

Chapter 12

Students as Peer Researchers: Lessons From Exploring Lived Experiences of Social Divisions in Relation to Postgraduate Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports learning from students participating as peer researchers in a pedagogically focused study. The chapter documents the peer research model used, its challenges, and its successes, to add to the evidence base about the reality of using participatory approaches, specifically with and for students. The chapter details findings from a study about the lived experiences of postgraduate students as they transition into learning at master's level. By exploring experiences qualitatively through the voices of students, lessons about the ways in which these inform lived experiences, enable better understanding of the wider circumstances affecting postgraduate student transitions, and their associated support needs are detailed. This chapter adds to the evidence base around postgraduate student transitions.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8198-1.ch012

BACKGROUND

Despite government policy focusing upon widening participation in higher education and increased applications to university from disadvantaged students in some areas, evidence suggests that inequality in educational experiences, progression and attainment remains an issue for some groups, as a result of their social divisions (Waller et al, 2018; Warwick-Booth, 2022). Barkas et al (2022) ask if there is an illusion of inclusion in higher education, with their research illustrating that students reported experiencing anxiety, and barriers to learning despite positive changes to institutional practices, and policy implementation linked to widening participation and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) characteristics. They acknowledge the impact of Covid-19 on students, but also argue that further research is needed to address inequalities in the student experience. Whilst Advance HE (2020) documents the need for institutions to pay careful attention to a range of EDI issues including gender, ethnicity and disability, the sector trend of analysing quantitative institutional data overlooks the wider experiences of students and potentially masks other inequalities that affect them during their time in higher education (Hewitt et al, 2020). Research still needs to capture the voices and detailed experiences of under-represented students to enable educational providers to better support them during their time at university. This chapter starts to address this gap in the evidence base, through the discussion of a small-scale peer research project, its findings and how the use of a peer researcher model can potentially enhance postgraduate student transitions into a masters level taught programme at a new institution, and new country in some instances.

O'Donnell et al (2016) note that defining student transitions remains challenging, as these are conceptualised in a variety of ways, therefore there is no single definition (Colley, 2007). Ecclestone (2006) describes transitions being conceptualised in four different ways. Firstly, there is institutional transition, in which students move from one educational context to another. Secondly, transition links to individual identity, shifting students' emotion and cognition. Thirdly, some authors discuss transition as a process of being and becoming (Ecclestone, 2006) Fourthly, and finally Ecclestone (2006) notes that post-modern theorists understand transition as a permanent human state. More recent work discusses the psychological components of transition linked to learning and development (Crafter and Maunder, 2012). Gale and Parker (2014) also define three areas in which transitions can be understood; induction, development, and becoming, though some views may not easily slot into any of these areas. They argue that the research evidence on transition as becoming is underexplored. Becoming refers here to the process of constantly changing through lived experiences. Indeed, work on postgraduate student transition has tended to focus upon moving from undergraduate study to masters level (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2016), though some of this has assumed that the transition to postgraduate level, is simply progression without acknowledging the complexities associated with changes in subject, environment, country, expectations of staff (Huessi, 2012) and indeed students who may not be ready to study at this higher level (Morgan, 2014). Huessi (2012) also notes that some postgraduate students report not being able to understand what is required of them, and that they feel unsupported. Tobell et al (2013) discuss similar issues arguing that institutional practices assume that postgraduates have expertise, and expert status, which contrasts to their own identities of struggle and confusion. Tobell et al (2018) argue that more work needs to be done to understand the quality of the learning experience for postgraduate student groups, specifically around their transitions to higher level requirements, because there is a lack of specificity about what enables successful transitions. Some evidence points to the importance of postgraduate student identities within communities of practice, for supporting successful transition. Postgraduate students need to feel valued and able to participate in educational practices (Wenger, 1998, Giles et al, 2020). Tobell et

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