Facilitating Transitions to Masters-Level Learning - Improving Formative Assessment and Feedback Processes

David Scott, Carol Evans, Gwyneth Hughes, Penny Jane Burke, David Watson, Catherine Walter, Mary Stiasny, Mandy Bentham and Sharon Huttly

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Acknowledgements

Higher Education Academy

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Executive Summary

The principal aim of this research project was to investigate students' transitions from undergraduate study or employment to Masters-level work, *and* develop and promote policy and resource arrangements derived from the investigation by improving formative assessment and feedback processes in higher education institutions. Our intentions at the beginning of the project were four-fold: to develop knowledge of these transitions and the particular problems associated with them; to understand how this relates to current forms of formative assessment and feedback provided on the programmes undertaken by these students; to develop models of effective feedback processes; and to develop models of effective transitions. This was a research-development-implementation-evaluation project.

The four transitions we chose to investigate were:

- *Pure to Applied Discipline*: this transition refers to students who, having taken a first degree in a non-applied subject such as physics or philosophy, then undertook a higher degree with an applied orientation. Movement is from a disciplinary base with an agreed set of methodologies and approaches to a new practice-orientated setting.

- *International Context to UK National Context*: this refers to the gap between an international student's expectations about learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and UK higher education approaches to learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

- *Work Intensification*: this transition focuses on the addition of part-time study responsibilities to full-time work. Students may encounter a number of problems in making this transition, including those related to time, energy, and commitment.

- *Non-academic and Non-standard Background to Academic Setting*: this transition refers particularly to current policy issues relating to Widening Participation agendas.

Students undergoing these single or multiple transitions are now common in UK higher education institutions.

We formulated a series of questions at the beginning of the project, which, in answering them, we felt would allow us to develop greater knowledge and understanding of the issues we were studying:

- How do transitions relating to disciplinarity, internationalism, work intensification and non-standard backgrounds currently operate?

- What learning problems do students encounter during these transitions?

- How do feedback and formative assessment processes currently operate in relation to these transition processes?

- How could these transition processes be remodelled so that they better meet the needs of students undergoing them?

- In what way could feedback and formative assessment processes be remodelled so that students are better able to progress their learning and more effectively meet the demands made on them by the transitions they choose to go through?

In order to answer these questions, we organised the project into five stages or phases of activity:

- A review of literature was undertaken, focusing on the five themes which were central to the project: i) a practice-orientated transition; ii) an international transition; iii) a work intensification transition; iv) a widening participation transition; and v) formative assessment processes.

- Four groups of students were recruited to the project from the core institution: i) a group of PGCE students (n=15) with degrees from a range of pure disciplines undertaking applied education studies courses in preparation for a teaching career; ii) a group of full-time international students studying on the MA or MSc programme who had not had residence in the UK before (n=15); iii) A group of part-time home students (n=15) who were full-time UK teachers or education professionals, some with a significant gap between this period of study and a previous period of study and who were all enrolled on the first year of an MA or MSc; iv) a group of students (n=15) from non-standard backgrounds either full- or part-time, and therefore in either their study year or their first study year across the range of courses on a Masters programme. The students from the four groups were interviewed at two points during these eleven months (at the beginning of their programmes, and eleven months in); and programme tutors were interviewed to determine the extent and type of formative assessment currently taking place, and appropriate documentary material was collected. In addition, the students were asked to complete a journal during these eleven months, to share their evaluations of their learning and assessment approaches with the project team.

- In the second year of the project, four small-scale intervention projects in a range of higher education institutions were completed. Each project had a series of stages or phases of activity: i) an area of practical concern was identified; ii) an intervention was designed, in relation to one of the themes of the project; iii) the intervention was made; iv) the effects of the intervention were investigated (i.e. the site-based project was evaluated); and v) amendments were made to the original resource deployments and teaching/learning processes implicit in the intervention.

- A small number of consultative interviews were arranged with invited groups of students. These were scheduled at the end of the project.

- The data-set was then analysed and written up. Project dissemination activities included: developing a set of guidelines for helping learners overcome the transition from undergraduate or equivalent work to Masters-level work by reviewing assessment and

feedback practices; a project website; peer-reviewed publishing; *and* interim and full reports at appropriate stages in the project.

The aim has been to provide answers to the five questions listed above.

Introduction

1. Those transitions which are relevant to postgraduate study, and in particular, Masters-level study, have a number of distinctive characteristics. These include: the transition's structure/agency relations; its compliance capacity in relation to formal rules, regulations and norms; movement through time (all transitions are characterised by movement from one time moment (T_a) to another ($T_\mathbf{b}$), and onwards to a series of other time moments (T_c to T_n)); the extent of its cultural embeddedness (this refers to factors such as duration, intensity, import, etc.); the transition's pathologising capacity (i.e. whether and to what extent the transition is understood as a normalizing and thus pathologising mechanism); its position in the lifecourse; its focus (for example, learning transitions, which refer to issues such as familiarity, receptiveness, assimilation, negotiation, rearrangement, formalisation, assessment/ accreditation, and the like); and how the transition relates to some end-point.

2. Students experience discipline-specific teaching approaches and interpretation of marking criteria, and, in addition, students conceive of the experience of study in different ways. This also includes notions of dissembling, internalizing misguided repertoires of action and belief, misunderstanding the rules of the discipline, and so forth.

3. Transitions have in-built pathologising mechanisms. Pathologising mechanisms construct the student as initially diminished or inadequate, with Masters study being about repairing these deficiencies. This view of student identity fits with a training model for students currently endorsed by governments such as in the UK, in which the learning metaphor is that of acquiring a set of behaviours, called skills, which once acquired, enables the student to perform a set of actions which have been designated as appropriate or the norm for the workplace.

4. Transition processes have an official form (created in part by the rules and arrangements of resources of the institution in which the programme is placed) which may be in tension with the student's understanding and preferred view (implying a going-on in the focused area) of the particular transition.

5. There is a dissonance between the actual process of learning and those bureaucratic technologies which are both intended to allow that learning to take place in a more efficient manner and monitor the effectiveness of that learning. The dissonance occurs because these technologies contribute little to the process of learning; in effect, they are different activities with a different focus, though they purport to be about the same matter. What results is a simulative situation where the tutor conforms on the surface to the demands of the quality assurance process, but in fact operates through a different set of logics. Whether they do this successfully is a different matter because they have to be highly skilled in playing both games simultaneously; in effect operating discursively along parallel tracks and making sure that the one doesn't contaminate the other. Their

sense of direction however, is always primarily directed towards putting in place the optimal conditions for learning of their students. Though the purpose of the bureaucratisation is to act as a form of labour control, this term fails to explicitly explain the full import of the process, because it achieves its purpose through changing the epistemology of the setting. This entails a displacement of content by operating with a standardised bureaucratic form of knowledge.

6. If we put to one side the issue of time flows, i.e. linear, stepped, recursive, we can identify the life-course in different ways: i) life-course as a stepped system of statuses; ii) life-course as a stepped system of learning markers; iii) life-course as a stepped system of resource accumulations; iv) life-course as a stepped system of career events, and thus as age-related; v) life-course as a stepped system of identity moments. Transitions are integral to the life-course.

The International Strand

7. People construct their own self-concept, but they do so in the context of their relationships in society. International students who come here from a background of success and excellence as scholars and communicators to a place where they don't know the rules are particularly at risk.

8. International students were critical of unhelpful organisational arrangements and inadequate feedback as they deployed their unique personal and professional coping mechanisms. They were also highly critical of unhelpful organisational arrangements and bureaucratic assessment practices. Formal acknowledgement of learner progress and offering negotiation around published schedules were proposed as examples of showing such respect to these learners. In addition, early information about all aspects of the course is a significant factor in the quality of the one-year international Master's student's experience. For example, students' responses in this study identified the need to address existing schema early on in the programme. Many 'had a template in their heads' of how to write which required revision to accommodate the different requirements of the professional programme.

9. For some students, there are deeply-felt cultural sensitivities; not just about language, nationality, and ethnicity, but also class and prior preparation, disability and special needs. There is thus a need for awareness training for academics to avoid unintentional discrimination against international students in teaching and learning.

10. The conventional picture of the international student as mainly hampered in their academic achievement by a lack of language proficiency does not correspond to the findings of this study, where there were many commonalities between first-language English international students and international students with other first languages. Furthermore, the participants in this strand did not correspond to the stereotypes of international students that feature in the literature. Some non-Western students embraced critical reading and writing practices, and some Western students found these challenging. A non-UK student found the critical practices on her course naïve and undeveloped in relation to what she was used to in her home country.

11. Relationships with tutors and supervisors are paramount in combating loneliness and isolation for international students. To mitigate against this, international students should be encouraged to form multi-nationality networks.

The Pure-to-Applied Knowledge Strand

12. There is an issue of level. This comprises not only concerns about how academic levels are set but also the question (probably the most frequently occurring) of "how am I doing?" This connects with other points about assessment criteria, assessment practice and feedback. It opens up questions, for example, about the relationship with prior academic work (formally at both higher and lower levels) and about a spectrum of performance (from "good enough" to "excellent").

