Improving the postgraduate coursework student experience: barriers and the role of the institution

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Abstract

Issues surrounding the Postgraduate Course Work (PCW) student experience are under-represented in the literature and in institutions. Research to date has tended to focus on the responsibilities of Faculties and the short term, issues associated with transition. The paper aims to address broader issue of the PCW experience using student survey data in order to make recommendations for institutions. Barriers to best practice are recognized as relating to identity/status, representation and administrative issues. Recommendations are made relating to clear marketing, Orientation events, provision of a geographical and institutional home and the communication of university goals to staff.

1.0 Introduction

Postgraduate Coursework (PCW) students are a significant component of University communities but typically are difficult to define as a distinct cohort. They are therefore less visible and, due to the variations in enrolment, times of semesters and the size of individual course cohorts, their interests can appear secondary to postgraduate research students and undergraduate students. The paucity of studies of PCW students attests to their lower profile generally within student populations. PCW students can fall through the gap of service provision, orientation, representation and networking.

In contrast, there is increasing emphasis placed on improving PCW student numbers, along with a growing focus within institutions on student feedback and student satisfaction surveys (Coulthard 2000; Swarbrick 2003). This paper aims to look at the broad picture of PCW student experience, recognising that if institutions want to increase the size of their PCW cohorts then it is essential to build our understanding of how these students can be best served. This will be achieved here using student survey, interview and institutional data. Best Practice guidelines developed in an AUTC-commissioned report (Reid, Rennie & Shortland-Jones 2005) will also be used to examine the role of the institution beyond individual course coordinators. Recommendations developed here aspire to improve practice in managing PCW cohorts generally, as current practice suggests that the PCW experience is an area that merits further attention in most Australian universities.

1.1 Characteristics of the cohort

Descriptions of PCW students are typically drawn from institutional statistics, identifying trends such as PCW students are much more likely to be mature-aged with some break from study (or possible no degree experience). They are more likely to be working part- or full-time and attending campus during evening and/or weekend sessions if at all.

However, potentially the most important characteristics of the PCW student population are identified by the students themselves. PCW students enrol in postgraduate courses for reasons more directly related to career path, professional networking and professional development than postgraduate research students. As such, their expectations of service delivery (often closely linked to their payment of fees), of standards of teaching and resources available and of the university experience are considerably higher than undergraduates or postgraduate research students. This is particularly the case in the 'professional' courses and can be linked to the relatively short duration of their courses and competition in providing professional training programs; students want their time at university to be efficient, high quality and value for money.

1.2 Background/Literature review

Literature is generally sparse on the topic of the PCW student experience in Australia. Previous studies focus on one aspect of the student experience such as Faculty teaching and course development (Reid *et al.* 2005) or transition (Symons 2001; Lang 2002).

Commissioned reports recognise the importance of the PCW issue and constitute two important contributions to the topic of PCW studies. Firstly, the DEST report (Coulthard 2000) found that the lowest levels of satisfaction for PCW students are their interactions with staff, other students and the academic community. Secondly, the AUTC report (Reid *et al.* 2005) makes considerable progress in understanding the principles and mechanics behind 'professional' PCW degrees. The report focuses only on courses delivered in business, education and health, perhaps unknowingly creating a distinction between these programs where students learn as part of a discrete and distinct cohort and other courses where students may be more integrated into the undergraduate population. The AUTC survey (Reid *et al.* 2005) interviewed Deans and students which, although yielding interesting useful results, limited the study to interactions between Faculties and PCW students. However, a list of 25 best practice guidelines were developed which are comprehensive and focus on tangibles such as resources and timetabling.

Student expectations are an emerging theme in the literature. Symons (2001) suggests that while PCW are unsure of what is expected of them, they have high expectations of the institution and their future experiences. This is echoed by Guilfoyle (2006) who notes that students may have a high expectation of teaching standards, resources available and support services (this may be linked to the payment of fees) and can feel particularly let down if their expectations are not met.

2.0 Methods

On-line surveys were undertaken at the end of 2004 and 2005 to gather demographic data and to gauge student opinion on a range of issues related to their PCW experience at UWA. Topics covered included transition, orientation and the best and worst aspects of being a PCW student. There was a total of 30 questions with 20 of these answered using 'radio-button' choices and 10 open ended questions for students to provide additional comments.

A range of other stakeholders were then also either surveyed (on-line) or interviewed in person. A series of broad questions on the provision of orientation services and the requirements of students were sent to all PCW course coordinators. Interviews were conducted with the current and past presidents of the UWA Postgraduate Students Association (PSA).

Broader requirements for demographic data were met using the UNISTATS facility where appropriate and surveys were made of other Institutional websites to gather organisational information.

