the lack of information about the representatives of respondents, and are therefore simply reported for information. Codes were given nominal numerical values and data were entered into SPSS (IBM Corp. Released 2012). Prior to analysis the following steps were taken: some categories were collapsed (e.g. mode of delivery was reduced to either ‘on campus’ or ‘off campus’; ‘living off campus’ and ‘issues specific to distance or on-line students’ were merged); categories with fewer than 30 responses were either merged (if sufficiently similar) or re-categorised as ‘other’; and some very small categories were removed from the quantitative analysis. Where significant differences between respondent characteristics were identified (using chi-squared) these are reported, however as noted above, they are not the predominant focus of this paper.

Results

Who responded?

Respondents were asked to indicate their job roles. The vast majority, as expected, were in clearly substantive academic posts in addition to occupying the role of programme director. The range of roles represented ranged from *Research Fellow/Assistant* (1%) to *Professor* (12.6%), with the majority giving the title *Senior Lecturer* (36%). A small number (3.9%) identified their job role as '*Administrator*'. A series of questions asked for information on their programme and the characteristics of students who typically enrol on it. This information is presented in Figure 1. There were some missing responses to all questions, these are not shown in the graph and as a result the total for each group is slightly less than 382.

[Insert Figure 1 about here. Figure 1. Figure 1. Programme and student characteristics: attendance mode, mode of delivery, discipline and origin of students.]

Common Challenges

We asked '*Are you aware of any common problems that hold PGTs back in their academic studies? If so, please indicate what they are and how serious you think such problems are*'. Some respondents identified more than one challenge, and six reported that there were no common problems of which they were aware.

Table 1 shows the number of comments in each category. Challenges identified by three or fewer respondents were categorised as 'other'. As experiencing academic culture shock and having low levels of English could be viewed as a lack of readiness for Master's level study these comments have been combined in row one of Table 1.

The category *Lack of preparedness for M level study* included comments relating to lack of academic (particularly writing) skills; lack of criticality (in analysis, reading, thinking); unrealistic expectations of the demands of PGT level study; inability to make the leap to postgraduate study; and, low levels of student confidence. The two most frequently mentioned *Institutional factors* were the perception that their university prioritized research over teaching (echoing Young [2006]; Kennelly and McCormack, [2015] and others), and the rigidity and inflexibility of university systems designed to support undergraduate teaching. Also mentioned were staff workload, lack of resources to support PGT students, and low entry requirements being set by the university. Responses categorised as ‘other’ included: the engagement of distance learning students, period of study, employment prospects, visas, and lack of employer support. There was a significant association between common challenges and discipline ($p=0.02$) and common challenges and mode of delivery ($p < 0.001$). Social Sciences respondents were more likely to report a lack of preparedness for study; those from Health and Social Care to report the complexity of students’ lives; and those from STEM to identify financial issues. In terms of mode of delivery, respondents from off campus programmes were more likely to identify complexity of students’ lives as causing problems.

[Insert Table 1 about here. *Table 1. Responses to ‘Are you aware of any common problems that hold PGTs back in their academic studies? If so, please indicate what they are and how serious you think such problems are’.*]

Sense of Belonging

We asked about ‘sense of belonging’ to follow up the work of Humphrey and McCarthy (1999), who identified that PGT students felt less involved with the university than any other student group, but where they were involved it was at the more local (programme or subject area/ discipline) level. We were interested to know if programme directors shared this perception. We asked how important programme directors believed it was for PGT students to feel they belonged to their programme, a student community, their ‘school/subject area/ department’ and the university. The responses are presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here: *Table 2. In your opinion how important is it for PGT students to feel that they belong to:*]

We then asked: ‘*Thinking about students’ sense of belonging to the programme, what, in your opinion can help facilitate this?*’. Categorisation of the 275 responses is presented in Table 3. The *Extra-curricular activities* were predominantly social events, but also included are informal gatherings or meetings of students, and more structured activities such as book clubs and film societies. Included under *Engagement with staff* are:

- 1:1 meetings;
- the visibility and availability of staff (academic and support);
- the quality of the relationship staff have with their students;
- the participation of staff in joint social events with students;
- knowing students’ names and treating them as individuals;
- meaningful contact during the taught part of the course.