13. There is an issue of identity. For example, it raises the very personal question: "what is this course doing to me as a person?" Or, "who am I becoming as result of this course?" How is any such change or transformation measured: against other students; against teachers, mentors and other staff members (including as role models); and against work colleagues?

14. There are house-keeping issues. Questions arose about how the group and individuals within it are being treated. Some quite intense concerns have arisen about mutual respect, about potential double-standards, as reflected, for example, in aspects of communication, of organisation, of rule-making and rule-breaking, of expectations and delivery (including of resources), and of administrative standards in general.

15. There is a bundle of technical issues, including IT environments, writing (format, style etc.), timetabling, and the scope of discretion and flexibility.

16. Resilience in relation to previous experiences, coping strategies, and cognitive styles, was understood as a key marker for success on the programme. Systems of support for students are therefore considered pre-requisites for success on the programmes.

The Widening Participation Strand

17. The conceptualisation of widening participation is central to developing inclusive and participatory approaches, practices and frameworks. A broad view of widening participation that focuses on the cultures and practices of the institution and programme of study, complex inequalities and the politics of mis/recognition supports the development of inclusive M level provision and practice. This disrupts and challenges problematic assumptions and discourses of deficit and neo-liberal, individualist perspectives that tend to ignore complex social and historical inequalities and misrecognitions. This helps to create a framework for inclusive, accessible and participatory programmes of study.

18. The early experiences of a postgraduate programme, including admissions and induction, are important in shaping a positive initial transition into the programme of study. A broad view of widening participation that focuses on the cultures and practices of the institution

and programme of study, complex inequalities and the politics of mis/recognition supports the development of inclusive M level provision and practice. This disrupts and challenges problematic assumptions and discourses of deficit and neo-liberal, individualist perspectives that tend to ignore complex social and historical inequalities and misrecognitions. This helps to create a framework for inclusive, accessible and participatory programmes of study.

19. Participatory pedagogical approaches help to support the processes of developing a sense of postgraduate student identity and of fitting in and belonging to a shared community of learning. The literature and data highlight the importance of recognition, identity and a sense of belonging for widening participation. The development of 'participatory pedagogies' helps to address these issues. Participatory pedagogies are underpinned by explicit sets of social justice principles and ethical starting points. In practice, this might involve, for example, that teachers and students initiate their pedagogical relationship with an explicit plan of the ways they will work together, ethically, critically and inclusively. This might also involve a commitment to creating interactive spaces for learning and teaching, where different forms of knowledge and experience might be drawn on and made available to help illuminate and make accessible the disciplinary or subject knowledge at the heart of the course. It might also involve an explicit discussion of the different perspectives, backgrounds and forms of knowledge of the participants whilst also subjecting these to critical reflection in collaborative learning processes. Participatory pedagogies understand concerns with curriculum and assessment as part of pedagogical practices and relations, not as separate entities. Thus, pedagogies are concerned not only with explicit practices of teaching and learning, but also with the construction of knowledge, competing epistemological perspectives and the ways that learning and meaning might be assessed to support pedagogical and meaning-making processes.

20. Writing as a method of inquiry and learning should be integrated into the programme of study, rather than offered as separate, remedial, skills-based provision. A commitment to widening participation in M level study requires the development of inclusive and participatory pedagogies and assessment frameworks in higher education that acknowledge the complex processes by which writing, and other related literacy practices (such as speaking and reading), is produced by students. This involves the pulling together, rather than separating out, of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, so that how we learn and teach is connected to what we learn and teach and how we then assess what has been learned and taught. Writing and other academic practices, such as reading and speaking, must be considered in relation to the development of pedagogies for widening participation. The students valued integrated approaches to the teaching of writing and other academic literacy practices, which supported their understanding of academic expectations and practices and the assessment criteria and framework. Writing as a method of inquiry is a resource that facilitates such integrated approaches to supporting students in their learning and in the production of work for assessment.

The Work Intensification Strand

21. Higher education providers should not attempt to micromanage learner transitions for part-time postgraduates. However, reducing the pressures by extending study time, or

designing assessments to incorporate work-related projects, or critiques of practice to provide greater synergy between work and study, is advisable.

22. Teachers and curriculum designers should provide clarity over M-level expectations of learner autonomy, underlying epistemologies and critical thinking, and indicate the level expected initially and the degree of progression expected throughout the course. This may create tensions with Quality Assurance agencies over the rigidity of curriculum design.

23. Teachers should give full respect for effort and sacrifices: changing arrangements without negotiation, or an over-emphasis on bureaucratic requirements, does not lead to mutual respect. Self-direction is paramount for part-time learners, but showed that while such learners expect to be autonomous, they are not always successful at self-management, although this cability develops over time. However, there may be a need to improve learner support mechanisms to enable students to develop coping strategies and respond to tutor and peer feedback.

24. Improvements in feedback strategies and approaches to give more information on progress (i.e. ipsative feedback) and to make it explicit how individuals can move through M-level study towards autonomy and self assessment (i.e. sustainable feedback) will assist motivation and confidence by demonstrating respect, in particular for less experienced learners.

25. While detailed feedback signals respect, excessive critical feedback may be counterproductive and not useful. Critical feedback needs to be incorporated into ipsative feedback and feed forward processes, so that learners can move on in their assessment careers. The balance between generic and task specific feedback also needs careful consideration.

26. Collaborative working with peers can be valuable in helping learners to appreciate a wide range of perspectives and find their own voices. However, this needs to be facilitated by credible pedagogic experts.

Assessment and Learning

27. An assessment for learning model developed for the school sector (Black and Wiliam, 1998) is also considered appropriate for the higher education sector. This model suggests that five key strategies and one cohering idea are appropriate. The five key strategies are: i) engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks; ii) clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; iii) providing feedback that moves learners forward; iv) activating students as the owners of their own learning; and v) activating students as instructional resources for one another; and the cohering idea is that evidence about student learning is used to adapt instruction to better meet learning needs; in other words, that teaching is adaptive to the student's learning needs.

28. Specific feedback issues, including: the need for concrete and specific feedback, filtering mechanisms student teachers employed when accepting or rejecting feedback that was offered them, the need for a clear bench mark of how they were doing in order to

understand the meaning of this feedback, clarification regarding technical issues such as the requirements of assessment/styles of writing and the timing of assessment, making authentic the feedback process, and preparing students for feedback, were prioritised.

29. Support for the students needs to be given prior to, and not after, the event itself, for example, guidance on suitable topics and the focus for an assignment were especially valuable for those students who demonstrated weaker self-regulation skills. If students and lecturers are to fully exploit feedback opportunities, time is needed to explore their beliefs and perceptions with regards to the value of feedback.

30. An over-emphasis on grades resulted in confusion between processes of formative and summative assessment, and subsequently had a deleterious effect on student progress. Dependence on grades for self-assessment is a barrier to autonomous learning.

31. Feedback needs to be perceived as an integral and iterative element of curriculum delivery. Clear direction need to be given in relation to the requirements of assessment and its role in the feedback process. There needs to be clarity regarding the rationale underpinning how all the assessment elements fit together. Timely and explicit sharing of examples of good practice is needed. Students need to be given opportunities to work with the assessment criteria to enable them to make sense of them.

32. Assessment should be authentic. There needs to be an alignment between the expectations of assessment and the levels of experience of the students. The timing of assessments needs to be manageable given the varied demands on the students. Issues relating to choice, affordances and limitations of assessment feedback for students (degree of student involvement in assessment design; degree of assessment choice; ways of working with peers, etc.) need to be addressed.

33. Those who were able to create synergy between their work and assessment benefited from this, and opportunities to collaborate with peers.

34. There is a problem with being overloaded with assessments at key transition points.

Chapter One: Methodologies and Technologies

The principal aim of this research project was to investigate students' transitions from undergraduate study or employment to Masters-level work, *and* develop and promote policy and resource arrangements derived from the investigation by improving formative assessment and feedback processes in higher education institutions. Our intentions at the beginning of the project were four-fold: to develop knowledge of these transitions and the particular problems associated with them; to understand how this relates to current forms of formative assessment and feedback provided on the programmes undertaken by these students; to develop models of effective feedback processes; and to develop models of effective transitions. This was a research-development-implementation-evaluation project.

The Transitions

The four transitions we chose to investigate were:

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Research Questions

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Project Phases of Activity

In order to answer these questions, we organised the project into five stages or phases of activity:

- A review of literature was undertaken, focusing on the five themes which were central to the project: i) a practice-orientated transition; ii) an international transition; iii) a work intensification transition; iv) a widening participation transition; and v) formative assessment processes.

