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An exploration of the postgraduate experience: transition and satisfaction

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Overview

- To discuss the neglected pedagogic area of the postgraduate student experience
- To discuss the findings of two studies
 - Exploring the predictors of transition to PG
 - Exploring student satisfaction using photo elicitation
- Consider how the findings can be utilized to ensure PG students feel included in the learning community

Postgraduate Students

Research has explored the transition to HE for UG students (e.g. Pennington et al., 2017)

Little research has explored transition from UG and PG outside of those exploring the PGCE student experience (e.g. Hyde et al., 2014)

Studies have explored the institutional-specific and subject-specific factors affecting the student experience (Bates et al., 2017)

NSS/PTES focus of institutions may miss out on some nuanced areas of the student experience – this could be particularly so for PG

Transition

Transition to HE vs. transition to PG

Are there different factors affecting the PG experience?

Academic self-efficacy – pre-registration programmes

Social identity and a sense of belonging

Changing nature of student satisfaction

Pennington, Bates, Kaye & Bolam (2017)

Explored predictors of transition and satisfaction in UG Psychology students – including effect of pre-entry programmes

Pre-entry students reported higher self-efficacy and higher satisfaction at the start of the academic year - no difference for social identity

At the end of the academic year, pre-entry and non-pre-entry students reported similar levels of self-efficacy, satisfaction and social identity

At time 1 – academic self-efficacy predicted satisfaction

At time 2 – in-group affect predicted student satisfaction

Study 1 – PG Transition

Aim of the study was to explore factors which predicted transition to, and satisfaction at PG

Longitudinal study – measured factors at beginning and end of the year (October and May/June)

Explored several subjects areas: Psychology, OT, Social Work and Physiotherapy

Additional interest around pre-registration M Level Headstart

Method

T1 and T2 – $N = 54$

Measures: Academic self-efficacy

Social Identity (centrality, ingroup affect, ingroup ties)

