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Exploring Transition From the Workplace to Higher Education During Covid-19: Postgraduate Quality and Provision

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate transitions rarely feature in literature and are scarcely acknowledged in practice, owing to assumptions about competence. This diverse group are often multimembers studying in alternative modes to cope with wide-ranging demands. Despite their contributions to society and the economy, issues concerning fitness for purpose within postgraduate resources, support and provision remain, influencing transition. Expertise brought to the academy is overlooked, and student expectations of study and relationships with staff are often misaligned. This research explores the return to postgraduate study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing on transition theory. A reflexive thematic analysis of focus group data revealed how workplace skills and behaviours helped manage transition; the significance of personalised relationships with colleagues, peers and staff; and how technology mitigated pandemic-related obstacles.

1 | Introduction

The 2020–2021 academic year was unusual for students in UK higher education (HE) as most were required to study remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. This created great uncertainty for students returning to the academy and for those unfamiliar with virtual learning environments. During this time, universities were challenged with keeping students engaged in their studies, putting the quality of support and provision under the spotlight (QAA 2023).

This research explored returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, from the perspective of PG master's students. The literature and discussion are framed by theory on transitions, which helped explain how experiences from the workplace influenced their relationship with the academy.

PG students (1994 Group 2012; Hoffman and Julie 2012) are increasingly returning to study for lifelong learning, to advance their competition and mobility in the labour market and to up-skill and retrain (OfS 2021; QAA 2023), particularly considering massification and internationalisation (Gravett and Ajjawi 2021). The current research aims to enrich understanding about PG experiences of study, reflecting on how provision and support can be enhanced.

This article takes the Quality Assurance Agency's conceptualisation of 'quality' defined as 'fitness for purpose' (Stott 2022: 3). Quality is often evident in students' personal and professional growth, how their expectations of HE are managed and their experience with identity (ibid). This is employed to explore the support and provision delivered through institutional practices to the returning learners during this unprecedented time, and how this influenced transition. This is discussed in tandem with the research questions:

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1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact individual-level transitions?

The findings are predominantly aimed at academic staff, with suggestions for supporting students' return to PG study. These include considering lived realities of students to support engagement and participation, acknowledging how workplace experiences can prepare and support students' academic development, and a call for further research on adjusting to online learning, focusing on community and belonging. These contributions address the current gap in the quality of support offered throughout PG studies, where postgraduate transition and the experience of returning to study from the workplace are less considered.

The PG experience of transition has been largely overlooked (Heussi 2012; Fawns et al. 2022), despite PG contributions to our society and economy (1994 Group 2012; Higher Education Commission 2012; The British Academy 2012). This neglect has led to calls for greater acknowledgement of PG needs and how these can be accommodated (Christie et al. 2008). Based on the diversity of PG students, they will likely begin their learning from different points, and thus require different support (Heussi 2012; Becker, Johnson, and Britton 2019). For students, it is not always clear how to employ the competence and expertise acquired from earlier roles to the study experience (ibid.), and oftentimes this is ignored as certain pedagogical approaches dictate how students learn (Fawns et al. 2022). However, to support students' academic success and to enrich the overall student experience, understanding these differences is paramount. On-going assumptions about PGs can create disputes about the support required (Heussi 2012), including assumed expertise and comparisons between PG and undergraduate study (Tobbell, O'Donnell, and Zammit 2010; Robb and Moffat 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students and staff encountered a sudden move to online learning. For many, this was unfamiliar territory, despite remote learning picking up momentum over the last two decades (Fawns, Aitken, and Jones 2021); notably more students are studying virtually to balance external commitments and to meet the university's unrealistic demands (Fain 2018; Remenick 2019; Clapp 2022). While remote participation can offer flexibility and autonomy to learners, issues with developing relationships remain (Fawns, Aitken, and Jones 2019); this is problematic when classes are large, and when individual needs go unnoticed (Fawns et al. 2022). In the current study, the role of technology and remote learning may have profoundly impacted PG transition, offering helpful information about delivering quality support during large-scale emergencies, and for diverse groups of learners engaging with their learning in alternative modes.

This research was originally a preliminary study for the author's doctoral research, but it has since become a stand-alone piece. Its focus on the quality of provision for returning learners, and the choice of data collection methods, tells it apart from the larger thesis which homes in on transition and identity renegotiation.

This research revealed its own unique findings and recommendations. Ethical approval was received by the host university, and participants consented to their data being shared in this manner.

2 | Literature Review

This research explored returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, using a framework of transition. Consideration is given to the influence of quality support and provision on transition. At the time of the current study, scholarship on PG transitions was scarce, and few reports on remote study during Covid-19 were available. As such, this literature review is informed by research on master's study in UK higher education (HE), returning to study and transition. This has shown how quality is developed and provided to students.

The literature confirmed a shortage of research explicitly documenting the experience of returning to study from the workplace, highlighting an important gap concerning postgraduate learners, mature students and returners.

