Facilitating the transition to postgraduate studies: What can we learn from the First Year Experience?

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There has been a significant growth in postgraduate enrolments in recent decades which has resulted in an unprecedented diversity of students at postgraduate level. As a consequence, traditional assumptions about the academic competence of postgraduate students which are implicit in university policies and practices are no longer valid. Recent research suggests that postgraduate students have similar transition needs to first year undergraduates, but this is not acknowledged at an institutional level. Postgraduate students encounter many barriers yet adequate academic support services at postgraduate level are lacking. This paper presents two cases studies from an Australian university which address the provision of academic support in Master's level programs. The findings indicate that a coordinated, program-wide approach incorporating non-traditional teaching strategies is needed to successfully integrate academic support.

The paper concludes that broad-ranging support is required to assist students to make a successful transition to postgraduate studies. A review of the First Year Experience literature offers useful insights into approaches to undergraduate transition which are relevant to the Postgraduate Experience. The increasing diversity of postgraduate cohorts and the complexity of their needs, however, poses significant challenges for traditional university systems. Nevertheless, it is argued that universities must take steps to prioritise engagement, support and retention at postgraduate level so that all students achieve quality education and employment outcomes. This will require the development of flexible university systems; targeted, postgraduate transition pedagogies based on undergraduate models; appropriate support mechanisms, including resources for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and further research.

Key Words: academic skills, employability skills, transition pedagogy, postgraduate studies, first year experience, academic support, accounting, public health.

1. Background

1.1. The widening participation agenda

The higher education sector worldwide is undergoing a period of historic, widespread transformation which is evident in the democratisation, commercialisation and internationalisation occurring across the sector in recent decades (Ernst & Young, 2012). The changes in higher education are the result of a confluence of factors including rapid technological development and the emergence of the knowledge economy; increased global mobility and shifting market forces;

and changes to traditional funding mechanisms (Ernst & Young, 2012; Sam & van der Sijde, 2014). The global trend towards the democratisation of knowledge and the movement towards universal, higher education participation in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries has been a key driver in the transformation of the sector (Gale & Parker, 2014). In Australia, in response to the government's agenda of broadening participation and deregulation of higher education, universities have lowered entrance scores, established alternative entry pathways, made dispensations to meet lower socio-economic and social inclusion criteria, and targeted emerging overseas markets in attempts to secure student enrolments (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015; Carpenter, Dearlove, & Marland, 2015). A similar movement towards wider participation in higher education is evident in the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland and the United States (US), as well as other OECD countries, all of which have pursued expansionary higher education agendas (Gale & Parker, 2013).

Whereas universities have traditionally focussed on teaching and research, a new economic imperative has prompted a more commercial approach to their mode of operation in recent times (Sam & van der Sijde, 2014). Faced with increasing student enrolments alongside shortfalls in government funding, universities have been compelled to adopt a more entrepreneurial role, pursuing new domestic and international markets in order to generate additional sources of revenue (Sam & van der Sijde, 2014). Commercial interests along with technological advances and globalisation have been the key drivers for the internationalisation of the sector and this has exerted a major influence on the way higher education institutions have evolved in recent decades (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). The increase in enrolments from non-traditional domestic markets together with the expansion of international markets has resulted in a level of diversity in student cohorts which is unprecedented in higher education (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006). Whereas the cultural and linguistic differences of international students are obvious, the wide variation in the education and socio-economic backgrounds of domestic students is a relatively new feature of universities which has significant ramifications for teaching and learning in universities. Nelson et al. (2006) note that commencing students from non-traditional cohorts are often ill-informed about university and have inaccurate preconceptions about the demands of university studies. Many enter university lacking the requisite study strategies, skills and attitudes for academic success (Carpenter, Dearlove, & Marland, 2015).

International students face additional challenges when beginning their university studies. Culture shock, social isolation, limited proficiency in English, and an unfamiliar academic environment render the adjustment to university study especially demanding (Hall & Wai-Chung, 2009; Counsell, 2011). Arriving with expectations about teaching and learning styles acquired from previous education experiences in their home countries, international students often encounter 'academic shock' in their first semester of studies (Carroll & Ryan, 2007). Hall and Wai-Chung (2009) point out that international students are expected to adapt to unfamiliar cultures of learning and communication without explicit instruction as to what this entails. Adapting to the demands of studying in an English language university is a complex process and international students must learn to recognise "the nexus between their own culture-situated interpretations of approaches to knowledge and academic writing, their personal values and the specific requirements of a distinct discipline regarding these approaches" in the new institution (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007, p. 158). Other factors which can influence academic performance include maturity, motivation, prior education and previous exposure to the discipline (Counsell, 2011).