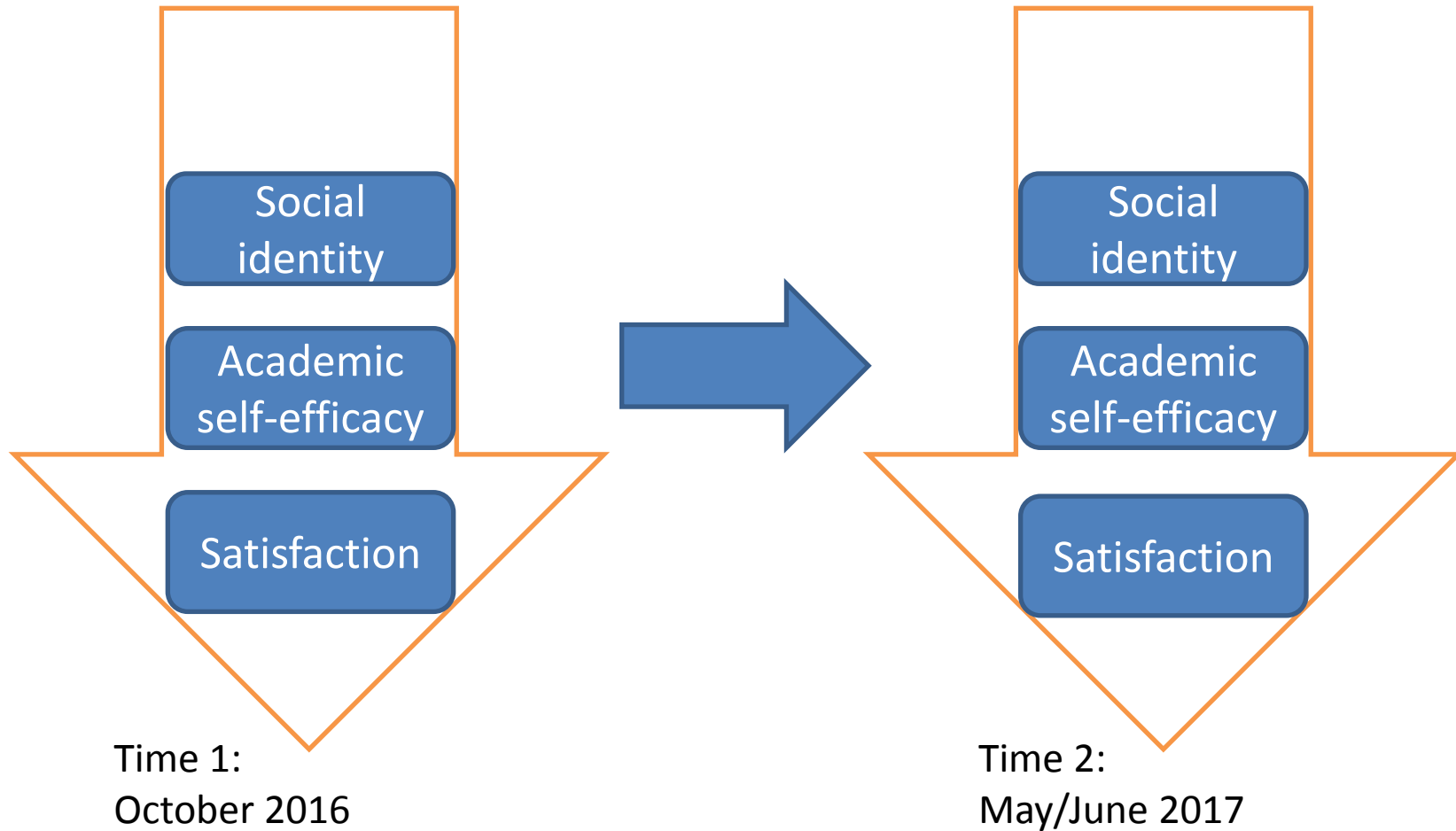
Satisfaction

Also measured: pre-registration programmes, however only 3 had completed.