Learning and teaching activities included specific approaches to learning and teaching to meet the perceived needs of the student cohort; programme design and structure, particularly the desirability of a distinct cohort identity and small class sizes; and, the availability of academic related activities such as field trips, residential weekends, and summer schools. *Communication and representation* has three main elements: the importance of clear and timely communication; the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter and programme blogs; and, student representation at various levels from class representative to student unions. The comments categorised as *Institutional factors* mostly related to the need for PGT to receive as much attention as other groups of students. The ‘other’ category includes comments that did not provide sufficient information to be allocated to an existing category, e.g. ‘course collegiality’. The only significant association found was between mode of delivery, with respondents for off campus programmes more likely to mention communication and representation and respondents for on campus programmes to mention extra-curricular activities.

[Insert Table 3 about here. *Table 3. ‘Thinking about students’ sense of belonging to the programme, what, in your opinion can help facilitate this?’*]

Respondents were then asked ‘*Thinking about students’ sense of belonging to the programme, is there anything which you think makes this challenging?*’ and 249 responses were received. The categories of responses are presented in Table 3. There were two main kinds of comments categorized under *Programme structure and organization*. Around half related to the challenge of students on one programme taking a wide range of external courses (or modules), not all with their programme cohort, and

often in other departments; and the reverse issue of students external to the programme opting in. Second, ten respondents wrote about the challenges presented by large cohort size particularly in terms of forming relationships with students. However, only three respondents indicated what they thought counted as large - 70, 100 and 150 respectively. Of the 23 comments categorised as *Institutional factors*, 11 described PGT as not an institutional priority, for some this was contrasted with a focus on UG teaching, for others, research. Some responses suggested that inflexibility was a problem '*old fashioned views on how people learn and handcuffs on assessment procedures*'. Some viewed the role of Programme Director as having too little time and status allocated to it by the university. Also in this category are comments about lack of staff time that explicitly identified institutional factors as causing problems, e.g. '*The Executive needs to recognize that considerable time and effort is required to manage teaching programmes professionally. Critically students expect access to academic staff even as independent PG learners*'. Two aspects of Master's level study were identified as problematic in terms of students' sense of belonging. The first is the short time on programme and intense nature of the work, resulting in students not having time to engage in broader aspects of university life. The second is the independent nature of study at Master's level, particularly during the dissertation stage. Issues categorised as *Other* included student finance (3) and students' negotiations of dual identity as student and professional (2). Again we looked for indications of associations between sector, role, discipline and mode of delivery and responses. As for other outcomes there was no evidence for an association with either sector or role. The association between discipline and challenges identified was of borderline statistical significance ($p=0.04$). Health and Social Care respondents were more likely to highlight multiple demands on their students' time, and STEM programmes the

language and cultural problems their students face. A significant association ($p < 0.001$) was evident between mode of delivery and challenges to sense of belonging, with, unsurprisingly ‘mode of study’ as a challenge being associated with off campus programmes, whereas institutional factors were more likely to be associated with on campus programmes.

[Insert Table 4 about here: *Table 4. Responses to: ‘Thinking about students’ sense of belonging to the programme, is there anything which you think makes this challenging?’*]

Discussion

In the first part of this paper we identified the tension that exists between the QAA expectations of Master’s level students and research suggesting the experience of staff and students is significantly different from this expectation. We noted small-scale qualitative research indicating that staff supporting PGT students are aware of, and are engaged in carefully negotiating, the tension between institutional expectations of their students, and the reality of who they are. In this respect our findings support those of smaller-scale studies reported earlier. The analysis presented in this paper contributes to this literature by providing views of staff directly involved in the delivery of PGT programmes in 60 universities across the UK.

Dealing with complexity

Our data suggest that many of those we surveyed understand that their students are dealing with complexity in their lives. Although 169 people skipped the question on common challenges, 213 people did provide responses, generating a sufficiently large

data set to justify drawing out common themes with a degree of confidence. Given the high proportion of non-EU students within the UK PGT population it is not surprising that the most frequently identified challenges are those associated with students whose first language is not English and/or who have not previously studied in the UK. For part-time students, often in full-time employment and with family commitments the perceived challenges are around achieving a balance between competing demands and finding time to study. For full-time students the perceived complexities are different again; for this group the main challenge is seen as financial and the need to take on part-time work. While the diversity of the student population is understood, it is not just one group of students who are seen as struggling to manage other demands alongside those of their programme.

Previous work on PGT student experience has suggested that institutional practices indicate a lack of awareness of the complexity of postgraduate students' lives (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010) and that assumptions are made about the nature of PGT students (Hallet, 2010). Our analysis suggests that those working most closely with the PGT students have a good awareness of the difficulties their students face, and a number of them identify institutional practices as part of the problem.