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- In the second year of the project, four small-scale intervention projects in a range of higher education institutions were completed. Each project had a series of stages or phases of activity: i) an area of practical concern was identified; ii) an intervention was designed, in relation to one of the themes of the project; iii) the intervention was made; iv) the effects of the intervention were investigated (i.e. the site-based project was evaluated); and v) amendments were made to the original resource deployments and teaching/learning processes implicit in the intervention.

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- The data-set was then analysed and written up. Project dissemination activities included: developing a set of guidelines for helping learners overcome the transition from undergraduate or equivalent work to Masters-level work by reviewing assessment and feedback practices; a project website; peer-reviewed publishing; *and* interim and full reports at appropriate stages in the project.

The Data Set

Our data-set consisted of a series of interviews (of different types and conducted at different moments during the project), evaluative data from a series of site-based projects, a range of diary entries and a series of literature reviews.

Interviews

The most common of all methods used in education research, interviews yield different kinds of data depending on the purposes for which they are being used and the kinds of interview most amenable to those purposes. As a starting point, all interviews focus upon a verbal stimulus to elicit a verbal response, but purposes will determine different approaches to the collection, management, and analysis of such 'responses'. At a general level, interviews sit in various positions on a continuum of qualitative-quantitative approaches to research. At one 'standardized' end are highly structured interview surveys that pay close attention to the task of collecting large amounts of data, in as focused a way as possible, through the use of proforma like ringing codes, the use of numerical values, tick boxes and so on. Here, as May (2003: 93) puts it, the interviewer attempts to control and 'teach' interviewees to 'reply in accordance with interview schedules'. At the other end, there are semi- and unstructured interviews that encourage interviewees to respond open-endedly and 'to answer a question in his or her own terms' (*ibid)*. Interviews vary, then, in relation to the degree of structure, interview purposes and length, depth and range, relationships between interviewer and interviewee, and the locations in which interviews take place. More importantly, however, interviews vary in accordance with the philosophical starting points that underpin them. This means that a reading of the epistemological and methodological bases of interviews and interviewing is a necessary pre-requisite in research designs that involve them, and include the inferences that might be most appropriately drawn from the analysis of such data.

Structured interviews are usually survey-based and are designed to explore certain pre-determined areas using questions that are designed in advance, and are prepared in accordance with one or more specifically stated research hypotheses or questions considered in a descending 'ladder' of abstraction from broad hypotheses to specific questions. They are standardized to the extent that the question, its wording, and sequence in the interview are fixed and identical for every interviewee who is usually referred to as the respondent. Using a relatively large sample of the total population and drawing upon statistical techniques in order to draw inferences that might be applied to the whole population, the use of the term 'respondent' is not, therefore, accidental since a core issue is to use a design that transfers large amounts of data for analysis with minimum 'contamination' of the data by the interviewer and involves a more 'passive' role for the interviewee, thus ensuring the application of reliability and validity instruments most closely aligned to the 'scientific'

method. This makes probing and clarification more problematic, though not impossible. Philosophically, the core underpinning is empiricism, and the end points of such approaches are to supply facts about the educational world, that are, in combination, reliable, valid and independent of the settings in which the interviewer(s) collected the data.

Towards the other end of the interview continuum, whilst qualitative researchers might differ about the extent to which they apply 'standardized' interview techniques, the core issue for researchers who use interviews in qualitative research is to seek in-depth understandings about the experiences of individuals and groups, commonly drawing from a small sample of people, frequently selected purposively, and with a de-emphasis rather than a necessarily whole-scale rejection of generalisability. In general terms, this was the favoured approach of the research team. The terms usually applied to such interview forms are 'unstructured' and 'semi-structured', although, as Pole and Morrison (2003: 30) argue, such terms are something of a misnomer, in the sense that 'unstructured' interviews *are* structured in accordance with a systematic research design, and 'semi-structured has become a kind of catch-all half-way house between structured and unstructured interviewing that commonly allows the interviewer greater flexibility to introduce probes for expanding, developing and clarifying informants' responses'.

The key issue and purposes for such interviews are requirements for the interviewer to define the interviewee as a person who is actively constructing their own world, and to draw upon the interview text to develop insights into such worlds. Again, the use of the term 'informant' rather than 'respondent' is not accidental, since it signals a specific kind of relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, in which there is awareness by the interviewer of the ways their orientations and experiences will affect the collection and interpretation of data, and that the relatively 'open' framework for information gathering will result in new themes and issues emerging in the course of data collection. The sense here is of emerging themes that are grounded in the data collected from interviewees rather than pre-determined prior to data collection.

During the interviews, conducted at different points during the two years of the project, and using different formats (i.e. individual, follow-up, sequential, group), we focused on a series of key issues in relation to our research focus: students' reasons for applying for the various programmes; their impressions of the application process; induction; programme material, including programme handbooks, module material, on-line material, actual and virtual libraries; cultural, geographical and social differences; tutoring and teaching experiences; writing experiences; crises of confidence; learning trajectories, i.e. intensitivity, pathways, conceptual connections, logistical arrangements; assessment processes; processes of auto-evaluation; oral and written feedback; peer support; and specific issues relating to the various transitions, such as the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and practice-based knowledge, or cultural epistemologies and technologies, or work intensification and compression of time.

Journals and Diaries

Diaries are among a wide and often complex array of documentary materials of interest to educational researchers. Diary-focused research is also a distinctive research genre that straddles qualitative and quantitative research. Diary keepers are either researchers or

research participants or both. Whilst most attention is given here to diary use by research informants, initial attention is drawn to diary use by researchers, and to diaries that are solicited accounts for the purposes of research rather than unsolicited accounts. Moreover, for our purposes, diary keeping is also seen as an essentially social act, even though historic or romantic associations with the term might be to view diaries as intimate or personal.

For researchers, and in particular, qualitative researchers, action researchers, and ethnographers, diaries are more than procedural tools for managing and documenting research stages that are sometimes referred to as audit trails. Important though these are, diaries are also integral to the production of the data record 'that underpins conceptual development and density' (Strauss, 1987: 5), which is a feature of all qualitative accounts of educational experience. The potential contribution of diaries, however, will always need to be seen as complex; differences in meaning and use, for example, may depend on a range of cultural contexts and situations.

In earlier accounts of use by researchers, distinctions are made between logs, diaries and journals (Holly, 1984; 1989). A log might be seen as a truncated record or aide-memoir, whilst a diary might be viewed as containing more personal and detailed information. As Burgess (1994) suggests, these distinctions are probably more useful analytically than in practice, since the umbrella term 'diary' can comprise substantive, methodological, and analytic elements. Diaries can be used to serve a range of critical purposes for the researcher. They offer tools for plotting research progress and critical research moments that can be charted alongside agreed tasks and targets for the research, as agreed among the research team.

Diaries raise issues about the recording and categorising of data, especially how much to record and their purposes and/or extent of inclusion in the final research account. Morrison (2002) gives a clear rationale for the purposes of diaries for the researcher and summarises their role in her own research as a daily record, as a reservoir of analytical memos and as a record for ongoing retrospection and introspection, warning readers that their various uses by researchers should not imply that a diary ever presents a complete record or neutral medium of production, or that it will remain unaffected by other writing and reading that is part of the qualitative research process.

Researchers' diaries are important elements of action research, being used as tools for reflection and the provocation of personal and professional change, and are also used as part of ethnographers' accounts of educational experience. Rarely are diaries used as stand-alone research instruments. In combination with interviews, photographs, and videos, diary data can make important contributions to research, especially qualitative research.

As for all personal accounts, diaries exhibit the strengths and weaknesses of information that is solicited from research informants. Yet in educational research, where there may have been a tendency to privilege the oral and the observed – what people say they do and what they are observed doing – diaries provide an interesting counterpoint. Whether this is because, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2008: 165) suggest, we tend to assume that the spoken account is more authentic or spontaneous, diaries have specific uses in picking up the minutiae of educational experience.

Whichever form taken, four key assumptions need to be born in mind. *Firstly*, diaries rest on the view that research informants are in a particularly advantageous position to record aspects of their lives and experiences. This is to do more than extol the value of self-report; rather, diarists are social actors who can make 'visible', through diary writing, 'inside' information that might not be visible or available to the researcher. *Secondly*, diaries allow researchers access to evidence that might not otherwise be available on logistical (researchers cannot be everywhere), or ethical (researchers ought not to be everywhere), or pragmatic grounds (researchers need to be elsewhere). *Thirdly*, combined with other forms of data collection and analysis, diaries are based on a premise that the researcher can collect, collate, aggregate, and analyse diary data in order to produce a wider and/or deeper picture of what educational experience means to individuals and to groups. *Fourthly*, diary accounts have the potential to produce large amounts of data. Researchers need to convince themselves, as well as the diarists, that such pursuits are worthwhile, and to reach agreement with diarists about which aspects can be open to public scrutiny, and how such data will be analysed.