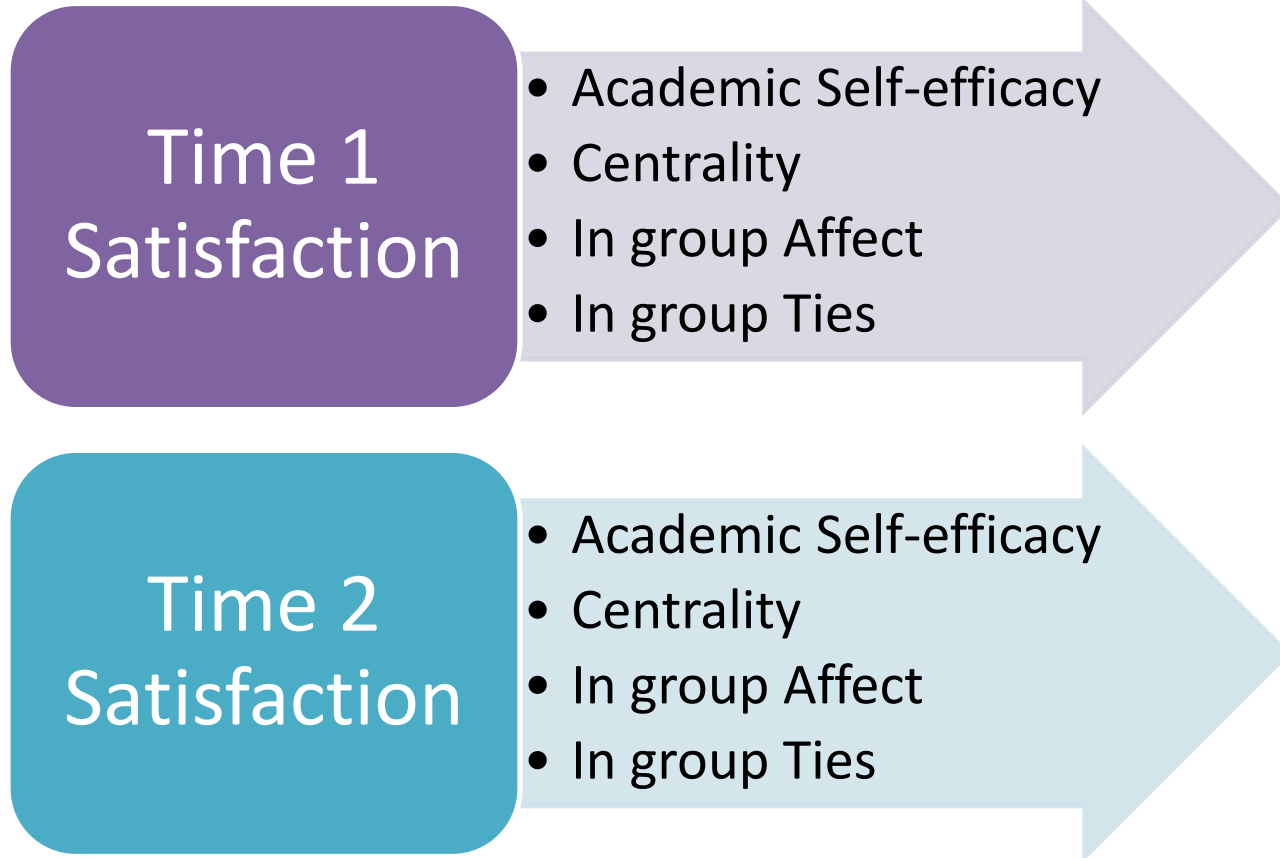
72% did UG at other institutions

74% “traditional” students at UG

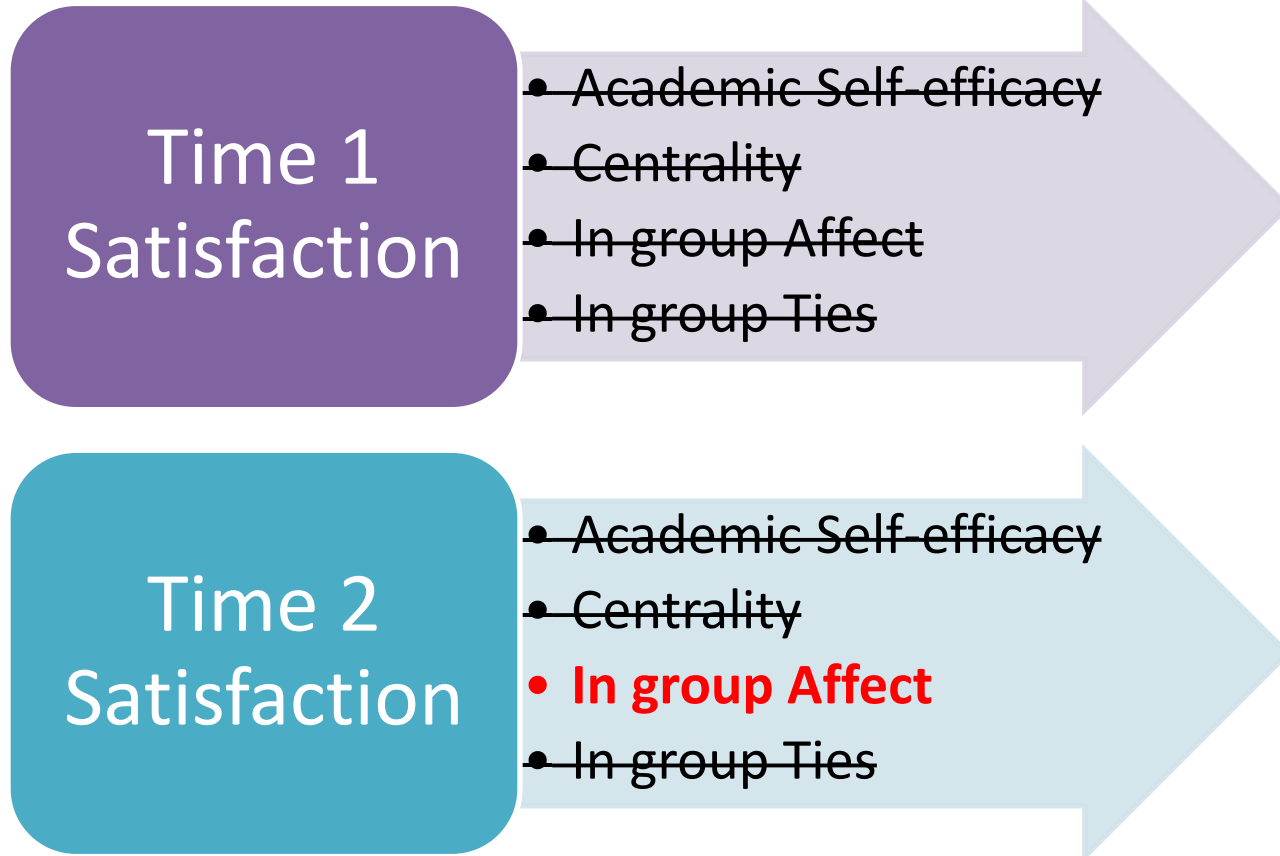
Results



Results



Results



Implications

Findings are in contrast to Pennington et al. (2017) – indicating adjustment at UG and PG are different

In group Affect important in predicting satisfaction later in the year

How are departments/institutions supporting group-based or collectivist opportunities?