Institutional factors

There were 23 responses categorized as *Institutional factors* to two separate questions. A return to the raw data revealed that in only three cases was there a common respondent. In other words, across the two questions, 43 individual respondents highlighted institutional factors as problematic. Although lack of resources was identified by only a few as a common problem facing students, and was therefore not categorized separately, 34 respondents identified lack of resources as a factor

negatively impacting students' sense of belonging. This may indicate that resources are seen as particularly important for supporting extra-curricular and social activities to promote student belonging.

The institutional factors seen as most problematic can be understood in terms of institutional culture. Many can be interpreted as consequences of a lack of priority accorded to PGT provision. While the low status of teaching generally fits with previous research (e.g. Young, 2006; Kennelly and McCormack 2015), we identified a perceived hierarchy of status of teaching at different levels, with Master's teaching at the bottom. In addition to inadequate resourcing, and the perception that work with PGT students is not valued nor given sufficient time; we also found that staff felt frustrated by inflexible university regulations that were designed primarily for undergraduate students.

A further institutional factor was identified around the challenges faced by non-native speakers, with the suggestion from many that entrance requirements were not sufficiently high. One person stated that *'recruitment goals of the university sometimes leads us to accept students who do not have enough language proficiency to perform well on our programme'*, whilst another stated simply *'Some students just should not be admitted into the programme'*. This suggests decision-making at a level removed from the 'chalk face', suggesting a more corporate culture in which decisions around learning and teaching are likely to be made at some distance from students and their lecturers (van der Velden 2012). These comments are perhaps not surprising given what we know about universities' dependence on overseas postgraduate students for financial stability (Burgess, Band and Pole, 1998). In the search to find alternative sources of funding, university policies may be having a disproportionately negative effect on staff engaged in delivering Master's programmes as this is where the highest

proportion of non-EU students can be found (although not all will be non-native speakers) (UUK 2015). Challenges with the academic demands of Master's level study are not, however, seen as restricted to non-UK students and it is to this that we now turn.

Preparedness for M Level study

There is one perceived challenge that runs across different kinds of students (part-time, full-time, UK, EU and non-EU) and different kinds of programme (research, specialized/advanced, professional/practice), and that is a lack of preparedness for Master's level work. Poor generic academic skills and the lack of ability to engage critically were the most frequently cited issues.

Our study suggests that for at least some of those responding to our survey, their experience of the students enrolling on their programmes is quite remote from the view of PGT students presented by the QAA (2013) as confident, independent, co-constructors of their learning. Our analysis suggests that we cannot assume that PGT students need minimal study and/or pastoral support and will require little or no help with transition, indeed many of them will need support to successfully negotiate fundamental aspects of their studies. We received many more comments relating to what might be considered basic academic skills such as essay writing and reading critically than to issues predicted in the literature e.g. around engaging with new learning technology (Brown, 2014), and negotiating multiple identities (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). For some, the gap between UG and PGT level was simply seen as too big a leap for many students. These findings raise the question of whether students are successfully completing UG degrees with poor academic writing skills and a lack of critical thinking, as those who contend that standards in Higher Education are in

decline might argue (e.g. Murray 2016), or are these skills forgotten in the gap between UG and PGT. Whatever the answer, the further question of whether successful completion of a UG degree can be taken as evidence of potential to succeed at PGT level needs to be considered.

We know from Humphrey and McCarthy (1999) that PGT students expect PGT specific support and facilities and want to be treated differently to UG students. However, the picture that emerges from our survey is of the perception of need for levels and kinds of academic support for PGT students that are similar to those offered to UG students. While some programme level support is integrated into core teaching and assessment, there were 30 reports of additional classes to address specific topics, and others describing offering feedback on voluntary *additional* assignments. The implication is that, in these cases the core teaching contact hours are insufficient to provide the support required. This is a worry given what we know about PGT students' concerns with their workload (Leman, 2016) and what our data has confirmed about multiple demands on students' time.

The involvement of staff in social events to support students' sense of belonging seems, if anything, to go beyond what might be provided at undergraduate level. While we cannot tell whether these staff are equally engaged in social events to support undergraduate students, it is at least possible that staff are compensating for what they see as inadequate levels of contact time allocated by their institution by supporting PGT social events in their own time.