In their diaries, students were encouraged to write about: their reasons for applying for the various programmes; their impressions of the application process; induction programmes; programme material, including programme handbooks, module material, on-line material, actual and virtual libraries; cultural, geographical and social differences; tutoring and teaching experiences; writing experiences; crises of confidence; learning trajectories, i.e. intensitivity, pathways, conceptual connections, improvement or becoming more skilled; logistical arrangements; assessment processes; processes of auto-evaluation; oral and written feedback; peer support; and specific issues relating to the various transitions, such as the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and practice-based knowledge, or cultural epistemologies and technologies, or work intensification and compression of time.

Implementation and Evaluation of Site-based Projects

Each of the five site-based projects was organised into a number of different stages or phases of activity: an area of practical concern was identified; a possible intervention was designed, focusing on a practical concern; an intervention was made; the effects of the intervention were investigated (i.e. the site-based project was evaluated); amendments were made to the original resource deployments and teaching/learning processes implicit in the intervention; and a description and explanation of the process was made.

In practice therefore, we were including an action research element in the project. Eclecticism is a key feature of action research. Described variously as action research, action-research, and action inquiry, various writers have also prefaced the term with words such as collaborative, participative, critical, technical, emancipatory, and practical, as if to offer readers a specific type or category of action research. Not surprisingly it has been understood (and misunderstood) in a number of ways. Fundamentally, action research is a research strategy which sets out to change the situation being researched. Its commitment to change does not preclude the use of familiar and 'traditional' research methods, frequently but not always orientated towards qualitative approaches. Its aims and purposes, however, can be seen in contrast to more traditional forms of research in which the intention (indeed requirement) is not to change or influence the situation being studied. Action research developed partly from a dissatisfaction with more orthodox, positivistic approaches to the

study of educational phenomena and partly from a desire to use the immediate experiences of educational practitioners to understand and effect change in professional practice.

Important though practicality is, if practical application was all there was to action research then there would be little to distinguish it from other forms of applied research. Lomax (2002: 122) describes action research as:

> a self-reflective, self-critical and critical inquiry undertaken by professionals to improve the rationality and justices of their own practices, their understanding of those practices and the wider contexts of practice.

The above definition also suggests that action research is more than practitioner research although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. All action research involves practitioners; it becomes action research when the researcher includes the investigation of his/her own practice with a view to improving it.

As Somekh (1995: 34) points out, action research rejects 'the concept of a two-stage process in which research is first carried out by researchers and then in a second separate stage the knowledge created by researchers is then applied by practitioners. Instead the two processes of research and action are integrated'. However, even the keenest proponents of action research differ about where the main emphasis in action research should lie. For Elliott (1991) the main emphasis is upon improving practice rather than creating knowledge. Writers like Whitehead (1993) argue that 'action research is a means of creating "living educational theories" that contribute individual epistemologies of knowledge that together contribute to knowledge more generally' (Lomax, 2002: 122). More general agreement lies in acknowledging that action research is more than about *reflective* practice in the sense that Schon (1983) first applied it. Rather, the emphasis is upon rigorous and systematic adherence to research techniques and practices (however eclectic) to inform that practice, and a requisite for *reflexivity* not always apparent in all forms of inquiry that are described as 'action research'.

So far we have identified at least three fundamental aspects of action research: its *practicality;* its commitment to *change* through improvements in professional practice; and the involvement of *practitioners* in specific and self-reflexive ways. A fourth aspect of action research tends to be its cyclical nature based on a research programme that is a plan for social action. A commitment to the processes of action research is one of stepped engagement in which a feedback loop from initial findings that are implemented and evaluated generates further research in the next cycle(s). The action research spiral was used in the project.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

We analysed the data throughout the project by using progressive focusing methods, identifying new themes and refining the research questions (Miles and Huberman, 2008). The development of theoretical categories and models was determined by pre-focusing on the area of study, by theoretical schema already developed in the area, and, more particularly, by engagement with the data themselves. Data from each cohort was analysed separately as well as in a cross-cohort and cross-institutional phase, in which themes and issues were compared and contrasted to draw out underlying patterns and common findings. To assist in the

management and analysis of data, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used, but not exclusively. This enabled some transparency in the process of analysis and further facilitated collaboration between project members. Emergent themes for each case study were tracked from coding, and for theory development. Ethical procedures were developed and implemented, with appropriate institutional approval, at different phases of the project (cf. BERA, 2007).

Synopsis

Each chapter of this report reflects a stage or phase of the research we undertook. The next chapter identifies the conceptual frame we used and the way we understood the key notion of transition. This is followed by an account of the literature relating to the five themes we investigated: i) a practice-orientated transition; ii) an international transition; iii) a work intensification transition; iv) a widening participation transition; and v) formative assessment processes. In chapter four we present and analyse the data from the first year of the project, and in chapter five we provide accounts of the five site-based projects and the consultative interviews. Finally in the last chapter, we develop some conclusions and a set of guidelines for helping learners overcome the transition from undergraduate or equivalent work to Masters-level work by reviewing assessment and feedback practices.

Chapter Two: Transitions

This chapter will focus on those transitions which are relevant to postgraduate study, and in particular, Masters-level study, and their characteristics. These characteristics include: the transition's structure/agency relations; its compliance capacity in relation to formal rules, regulations and norms; movement through time (all transitions are characterised by movement from one time moment (T_a) to another (T_b), and onwards to a series of other time moments (T_c to T_n)); the extent of its cultural embeddedness (this refers to factors such as duration, intensity, import, etc.); the transition's pathologising capacity (i.e. whether and to what extent the transition is understood as a normalizing and thus pathologising mechanism); its position in the lifecourse; its focus (for example, learning transitions, which refer to issues such as familiarity, receptiveness, assimilation, negotiation, rearrangement, formalisation, assessment/ accreditation, and the like); and how the transition relates to some end-point. Finally, the chapter will focus on transitions as they relate to moments in the development of the subjective normative authority of the learner.

Learning Transitions

A learning transition implies movement from one learning moment to another. It doesn't just refer to an accumulation of learning; that is learning more and more about something, or acquiring more and more facts about something, or becoming more and more skillful at something. This is because a learning transition involves a qualitative change, in addition to a quantitative change. What we mean by this is that the transition takes place when the person thinks, has acquired the skill of, now has the disposition to do, something conceptually different from what they could before. For example, some learning at Masters level (certainly on courses focused on professional concerns) involves the student in acquiring the skills, knowledge and dispositions (i.e. personal characteristics) to enable them to: understand what is going on in their practice, make judgements about their practice, and intervene in their practice. So, what we are saying here when we talk about learning is that this reflexive knowledge, skill, or disposition is newly acquired and there is a transitory process which takes the student from one state to another.

Furthermore, this transitory process has an official form (created in part by the rules and arrangements of resources of the institution in which the course/programme is placed), which may be in tension with the student's understanding and even preferred view (implying a way of going on in the focused area) of this particular transition. Furthermore, this formal view seeks above all else to fashion the student to its way of going through the transition. Secondly, and in part, the student's preferred way of going through the transition may begin to influence the formal version of the transition. If for example someone in authority sees that a particular set of rules and resources is not working, or is creating problems in other aspects of the setting, or even that there is a conceptual gap/contradiction within the discourse which is structured by and in turn has a structuring effect on those rules and arrangements of resources being played out in the transition, then change may occur.

A key influence on the type of transition experienced by the student is the type of knowledge developed on each programme, and as a result, identity development in relation to Masters-level study is regionalised (in an epistemic sense) (cf. Bernstein, 1996). However, this is not

to deny that there will be common aspects across these various programmes. So, for example, the learning experience for the student is likely to be hierarchical, with the student accepting that she will have less experience and knowledge than her tutors. There will also be aspects of commonality in the 'rites' of initiation and acculturation into student life.

However, and this is where differentiation occurs, disciplines which emphasise 'correct' views of knowledge and fixed and agreed procedures for developing that knowledge are also likely to have a particular view about the relationship that should be established between tutor and student, and about how the student is positioned. In contrast, in those disciplines which are characterised by a plethora of languages or approaches, and which do not have an agreed view of knowledge or of knowledge development procedures, the tutor/student relationship is likely to be understood in a different way. There are other factors which influence difference; for example, the history of the department/tutor, the location of the university, and so on.

Furthermore, students conceive of the experience of study in different ways. The first of these is that the student learns the rules about how they should behave and adapts temporarily. This may be about what constitutes an appropriate form of writing and talking (presentation), or what constitutes appropriate forms of knowledge in the discipline and how to make sense of them, or even what constitutes appropriate practices in the discipline and how to operate within them. But they do not integrate them into their repertoires of action and belief. In other words, they dissemble, because, for the duration of their study, they want to be accepted into the discipline. Ultimately Masters-level status is a badge of esteem rather than a signifier of identity in the discipline. These are students who become acutely aware of the 'interaction rites' and ways of enacting them in order to maximize opportunities for success.

The second way is that the student tries to take on this academic identity, but for a variety of reasons they cannot or do not enter into the practices of the discipline; that is, they do not fully understand the rules of the new practice; the rules of the new practice are opaque; the rules are disputed and their understanding of them is mediated through a maverick tutor; or the pull of the rules in their professional setting is so compelling that they ignore the new rules. The third way is that they are able to access these new rules and instantiate them fully and successfully.