2.1 | The Postgraduate Landscape: Master's Study

Undergraduate (UG) studies are no longer a 'natural end point' (Becker, Johnson, and Britton 2019), as students are staying in education for longer to obtain higher qualifications like master's degrees and to gain a competitive edge in the labour market (Evans et al. 2018). This was helped by the introduction of the PG student loan in 2016 which supported the continuation of learning, creating opportunity and access for diversified communities (Charlton 2016).

Acknowledgement of the growing diversity of PG students is not always reflected in practice, indicating a need for institutions to readdress the suitability of existing resources (Gale and Parker 2014). Students may experience quality differently owing to the difference in support required for transition, this may be attributed to demographic characteristics, or their student status as mature or returning, part-time, flexible or remote (Heussi 2012; Sutherland 2015; Rovagnati, Pitt, and Winstone 2022). O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007, 313) contend that,

adult students themselves are not a homogeneous group—in any given group there will be different career experiences, different family situations, and variable educational backgrounds.

Many PG students encounter multimembership (Lave and Wenger 1991), as they often participate in different roles and domains simultaneously. The exchange of information across settings can influence the experiences and performance of individuals (Lave and Wenger 1991; Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009). Wenger (2010) and Marvell (2022) discovered that the relationships accompanying multimembership can provide stability during transition.

Alternative modes of study are undertaken by PG students to accommodate their demands (Semper 2020). These are often advertised as flexible with time and place, indicating that study can slot into existing commitments. However, Semper's (2020) research on remote study found that external commitments often had to be rearranged to accommodate live sessions to access peers and supervisors, who acted as gatekeepers to opportunities and services. The challenges of remote study reoccurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, as students experienced restricted access to space, technology and study materials (Salta et al. 2022). Interestingly, Semper (2020: 7) indicated that successful completion of remote study required learners to be controlled and driven, introspective, problem solvers and stubborn, though how these qualities were developed remains unclear.

PG teaching and learning is complicated by students' expectations of and ideas about study (Crisan et al. 2018). The PG experience requires students to exercise independent practice, characterised by an 'absence of information' (Tobbell, O'Donnell, and Zammit 2010: 274). Students are also expected to have a rich knowledge base of subject content, the ability to think critically and an understanding of research ethics (QAA 2020). Oftentimes, the lack of information offered to students prior to enrolment can lead to unpreparedness (despite earlier learning), fostering anxiety and confusion about their studies, including assessment and managing workloads (Hoffman and Julie 2012; Bamber et al. 2019; Robb and Moffat 2020). These issues persist due to the assumptions made about PG learners; the most problematic belief is that they are 'experts of the environment' (Tobbell, O'Donnell, and Zammit 2010). This is rightly disputed by Robb and Moffat (2020, 41) who asserted that 'success at undergraduate level does not mean students are prepared for studying at Master's level'.

The literature indicates that the experience of PG study and returning to education warrants further investigation (Evans et al. 2018), highlighting unclear expectations from students and the academy, and the different rules and institutional practices that students are faced with (Christie et al. 2008; Heussi 2012). The literature also points to issues with quality as support structures and introductory resources designed to help students adjust are known to influence student self-perception and confidence in persevering (Sutherland 2015; Semper 2020).

2.2 | Transition and Returning to Study

The return to PG study is framed by theory on transition in the current research. Illustrations of transition in earlier research on adult education have provided insight into how social and environmental factors influence the experience; this has informed the exploration of both workplace and academic practices.

The limited scholarship on PG transition revealed challenges faced by returning students, as resources overlook their needs, and expectations are poorly communicated (Stuart et al. 2008; Bamber et al. 2019). Despite these, the transition landscape continues to be dominated by the undergraduate experience (Kift, Nelson, and Clarke 2010; Brook et al. 2014), as individuals leave home, identify as first-generation students and adjust to academic identities (Worth 2009). Research on doctoral

candidates continues to grow too, detailing the novice experience (Beaton 2022), and the liminal nature of their often-dual role as student and staff (Cutcher 2015; Campbell 2024).

The current study employs Schlossberg's conceptualisation of transition, defining it as 'any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles' (Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson 2006, 33). This was assigned to the theoretical framework, based on its earlier significance to research on adult education and returning learners (see Griffin and Gilbert 2015; Karmelita 2018). The theory suggests that transition unfolds in three parts: As the individual moves out, moves through and moves in, as though in a transition continuum, preparing for the next stage or event. 'Moving through' transition connects with liminality, where one is betwixt two situations (Cutcher 2015), on the periphery of an identity or community.

Schlossberg (2011) is not alone in conceptualising transition as a time of change and growth, in relationships, roles or day-to-day life (Gale and Parker 2014; Bamber et al. 2019). Her research explores the coping mechanisms employed to overcome unfamiliar and often challenging encounters. This is discussed in the Methodology, notably informed by Schlossberg's model of 4S's (Schlossberg 2011).

