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Transition into Taught Postgraduate Study

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The transition to taught postgraduate study involves building an understanding of what it means to be a student at this level specifically. Students need to appreciate the intensity of the course both in terms of difficulty and pace, rather than viewing it as an extension of an undergraduate degree.

Postgraduate courses usually require a higher level of intellect and comprehension and a significant amount of independent study and research, alongside active participation within the academic community. The short term nature of most taught postgraduate programmes also means that students must make a swift transition to this level of study, in particular in terms of skills development, as well as having an eye on where they are going at the end. Unlike many other programmes of study, therefore, the intensity of taught postgraduate study puts extra emphasis on the need for an effective transition and induction process.

Student View

“I’m only here for a year and I want to take part in activities and focus on my studies and I find it difficult to find a balance.”

“You want to experience something different to undergraduate freshers. It would have been great to have had a master focused freshers’ week.”

“I was not prepared for the amount and intensity of work even compared to my final year undergraduate course. It’s been a big step up.”

Thinking back, did you feel prepared for your move from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study?

Students had completed the application and registration process, but had not really thought about being a postgraduate student or done anything specific to prepare for their next course of study.

They felt that communication with them prior to arrival was very important and for some, particularly where they had accepted a place a few months prior to starting, they felt a real gap in communication. They suggested that having regular updates from the University would help in making them feel welcome, and could start preparing them for their course.

Many postgraduates are new to the city and the University, but students felt that the Freshers' Fair and related activities were aimed at new undergraduates and did not suit their needs or were not appropriate for them (where they were 'lumped in' with undergraduates). Targeted postgraduate freshers' events, particularly a postgraduate reception or gathering, were suggested at University not just School level, so that students could also meet postgraduates from other Schools.

What have you found to be the main differences between studying at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels?

Students felt that the differences of studying at this level were: the need to 'hit the ground running' with study and research and to get to grips quickly with University procedures and processes; increased workload, both in the amount of work and the need for more advanced comprehension and intellect; the importance of being part of the academic conversation and making a contribution to this as a peer (no longer a passenger); the need to be proactive, taking responsibility for your own study and research and being engaged within your School in general; the importance of having or developing a plan for what you are going to do next- what you want out of the course and where you want it to take you. In summary, students felt that there was a different level of intensity relating to postgraduate study and that it was not just a harder version of an undergraduate degree, but felt like a research degree rather than a taught course. They also felt that some students, particularly those returning to higher education study after a gap or international students from different cultures might find this difficult to manage.

Were you offered any academic support with your move from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study? What worked well? What didn't work so well?

Students had experienced limited academic support and felt that assumptions were often made about their skills levels. Some felt that if the area of study was new or interdisciplinary, academic support to help them think in new ways or understand unfamiliar resources would have been useful.

There was a general consensus that there was lots of help there if you ask for it, for example staff office hours and personal tutors, but that you could miss out on this if you did not actively seek help.

Students' experiences of personal tutoring at this level were varied, but all felt that tutors could offer help and advice with the transition to postgraduate study.

What things have you done yourself to help with your move from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study?

Students felt that their time management skills had improved out of necessity, and that planning their time carefully was helping to manage their workload. They also thought that they had to recognise early on the need to take control of their studies: setting up meetings with academic staff, making key decisions about the direction of research and getting involved with their School's academic community, in order to help make the transition smoothly.

Do you think the School / University could have prepared you more fully for your move from undergraduate to postgraduate study? If yes, in what way could this have been done?

Students felt that regular communication prior to starting could get them thinking about the transition and excited about the course ahead. It could also be used to suggest things they could do beforehand and what to expect on arrival. This could also start a conversation with students if they have questions or thoughts to share. A joint Skype session introducing the School and academic staff had been used by one School for international students, but home students also felt that tapping into this before arrival would help them build their understanding of the academic community and get them excited about the course.

Some students had been given pre-arrival tasks to do but they felt that integrating these into the first couple of weeks of the course and doing /discussing these with other students would have been more beneficial. Facebook groups were also suggested pre-arrival, perhaps managed by a PhD student.

As well as the practicalities of studying at Leeds, students felt that transition and induction should also cover what is expected of you as a taught postgraduate, as well as what you can expect and what is on offer to you, so that you can make the most of your course and all that Leeds has to offer.

A talk from a taught postgraduate student just finishing the course would be really helpful.

What do you remember as the most helpful advice you have been given in the first few weeks of this semester?

Students had received advice such as: “treat the course as a job”, “don’t underestimate it” and “expect to have to speak to anyone and everyone in your school”.

What useful advice would you provide to students to prepare them for their move from undergraduate to postgraduate study?

“Have a clear idea what you want to get out of the year”; “decide what your focus is in order to make the best use of your time”; “think about your future plans early on, so that you can focus your efforts during the year”; “don’t just think you’re starting your masters, you’re starting a lot of things and doing them all at once”.

