

Student and staff perceptions on first-year postgraduate experiences

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Prior research and scholarship resulted in awareness and ameliorative measures to resolve problems experienced by first-year undergraduate students. However, there is a paucity of similar research within the postgraduate context. Through an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching strategic priority project on postgraduate student experience, staff and students were recruited through purposive strategies to ensure a mix of males and females, coursework and research, Masters and PhD, and levels of staffing positions from lecturers through to senior executives including professional staff members. Across 26 Australian universities, student engagement breakfasts, interviews and focus

groups were conducted with a total of 366 participants (319 students and 47 staff). Two research team members independently conducted narrative thematic analysis of collected data using pre-established proformas and a third reconciled the analyses. First year experience emerged as a salient inductive theme. Both staff and student interviewees offered first year experience when asked to list strengths and limitations of their postgraduate programs. The overall sentiment was negative, in that both students and staff expressed that first year experience requires significant improvement across the country. The same four strategies that Kift identified in 2009 to enhance the first year experience transition for undergraduate students appear to be needs of postgraduate students. These strategies are: 'a curriculum that engages students in learning; proactive and timely access to learning and life support; intentionally fostering a sense of belonging; and sustainable academic-professional partnerships.' Numerous staff and students expressed a belief that it is a misnomer that the age, maturity and life experience of postgraduate students means that they do not require these strategies. Postgraduate students said their needs were heightened by academic skills that had faded during time in the workforce, co-occurring educational technology and particularly library tool advances, and lack of understanding of the research process. Interviewees said that a quality first year experience sets students up for a beneficial experience throughout the programme and carries into graduate outcomes.