If we assume that learning is as central to the processes of engaging in these forms of study as it is for education actors at other levels/sectors, then the experience of learning is also deeply embedded in disciplinary contexts. For many students the prescribed link is to practice and the assumed mediation between theory and practice is usually, though not exclusively, through engagement with empirical research, commonly of the relatively small-scale, focused on their own or someone else's practice, and related to *this* disciplinary framework or approach rather than *that*.

Yet, learning is complex and potentially rich and rewarding, where the student is presented with a mass of information, ideas, schema, opinions from a number of different sources (i.e. books, articles, lectures, seminars, emails, *e*seminars, personal communications and so on). What the student does is shape this mass of information, and this shaping can take a number of different forms: partial shaping, complete shaping, discarding with no replacement, confusion, on-going, going backwards and forwards and so on. Shaping takes place against a scholarly background; aspects of which may or may not be implicit and where some but not

all of its aspects can be surfaced for deliberation. This background also includes a retrospective view of the identity of the student, a sense of their present identity(ies), a prospective view of their identity(ies), a placing of the work in various discourse communities, a particular understanding of the way the rules work in those discourse communities, and much more; all of which interact in various ways. For individuals mediating between their various multiple identities, learning is irredeemably social, embedded, and selective. So the student has to absorb some of the ideas they are presented with and discard or partially discard others. Even if the student is prepared to operate through a notion of multiple identities, they are still selecting, filtering, endorsing, rejecting, enhancing and discarding.

Structures, Agents and Time

These identities are made and remade at different points of time during the study period, and in relation to the affordances of social practices and discursive formations within which they are located. These structures (i.e. embodied, discursive, agential, institutional and systemic), which also act as identity positioners, are fluid, transitive and at times contradictory (but not in equal measure), and the student is interpolated in them, though never so that their freedom of action and re-creation is absolutely circumscribed. Examples of discursive formations expressed in narrative mode are: induction, mastery, coping, expansion, autonomy, self-realization, self-actualisation, external control, and professional effectiveness. Each of these discursive formations is temporally sequenced, though in different ways, so for example, a learning narrative might consist of exchanges between teachers and students where the purposes of these exchanges is to dissolve, fragment or otherwise disrupt the model of knowledge held by the student. This implies a non-linear learning narrative and thus it has implications for an understanding of how time impacts on transitions. All transitions then are characterised by movement from one time moment (T_a) to another ($T_\mathbf{b}$), and onwards to a series of other time moments (T_c to T_n). However, this sequence should not be understood as exclusively linear or non-recursive.

During her time of study, the student is confronted with a set of ideational resources or structured discourses, and in addition, she is embedded in another set of structures, or what Nash (2005) refers to as 'structures of agency'. These structures of agency mediate, for the individual, entry into those discursive structures which act as a resource for her belief systems; as a result, social theorists have to confront notions of formal and informal learning and therefore of assimilation, discarding, layering, organising, synthesising, selecting, and meta-processes connected to learning. Discursive structures may be characterised as those ideational resources which sustain her, and they include a range of stories, narratives, arguments and chronologies that have a number of distinctive features: they have a specific time-place location, and thus are subject to change and amendment; they are structured in turn and thus different patterns of story-telling or narrative genre are possible; and they compete with other genres. In addition, they play a role in the construction and maintenance of structures of agency.

There is a further issue and this relates to what Michael Bratman (1999) has referred to as the 'subjective normative authority for the agent'. Those psycho-social narrative forms impact on intentionality, and in particular on what constitutes a good reason for an agent to act; what, in short, gives that agent the subjective normative authority for her planned and intentional

activity. Indeed, it is reasonable to go further than this and suggest that those activities which are the outcomes of agential decisions but which are not planned, intended, or subject to a process of reflection, are also implicated in those reasons for action. What constitutes a good reason for doing something or even thinking about something, and how much weight or significance the agent should give to that reason, are conditioned by those affordances embedded in historically specific discursive structures, made manifest through narratives, stories, arguments and ideational formations, and their availability to the individual agent. Individuals themselves cannot create discursive structures, though they may contribute to them either through collective action of a specific type, or through penetration of, and change to, current ideational formations. The point here is that any and every transitional move made by a student may not conform to those expected and sanctioned forms of learning transitions, as they are practised on Masters-level courses in UK universities, and indeed may contribute to changing them.

Identity

Identity formation assumes a particular shape in relation to transitional activities. Previously we referred to the way that students are positioned within assemblages of official rules and arrangements of resources; stories, narratives, arguments, and chronologies; structures of agency; and discursive structures, all of which has implications for particular transitions. So for example, an international student might want to take on the formal identity of a student undergoing a Masters programme at a UK university. She is placed within the assemblage (which of course is not static but changing) and has to find her way through it. There are clues as to how a good student might think, behave, feel, or act, such as the following of rules – academic forms of literacy, notions of referencing, non-plagiarisation, criticality, asking relevant questions, beginning to understand disciplinary mechanisms such as appropriate knowledge structures, criteria for excellence, assessment processes, relations with supervisors, etc. However, the student might want to adopt an authentic identity, that is, one which is not temporary or on the surface or superficial (authenticity certainly has an integrated and depth feel about it). And all of the above have superficial and depth forms. So for example, in order not to plagiarise, one can follow a set of rules, and perform in the practice in the correct way, without at the same time fully understanding notions of originality, ownership, self-realisation, performance and the like. Indeed, with regards to this particular example, it may be that the rules themselves do not fully incorporate these principles and therefore in the set of rules there are contradictions, aporias, gaps, incomplete statements, etc. But the point is that we can distinguish between in depth and superficial forms of understanding, and students may develop either of these.

And within the appropriation of these rules and many others and the rest of the assemblage is a notion of identity as a student. These assemblages never impose in any absolute sense on the student, however, the person who actively seeks an identity as a student works within this assemblage. In working with this assemblage, a student brings to it previous identities, knowledge constructs, skills, dispositions, etc. and thus the process of identity formation we are talking about here is an overlay. This is a transformative process and it may take a number of forms, i.e. accretion and thus retention of the original formation; or subsumption, where the original formation is subsumed into a new domain and thus loses its identity; or subtraction so that parts are discarded to accommodate the contingencies of the new formation.

Pathologising Capacity

There are different types of transition and therefore they have different characteristics, e.g. an international to national transition suggests that a set of behaviours which is acceptable in one geographical/cultural area is not acceptable in another. However, a work-to-work plus part-time study transition refers specifically to issues of time, the compression/expansion of time, and its management. The latter still has the characteristic of a previous set of behaviours but these are not acceptable in the new setting. This implies a possible disjuncture between the practice of the transition at an official level (official might refer to the original and subsequent construction of the practice by the university) and how it is understood and practised by participants in the practice, i.e. students. Clearly, this doesn't just involve students learning the new rules and understanding the new set of arrangements of the new practice, but also conforming to those new rules and arrangements. So the disjuncture may become a conjuncture, though quite clearly not in every case. What this also means is that the participant is inducted into the rules of the practice (maybe successfully, maybe not) through a number of means.

The first of these refers to the idea that the behaviours and beliefs of the new recruit are deemed to be abnormal, not fitting the accepted pattern, and not congruent with the aims of the practice. Thus a student might want to avoid this during their time as a student. The pathologising mechanism is a part of the practice itself. Learning is understood as a process of internalising the rules of the new practice. Attached to a pathologising mechanism is a set of sanctions, which in turn can be formal or informal. These are not just discursive but may also inhere in the arrangement of resources. The pathologising mechanism is likely to be attached to a different type of discourse (and thus has a complicated discursive structure) which makes it seem more attractive to students.

Pathologising might also take another form; that of constructing the student as initially diminished or inadequate, with Masters study being about repairing these deficiencies. This view of student identity fits with a training model for students currently endorsed by governments such as in the UK, in which the learning metaphor is that of acquiring a set of behaviours, called skills, which once acquired, enables the student to perform a set of actions which have been designated as appropriate or the norm for the workplace. This is not to deride the importance of training or professional development as aspects of study, but rather to take issue with some of the forms taken and the assumptions that underpin them. The training tendency is further exaggerated by another false assumption, that students begin their student journey as deficit learners in which the deficit can only be reversed by recourse to training that points to ways in which individuals might be encouraged to handle their emotional as well as learner-selves better, and so become more adept at personal planning, coping with the stress of study and so on. This is a version of what Ecclestone (2007) has referred to as a view of the learner as "the diminished self", increasingly referenced and revered in education policy and practice. This, of course, takes on a specific nuance with professional learners who, in other respects, are at, or approaching, the peak of their professional careers, and might be expected to have these skills in abundance.