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested to enhance the support for students transitioning into postgraduate study:

- Communication: keep in touch with students once they have accepted a place. This could be by regular emails, a Facebook page maintained by current Masters / PhD students, webinars to introduce students to staff and allow them to ask questions.
- Postgraduate freshers' events: tailor sessions to postgraduates and provide the opportunity for them to meet their academic community, including other Masters students, PhDs and academic staff. University-wide postgraduate freshers events are also recommended so that students can meet postgraduates from other Schools.
- Expectations and differences: communicate with students prior to arrival what to expect, what is on offer, and what is expected of them as a taught postgraduate student. Highlight the differences between study at undergraduate and postgraduate level throughout transition and induction, so that they can acclimatise.
- Induction: aim for a focused induction programme of direct relevance to postgraduates and which allows students to highlight and follow up on their specific academic support needs, as these may be varied. Ensure that students are in touch with personal tutors and know all the avenues of help on offer. A talk

from a student who has just completed the Masters course is useful in building understanding.

- Skills development: provide support for students to understand and develop skills needed to be effective postgraduate students, particularly research skills, planning and organisation, and proactivity and engagement.

Case Study: School of Earth and Environment *Contact: Katie Livesey*

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The School of Earth and Environment has developed an online transition and induction resource – Step Up to Masters, which is designed to prepare students for studying at Masters level. The resource was developed following the success of the School's undergraduate transition resource- Countdown to University Study. Step up to Masters combines practical transition and arrival information, with general support and advice for studying at this level, and therefore provides a single port of call for Masters students. Information is provided in a staged approach, giving practical suggestions for what to do before arrival, through July, August and September. This encourages students to confirm their place, as well as to start preparing for the transition.

The resource builds student understanding of what to expect at Masters level, in terms of workload, timetable and assessments, as well as encouraging them to consider their goals and existing skills prior to arrival, so that they are ready to make the most of opportunities on offer. In addition, there is a section on academic study skills, highlighting the need to apply and demonstrate these at a higher level, in particular advanced critical thinking, questioning and reflection, researching, referencing, academic writing and online learning. There is also information on how students can get involved in University life and their academic community, and quotes from lecturers about what they expect from students studying for their Masters. As well as general information and guidance for Masters students across all programmes in the School, the resource is also used to provide programme-specific information, including pre-induction reading and critical thinking activities. Step up to Masters has been well used by students, with significant numbers of international students accessing the resource prior to arrival.

<http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/stepup/>

Case Study: School of Law

The School of Law runs a compulsory Postgraduate Legal Research Skills module (LAW5661M) for all students on LLM programmes. The aim of the module is to prepare students for legal research required for seminar preparation, coursework assignments and writing dissertations in law. It aims to instil the fundamental research skills that postgraduate students need and equip them with the skills required to conduct an independent research project. The module outlines different techniques and methods of doing legal research, as well as the steps involved in conducting research, such as identifying and developing research questions, finding and evaluating sources, compiling a literature review and critically analysing existing materials.

The module was developed from a previous research methods module which focused specifically on research methodology rather than research skills. Academic staff found a gap in students' understanding and skills in key areas such as selecting and analysing resources, referencing and dissertation writing, as many of the students did not have prior experience of research work. The module therefore builds from these key research skills through to the research methodologies covered in the original module, and provides students with opportunities to build academic skills which support their other taught postgraduate modules as well.

Student feedback on the module is very positive and shows a clear understanding of how it relates and supports their postgraduate programme as a whole. The two pieces of assessment are clearly linked to seminar work and involve practical tasks of analysing legal cases and research, emphasising the increased need for critical and analytical skills at this level. Module lectures are provided to the whole cohort, whereas seminars are programme-specific, with students divided into small groups with their immediate peers; thus ensuring the direct relevancy of cases and literature used. The module contributes to the overall induction of taught postgraduates by placing a clear emphasis on research skills development at postgraduate level.

The module sits alongside an induction programme of weekly academic and professional skills sessions running for nine weeks. These non-credit bearing sessions are not assessed and focus on transferable skills, such as academic writing, presenting, analytical skills and plagiarism. The programme also includes

sessions on maximising the Masters experience and from the Careers Service. These sessions aim to provide support for students more broadly, particularly international students or those new to the subject area. The School also provides a weekly taught postgraduate drop-in surgery for students to raise any issues or access extra support.

Resources

Skills@Library's Skills for Success resource provides an introduction to the Library for taught postgraduate students, as well as guidance on finding information, critical thinking and academic writing at this level of study.

<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/tutorials/skills-for-success/>

Greenwich University Case Study

<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience/case-studies/case-study-23-transition-into-postgraduate-study-university-of-greenwich-london>

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