1.2. The postgraduate experience

The expansion in undergraduate enrolments resulting from the broader participation agenda has been accompanied by unprecedented growth in postgraduate enrolments (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013a). In the UK, postgraduate students (including research students) represent approximately 23% of the total university enrolments (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b) and the situation is similar in Australia (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014). The proportion of students enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs in Australia has doubled from 11% to 22% of total university enrolments over the last 30 years (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014) with a 36% increase in

coursework masters enrolments (including domestic and international students) from 2003 to 2009 (Kiley, 2013).

In the light of increasing student numbers and courses, Hall and Wai-Ching (2009) claim that further investigation into the learning experiences of postgraduate students is warranted. There is a substantial body of research investigating strategies to facilitate the successful transition of first year students to university (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Kift, 2009; Thomas, 2012, but this is not replicated at postgraduate level where there is arguably a paucity of research on the transition to postgraduate studies (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013a, 2013b; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthorn, & Zammit, 2009). Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013b) postulate that the gap in the literature stems from the assumed 'expert status' of postgraduate students who, having completed an undergraduate degree, are assumed to be competent at 'negotiating and performing' in the university environment (p. 124).

The assumption of competence is implicit in policy and practices in universities; however, recent studies have challenged this notion, finding that the disparate nature of the postgraduate cohort means that traditional assumptions about their prior knowledge and skills are ill founded (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b; Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). Indeed, the expectations in relation to independent learning which stem from the presumption of competence can undermine confidence and increase feelings of isolation in postgraduate students, with potentially adverse implications for transition trajectories (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b). Prior research has highlighted the often fragile status of postgraduate students' identity, with the need to establish a learner identity and identify with a learning community a crucial issue for postgraduate students (McCormack, 2004; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b). In an online learning community, Blount and McNeill (2011) reported that postgraduate students needed support to engage with educational technology and build confidence in using it, while Littleton and Whitelock (2005) found that identity, confidence, self-presentation and social comparisons were very important to postgraduate students. The presumption of homogeneity in the postgraduate student population is another misconception on the part of universities and the hiatus created by misunderstandings and mismatches in the respective expectations and needs of postgraduate students and academic staff must be addressed in order to create a successful teaching and learning environment (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b).

Responding to the call for more research into the postgraduate experience, Kinash and Crane (2016) conducted a large scale investigation into the postgraduate experience across 26 universities in Australia for the purpose of generating guidelines for evidence-based, best practice. One of the key findings from 266 participants was that postgraduate students encountered numerous barriers in making the transition to postgraduate studies, with many students and staff dissatisfied with the student experience. Postgraduate students reported similar transition needs to first year undergraduates, but this was not addressed by universities which failed to provide adequate support services. The complexity and diversity of postgraduate students and the failure of universities to accommodate their varied needs and circumstances was a recurrent theme. In relation to career development, students felt they were not given adequate guidance and support in developing their employability skills and making the transition to professional employment after completion of their studies.

1.3. The transition to professional employment

The focus of much of the literature on the transition to university has been on the first year of studies. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in perspective in the way in which transition is perceived in the research. This more recent approach views entry to university and successful negotiation of the first year of studies as part of a larger transition, in which students make the transformation over a period of years from commencing student to graduating student and finally professional employee. This approach entails the design and delivery of a 'transition curriculum' throughout an entire course of study, incorporating strategies to enhance engagement and retention at first year and beyond, as well as relevant capstone experiences and preparation for a professional career (Kift, Butler, McNamara, Brown, and Treloar (2013); O'Donnell, Wallace, Lawson, & Leinonen, 2015). This broader perspective incorporates not

only the development of the academic skills and discipline knowledge required for successful course completion, but also the employability skills and competence required for entry to the world of professional employment.