There is however, a more obvious way. This is about a learning transition; learning essentially and fundamentally is holistic and thus incorporates beliefs, dispositions, worldviews etc. and thus a student studying on a course at Masters-level is not just concerned

with changes to their knowledge structures in a superficial sense but also with changes to the background to that knowledge, and this incorporates understanding and internalising new rules and new resource arrangements, replacing the old or perhaps storing the old alongside the new; in other words, becoming a different person. There is no pathology involved; there are only right and wrong ways of behaving.

Position in the Lifecourse

If we put to one side the issue of time flows, i.e. linear, stepped, recursive, we can identify the lifecourse in different ways: i) Lifecourse as a stepped system of statuses (The person moves from a lower status to a higher status – or S_1 to S_2 to S_3 to S_n, a series of status steps, where status is understood as the accord given to the position attained by the person. A transition is understood as movement between these steps.); ii) Lifecourse as a stepped system of learning markers (This can be understood in two ways. The first is in formal terms, an example might be sectorial, i.e. pre-school to primary to secondary to post-compulsory, etc. The second is in terms of informal conceptually-orientated learning stages, e.g. Piaget's schema comprising progression from concrete operational to formal operational thinking, or Kohlberg's stages of moral thought, where the subject progresses from pre-moral and conventional rule conformity levels to the acceptance of general rights and standards, and even to adopting individual principles of conduct. A transition is then understood as movement between these stages.); iii) Lifecourse as a stepped system of resource accumulations (Resources are here defined as capital accumulations, such as cultural, social, economic and emotional. A transition is understood as movement in one direction between the different accumulation episodes.); iv) Lifecourse as a stepped system of career events, and thus as age-related (Here the formal system is given priority. This is the traditional form given to the lifecourse, and it refers to events such as: birth, school, marriage, motherhood, death, etc. Transition then is understood as progression through these life-determining moments.); and finally, v) Lifecourse as a stepped system of identity moments (This is the most controversial because it involves the identification of a stable system of identity or in this case a series of stable identities, and the person moves between them. Some examples are induction, self-realisation, graduation, etc. The transition is from one identity moment to another.).

The transition is always time-specific, though as we suggested above, it may be linear, stepped or recursive; and the trajectory may be horizontal or vertical. A vertical trajectory is where the one event gives way to another, so for example, e_1 leads to e_2 to e_3 leads to e_4. A horizontal (with vertical elements) trajectory consists of Time Moment$_1$ ($e_1 + e_2 + e_3$) moving into Time Moment$_2$ ($e_1 + e_2 + e_3$), and so forth. A further categorisation needs to be identified. Transitions are either i) progressive (movement in the transition is characterised by the type of change – qualitative or quantitative; or ii) teleological – this refers to a notion of attaining some final end or point of stasis, so the transition is characterised by movement along a set path; this doesn't mean that the movement is always linear, it may still be irregular. An example might be becoming someone, e.g. becoming a graduate. Finally, there are transitional mechanisms, i.e. what occasions movement between the different stages (critical incidents, crisis points, normal points, and maturational points).

We have suggested in this chapter that those transitions which are relevant to postgraduate study, and in particular, Masters-level study have a number of distinct characteristics. These

include: the transition's structure/agency relations; its compliance capacity in relation to formal rules, regulations and norms; movement through time (all transitions are characterised by movement from one time moment (T_a) to another (T_b), and onwards to a series of other time moments (T_c to T_n)); the extent of its cultural embeddedness (this refers to factors such as duration, intensity, import, etc.); the transition's pathologising capacity (i.e. whether and to what extent the transition is understood as a normalizing and thus pathologising mechanism); its position in the lifecourse; its focus (for example, learning transitions, which refer to issues such as familiarity, receptiveness, assimilation, negotiation, rearrangement, formalisation, assessment/ accreditation, and the like); and how the transition relates to some end-point. In the next chapter we offer an account of the literature relating to the five themes we investigated.

Chapter Three: The Literature

The review of literature offered in this chapter focuses on the five themes which are central to the project: i) a practice-orientated transition; ii) an international transition; iii) a widening participation transition; iv) a work intensification transition; and v) formative assessment processes. A review is a detailed interrogation of the literature underpinning a research topic. The term interrogation has a specific meaning and involves a critical examination of sources not only from a range of theoretical perspectives but also in terms of the definitions and methodologies underpinning those sources, linked to their importance for the research study.

Critical readings of published literature are integral to academic inquiry, although the form taken shows cultural variations. With increased globalization and the growing internationalization of student experience, some but not all variations are diminishing. This is more than a competency issue; there is a complex intermeshing of factors like deference to experienced and/or published authors or a reluctance to engage in readings that stand in direct or 'threatening' opposition to one's own perspectives or experiences in education. However, although some academics in education may not always provide the most appropriate role models to follow, especially in relation to such challenges, it is the critical literature review that lies at the heart of academic inquiry and is rooted in critical engagement with the published writings of significant 'others' in education and education research.

The term 'critical' is therefore central to the interpretation of a literature review. This requires 'an attitude of scepticism' (Wallace and Poulson, 2003: 6) towards researchers' own as well as other's knowledge, and the processes deployed to produce such knowledge. It provides the researcher and the reader with a 'picture' (historical, methodological, and/or theoretical) and an understanding about the issues that the 'picture' raises and, as importantly, omits. This requires a questioning and scrutinizing approach in checking and cross-checking published claims to 'truth'. And finally, it requires an open-minded and constructive approach to covering the thinking of writers who do not support the ideas of the researcher as well as those who do, and, as importantly, 'a willingness to be convinced if scrutiny removes doubts, or unconvinced if they do not' (*ibid.*).

Professional Knowledge

The first of these transitions refers to students who, having taken a first degree in a non-applied subject such as physics or philosophy, then undertake a higher degree with an applied orientation. Movement is from a disciplinary base with an agreed set of methodologies and approaches to a new practice-orientated focus. Four types of knowledge have been identified: disciplinarity, technical rationality, dispositionality, and criticality.

Disciplinarity

Knowledge-construction of this type involves the student in being inducted into a disciplinary practice which is well-established in the university. The student, if they are successful in the practice, engages in a form of self-examination which Barnett (1997) describes as 'self-reflection on the student's own disciplinary competence' (p.97). This involves the student in reflecting on those theoretical and methodological frameworks through which they

understand reality and more closely aligning themselves with those which characterise their chosen discipline or sub-discipline. The rules of the discipline, in this ideal model, are based on a set of criteria for evaluating knowledge, a set of definitional criteria which includes and excludes what is considered proper knowledge, and a set of methodological criteria through which an initiate operates; a set of procedures which delineates a practitioner from a non-practitioner. An indifference is shown to other forms of practice, whether they be other disciplines or the practicum. The practicum is the source for theoretical deliberation, but the discipline retains its role as the ultimate arbiter of knowledge claims; those knowledge claims being classificatory, evaluative and methodological. A disciplinary practice changes over time because some players in the game are substituted for others, and because the rules of the game develop and evolve. These rules may be invisible and tacit or formally codified and explicit. Success is achieved when those rules are internalised and the student is initiated into the discipline.

The picture is however, more complicated. Disciplinary practices are to a greater or lesser extent closed with strong or weak boundaries between them and other forms of knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge may also be expressed generically; that is, though it displays two of our three characteristics of disciplinarity: an indifference to the practicum and the designation of the practicum as merely the source for theoretical deliberation, it shares a common purpose with other disciplines located in the academy. Rather than being concerned with outcomes or performativity, traditional university and cross-disciplinary agendas are pursued, so that broadly the purpose is to defend notions of truth, objectivity and dispassionate study.

This generic form of knowledge may be construed as 'scientistic' (Habermas, 1987), where scientific description is understood as synonomous with knowledge-creation. All other forms of knowledge, including practitioner knowledge, are considered to be inferior or mistaken versions. What this also suggests is that it is possible to identify a correct method for data-collection and if this method is properly applied, then this will inevitably lead to the construction of objective, value-free and authoritative knowledge. However, this generic form of disciplinary knowledge may be rooted in different foundational principles, so that notions of truth, objectivity and authority are understood in different ways. What is shared is a belief in epistemological foundations, and the possibility of the academy producing truthful knowledge, in contradistinction to practical, folkloric or other types of knowledge.

This methodological version of disciplinary knowledge is policed in part by the imposition of a set of procedural values at the stages of examination and validation, where the student is required to meet certain criteria which are broadly accepted by most members of the academic community. They act as a bulwark against the dissolution of academic credibility, but their application acts to include and therefore validate certain types of knowledge and exclude and therefore pathologise other types of knowledge. Underpinning this view is a belief that disciplinary knowledge is superior to knowledge produced in the workplace or outside the university.

The work of the student at Masters-level may be focused on practice; but it is does not seek to change it in any immediate sense. The student takes on the role of the outsider even if it is research about their own practice or an example of practice which has some resonances with their own. In this model the theorist and the practitioner are engaged in different activities. Walsh (1993) for instance, suggests that there are four mutually supporting but distinctive

kinds of discourses: deliberation, evaluation, science, and utopianism. Discourse, he defines, as a mode of enquiry that is logically distinct in some way. The practical setting, in Walsh's third type of discourse, therefore acts as the testing bed for theoretical propositions developed elsewhere, and the student undertaking professional study is initiated into a practice which is distinct from their work-place practice.