How may departments/institutions promote university/student identity more effectively in pre-entry and induction events?

Study 2

Study 2 – Satisfaction and Experience

Replicate Bates, Kaye and McCann (2017) exploration of the UG student experience

Learning environment

Work Life Balance

Wider University Community

Utilising a new method

Demonstrated the complexity of student satisfaction including at an institutional and subject level

Photo Elicitation

NSS/PTES is informed governing bodies and policy-makers, not necessarily reflective of the “lived experience” of students

Much of the research that has been done in this area has used questionnaires and quantitative research (e.g. Gibbons, Dempster & Moutray, 2011)

Even more qualitative approaches are still structured and designed from a staff perspective – what we think matters to the students

Photo elicitation - the use of photos within an interview setting (Harper, 2002)

Visual stimulants alters the tone of the interview - prompting emotional connections to memories

It can further lead to new perspectives and explanations of a previously understood topic (Hurworth, 2003)

Method

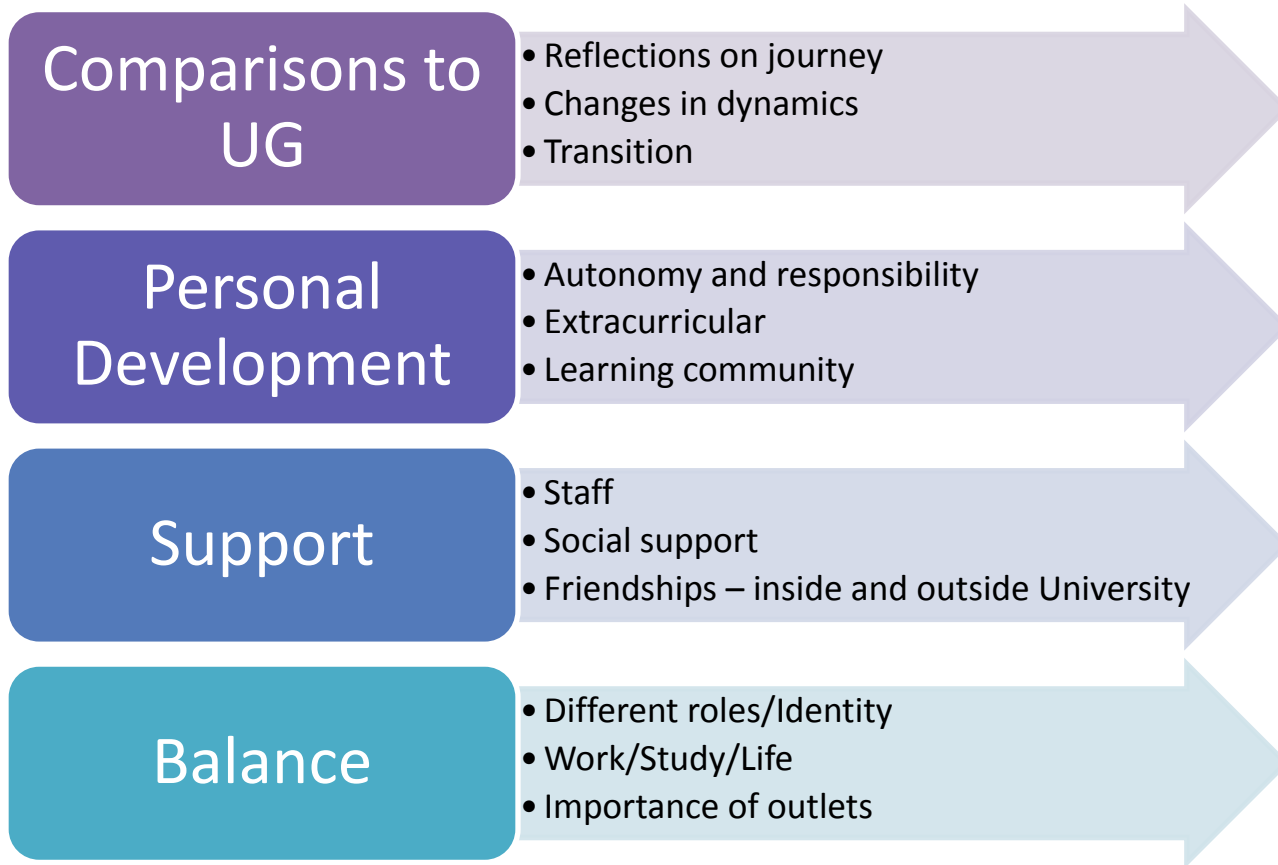
Students were recruited from the University of Cumbria MSc ($N = 3$) and PhD ($N = 4$)