Graduate employability is core business for universities and, according to the Graduate Careers Australia annual survey of employers, it is 'soft skills' which are impediments to graduate employment in Australia, with employers reporting that interpersonal and communication skills, attitude and work ethic, and motivation were particularly important for graduate hires (Norton & Cherastidthan, 2014). A number of key studies in recent years have investigated graduate outcomes and the results have revealed poorer employment outcomes for international students as compared to domestic students (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Birrell, 2006; International Education Association of Australia, 2013). Arkoudis et al. (2009) reported that international students lagged behind their domestic counterparts and faced greater challenges in securing fulltime employment after graduation. Employers expected minimum standards of English Language Proficiency (ELP) and international students who failed to demonstrate this were unlikely to be employable in their field. Graduates needed to have strong technical skills and be 'well rounded' individuals who were a good cultural fit in the organisation. However, Arkoudis et al. (2009) found that international students were less likely to have an understanding of workplace culture and the personal characteristics and attributes required for professional employment in Australia.

The requirement for a broader skillset extending beyond the boundaries of the discipline is evident in the two professions examined in this paper: professional accounting and public health. In professional accounting, Hancock et al. (2009) reported that employers expected technical competence, but selected candidates with superior non-technical skills over applicants of similar academic merit who were less adept in the non-technical areas. Communication skills, teamwork skills and self-management were highly valued in graduates and essential to career advancement but, in a disturbing paradox, employers were disappointed with graduates' skills in these areas (Hancock et al., 2009). A number of other studies reached similar conclusions about the need for competence in both technical and non-technical skills in professional accounting and the failure of accounting graduates to reach expectations (Jackling & De Lange, 2009; Gray & Murray, 2011; Wells, Gerbic, Kranenburg, & Bygrave, 2009).

In the public health arena, in a comparative, multi-country European study investigating the competency needs of public health graduates seeking employment, Biesma et al. (2006) highlighted the importance of generic skills. They reported that "while public health specific knowledge is providing a useful starting point for entry-level public health professionals, employers increasingly recognise the value of generic competencies such as communication and team working skills" (p. 325). Other studies have identified generic competencies as essential in the public health arena which has changed dramatically as a result of globalisation, advances in life expectancy, the rapid growth of knowledge and new public health paradigms (Clark & Weist, 2000).

2. Case studies

The need for more academic support at postgraduate level is clear, but the diversity of students enrolling in postgraduate programs presents challenges for academics, raising questions as to how to effectively embed the requisite academic and generic skills in postgraduate programs. This section presents two cases studies from an Australian university which address the provision of academic support in Master's programs to facilitate the transition to postgraduate university studies and the transition to professional employment respectively. The first case is the Master of Professional Accounting (MPA) where the focus is on employability skills and making the transition to professional employment while the second is the Master of Public Health (MPH) where the emphasis is on entry level skills and navigating a successful transition to postgraduate study. The MPA and MPH are both fee paying, coursework programs which attract large enrolments of international students but concerns about their professional employment prospects have been raised (see previous section). This paper suggests that, in the absence of effective transition strategies and appropriate academic support at postgraduate level which

caters for the diversity of the student population, the flipside of widening participation may be a disappointing postgraduate student experience with poorer educational outcomes and fewer professional employment prospects.

2.1. Case 1: Master of Professional Accounting – 2010-2012

2.1.1. Background

The MPA is a postgraduate, coursework degree which provides an opportunity for graduates whose first degree is in another discipline to undertake additional studies in accounting. The course is predominantly technical, equipping students with the knowledge and skills required to embark on a career in professional accounting. The MPA comprises twelve mandatory units (see Table 1) and is accredited by the national accounting bodies in Australia.

Table 1. Master of Professional Accounting - course structure.

Mandatory Units – 12	
Business Foundations	Accounting for Planning & Control
Business Communications	Auditing
Principles of Accounting	Taxation Law
Financial Accounting	Accounting Theory & Practice
Principles of Economics	Principles of Finance
Corporate Law	Quantitative Studies

In recent years, favourable visa regulations have made it possible for international students to take advantage of the MPA as a conduit to permanent residency in Australia (Birrell, 2006). This has boosted enrolments of international students in MPA programs; however, employers and other key stakeholders have expressed reservations about their employability, citing poor ELP and lack of competence in non-technical skills such as communication, problem solving and teamwork (Birrell, 2006; Hancock et al., 2009).