Returning to HE may uncover barriers to participation; these might be structural, financial or cultural barriers. For instance, international students may encounter language barriers, while home students might be negotiating professional roles beyond the academic setting (Liu and Pullinger 2021). Importantly, PG students frequently encounter institutional barriers too, comprising assumptions made by staff. Often students are believed to be adequately prepared for their learning, owing to their earlier completion of a UG degree (West 2012; Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013), particularly when studying in a related discipline (Becker, Johnson, and Britton 2019). This 'continuation of learning' (Tobbell, O'Donnell, and Zammit 2010) implies that there is little difference between UG and PG studies and the obstacles faced (ibid.; Hardin 2008; Becker, Johnson, and Britton 2019). However, Clapp (2022, 36) rejects this notion, recalling the 'subject-specialist independent research' required of PG students, explaining that practising critical thinking and independence are not ordinarily fostered at UG level (ibid.).

Implicit assumptions about student competence are evident in the use of academic language, student-staff relationships, and the support specific to PG students (Liu and Pullinger 2021); however, these are thought to stem from an absence of understanding about student cohorts and could be overcome by academic staff projecting their investment and interest in student learning (Faidi 2021).

The support required by PG students will vary due to their heterogeneous nature (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007); this can differ across organisations and between level and mode of study (Hoffman and Julie 2012). The quality of support may be explored through the availability of resources for study skills such as academic writing, managing workloads and independent practice (Faidi 2021). Lui and Pullinger (2021, 103) contend that PG students prefer to have resources integrated

throughout their programme, and that ‘PGT students often prefer to attend sessions marketed as ‘Masters only.’ However, tending to the demands of PG learners can also include offering support with funding, childcare, transportation and access to learning materials (Stuart et al. 2008; Marvell 2022). Accommodating these demands can help students to embrace the culture of the space, shaping ‘positive relationships’ with the experience (Hoffman and Julie 2012). Issues of quality are evident in the exclusion students face as unfamiliar practices are communicated through inaccessible academic terminology (Sutherland 2015). Pressure to overcome these obstacles promptly is emphasised by the shorter duration of PG programmes (Bownes et al. 2017; Robb and Moffat 2020). When students do not receive the support they require, they may encounter imposter syndrome, creating feelings of inadequacy and ‘intellectual fraud’ (Cisco 2020). PG students require resources for adjustment early on, to help them foster academic relationships and connect with academic culture (Bownes et al. 2017).

Returning students will have different ‘coping mechanisms’ and ‘strategies’ (Schlossberg 2011) to support their preparedness for transition, influencing how confident they feel. Preparation for study can begin early on if students receive timely communication about what their studies will look like (Liu and Pullinger 2021). The strategies students draw upon may be informed by earlier experiences of learning, whether in the academy, the workplace or informal settings, and may influence expectations. Students returning after a break may find that their relationship with academic culture has been interrupted, impacting their awareness of academic norms (Liu and Pullinger 2021). Hoffman and Julie (2012, 4) explain that ‘previous qualifications, experience in a field of expertise, understanding of the research process and involvement in scholarly activities’ might influence how students cope.

Strategies may also be informed by the multimembership of learners as they move between environments. Dixon and Ward (2015) discuss the distinctions between formal and informal support in their review of learner–practitioners.

Formal support was that provided by the learning institution and included the provision of appropriate learning materials as well as access to lecturers and other key staff. Informal support was that provided to students from outside of the learning institution (Dixon and Ward 2015, 54).

Notably, they (ibid.) found that informal support was greater than that received by the workplace, although employers often provided time and flexibility to accommodate academic demands, enabling workers to build connections with their study experience. Dixon and Ward (2015) indicated that worker’s continued professional development was hampered by their colleagues’ lack of interest and enthusiasm, dismissing the significance of their research to the setting. Motivation was, however, sustained during interactions with colleagues that had previously fulfilled further learning themselves (ibid.), overcoming feelings of aloneness. Examining the implications of these behaviours on lifelong learners, Black and Bonner (2011)

contend that to sustain continued development both academically and professionally, employers should consider ways to enhance the perceived value of academic studies within workplace cultures. Dixon and Ward’s (2015) research showed the influence of academic staff on student perseverance, self-belief and assessment of the experience, through providing consistent encouragement and support.

2.3 | The Workplace

It was paramount that the current research understood the influence of the workplace on how the participants’ fulfilled their PG roles (Coman 2016). The literature revealed that a high percentage of mature and returning students continue their professional roles alongside study (Pollard et al. 2016), and that greater consideration needs to be given to its purpose. This section outlines how these existing commitments can influence the choices made about study, including rationale for enrolling and mode of study. The scholarship also suggests that workplaces should consider how they can support their workforce to excel in their roles through nurturing academic skills. Pollard et al. (2016) explain how the influence of employers was dependent on the significance of the programme of study to the workplace and what kind of support was required by the colleague. Indeed, they also found that the elected mode of study was symbolic of the arrangements offered by employers; this might include a flexible hours arrangement (ibid.). Common features of the workplace experience are explored below.