Technical Rationality

Whereas disciplinarity is characterised by an indifference to the practicum, and the designation of the practicum as merely the source for theoretical deliberation, technical rationality has a different set of characteristics. Practitioners are required to set to one side their own considered and experience-based ways of conducting themselves at work because these are partial, incomplete and subjective; by contrast they incorporate into their practice scientific knowledge that transcends the local and the particular. Practitioner knowledge is therefore considered to be inferior and incomplete because it is context-dependent, problem-solving, contingent, non-generalisable and is judged not by objective criteria but by whether it contributes to the achievement of short-term goals and problems encountered in situ. An assumption is made that the objective knowledge that is produced about programmes, activities and institutions binds the practitioner in certain ways; those ways being the following of rules which can be deduced from that knowledge. Knowledge produced by outsiders, or practitioners behaving as outsiders, is superior to the knowledge produced by practitioners working in situ.

The implication for practitioners undertaking academic study is that they should divest themselves of their prior incorrect and incomplete knowledge and adopt precepts based on the objective study of practical activities. Usher *et al.* (1996) describe the role of the practitioner in this mode as a technical and problem-solving activity. It is a view which is concerned with determining a measure of technical efficiency which will necessarily lead to the achievement of predetermined ends and these are separate from the determination of means per se. Disciplinary modes of knowledge rooted in epistemological foundations no longer have credibility in society, and have been replaced by knowledge as the optimising of efficient performance. This type of knowledge, which may be resisted by academics working with disciplinary forms of knowledge, has become a characteristic of some M-level courses.

Knowledge in this mode is applied to the practicum, and indeed its rationale is whether it makes the workplace a more efficient and a more productive place. It may relate to the skill-development of the individual, i.e. presentational skills, or to the strategic knowledge of the individual in order for him or her to function effectively in the workplace or to the technical ability of the student so that they can better provide the workplace with solutions to problems that they and others encounter. There is no desire here to examine the various contexts of the work, whether they are political, ethical or consequential. The main criterion for the successful development of this process is whether it works in practice. This mode of knowledge can be contrasted with dispositional knowledge that has affinities with older university agendas.

Dispositionality

A different view of the process comprises a belief that it is possible to identify a number of dispositions, liberal in orientation, which through appropriate pedagogic means are taught to students, and the student is better able to go on in the practice as a result of applying them. This is a third type of knowledge. No end-point is specified so that what works or what behaviours produce the best results are not considered to be relevant criteria for the justification of these forms of knowledge. The end point or outcomes of the application of these dispositions is considered to be uncertain, as the dispositions are justified as ends in themselves. A further justification is provided for not designating specific outcomes in the professional workplace and this is that purposes, organisational arrangements and the like cannot be identified outside of the workplace itself and in terms of prevailing conditions. In short, change is such an endemic aspect of workplace life that to specify ends from teaching programmes would render them very quickly out of date. Furthermore, knowledge itself is understood as non-predictable, non-deterministic, situation-specific and contextualised.

Unlike critical forms of knowledge (see below) where the emphasis is on structural and institutional reform, this mode of knowledge is concerned with the development of the individual through reflection. The reflection occurs in relation to the activity under examination and is therefore action-based. The student sees their practice in a different light which means that the decisions they make in relation to future actions are different. Schon (1983) characterises it as a continuous interrogation and imaginative reconstruction of the practitioner's actions as they are unfolding.

Criticality

A final form of knowledge prioritises criticality. Here the purpose is explicitly or implicitly political and change-orientated. Knowledge is understood as critical, that is critical of the prevailing ethos and purposes of the various workplaces. Individuals are positioned within discursive and institutional structures which influence how they understand themselves and others and how they can change both themselves and the institutions in which they work. Some M-level programmes of study therefore have as one of their purposes interventions in the field and the imposition of a set of values on the workings of the organisation, how it functions, what it produces and what its effects are. Its concerns are fundamentally to do with identifying power structures in society and destabilizing these, to the end that more equal and more just arrangements are made.

These four modes of knowledge, disciplinarity, technical rationality, dispositionality and criticality, are ideal and operate in different ways in Masters-level programmes. Indeed, hybrid versions of each may be produced. Programmes may be constructed as disciplinary forms of knowledge, but rapidly assume, not least in the minds of students, a critical form. Furthermore, at different points and in different places programmes operate through different modes of knowledge. In each arena and at different times, different modes of knowledge-construction may take precedence. One of the consequences of this is that the knowledge which is produced has different impacts in the workplace.

Internationalism

The second transition refers to International students. An *International Master's student* is here taken to mean a student with a first degree awarded outside the UK, whether in their home country or elsewhere, and includes those students who are classified in Higher Education Statistics Agency reports both as 'EU' and as 'Overseas'. The homogeneity of this group is not unproblematic, as Hyland, Trahar, Anderson and Dickens (2008) have noted: the category comprises students from a range of countries whose educational traditions vary widely on a cline of similarity to that of the UK.

Analysis of the literature calls into question the degree to which the term *international student* is a useful category, given the range of experience, expectations and resources that these participants bring to their courses; and the degree to which their experience is shared by other groups of one-year Master's course students in the UK. Particular reasons make it important to investigate the transitions that are navigated by international students in moving from first degrees in their home countries (or a third country) to taught Master's degrees in the UK. First of all, international students represent a very large proportion of the taught Master's degree students in the UK. Figures for 2007-2008 indicate that of the 155,046 students enrolled in the first year of a taught Master's degree in the UK, 50% were either European Union or so-called 'Overseas' students (Higher Education Policy Institute and The British Library, 2010: 10). This large population of students merits careful study, in order to promote the quality of the teaching and learning they receive. The second reason why it is particularly important to investigate the transition to Master's level of this group of students is that most Master's courses in the UK only last one year (unlike Master's courses in the USA, for example, which tend to be two years long).

In the literature on the adaptation of international students to study abroad, research has consistently found that international students who adapt successfully tend to take approximately six months to do so. Brein and David (1971: 218) recount that 'few first-time sojourners recover from the culture-shock experience in less than 6 months, and it is not uncommon for it to last for a year'. Over thirty years after this statement by Brein and David, Ryan (2005: 98) reports that it can take international students 'at least six months to summon the courage to speak in class'. The Higher Education Academy's (2011) advice on supervision of international students warns that '[t]he first 6 months of any international study will be the hardest'. Andrade (2006:149) even suggests that 'adjustment levels may plateau in the second year… suggesting that institutions must go beyond the first year in providing transition support'. However, by the time they are six months into their course, most Master's students in the UK have finished the taught provision of the course and are working on their dissertations. It is crucial to seek knowledge about those international Master's students who do successfully manage this transition, and to seek ways of easing the transition for all students in this group.

The review that follows deals with the themes that most commonly recur in the literature on international Master's students: how these students cope with ways of working in Western, and more specifically British, universities; the supervisory relationship; the stress and loneliness of the international student; and interventions that have been proposed to address these issues. Two exclusion criteria have been applied to this literature review, and these will first be justified.

Research on other international student populations excluded

There is a large body of research exploring the experiences of international students in higher education. However, much of this research is not unproblematically generalisable to the population addressed in this study. It has already been pointed out that a one-year Master's degree is atypical against the background of the global international student experience: undergraduate degrees take three or four years, doctoral degrees take three years or more, and Master's degrees in other English-speaking countries tend to take two years. The comparatively short time scale of the typical UK Master's degree imposes special constraints on the international student; it can even be argued *a priori* that the experiences of these international students have more in common with the full-time students in the other strands of the *Transitions* study than they do with international students pursuing either undergraduate or doctoral degrees, or two-year Master's degrees. The reduced time scale of the typical UK Master's degree means that some of the excellent research on the international student experience, including work done under the auspices of the Higher Education Academy (e.g. Hyland, Trahar, Anderson and Dickens, 2008; Carroll and Ryan, 2005), but which does not focus specifically on one-year Master's programmes, may only be extrapolated to the UK Master's student context with great care.

Research focusing on the international undergraduate student population may fail to be generalisable to the target population of this study for other reasons as well. For example, Schwelsfurth and Gu (2009) discuss the difficulties that the undergraduate international students in their study had with aspects of British undergraduate culture such as the value given by many first-year British students to alcohol consumption and clubbing in their first year outside the parental home.   Issues such as these, to do with the age and maturational development of British undergraduate students, may be important, especially in a context where international undergraduates constitute less than 12% of the UK undergraduate population (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2011) and are therefore under pressure to integrate into British undergraduate culture; however, they have little relevance to the international Master's student.