Students from China and India account for the majority of enrolments in the MPA program at the university. In semester one 2010, the Head of the School of Accounting initiated a study to investigate concerns about MPA graduate outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of the literature was undertaken in order to identify the key, non-technical kills viewed as critical for a successful career in accounting. 'Employability skills' was the term used in this context to indicate non-technical skills which were considered as prerequisites for employment. A long list of skills was initially collated but this was distilled to include four key skills which could be successfully embedded and contextualised within the course content. The short-listed skills included: (i) oral communication, (ii) written communication, (iii) critical appraisal and problem solving skills (viewed as one composite skillset), and (iv) teamwork skills.

The next step involved the development of the MPA Employability Skills Framework (ESF), which was designed for the purpose of embedding the four key skills across the entire MPA program. A fully integrated and contextualised approach for teaching these skills was adopted for the ESF (a simplified version of the ESF is depicted in Table 2), based on evidence indicating that generic skills should be integrated into course content rather than taught in separate skills-based units (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Harris & Ashton, 2010). Within the ESF, the four key employability skills were mapped to specific units, with a requirement for all units to address at least two skills in a manner which allowed for the scaffolding of learning experiences and appropriate skill development throughout the program. (The development and implementation of the ESF is outlined in more detail in Bunney, Sharplin & Howitt, 2013).

The implementation of the ESF occurred progressively over four semesters beginning in July, 2010 and ending in June, 2012. During this time the Leaning Advisor (LA) attached to the School worked with unit coordinators in order to incorporate the designated employability skills in learning outcomes, devise appropriate teaching and learning strategies, modify assessments, and develop feedback and support mechanisms to facilitate the development of the nominated skills. The LA also developed teaching and learning materials and facilitated workshops targeting the relevant skills, contextualising the material to the unit content and assessments. A final part of the rollout process was to up-skill academics so that they could assume responsibility for embedding the requisite employability skills in subsequent semesters, in order to ensure the sustainability of the ESF.

Table 2. Employability Skills Framework (simplified version).

Semester	Unit	Teamwork	Oral Communication	Written Communication	Critical Appraisal & Problem Solving
S1	Business Foundations	☑	☑		☑
	Business Communications		☑	☑	
	Principles of Accounting	☑			☑
S2	Financial Accounting	☑	☑		
	Principles of Economics		☑	☑	
	Corporate Law			☑	☑
S3	Accounting for Planning & Control	☑	☑	☑	☑
	Auditing	☑	☑	☑	☑
	Taxation Law			☑	☑
S4	Accounting Theory & Practice	☑	☑	☑	☑
	Principles of Finance			☑	☑
	Quantitative Studies	☑	☑	☑	☑

2.1.2. Evaluation

At the end of the two-year implementation phase, the impact of the ESF was evaluated in a three part qualitative study. In the first part, students enrolled in the MPA program were asked to complete a questionnaire about their learning experiences and perspectives on the development of the four key skills targeted in the ESF (the demographic data for students who participated in the survey are included in Table 3).

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Table 3. Demographic Data for Student Participants (*n* = 87).

Gender	Number	%
Female	47	54.0
Male	38	43.7
Unspecified	2	2.3
Age		
20-25	38	43.7
26-30	29	33.3
31-35	13	14.9
36-40	2	2.3
>40	2	2.3
Unspecified	3	3.5
Nationality		
Africa	10	11.5
Asia	29	33.3
Australia	8	9.2
Europe	3	3.4
Indian region	32	36.8
Other	4	4.6
Unspecified	1	1.2
Enrolment Status		
Domestic	10	11.5
International	77	88.5
Language		
Native English Speaker	15	17.2
Non-English Speaking Background	72	82.8
Completed UG degree		
Yes	82	94.2
No	2	2.3
Unspecified	3	3.5
MPA units completed		
0-3 (1 semester)	28	32.2
4-6 (2 semesters)	15	17.3
7-9 (3 semesters)	29	33.3
10-12 (4 semesters)	13	14.9
Unspecified	2	2.3
Work as Accountant		
Yes	72	82.7
No	3	3.5
Unsure	12	13.8

In the second part, academics teaching on the program were invited to attend a focus group meeting to share their observations about their teaching experiences and the impact of the ESF on students' skills. In the third part, documentary evidence in the form of unit plans, assessments and marking rubrics was examined to determine the extent to which the ESF had been integrated into course materials. Three different methods of data collection from three different sources of data enabled the triangulation of the data.