2.4 | Organisational Culture

Organisational cultures can be felt or sensed through symbolic acts or items; these can influence how individuals conduct themselves and their work (Coman 2016). Cultures have been referred to as ‘networks’ and ‘webs’ (Tierney 1988), depicting the interconnections between individuals, their beliefs and organisational values and behaviours and interactions (Glisson 2015; Karapancheva 2020). Facets of culture become ‘norms’ of the setting (Tierney 1988), they are shared traits and contribute to the shaping of collective identities (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2006). The formation of culture and community can enrich workplace outcomes as objectives are accomplished through heterogenous groups exchanging knowledge and resources (Donze and Gunnes 2018; Walker 2021).

2.5 | Working From Home (WFH)

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a rise in individuals WFH to avoid disruption to their work, studies and support networks (Harari, Keep, and Brien 2021). In some cases, organisations provided technological equipment to support workers; this, and the government’s furlough scheme radically reduced redundancies (ibid.). Carrying out work remotely challenged workers to continue identifying with their professional roles while balancing various external commitments (Littlejohn et al. 2021; Couch, O’Sullivan, and Malatzky 2021); this was owing to the spillover of demands into remote workspaces or

into their assigned working time. WFH has historically been conceptualised as an effective way to manage multifaceted commitments, offering workers flexibility and autonomy (Olson 1983). However, given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, and in some cases the lack of preparedness for this mode of work, many individuals quickly discovered the distractions of the home, and began feeling the literal distance between former and current situations, separating them from colleagues, workspaces and strands of identity, that required behaviours and actions distinct from those carried out at home (Couch, O'Sullivan, and Malatzky 2021).

3 | Methodology

This study took place remotely in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a research-intensive Russell Group university. The closure of universities worldwide led to over 1.5 billion students experiencing distance learning (Salta et al. 2022). Despite the challenges this created for fulfilling research, the findings revealed much about support provided by the university during an emergency and how technology facilitated this.

3.1 | Participants

Upon receiving ethical approval, I advertised for postgraduate (PG) participants from a single faculty within this Russell Group university. The participant criteria stated that individuals must be enrolled on a master's programme, have previously completed a bachelor's degree or equivalent and must have completed a minimum of 1 year in employment between their two programmes of study. Based on this criteria, participants were likely to be a minimum of 22 years old (if they had completed their studies exceptionally early), but there would be no upper age limit. Owing to the remote nature of study during the time of the current research, participants were not required to disclose whether they were studying at a distance or on-campus.

The gatekeepers were heads of department from across the single faculty; they were contacted via email with a request to disseminate the research opportunity to current PG students. A nonprobability sample was used, as participants were from a convenience sample and thereafter recruited via snowball sampling as staff shared the opportunity with their communities (O'Reilly 2012). Data were collected in the summer term of 2021, where some participants were completing their studies and others (part-time students) continued to study.

Five participants were recruited for this study. They were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. These were: Quinn, Alex, Rene, Jude and Gray.

3.2 | Ethics

From the outset of the research, I was aware of my commonalities with the sample, as I too had been a returning PG student at the same university and had pursued various professional roles between my studies. I was aware of my biases and the closeness of this to insider research. While this former insight had

the potential to enhance the interpretation of data, to overcome any bias, I developed an autobiographical excerpt guided by Crossley's (2011) work on narrative. Here, I explored my encounters with transition, the workplace and acclimatising to the academic setting, separating my narrative from the participants'.

The research received institutional ethical clearance, as part of a larger doctoral study. While this was intended to be a preliminary study, it became a stand-alone piece contributing unique insight into transition and quality at master's level. This study informed the research design and theoretical framework of my doctoral thesis, as noted in the Conclusion.

The ethics process involved completing an ethics application, and designing an information sheet and consent form, indicating the rights of participants. These included their right not to answer questions that created discomfort and their right to withdraw at any point. Within this, I abided by the university's Principles of Integrity and the Professional Code of Ethics set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). The research was low risk as it worked with adults on nonsensitive topics. GDPR training was completed in preparation for data collection and storage; participant data would be destroyed upon request should they withdraw from the study early.

3.3 | Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected via a remote focus group on Zoom. The data captured thick accounts of experience and authentic representations, through semistructured open-ended questions. The data revealed patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2019) and unique anecdotes that may have been missed in quantitative data. This was important as I strived to provide a transparent view of returning to study and the diversity of the PG cohort.

The focus group was a safe and effective way to gather data and bring students together at the time (Capuzzi and Gross 2002; Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg 2022), overcoming the issue of distance. I was initially concerned about how the absence of social cues would impact the participants' interactions, but they were patient and generous with their anecdotes. The focus group created a space for reflection and benchmarking experiences (Webb and Kevern 2001), helping participants to realise that they were not alone (Davies and Harre 1990); the recognition of others encountering transition helped establish a sense of sameness and belonging (ibid.). This situation encouraged them to share interpretations of experience and words of support (Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg 2022), which can instil hope in individuals experiencing uncertainty (ibid.).