3.0 Results

Survey data

The survey was distributed to all students who commenced PCW studies in 2004 and 2005. We got 120 responses in 2004 and 62 in 2005 resulting in a response rate of 6% (although initially disappointing, this response rate is comparable with that received from the majority of similar institutional surveys of large cohorts).
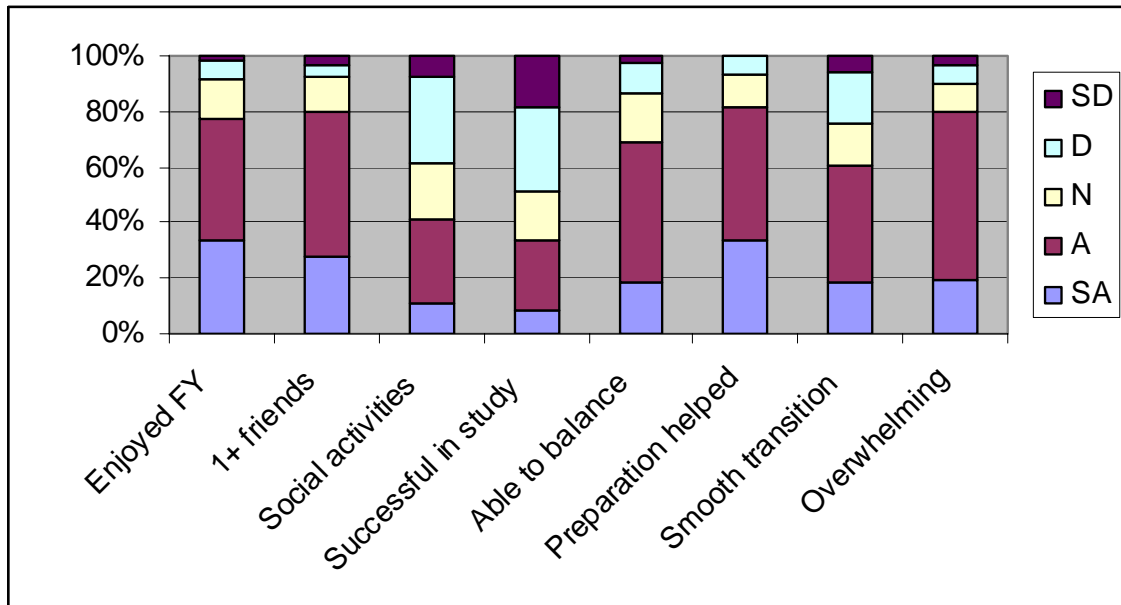
Figure 1 – Summary of survey data from 2004 and 2005 (SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neither, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree).

Undoubtedly the survey showed some encouraging results (Fig 1). For example, 77% of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed their first year (almost 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed). In addition, 80% made one or more friends (7% felt that they didn't). Although figures weren't as high, it was pleasing to see that 60% thought they had a smooth transition to PCW studies (25% didn't).

However, the survey also demonstrated some difficulties experienced by PCW students. In particular, 80% of respondents found their first year overwhelming and daunting and only 10% didn't.

The survey also highlighted what might be considered particular aspects of PCW studies. For example a particular challenge in PCW is balancing studies and other commitments and 69% of respondents found this difficult (13% didn't). Similarly, only 41% engaged in social activities on campus (38% didn't) which may highlight that PCW students are less interested in areas outside their courses. However, they have expressed an interest in networking so maybe the activities available do not suit them. Only 34% thought their first year studies were successful (49% didn't) and 82% thought their previous life experiences prepared them for the PCW experience, whereas 7% didn't.

On a more practical level, 62% of respondents didn't attend any form of orientation although 75% of those who did found it useful and informative. In addition, 29% didn't receive any kind of Orientation Guide. Interestingly 48% sought help outside their faculty and Student Services (mainly from library staff) which also highlights that the PCW experience extends beyond the course and faculty they are enrolled in.

Survey comments

As is typical in surveys of this type, the comments revealed particularly strong feelings. PCW students consistently stated that the top three best things about PCW studies are making friends and networks amongst other students, an enjoyment of the subjects covered and an enjoyment of the stimulation of

learning. Conversely, (and potentially more revealing) are the comments made by students about the least enjoyable parts of PCW study; the most common complaint being timetabling, flexibility and lecture schedules. Comments were also made about the perceived (low) status of PCW students amongst teaching and administrative staff and the treatment they received. Students also noted the gap between their expectations of the resources that would be available to them and what they received.

4.0 Barriers to Best Practice

Identity and status

A lack of group identity is possibly the most important barrier to best practice in the PCW student experience (Reid *et al.* 2005). By its very nature, the cohort is a heterogeneous group that is difficult to describe or categorise. Students are spread across Faculties, attend campus at different times (or not at all) and often have no physical or geographic 'home'. Conditions of group identity are obviously more developed in well defined cohorts within dedicated Graduate Schools (that are often seen in Management, Education or Health Sciences) but the opposite may be true when PCW students are not provided a defined identity by Faculties.

PCW students are not undergraduate students (although they may enrol in some undergraduate units) and are not research students (although they are likely to undertake some sort of research project during their candidature). This overlap suggests that PCW students are served by both the undergraduate and the research communities but this is typically not the case.