2.1.3. Students' perspectives

In the initial stage of the analysis, students' responses to each question were classified as positive, negative or ambiguous and the results are summarised in Table 4. A detailed thematic analysis of the responses was subsequently undertaken using NVivo and the findings are reported in detail in Bunney, Sharplin, and Howitt, 2015. Overall, the analysis revealed that the ESF had positive impacts on both the teaching and learning outcomes of the MPA. The majority of students believed that (i) their employability skills had improved and (ii) this had a positive impact on their learning experiences. This is a significant finding as the primary objective of the ESF was to improve the employability skills of students with a view to improving their professional employment prospects. However, changes to teaching methods and assessments were made during the implementation phase of the ESF and the results of the study suggest that they had a composite effect, eliciting improvements in employability skills as well as enhancing the learning experiences of students. The trend away from the traditional lecture/tutorial model towards a more student-centred teaching approach, with more opportunities for class discussions and group work, emerged as the most important factor.

Table 4. Summary of Responses to Student Questionnaires.

Coded Responses	Positive	Negative	Unsure/ Other
Q 1 Improvement in generic skills development			
Q 1(a): Written Communications ($N = 80$)	75 (94%)	5 (6%)	0 (0%)
Q 1(b): Oral communications ($N = 80$)	74 (93%)	6 (7%)	0 (0%)
Q 1(c): Critical analysis and problem solving ($N = 78$)	69 (88%)	9 (12%)	0 (0%)
Q 1(d): Teamwork ($N = 82$)	71 (87%)	11 (13%)	0 (0%)
Q 2 Impact on learning experiences – written communications			
Q 2(a): Understand the learning materials ($N = 72$)	60 (83%)	8 (11%)	4 (6%)
Q 2(b): Participate in class ($N = 66$)	50 (76%)	14 (21%)	2 (3%)
Q 2(c): Complete assessments ($N = 69$)	64 (93%)	4 (6%)	1 (1%)
Q 3 Impact on learning experiences – oral communications			
Q 3(a): Understand the learning materials ($N = 65$)	47 (72%)	18 (28%)	0 (0%)
Q 3(b): Participate in class ($N = 75$)	69 (92%)	6 (8%)	0 (0%)
Q 3(c): Complete assessments ($N = 63$)	47 (75%)	14 (22%)	2 (3%)
Q 4 Impact on learning experiences – critical analysis and problem solving			
Q 4(a): Understand the learning materials ($N = 65$)	58 (89%)	5 (8%)	2 (3%)
Q 4(b): Participate in class ($N = 62$)	54 (87%)	8 (13%)	0 (0%)
Q 4(c): Complete assessments ($N = 65$)	58 (89%)	5 (8%)	2 (3%)

Table 4 continued

Coded Responses	Positive	Negative	Unsure/ Other
Q 5 Impact on learning experiences – teamwork			
Q 5(a): Understand the learning materials ($N = 60$)	48 (80%)	12 (20%)	0 (0%)
Q 5(b): Participate in class ($N = 57$)	47 (82%)	10 (18%)	0 (0%)
Q 5(c): Complete assessments ($N = 65$)	58 (89%)	5 (8%)	2 (3%)
Q 6 Importance of generic skills for future employment			
Q 6(a): Written Communications ($N = 75$)	74 (99%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Q 6(b): Oral communications ($N = 74$)	74 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q 6(c): Critical analysis and problem solving ($N = 75$)	72 (96%)	1 (1%)	2 (3%)
Q 6(d): Teamwork ($N = 73$)	70 (96%)	2 (3%)	1 (1%)
Q 7 Confident about future employment prospects			
Q 7 Confident about future employment prospects ($N = 77$)	55 (71%)	15 (20%)	7 (9%)

2.1.4. Academics' perspectives

The twelve academics teaching on the MPA program all contributed to the focus group discussion. Ten attended in person and two provided written feedback. An analysis of audio and written transcripts of the focus group discussion revealed that academics were generally optimistic about the effectiveness of the ESF, embracing for the most part the changes in teaching approaches required (Bunney, Sharplin & Howitt, 2015). However, this was tempered by constraints on teaching time and the need to cover prescribed discipline content which limited how much time could be spent on teaching employability skills. International students, in particular, required more time to develop their communication skills and this represented an ongoing problem for academics. They also noted the considerable challenges inherent in catering for a diverse student population, with domestic and international students requiring different teaching strategies and levels of support.