Overall we found that for some staff there is a disconnect between the time commitment they think is required to provide a positive PGT student experience, and what their institution considers sufficient. While there are calls for additional support from non-academic staff or support units, and for resources to support extra curricular

activity, the biggest demand is for more academic staff time. This is in line with previous research that suggests that lack of time is a consistent complaint from academics (e.g. Davies and Bansel 2005). Evidence for this is in the number of people (76) who identified engagement with staff as a key facilitator for students' sense of belonging (endorsing Johnson et al, 2007), and the 37 who identified lack of staff time as a barrier. It is also implicit in comments about workload, lack of status, the difficulty of getting colleagues to contribute to PGT teaching, and additional work being done 'on a voluntary basis'. One programme director, commenting on the need to provide support for academic writing for non-native speakers, wrote '*We cannot provide enough support in this area without eating further into personal time resources*'. The challenge is to square the circle in terms of how much support PGT students want, expect, and have time to access; how much they need; how different their needs actually are to those of undergraduates; and whether they ought to be treated differently regardless. The challenge will be complicated by the diversity within the PGT student population.

A small minority of the respondents were happy with their programme and its students. For these respondents there appeared to be a degree of flexibility and autonomy permitting them to develop a programme for their students that fully met students' needs. This suggests that van der Velden's (2012) positive message about the re-emergence of cultures characterized by loose operational control (ie collegial or entrepreneurial) is being seen in a number of institutions. However, for a larger minority there were more weaknesses than strengths, and for most respondents there was a mixed picture, suggesting both strengths and weaknesses.

Whilst our methodology precludes any claims to statistical generalizability, what we can say is that for those who are unhappy with aspects of their PGT provision, the problems identified are patterned in the ways we have identified above. PGT students are perceived as dealing with complexity and juggling multiple demands, there is a gap between the reality of PGT students' readiness for study at Master's level and institutional assumptions and the QAA vision. Institutional practices and cultures are often said to add to the challenge of meeting the needs of this diverse group.

Conclusion

Who we understand our PGT students to be is important because we will act towards them in ways that are shaped by who we think they are. What our research suggests is that, at least in some programmes, students will be receiving conflicting messages about who they are and who they are expected to be. In some cases PGT students appear to be provided with levels of support similar to that offered to UG students. This raises the possibility of a vicious cycle in which staff see students as lacking the capacity to work independently at Master's level, providing support to bring students up to standard, students then viewing that level of support as normal, in turn inhibiting their development as independent learners. The dilemma is that we want PGTs to see themselves as independent learners, critically engaged, academic partners, but feel unable to treat them in this way.

The added complexity is that while many staff see students as requiring high levels of support and contact hours beyond the delivery of core teaching, in contrast, at least some institutions have a view of PGT students which is much more closely aligned with that presented by the QAA and allocate resources (including staffing) accordingly. Our study suggests that the culture of universities appearing to prize teaching whilst

continuing to prioritise research persists in a number of institutions. The experience of some of our respondents is that not only is teaching not valued, but also teaching Master's students is least valued of all. Indeed, one interpretation of our data is that rhetoric about the independent and expert nature of PGT students is being used institutionally as a justification for allocating them little resource, particularly in the form of academic staff time.

It would appear that something has to give. The 'goal-posts' could be moved. Expectations of PGT students could be lowered, accepting that a large number of students are unlikely to achieve the QAA 'facets of Mastersness' by the end of their programme of study. This would remove much of the distinction between undergraduate and Master's level study, with all the associated issues that would raise, including the question of what a Master's would be for. Alternatively, the aspiration could be retained and admission processes altered to ensure only students with the clear potential for independent Master's level study were admitted. This would significantly lower PGT student numbers and is unlikely to be welcomed by institutions for which PGT is financially important (Pereda, Airey and Bennet 2007).

Neither of these 'solutions' appeal, and both raise concerns familiar from Clarke and Lunt (2014) regarding the need to balance access, quality and employment outcomes. An alternative would involve some revision of aspiration, some tightening up of admission, but with a focus on looking at what kinds of institutional practices are required to support PGT students from where they actually are at when they enter their programmes of study, to where we aspire for them to be at the end of their journey. Clear articulation to students of the journey we expect them to go on and the reasons why it matters would need to be matched by institutions reviewing how much resource, particularly in terms of contact hours, would be required to provide this kind of support.

In this way the promotion of independence is more likely to be experienced not as lack of support (Tobell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010) but as a necessary part of the planned and supported journey to Mastersness.

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