The focus group connects with Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2022) descriptions of group counselling, as they draw on membership. Identifying with others can lead to participants feeling like 'insiders rather than outsiders' (ibid: 236). Recognising a sameness or acceptance can create an environment free of judgement. The semistructured nature of the questions offered the participants autonomy over discussion, while their ability to empathise (Capuzzi and Gross 2002) with one another spurred on richer conversation.

This method allowed the individuals to use characteristics of language not easily identified in writing, like tone, volume, gesture, laughter and pace (Peterson 2013). This supported participants to emphasise certain words and phrases, to insert questions and to create impact.

A series of transition-oriented questions were explored, including consideration for earlier transitions, the role of organisational culture and their experiences with socialisation and acculturation, revealing how they had adjusted to institutional practices and academic identities.

Focus group questions:

1. How have you found the experience of moving from the workplace to higher education?
2. Do you feel as though the organisational culture in your previous workplace has had an impact on your approach to learning during your master's programme?
3. During the transition, did you feel that you experienced any sort of identity development? For example, do you feel as though you have assumed a different role or status?
4. Did the process of acculturation have an impact on your transition to your programme?
5. Reflecting on your move from the workplace to higher education, can you talk a bit about if and how you felt supported through your transition?

To understand the contribution of this research to the landscape, a review of literature was undertaken. Literature on the postgraduate experience was explored, informed by scholarship on transition, along with features of the workplace including organisational culture and working from home. To clarify the suspected neglect of the PG student experience (1994 Group 2012), search terms from existing research included 'mature students', 'returning learners' and 'independent learners'.

3.4 | Data Analysis

Once the data were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were applied, a reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2020), comprising inductive and deductive levels. To familiarise myself with the data I took inductive-level notes, adding labels and codes. The five-stage process was fulfilled, allowing me to move about in the data to enrich my interpretations; these included familiarisation, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining the themes and writing up (ibid.).

Schlossberg's (2011) conceptualisation of transition structured the theoretical framework, determining the design of questions and the approach to analysis. In the fifth stage 'defining the themes', Schlossberg's model of 4S's (Schlossberg 2011) was employed deductively. Earlier studies exhibit the model being used to explore assets and liabilities of individuals in transition, assessing the coping mechanisms of returning learners (Karmelita 2018), veterans re-enrolling in education (Griffin and Gilbert 2015), community college students (Lazarowicz 2015), transition to postsecondary

education (Pendleton 2007) and retirement (Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg 2022). The success of the model in capturing the rich subjectivities of experience justifies its suitability to this study, particularly considering the diverse PG population.

The 4S's comprise the situation, self, support and strategies. The *situation* clarifies triggers of transition; the individual's assessment, whether it was positive or negative, on-time or off-time, based on their biological, social or cultural positioning; and the perceived duration. The *self* reveals the influence of psychological resources like ego characteristics, self-efficacy and commitment, along with individual demographics. The *support* available might be emotional or practical, like funding and child support, or friendships and employers; it can also reveal what support is absent and the impact of this. Finally, the *strategy* reveals the actions taken to manage the stress and change the meaning of transition.

The four themes presented in the Findings/Discussion are explored in terms of Schlossberg's 4S's, and ultimately characterise the way that support was either attempted or absent for the returners. The themes exhibit the types of support provided by the workplace and the academy, through descriptions of needs, expectations and observations. While the descriptions of the data and the synthesis of literature narrate and contextualise the experiences of transition and returning to PG study, the themes reveal how the participants responded to change, and how they coped and persevered during their return.

4 | Findings and Discussion

These findings portray how the participants employed their expertise, skills and behaviours from the workplace during their return to study (Beach 1999), and how institutional practices corresponded with these approaches. The participants' reflections speak to the fit of provision provided by academic staff during their experience with remote study (Stott 2022), with indication for how these encounters could be enriched.

Four themes were created to address the research questions. These depict the subjectivity of transition and are presented using Schlossberg's (1981) model of 4S's, which helped determine the participants' assets and liabilities during transition. The four themes are labelled: *managing transition through transferable skills*, *observations of organisational culture*, *personalising support* and *the use of technology to facilitate remote teaching and learning*. Much of the data retells what the participants did to overcome issues of quality in their support and provision, pointing to gaps that require consideration in practice by academic staff.

Research question 1: What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

The participants' studies were influenced by their former (or ongoing) workplaces and cultures. The first theme highlights the transfer of knowledge into the returned-to setting to overcome challenges with community building and developing academic skills. The second theme, '*observations of organisational culture*', illustrates the lasting impact of workplace relationships and how these shaped their preparedness for study and views of academic staff.

