Post-Graduate Transition: Challenges for Staff in HE

Dr Sally Alsford and Dr Karen Smith
Educational Development Unit
Background to the study

- Considerable attention has been given to undergraduate transition (both at UoG, and across the sector)
- Transition to postgraduate study is largely un-researched (O’Donnell et al 2009)
- Yet:
  - *Embarking on Masters level studies could be viewed as a key transitional ‘stage’ of a longitudinal learning career in which particular intellectual, social and emotional challenges are likely to arise* (Scott et al 2011)
Study focus

- Investigate the experiences of both postgraduate students (taught and research) and those who teach and support them
- Aim to:
  - identify effective strategies already in place
  - design specific support from which postgraduate students could benefit
  - design resources which would best equip staff to support them
Methodology

- Small-scale and exploratory
- Focus groups with staff (n=30) and students (n=41) across all three campuses, including discipline-specific focus groups at Medway and Avery Hill
  - Activity-based exercises: post-it notes; journey mapping; life-cycle annotations
- In-depth interview with 5 students
Preliminary findings

- We will focus on some of the findings from the staff and student focus groups:
  - Post-it note exercise (staff and students): ‘what could the university do to better help postgraduate students settle into their study?’
  - Student lifecycle exercise (staff)
  - Journey mapping (student)
Post-it note exercise:
What could the University do to better help students settle into postgraduate studies?

**STAFF**
- Information / communication
- Early induction activities
  - Library induction
- International students
- Finance
- Social events / support
  - Parity of support
- Administrative support
- Support within curriculum
- Additional courses
- Physical spaces
- Student representation
- Alumni involvement

**STUDENTS**
- Pre-arrival information
- Induction and information
- International students
- Finance
- Activities and opportunities
  - Peer / socialisation
  - Placements
  - Community
- Technical / resources
- Academic / curriculum
  - Guidance/support
  - Time issues
- Roles, rules and expectations
- Supervisor relationships
Student life-cycle

Understanding online application. Where do you turn to ask questions?

Who decides which students are offered a place?

Getting, retaining all information, conflicting messages

Often students not ready for a PG qualification

The first week of the programme is key

Do I want to be here?

Bureaucracy, fatigue, academic growth, life balance.

They hit a bit of a trough and need encouragement.

Is the programme relevant to my job aspirations?

Understanding the unique employability of PG students

Moving through the course

Employment

Application

Pre-arrival

Arrival

First term

Being part of a PG community

What is expected of me, how much work will I need to put in? What will marking be like?
Journey mapping
Initial recommendations

- Social space for postgraduate students
- Programme and social activities aimed at postgraduate students
- Clear and consistent pre-arrival information
- Clarification of expectations of academic work and support for postgraduate study
- Timetabled personal tutoring
- Consistent and final start dates
- Greater consistency – Director/s of PG study? Dedicated PG admin support?

[a fuller set of recommendations will follow the completion of data analysis]
What next?

• Finish interviews
• Complete data analysis
• Write a report for Learning and Quality Committee and New Arrivals Steering Group
• Write an academic paper
References