Asked to take 5-10 photos that represented their university experience

The photos then guided the interviews with some additional prompting questions:

- 1) Please could you talk through these photos
- 2) How do you think these capture your experience?
- 3) Why is X (depicting something in a photo) an important aspect of you being a student here?
- 4) Is there anything else you want to discuss about your student experience which isn't depicted here

Themes



Comparisons to Undergraduate - Transition

“...there is more of an emphasis on me, pushing things forward. Whereas as a undergrad you kinda get spoon-fed stuff. Which um makes the whole process a lot easier really” (P3; PhD)

“then it gradually kind of build throughout it to realise you’ve got to question everything and then I think the jump from the end of third year to postgraduate is not that much of a gap it’s just a natural progression into something else” (P5; MSc)

“then you are left to a lot more autonomy with your PhD. I just think that you have got to learn and that might be a shock for a lot of people.” (P2; PhD)

Balance



“Um, so how do I juggle it all in? I kinda [sic] just go through natural phases, like sometimes some weeks will go by and I will do absolutely nothing with my PhD and will read absolutely nothing and that is a natural thing that does seem to happen and then I will see something or will look at something or get an email and I’ll become interested again” (P3; PhD)

“...time is your enemy... I always felt like I was chasing time” (P5; MSc)

Identity and Roles

“I suppose it’s the difference between between all the different sort of roles that I’ve got so it’s like mother, wiping snotty noses watching cbeebies, doing all that side of things but then I have to switch to being [job role] and you know going about my job there and then the student side of it which is very different again, so it’s...and wife, I better not forget that bit, it’s sort of quite varied things you’ve to slot into...erm” (P1; PhD)

“But academic me is always there and always thinking...but if I had said that to those people there, they wouldn’t have...we were getting paid to do a job and it was fun and that what it all was.” (P3; PhD)



Balance – having an outlet

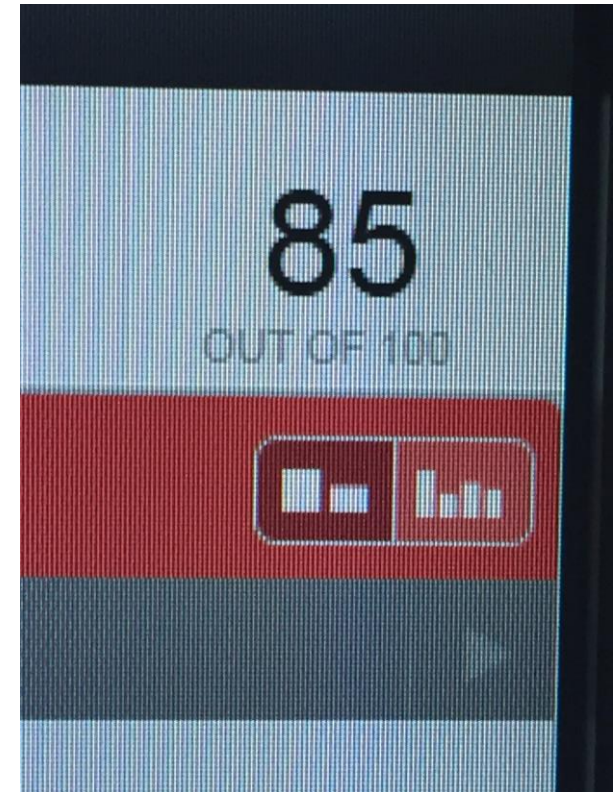
“So that is a photograph from the summer and since I started doing my PhD...one bit of advice I heard a lot of is again to try get away from sitting at a desk for too long...when I get into something and I’ll just crack on and four or five hours will just fly by and then I will be tired the next morning, and there is just no way to do it. So I have kinda [taken up biking a little bit...now I just use it as an escape. So that is a photograph of me just stopping below Ingleborough...not only just to keep me fit an active but also like I said, you have got plenty of time to be on your own and just not think about anything I guess, just enjoy it. So that was this summer in particular of trying to make an effort again to physically separate my work from my personal life.” (P4; PhD)