4.1 | Self: Managing Transition Through Transferable Skills

The participants detailed how facets of their workplace organisational cultures supported them to flourish in the returned-to setting. They reflected on actions and behaviours that were intended to help regain control during transition (Schlossberg 2011). These exhibited their resilience and self-belief (Hoffman and Julie 2012; Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg 2022), which helped overcome issues with remote study, participating from different time zones, and having taken time away from the academy.

The participants were determined to develop community and a sense of belonging despite studying remotely. By establishing study groups and societies, and encouraging communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) to form, they hoped to enhance their experience.

I tried to get us together in a study group, I tried a few different things kind of utilizing what I did anyway in my professional life.

(Rene)

We created a system, something I think, maybe some of you are familiar with the '***** society', and we support each other it's a great platform.

(Jude)

Departing an environment committed to fostering belonging can cause internal havoc as students grapple with building new relations with unfamiliar others (Matheson and Sutcliffe 2018). However, active participation can support students to develop new strands of identity (Sutherland 2015) and to continue learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). This was reflected in Rene's belief that shared experiences could enhance learning quality, providing students with somewhere and someone to relate to. This was echoed by Jude who missed having peers to 'chat about the struggles of the master's degree' with. These opportunities might help overcome 'feelings of alienation and exclusion' (Christie et al. 2008, 567), commonly encountered when students sense distance from a stable network (Schlossberg 2011). Quinn's account of the experience summarises this, stating that they 'Just worked on my own [...] I need more'.

The participants' proactivity helped them gain confidence as they discovered students searching for similar communal platforms (Semper 2020). Some participants alluded to these virtual spaces offering a human connection, purpose (Chen and Bogachenko 2022, 63) and 'togetherness/community' (Enriquez 2013, 319), which Schlossberg (1984) argued can boost perseverance during transition. Jude received affirmation through others who they had relied on to 'make sure that I'm doing okay', which corresponded with earlier findings on the mystification of student expectations and meeting the demands of institutional practices (Steele 2018).

Additionally, some participants were motivated to use university resources and workshops including an academic writing centre, which helped enrich key study skills, enhance their

writing proficiency and understand the requirements of PG study, knowledge that often remains implicit (Hoffman and Julie 2012; QAA Scotland 2014; QAA 2020). Rene claimed that,

Having that space where there's actually students working at the same time [...] it's been so helpful and off the back of that [...] I've had a few study groups with fellow students when the academic writing centre wasn't running them [...] that's been a really big resource for me actually.

While Clapp (2022) confirmed that developing PG skillsets is essential to understanding PG roles, Hoffman and Julie (2012: 2) argued that resources should be available early on for new students to help them learn about 'organisation (using resources like the library, computers and statistics, time management and available resources); the supervisory relationship'. Access to quality resources prior to enrolment can enhance preparedness for transition, particularly when building on existing knowledge (Bownes et al. 2017). Where participants had a break from HE, adjusting to virtual platforms created a barrier, as evidenced by Quinn who reported that 'you just get into a very narrow world, comfortable existence, you know, limited knowledge, limited skills'.

The participants' proactivity was further evident in their search for employment and volunteering opportunities at the university. Alex became a Graduate Teaching Assistant, which gave them purpose and helped them feel 'part of a team', reinforcing their commitment to the academic culture. Rene reported that these remote opportunities still lacked a human connection, suggesting that 'it's just not the same [...] you don't really interact with anyone'.

4.2 | Support: Observations of Organisational Culture

The workplace organisational cultures influenced how the participants related to their work setting, roles and communities within. These relationships likely shaped the expectations or hopes they had of academic staff and peers.

Quinn and Alex described how their workplace responsibilities defined the boundaries of their position. They reported that constant feedback from colleagues made them feel monitored, creating feelings of stagnation in the hierarchical environment. The participants referred to 'routine' and organisation, implying that there was little opportunity to contribute to decision-making or to exercise autonomy.

Alex described feeling intimidated and embarrassed by their low-quality interactions in the workplace. They illustrated a pecking order and power imbalance, as they worked with a line manager and boss. They stated, 'you did kind of always feel like you're being told off', owing to unpredictable relationships, which were confusing and chaotic.

Contrastingly, reflections by Gray, Rene and Jude oozed a positive, collaborative and supportive atmosphere. These reflections contrasted with findings by Dixon and Ward (2015),

who recalled the lack of significance placed on research and academic skills by colleagues and called for recognition of this activity within workplace cultures. While a steady stream of feedback also ensued for these participants, this was tailored to the interactions within relationships. Acknowledgement of the participants' contributions to their work setting created feelings of value and mattering. Rene described their workplace as encouraging and considerate of their pursuit of learning. Through personalised exchanges, they developed strong informal and formal relationships with colleagues. Upon returning to HE, Gray sought support from colleagues when insufficient resources were available, stating how they were 'quite happy when I was working because I met lots of great people so maybe they can encourage me'.