The 'invisibility' of this group is compounded by a reported 'low status' of PCW students amongst other students and staff. Survey data has shown that PCW programs are seen as much lesser importance than undergraduate or research degrees and that the students enrolled in these programs are by association, less worthy. An example was reported from a Science Faculty where a PCW student was entitled to a study space but not in the same 'nice' room as the research students. Difficulties in forging an identity from within and unclear perceptions from outside the group have knock-on effects in, and are exacerbated by, other areas of the PCW experience; namely representation and logistical issues.

Representation

A cycle of problems exists where PCW students are underrepresented on University committees – both formally and informally. A quick browse of the websites of the Group of 8 universities highlights that while all these institutions have some form of central Graduate School that administers to postgraduates, 4 of the 8 explicitly only look after research students with schools named Graduate Research Schools or similar (ANU, Monash, UNSW, UWA) with the other 4 headed by a Dean of postgraduate studies (or similar) but with a focus still firmly directed at research students (Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland, Sydney). Admittedly, these institutions are research intensive and the story may be markedly different in institutions more targeted at PCW students. However, one of the Go8 institutions until very recently had a Dean of Postgraduate Research and a Dean of Undergraduates, potentially leaving PCW wondering where they might fit in the University's priorities.

Past and current president(s) of the UWA Postgraduate Students Association reported that it is notoriously difficult to find a PCW representative for the committee. This PCW representative is supposed to attend the University Teaching and Learning committee meetings but the lack of a representative has meant that the PSA president (a research student, with assumedly less interest of knowledge of TL& matters) has attended these meetings for at least the last 5 years.

Similarly, Faculty Board meetings are attended by an undergraduate representative from the Guild and a research student who sits on the PSA. Whilst Faculties may have a postgraduate research co-ordinator who oversees research programs and student activities, these staff rarely if ever have responsibility for PCW students. Course coordinators are largely left with the responsibility (and the workload) of looking after the PCW student experience.

This lack of PCW representation beyond course coordinators then means that there is little if any networking amongst staff who have a common interest in PCW interests. This isolation and heavy workload for individuals means that it can be difficult to find an audience for best practice literature on PCW issues and even harder to find staff members willing or able to publish accounts of PCW practice. This highlights a potential gap between a university's stated priorities and what is possible 'on the ground'.

Logistics and administration

A range of logistical and administrative factors complicate the issues associated with the supporting and enhancing the PCW student experience. Course coordinators reported some very small cohort sizes (as small as 1 or 2!) and highlighted that it is difficult for these students to develop and maintain any sense of identity. Course coordinators are often teaching and administering units and classes at the same time, making it difficult to add further tasks such as representation and integration to the list of responsibilities.

From a broader perspective, staff outside Faculties may find it difficult to locate and contact PCW enrolled students. The various start times for PCW students (including trimesters and summer semesters) make it difficult to organise a campus-wide welcome and orientation programme. It can also be difficult to gain access to PCW student contact details depending on how and where these are stored. In fact, with a large and growing number of types of postgraduate degree, it can be difficult for both staff and students to even identify what is classified as a PCW degree and what is administered as PG Research.

5.0 Recommendations for improving the postgraduate coursework student experience

The Reid *et al.* (2005) paper provides a comprehensive list of recommendations for Best Practice. However, this list largely covers resource-related issues and is primarily directed at Faculties and unit coordinators. This paper has attempted to canvas a broader perspective of the PCW student experience and as such makes the following recommendations:

Marketing must focus on providing a realistic picture of PCW study.

The PCW student experience begins with their first contact with the institution and this may not always be from Faculty staff. Greater collaboration should occur between Faculties, PCW coordinators, International Centres and Public Relations departments within institutions to provide a consistent message.

Institution-wide Welcome and Orientation events should be offered in addition to Faculty events.

Orientations events can be used to inform students of services available across campus and to outline expectations and standards. Networking and integration opportunities (with PCW students in different course) should also be promoted.

PCW students need a geographical and institutional home

Feeling part of a clearly defined cohort and a sense that they are a valued part of the university community are crucial to the PCW experience. On a practical level, this refers to representation on committees, an

obvious figurehead in the university executive as well as areas for PCW students to meet, hold seminars and socialise.

Institution goals must be reinforced by individual staff members

Students' expectations of staff treatment and attitude are particularly high and can be hard to attain, with staff members potentially not aware that they have a PCW student in their unit (except in the case of professional PCW degrees). In addition, PCW coordinators should be afforded teaching relief to network with peers on PCW issues and to inform colleagues of important issues relating to these students.

6.0 Conclusions and future work

This paper has examined the PCW student experience from a perspective beyond that of an individual course or Faculty. In the past it has been assumed that because PCW courses are typically administered and taught through Faculties that they are the only influence on students' experiences. However, students are subject to broader forces within and outside the University community and it is important to consider these in best practice guidelines. In addition, responsibility for the PCW student experience lies beyond individual course coordinators and Faculties.

Further study should be conducted into the specific differences between the experiences of students enrolled in 'professional' PCW courses and those not in a distinct PCW cohort.

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