Experiencing transition into postgraduate study: can the application of relationship marketing principles help? (0473)

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Summary

The concept of transition is rooted in psychology and originally based on work conducted into bereavement, family crisis and depression (Parkes, 1988; Holmes and Rahe, 1967). The transition of undergraduate students into Higher Education environments of academic and student life encompasses various types of change. For many students, starting at university is an intimidating "leap into the unknown" (McInnis et al, 1995). However, Wakeling (2005) found that "a surprising omission is the analysis of progression to postgraduate (PG) study" (p506).

This project aims to contribute to the literature relating to the PG transition experience. It consists of a qualitative study employing a semi structured interview methodology, in the first phase. It explores student expectations and experiences in the early stages of their transition to PG programmes and presents several key emergent themes. Some suggested approaches using relationship marketing principles in the study's second phase, using action research, are presented.

Paper

Whilst there have been many studies undertaken into UG and other forms of educational transition, comparatively little is known about the factors that affect students whilst making the transition into postgraduate (PG) study. This despite the rapid growth and increasing importance of PG students to the university sector. According to Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) "in contrast to other types of educational transition, the transition to PG study has not benefitted from a wide and diverse literature" (p261). This situation may be due to assumptions that this transition may be less demanding for students than the move to UG study at university (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013).

In the context of PG programmes, although feedback is routinely collected from students nearing completion of their PG degrees, using the PG Taught Experience Survey, there still appears to be a gap in understanding the issues faced by students entering PG study. It seems imperative that data relating to students' expectations and experiences are collected at the start of their PG programmes.

The purpose of this project, although relatively small scale, is to contribute to the growing body of literature relating to the PG transition experience. The aim is:

- To explore the expectations and experiences of students' transition at the start of their PG studies.

Applying a modified grounded theory approach, 30 semi structured interviews were initially conducted. Students were selected using a purposive sampling approach from a variety of PG business programmes. The resultant data were analysed inductively using a thematic analysis approach and several key emergent themes reported are below.

Reputation of the university

This was felt to be a key factor in choosing a university and PG programme of study. Rankings and accreditations of programmes (AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS) were important in attracting students but also word of mouth (WOM) recommendations from family members, peers and academic staff at other institutions were believed equally important.

Feelings/expectations

Most of the students interviewed at the start of their PG programmes expressed feelings of excitement and anticipation. A few felt anxious, nervous or somewhat concerned about how they would cope with the level of the programme, fit in with other students and the intensity of the PG programme.

Information sufficiency

Most students stated that they wanted more information and communication with the university prior to their transition to PG study. They explained that this was particularly necessary for UG students who were thinking of embarking on further study to PG level.

Development of a community of practice

Students reported that they expected to (and some did) feel part of a specialist community with their peers and tutors once they joined the PG programme. Some said they felt that the support from their tutors, together with their specialist knowledge and expertise, helped to build relationships with academics and to enhance student prospects.

Work readiness/employability/practicality

All students stated the key reason for their entry to PG programmes was to prepare them for employment. They hoped that the programme would significantly enhance their future job

prospects. Only one student planned to continue onto PhD level. The students stressed the need for practical relevance to their skills development and career choices.

Long term relationships/networking

Students reported that they wished to maintain a long-term relationship with the university as alumni post completion. This was felt to enhance career prospects through networking opportunities. Networking was mentioned as being crucial to their future success.

Pressures/intensity of study/life balance/workloads

A key theme related to intensity of the PG programme and difficulties of maintaining a balance. Although students expected their PG programme to be intense, they all expressed surprised at how intense it was! They felt that they could have been made more aware of this prior to the start of the programme.

Organisation of programme/internal systems

Students felt that overall the organisation of their programmes were reasonably good. However, they criticised late changes made to modules and to timetables which they did not appreciate. As one student explained clearly: "*we are on a really intensive programme it's difficult to manage anyway, only to find that you need to come in on a different day next week for a seminar, this makes my life really hard*". Some also found some of the internal university systems and procedures rather hard to navigate.

Buddying/ support systems

One area of concern was a perceived lack of support expressed by some overseas students. They appeared to be unaware of some support services the university offered. One aspect mentioned several times related to a "buddy scheme" at the university, so that international students "*could work alongside a UK student buddy*" to support them.

Peer learning/group work/composition of student community

Some students expressed concerns about the composition of the student community on their programmes. Both home/EU and international students found difficulties at times working with students from different cultural backgrounds, mainly due to differences in expectations, language and learning styles. Some students reported that this was manifest particularly in the induction group tasks and other assignments, where some of their peers "*were happy to take a back seat and not participate fully*" in these tasks.

Employability support/internships/job prospects

Most students reported that the reason they had decided to embark upon PG study was to enhance employability/job prospects. Work placements or internships were vital in helping them to achieve a career in their chosen field. Events such as employer fairs were popular too.

These findings demonstrate the need to improve the experiences of students and meet their expectations during transition to PG study. The next stage of the study will be to test suitable practical approaches using an action research based methodology. The application of relationship marketing (RM) will be applied to ascertain whether improvements can be made. According to Al-Alak (2006) RM includes "activities or actions that attract, motivate, and enhance existing and potential students' relationships" (p. 4). This will include ways to improve satisfaction, service quality, commitment and trust (Hennig- Thurau et al. 2002).

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