Research question 2: How do institutional practices impact individual-level transitions?

Two themes addressed the second research question exploring how the quality of institutional practices influenced the participants' studies and transition. The first, '*personalising the experience*', reveals the significance of tailored and consistent feedback from academic staff. Although this predominantly highlights what the participants felt was missing from student-staff relationships, this also speaks to the implicit expectations of PG students to be autonomous in their studies (Bamber et al. 2013; QAA 2020). The second theme, '*the influence of technology on teaching and learning*', describes how students navigated remote study and how they were encouraged to participate and supported to access the experience. This revealed the on-going assumptions made about student competence at master's level, in particular in using digital technologies (Hoffman and Julie 2012; Macleod, Barnes, and Huttly 2019; QAA 2020).

4.3 | Support: Personalising the Experience

Some participants described how on-going relationships with colleagues supported their perseverance, stabilising the transition (Schlossberg 2011). They valued these interactions, explaining how feedback was unique to each relationship they were part of. This helped them to understand who and how to be in relation to the other (Blume 2010), something that can be difficult to understand when feedback is absent (Matheson and Sutcliffe 2018). However, early dissemination of feedback can foster adjustment to a student identity (ibid.), leading to prompt identification of obstacles and available skills in the new setting. Sutherland (2015, 40) also suggested that early intervention can 'alleviate some of the Mastersness challenges'.

In the academy, Jude longed for an affinity with their tutors, but instead sensed a distance growing between them. They stated,

I haven't adjusted and the reason behind it is because well now trying to write my dissertation and my sole problem is that I haven't talked to anyone about it. I don't know if I'm going in the right direction or not I feel doubtful [...] whenever I talk to my tutor it's very academic it's not even in like a reassuring manner.

The lack of affirmation received inspired Jude to sustain an affiliation and loyalty towards the workplace, preventing them from adapting to the norms of the university (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012); Bownes et al. (2017) reported that 'better communication with lecturers and peers' can help overcome this. Notably, returning learners often have lower levels of self-efficacy, influencing how they perceive themselves in relation to their peers (Bamber et al. 2019). In the workplace, the participants understood their roles, the expectations and they had existing support networks (Blume 2010); the safety of these relationships, however, made it difficult for some participants to let go (Schlossberg 2011).

The participants struggled to prepare and thereafter adjust to a student identity owing to limited information about the PG role designed for prospective master's students, which impressed upon their confidence and performance (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981; Christie et al. 2008; Menzies and Baron 2014; Stuart et al. 2008; Bamber et al. 2019). The gaps in their understanding disconnected them from peers and the academic community (Gale and Parker 2014; Liu and Pullinger 2021; Salta et al. 2022), as reiterated by Rene,

In the beginning, I really struggled because there just wasn't enough support, and I remember discussing with other part time students who had come on after working for a while they should have done maybe like a summer school or started a bit earlier [...] You know just given us a bit of like a basic update [...] even things like when you're subscribed to like automatic emails, I get all the like careers emails which aren't relevant to me and that made me feel like they didn't care as much about part time students who are working, and it just wasn't very tailored to us, even though the course was promoted as a course that you should take if you are working.

(Rene)

4.4 | Strategy: The Use of Technology to Facilitate Remote Teaching and Learning

Owing to the 'lockdown' experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, students were required to work and study remotely, often in isolation (Salta et al. 2022). Some participants overcame this by using social media platforms to form groups, highlighting their resourcefulness (Lave and Wenger 1991); however, little evidence spoke to the success of the support offered by the institution. While the institution's implementation of technology to overcome disruption to studies helped manage the challenging circumstances (Schlossberg 2011), participants' thoughts about these remote sessions reflected the suitability of approaches taken by academic staff.

Alex had maintained their networks virtually, after only a term of studying in-person. While these helped to benchmark the experience, they reported drawing on earlier learnt skills to stay organised. Alex explained how 'it really is all up to me and the isolation of it was pretty hard at first'. In Rene's experience, they reported 'a year of people not responding',

despite attempts at community building based on workplace values. These findings highlight the significance of interactions in overthrowing feelings of isolation (Heussi 2012; Robb and Moffat 2020).

Identity conflict emerged as the participants met new demands in spaces filled with symbolic objects pertaining to other strands of identity. Unable to share their experience with peers, Jude reported 'it was difficult to kind of try to find the balance between being a student and not having kind of support that helped me gravitate towards being a student'. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2022) claimed that weathering transition with others can provide comfort, although these relationships were mostly absent as the participants lacked opportunity for community building; Jude reiterated this, stating that, 'no one related to what I was doing and I found it very difficult being alone'.

The participants experienced synchronous and asynchronous learning. This meant interacting with peers on screen sometimes and submitting work to online portals with minimal feedback on other occasions. These experiences impacted how much they perceived their contribution to matter (Schlossberg 2011). Fawns, Aitken, and Jones (2019) noted that pedagogical choices influence how students feel supported to take part in the experience. Remote study had influenced the participants' perceived quality of their studies, as they participated from different time zones and locations which emphasised the distance between their cohort. Additionally, the accessibility of facilities (both academic and social) was limited (Semper 2020).