2.1.5. Documentary evidence

The analysis of the unit plans, assessments, marking rubrics and other supporting evidence revealed that the two skills-based units in the MPA program, Business Communications and Business Foundations, were closely aligned with the requirements of the ESF. In the remaining units, a greater level of alignment was found in units belonging to the School of Accounting than units belonging to other schools (e.g. School of Law and Justice). This was possibly because the ESF was a project driven by the School of Accounting, involving an extensive consultation process and a strategic implementation plan. This process captured all School of Accounting unit coordinators but not those from other schools whose participation was not mandated by the Head of School.

2.2. Case 2: Master of Public Health – 2014–2015

Like the MPA, the MPH is a postgraduate, coursework degree which is widely promoted to overseas students, many of whom view the opportunity of enrolling in an MPH as a means to a better life in Australia. The MPH focuses on the development and management of public health policy and programs in an international context and includes research preparation for students interested in pursuing research in the discipline. The program includes nine core units and three elective units (see Table 5).

The majority of international students enrolling in the MPH program at this university are of Indian origin and, whilst most are competent English speakers, they are generally unprepared for the demands of postgraduate studies. At the start of semester 1, 2014, the Academic Skills Centre was approached by the course coordinator who was concerned about poor academic skills and course progression for MPH students. A series of meetings between LAs and academics teaching on the program and an informal assessment of student work revealed an urgent need for intervention. However, in this case, the adoption of a fully integrated and contextualised model to embed academic skills across the program was not considered a viable option.

Table 5. Master of Public Health Course Structure.

Mandatory Units	Elective Units
Leadership and Health Advocacy Skills	Public Health Strategies
Public Health: Philosophy, Principles and Practice	Public Health Evaluation
Epidemiology	Communicable Disease
Diversity, Culture and Health	Law and Ethical Issues
Strategic Decision Making and Program Planning	Maternal, Child and Youth Health
Biostatistics	Principles of Environmental Health
Research Preparation: Principles and Approaches	Workplace Hazards
Health Science Research Project 1	Emergency & Crisis Management
Health Science Research Project 2	Occupational Health Management
	Project Management
	Program Management

Over the ensuing two year period, one LA worked with academics on a number of units in the MPH program, adopting a range of strategies to assist students with the development of academic skills. At a course level, a series of 90 minute seminars providing an orientation to postgraduate studies in Australia was offered, covering topics such as teaching styles and lecturer expectations, assessments, research skills, academic integrity, referencing and academic writing. The seminars were aimed at students enrolled in their first semester of study but all were welcome. They were offered on campus and online and while attendance was encouraging in the first semester, it declined notably in subsequent semesters. Disappointing student attendance was not unexpected as studies show that students most in need of help often do not attend voluntary classes designed to assist them to develop their skills (Harris & Ashton, 2010). The reasons offered include a lack of awareness of skills deficiencies (they don't know what they don't know); unwillingness to identify as students needing additional support; and failure to perceive the true value of these workshops.

At a unit level, the involvement of the LA in specific units was driven primarily by individual lecturers who were concerned by the gaps in academic skills they perceived, rather than as a result of a structured, course-wide initiative. The starting point was the learning outcomes and major assessments for the units which varied in type (essays, case studies, reports, exams etc.). The LA provided advice to academics on the design of assessment tasks and rubrics, making them more structured with more detail regarding lecturers' expectations and the use of appropriate academic conventions. The LA then delivered voluntary add-on workshops for each unit 'unpacking the assessment task', outlining the task requirements, clarifying academic conventions and teaching the academic skills required in the assessment. However, the time allocated

to the workshops was limited (2 × 90 minutes per unit on average) and attendance was inconsistent as the workshops were not mandatory. The workshop materials were also made available online for students.

At a course level, the LA was also available for individual and small group assistance with assignments during a dedicated, 90 minute weekly Drop-In Assignment Support session. Although initially well attended in the first semester, attendance rapidly dropped off in subsequent semesters. Individual consultations with the LA were also available on request, but only a very small number of MPH students availed themselves of this opportunity. The few students who did, appeared to benefit in terms of academic skills development which translated into better marks for assessments. However, the ad hoc nature of the LA's involvement with units in the MPH program meant that a formal evaluation from a whole-of-program perspective was not possible. The variety of lecturers, teaching styles, unit content, assessments and workshops, and the lack of a program-wide strategy precluded any sort of rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of academic support strategies. Attendance was monitored and student grades between semesters were informally compared, but no statistical evaluation was conducted.