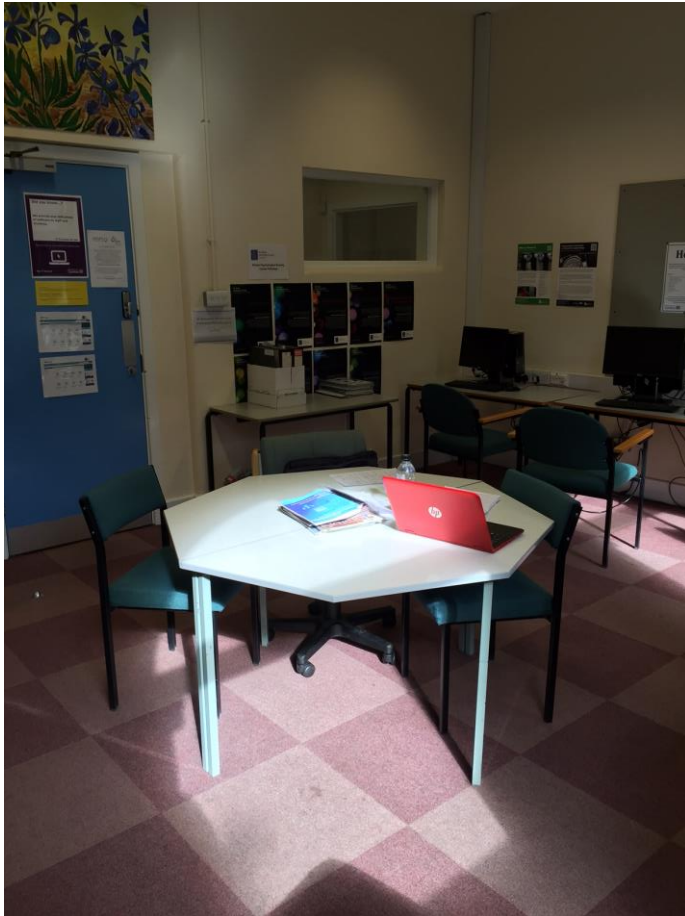
Personal Development

“...a lot of satisfaction comes with the confirmation that you know what you’re doing on the course, so that 85 [%] to me is representative of erm that what I’m doing and all the hard work I’ve put in is kind of the right thing to do” (P5; MSc)

“ it did knock my confidence quite a lot erm but at the same time the feedback was really useful and erm although it took me a little bit of time to come back erm I’m kind of grateful for it now...I’m lying I’m not grateful for a bad grades [laughs]” (P6; MSc)



Learning Community



“...like the undergraduates there that helped me formulate my ideas for what I’m doing and helped me move forward, just by challenging me on what it was...because in in terms of understanding you know if you can explain it to someone else you then increase your own understanding of it and because there’s so many years can use that room erm like someone was there struggling once with a t-test and you’re there and you’ve got to kind of dust the cogs off and you know like ok...oh yeah that’s how you do it and that refresher was helpful...” (P5; MSc)

Friends and Family

“Just as a way of support after we all had been through this journey...We came out on top. It was like a journey of friendship as well as the university journey” (P2; PhD)

“That is my dad on graduation day, um [pause] my dad has been a really big influence through um [pause] all my years at uni really” (P7; MSc)



Staff

“it could be just when I meet up with and feel more comfortable when I meet up with both my supervisors, who are now spread out throughout the country and when I get together with them, we have a beer about something and we talk about PhD much more comfortably” (P4; PhD)

“Erm...I would have liked to take pictures of some of the lecturers...although this course is fantastic with the content the lecturers make the course and I think some of the lecturers here especially are kind of role models of what I would like to be if I became...as cheesy as it sounds...would be like a role model of like I'd like to be when I move into education” (P5;Msc)

Implications and Conclusions

Compared to the UG transition – different factors must be affecting the transition to PG (to be followed up)

For the wider student experience – many similar things were important

Demands on PG students is more significant

PG students seem more reflective of the “journey”

Importance of the wider learning community/university community is significant at both stages of this research

What does this all mean for HEIs?

Implications for how we measure satisfaction? Internally, if not externally?

Implications for how we might foster student satisfaction?
Foster social relationships?

How can we ensure PG students are still full included in the learning community?

Marketing? Attracting future students?

Encouraging the pre-entry programmes

Thank you for listening!

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Bates, E. A., McCann, J. J. & Harland, L. (2017) *An exploration of the factors predicting transition to postgraduate study: A longitudinal study*. Manuscript in Preparation.

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Bates, E. A., Kaye, L. K. & McCann, J. J. (2017) A snapshot of the student experience: Exploring student satisfaction through the use of photographic elicitation. *Manuscript under review in Journal of Further and Higher Education*.