Support might be found in online resources (Bownes et al. 2017; Robb and Moffat 2020), although issues with digital literacy skills created barriers. Participants of the current study indicated a lack of familiarity with institutional virtual platforms owing to prolonged disengagement with the academy. Clapp (2022) points to the significance of quality 'guidance and signposting' to support familiarisation with platforms and course materials prior to studying. They emphasised that virtual resources should be of equal quality to on-campus facilities (ibid.), ultimately improving the overall student experience.

5 | Conclusions/Recommendations for Practice

This research explored the experience of returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings highlighted how the participants transferred skills from the workplace to cope with transition, remote study and developing online communities. Notably, the participants reported that the support and provision provided by the institution did not meet their needs or expectations, but their reflections offer suggestions for enriching the experience.

This final section offers recommendations for practice, focused on developing quality remote provision and how to accommodate diversity at master's level. While the small scale of the current study may not offer recommendations to larger groups, the insights speak to the delivery of support and provision during a crisis, raising awareness of the complex transitions encountered

in our dynamic universities. The data have enriched understanding of PG study, of the support required by mature and returning students, and the experience of learning in virtual environments. These findings have implications for enriching the suitability and fit of resources and provision within HE (Stott 2022).

5.1 | Recommendations for Practice

The findings reveal that academic staff require a better understanding of PG students' lived realities, as poorly informed resources and institutional support may create doubt about the quality of provision (Hardin 2008; Gale and Parker 2014; Becker, Johnson, and Britton 2019).

Consideration for workplace experiences reveals individual differences, simultaneously unearthing where support is required and where learning can be built upon. Academic staff may consider how participation in a professional setting can be used to enhance learning, but they may also recognise that these experiences can determine student expectations or support needs. The usefulness of this information has previously been overlooked, where the focus has been on student experiences with formal education settings (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013). The participants' actions exhibited the lasting impact of the workplace as they managed their transition by drawing on facets of former organisational cultures, such as existing relationships and various behaviours and skill sets. While the resourcefulness of the participants exhibited their competence in rising to institutional assumptions, they also indicated gaps in their academic provision.

The findings emphasise the urgency for greater support in adjusting to online provision. The data revealed that establishing community within their studies was challenging, influencing how they felt about the student role. This raised questions about facilitating the development of student identities in virtual spaces (Fawns et al. 2022). The data indicated that remote study should include more opportunities for student interaction, and to integrate authentic projections of themselves in the sessions, to help overcome the felt distance between them (ibid.). The findings showed how some participants created spaces to enable community building; this depicted the importance of recognising the pastoral as well as academic needs of the cohorts, also signifying the importance of personalised relationships. Consideration for relational pedagogy might enhance the experience of bonding, for instance, by developing an ethic of care. Indeed, further training for facilitators of online spaces would help tailor provision to students' needs.

Providing remote resources can support student adjustment to institutional practices and a student identity, indicating that early intervention could impact the PG experience (Stuart et al. 2008; Bamber et al. 2019). While the small sample and data of the current study cannot provide a transparent image of support offered to remote learners generally, these findings underscore the need for further research on virtual learning, to compare the quality of resources offered during a pandemic and to students choosing remote study generally. It would also clarify what has been learnt in the years following the lockdowns.

While this research has offered insight into the return to PG study, mostly for academic staff, there are also organisational implications. The knowledge might be of use as support is developed for individuals returning to study to retrain or upskill. Indeed, where individuals are multimembers, their participation across contexts might be considered with this research in mind.

5.2 | Limitations/Recommendations for Future Research

This small-scale research comprises methodological limitations that should be considered in future research. For instance, that the sample size is very small has created a limited view of the returning experience during this unprecedented time.

The language employed in the focus group questions requires reconsideration (Peterson 2013); for instance, the participants' limited understanding of 'organisational culture' created uncertainty about the relevance of contributions. The language choice should ensure equal access to meaning, to ensure the composition of authentic narratives (ibid.).

In the focus group, reflections were based on hindsight, meaning that temporal distance may have influenced the data (Jones 2019). Consideration should be given to collecting data in proximity to occurrence. This might include requesting shorter but more frequent submissions of data or asking the participants to record their data in different ways over a longer period.

Lastly, collecting data via Zoom during the pandemic was deemed a suitable method. However, this has revealed how bringing participants together in person might be beneficial for students seeking others to benchmark their experience with and build a community with. The human connection was important to the participants (Gourlay et al. 2021), so bringing them together on campus, for instance, may influence how they relate to the experience, one another, and the institution.

Author Contributions

Kristyna Campbell: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, data curation.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was sought prior to data collection, along with participant consent to disseminate the data.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

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