3. Discussion

3.1. Insights from the Master of Professional Accounting and Master of Public Health

A comparison of the MPA and the MPH programs from an academic support perspective reveals similar problems in different disciplines. There was, however, a key distinction in the drivers for change and approaches to student support adopted in each case. The MPA project was driven primarily by external market forces amidst widespread reservations about the employment prospects of graduates with the focus on exit level skills rather than entry level skills. All academics teaching on the MPA were directly involved in the implementation and evaluation of the ESF which represented an evidence-based approach and was subject to a formal evaluation. In contrast, the request for academic support for students enrolled in the MPH program was generated internally, driven by academics' concerns about the lack of preparedness and inadequate academic skills of students enrolled in the course. The focus initially was entry level academic skills rather than appropriate exit level skills; however, this has now changed in accordance with the identification of graduate employability as one of the university's new strategic priorities. Lacking a cohesive, overall program perspective like the MPA initiative, the approach to academic support in the MPH was piecemeal, determined largely by the respective unit coordinators, with direction and guidance from the LA involved.

Despite these differences, the two cases offer a number of insights regarding the embedding of academic support within a program of study. Firstly, the findings suggest that a coordinated, program-wide approach is needed to integrate generic skills in a program of study and this is supported by prior research in the field (Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Mead, 2009; Sloan & Porter, 2009). Skills development is progressive and incremental, requiring regular practice and feedback over a period of time, and integrating teaching and learning tasks in a structured manner across an entire course is the ideal way to achieve this (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). A framework model like the ESF is well suited for this purpose as it allows for the scaffolding of learning experiences, affording multiple opportunities for students to develop their skills over the duration of their studies (Willcoxson, Wynder, & Laing, et al., 2010).

In addition, close collaboration with LAs appears to be a key aspect of successful programs incorporating fully integrated, academic support (Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Mead, 2009; Sloan & Porter, 2009). This is particularly important when teaching international students who require English language support and more time to develop their communication skills. Constraints on teaching time and the need to cover prescribed discipline content creates tension for academics and this needs to be addressed at course and institution level through policies and practices addressing the transition needs of all postgraduate students (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). Traditional teaching modes do not cater adequately for the disparate needs of such a diverse student population and a range of non-traditional, innovative teaching strategies is needed (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). Prior studies demonstrate that strategies such as small

group teaching (Fortin & Legault, 2010), cooperative learning strategies (Hwang, Lui, & Tong, 2008) and problem-based learning (Hansen, 2006; Biesma et al., 2008) are more effective for teaching generic and academic skills to varied cohorts. In the case of the MPA, the shift away from the traditional lecture/tutorial model towards a more student-centred teaching approach improved student engagement and enhanced learning experiences.

3.2. Reflections from the First Year Experience

The First Year Experience (FYE) literature offers additional insights which are applicable in the context of the postgraduate experience. First and foremost, the findings from the MPA and MPH regarding the need for a holistic, program-wide approach to academic skills development, contextualisation, innovative teaching strategies as well as feedback and support mechanisms, are supported by a number of studies in the FYE domain. According to Tinto (2012), contextualised, timely academic support; student engagement achieved through purposely designed pedagogies; frequent feedback on assessments; and the establishment of learning communities are key pillars in enhancing student success. In a similar vein, Thomas (2012, p. 6) affirms that the "heart of successful retention and [student] success is a strong sense of belonging" which is closely aligned with social and academic engagement. Meaningful interactions with staff and supportive peer relations are also crucial to the development of knowledge and confidence (Thomas, 2012). This requires high quality academic programmes, student-centred teaching, learning experiences which are relevant to students' interests and goals, and effective intervention.

These principles underpin the various approaches to the FYE, classified in terms of first and second 'generation' approaches in the literature (Wilson, 2009). First generation approaches are those which target co-curricular initiatives such as orientation, peer support, learning assistance and social activities, while second generation approaches address curriculum issues like course design, assessment and building learning communities (Gale & Parker, 2013a, 2013b). More recently, a new, third generation approach to the FYE has emerged, which incorporates a 'transition pedagogy' intentionally designed to increase student engagement and retention (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). This 'transition pedagogy' is based on six key principles underpinning first year curriculum design: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment and evaluation (Kift, 2009). It has generated broad interest and is presented as the ideal vehicle for facilitating a sense of engagement, support and belonging in increasingly diverse first-year student populations (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). Harden-Thew and Dean (2015) caution, however, that the efficacy of a 'transition pedagogy' ultimately depends on the academic staff who design and deliver the curriculum, advocating the need for professional development opportunities for all teaching staff. The 'Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points' framework for professional development was devised at their institution for the purpose of refining transition teaching practices (Harden-Thew & Dean, 2015).

An alternative perspective on university transition which questions the premises underlying these 'generational' approaches is conveyed in the work of Gale and Parker (2011, 2013, 2014) who claim that, in spite of the growing interest in transition, it is not well defined in the literature. This is an important observation because assumptions about the nature of transition ultimately drive institutional policy, practices and research. In a broad review of the literature on transitions in Australia, the UK and the US, Gale and Parker (2014) identified three broad conceptions of transition: T1 'induction', T2 'development' and T3 'becoming'. The T1 approach, which includes the 'generational' approaches, holds that transition is best addressed at an institutional level through activities such as induction processes, targeted support services and specific curricular design. T2 suggests that it is more a question of individual development whereby students move from one stage of life to another, acquiring a new identity as a university student. T3 contends that the student transition experience is neither a uniform nor linear process but one which is characterised by diversity, complexity, subjectivity and flux (Gale & Parker, 2014). The authors conclude that, while predominant notions of higher education transition fall into either T1 or T2, it is T3 which represents the way forward. This entails a change in focus from a largely system-focussed approach, in which students are expected to make the transition to higher education by learning to conform to institutional requirements, to an approach which is

more flexible and student-centric, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of contemporary student populations.

3.3. Implications for the postgraduate transition experience

The mandate for universities to address the transition needs of postgraduate students is clear and the critical issues of engagement, support and retention at postgraduate level must be made a priority at an institutional and national level (Kinash & Crane, 2016). Institutional policies to address the transition needs of postgraduate students are necessary, along with the allocation of appropriate funding and resources (Kift, 2009; Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). Transition pedagogies providing fully integrated, academic support structures catering specifically for the needs of postgraduate students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are crucial to improving the postgraduate student experience (Hamilton, Thomas, Carson, & Ellison, 2012). In this respect, the FYE literature and the principles and strategies developed in undergraduate transition programs provide a solid foundation on which to base a blueprint for postgraduate transition which caters for the needs of all students. A vertical approach to transition extending beyond the first year of postgraduate study to include subsequent years of study as well as the transition to professional employment is desirable at postgraduate level (Gale & Parker, 2013; Kinash & Crane, 2016). Finally, further investigation into the particular challenges and opportunities arising from the increasing diversity of postgraduate student cohorts, including international students and non-traditional domestic students, would provide additional evidence and impetus for the changes required to improve the postgraduate student experience (Hamilton et al., 2012). It would also assist in identifying exemplars of good practice in postgraduate transition to add to a body of evidence-based practice in the postgraduate transition domain (Hamilton et al., 2012).

4. Conclusion

Greater student mobility and broader participation in higher education have changed the university landscape in ways that were inconceivable several generations ago, resulting in burgeoning student enrolments and an unparalleled cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity of student populations. However, widening access to university brings with it social and moral responsibilities and it is incumbent upon universities to provide adequate levels of support for undergraduate and postgraduate students (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Thomas, 2012). Historically, the focus on retention and engagement has been on undergraduate students; however, the postgraduate student experience is now attracting the attention of academics, researchers and university management. The considerable financial contribution made by postgraduate students to university budgets means that, from an economic perspective, universities must take steps to ensure that fee-paying students gain a quality education experience in order to protect their reputations and ensure that markets are sustainable (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). From a social justice and equity viewpoint, postgraduate students have as much right as undergraduate students to a quality education experience and universities have a moral obligation to provide adequate support (Nelson & Creagh, 2012). From a broader, societal perspective, quality graduates have the capacity to make a better contribution to society and to the new knowledge economy (Bunney, Sharplin, & Howitt, 2015). Clearly, not all postgraduate students are competent in 'navigating and performing' in the academic world and broad-ranging support is required to assist them to make a successful transition to postgraduate studies. However, the diversity of postgraduate cohorts means that there is no 'one size fits all' recipe for support and this poses significant challenges for traditional university systems and teaching approaches. A commitment to address the diverse needs of postgraduate students requires universities to prioritise the Postgraduate Experience and develop new, flexible systems and specifically targeted transition pedagogies.

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