Likewise, research that deals mainly with the international doctoral student experience can only be applied with care to the target population of this study. A typical UK Master's course consists of a combination of an initial taught portion followed by the execution of a small research project and its writing up in a dissertation; more of the year is spent in taught provision than on the dissertation project. This makes for a learning experience quite unlike the doctoral student experience, where the majority of the doctoral student's time is spent pursuing an individual research project under the direction of a supervisor. Of course, some aspects of dissertation supervision resemble the doctoral experience, and research relevant to these aspects will be called upon in the review below.

It is argued, therefore, that in different ways, the one-year international Master's student population is different from other international student populations. Therefore, except in cases where there is a specific cause to call upon research dealing with a wider international student experience, the literature reviewed below deals with Master's degree programmes and students.

Research Focusing on International Students' Language Proficiency Excluded

A second consideration is that some of the research which has focused specifically on Master's students, and even on UK Master's students, deals with problems directly associated with limited language proficiency. The decision has been taken not to examine this issue here, for three reasons.

First, the focus of this strand of the *Transitions* project is not on students with limited English proficiency, but on international students. Some international students (and some of the students who took part in this study) are native speakers of English; other international Master's students have obtained their first degree at an institution where English is the medium of instruction. For these students, English proficiency is not an issue. What is of interest in this strand is what is common to international students in transition to UK Master's courses: for example, arriving in the UK as a burgeoning academic who knows all the rules at home, but none here; in most cases only being in this UK for a year, with implications both for the necessity of speedy integration and the knowledge they will return home.

Second, if students are being offered places on courses for which their language proficiency is not sufficient, the possible solutions appear straightforward: courses/universities raise the English language requirements for Master's degrees; or they support their Master's students' English language development intensively before, near the beginning of, and/or during these courses; or they intervene at the level of the academic staff who are teaching these students, to make teaching more linguistically accessible to students with a limited command of academic or discipline-specific English. All of these solutions have been implemented, sometimes in combination, at various UK universities. It does not seem fruitful in this review further to discuss this aspect of the experience of some UK international Master's students.

Finally, the institution where the first part of the present study was carried out has a relatively high English language proficiency requirement, in comparison to that reported in some of the studies where limited English language proficiency is a focus of discussion. Perhaps because of this requirement, English language proficiency did not figure with any prominence in the concerns of the respondents.

Ways of Working in the British University

There are commonly held perceptions about a dichotomous relationship between Western academic culture and those of other countries, and national cultures are deemed to be powerful predictors of the attitudes and behaviours of members of those cultures (Hofstede, 1994). This assumed cultural influence is held to make it difficult for learners to adapt to new educational cultures that transgress the precepts of their home culture (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Bell, 2007). Littlewood (2000) challenged the idea of culturally fixed attitudes in an article entitled 'Do Asian students really want to listen and obey?' Littlewood's study of 2,307 students in eight Asian countries and 349 students in three European countries revealed no significant difference between countries in how much responsibility and control students wanted to exercise in classrooms. In view of this, it is not surprising that behaviour should be found to follow attitude: Liu (2009), in a study of Chinese Master's students of marketing in the UK, observed that the students soon began to appreciate the student-centred and process-

oriented approach they found in their marketing classes, challenging 'the predominant, deeply-held assumption of Chinese students as passive learners' (Liu, 2009:33).

Likewise, Rich (2005:3), in her study of international students from several countries on a UK Master's course in teaching of English to speakers of other languages, points out the 'danger of over generalization and reductionism in the ways in which culture is seen to define individual actions'. Rich found that her students actively sought to adjust their perceptions of what learning would be like in their new setting and worked strategically to maximise their chances of success. Not only is this positioning of the international Master's student as agent reflected again in Morita's (2004) study of six female Japanese graduate students in Canada, but a more nuanced portrait emerges of how behaviour may be deceptive to an observer prone to stereotyping. Morita's students gave thoughtful explanations of their behaviour in class, including a range of explanations for keeping silent in different classroom situations; this did not correspond to the stereotype of the demure and reticent Japanese woman. The students' explanations showed them as agents maximising their learning possibilities.

Some researchers argue that Western universities should offer international postgraduate students even more than a chance to acculturate to new ways of learning. Cadman (2000:475) argues that 'the challenge to learn is on both sides', and that Western scholars should critique the values of their academic tradition by attending to the learning practices and values of other educational traditions. In the International Bridging Program that Cadman describes, international postgraduates examine the skills they bring and examine how these relate to those that they may be acquiring in the new learning environment. Similarly, Hyland, Trahar, Anderson and Dickens (2008: 4) pose the question of 'whether we position "international students" as needing to acquire a set of skills to assimilate with the dominant pedagogical approaches or whether we position ourselves – local academics and students – as needing to learn and be open to change'.

These suggestions may offer a response to the finding in Schevyens, Wild and Overton's (2004) study of international postgraduate geography students in Australia that a salient issue for these students was the difficulty of having been high achievers in their home countries and finding themselves disempowered by their struggles for expression and understanding. In an ethnographic study, Brown and Holloway (2008) observed 150 international students over a twelve-month UK Master's course, and had formal interviews with 13 of the students at regular intervals. The students' response to 'the shock of arrival' is characterised in three ways: *choosing segregation*, involving avoiding the host language and restricting culture learning; *choosing multiculturalism*, involving finding a new voice and meeting diversity while maintaining cultural identity; and *being marginalized*, involving avoiding the host language and minimizing cultural learning. Each of these trajectories is seen by Brown and Holloway as a positive evolution of a new self.

Keene (2006) looks at the contrasts between the way that international students resist the academic discourse that positions them in a deficit model, and 'place themselves in storylines of strength and agency', allowing the sometimes contradictory discourses constructed by others and self to co-exist, thus allowing for 'discontinuities in ways of being that lead to new identities being formed' (Keene, 2006: 241).

Supervision

An area that is frequently cited as problematic for the international Master's student is the supervisory relationship (e.g. Schevyens, Wild and Overton, 2004). McClure (2007) used a qualitative, critical-incidents methodology to work with twelve electrical and electronic engineering students from China (six Masters students and six doctoral students) who were studying in a British university on full financial scholarships. One of the areas of marginalization for these students was a mismatch between their conception of their role and that of their supervisors: the students were from a context where joint research with a supervisor was the norm, and were expected by their British supervisors to undertake independent research.

The mismatch in expectations is sometimes positioned as a problem stemming from deficits in the student: Brown's (2007) article is entitled 'A consideration of the challenges involved in supervising international Masters students', and the main challenges cited are lack of language proficiency, lack of critical analytical skills and 'a prevalence of personal problems' (Brown, 2007: 239). However, in Cadman's (2000) questionnaire study of international postgraduate students participating in a programme designed to help bridge their transition to study in an Australian university, not only did students recognise that there risked being differences between supervisor and supervisee expectations, but some students expressed perplexity at how to ascertain just what these differences were: they were reticent about asking supervisors directly for fear of damaging the relationship. Cadman tentatively suggests an institutional forum for solving this sort of problem.

Adrian-Taylor, Noels and Tischler (2007) pursued the question of prevention and management of conflict between supervisors and postgraduate international students further. They surveyed 55 international postgraduate students, of whom 37 were Master's students, and 53 supervisors to determine whether they had encountered supervisor-supervisee conflict, to what they attributed the conflict, what their resources were for managing conflict, what services and policies they would like to have to manage and prevent conflict, and how they would prefer to deal with conflict when it arose. Once again, unclear expectations emerged as a source of conflict; insufficient time and insufficient feedback from supervisors were also mentioned. Both students and supervisors gave negotiation as a preferred way of dealing with conflict, over any involvement of a third party such as arbitration or mediation.

What do international students expect of their supervisors? Rice *et al.* (2009) carried out a survey of 367 graduate students in a US university. Students who were unhappy with their advisors perceived a lack of guidance and feedback, on the one hand, and excessive demands on the other. Notably, the ideal supervisor was said to have cross-cultural empathy, interpersonal skills, and to be good at giving advice. Egan, Stockley, Brouwer, Tripp and Stechyson (2009) analysed perceptions of graduate supervision in the exit surveys of 283 doctoral students and 1052 Master's students at a Canadian university. As in the Rice *et al.* study, students (especially those in arts and social science disciplines) placed more value on supervisors' attributes that were not directly related to the requirements of supervision.

It would be tempting to interpret the reported differences in expectations between supervisors and international supervisees as an effect of prior educational experience on the part of the supervisees. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Bartram and Bailey (2009), in a study of

152 international students (on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses) and 116 UK undergraduates, found that UK and international students had much the same view on what makes an effective university tutor or supervisor. Of four possible attributes, teaching skills were the most frequently chosen (63% UK/41% International), followed by personal attributes (17%/37%), relationship with students (11%/14%), and lastly knowledge (9%/8%). Bartram and Bailey acknowledge that there may be some problems with these categories and how they were interpreted: it may not always have been straightforward to distinguish personal attributes from teaching skills; and the low rating for knowledge may have resulted either from an assumption that a university lecturer should have the necessary knowledge or from a world view that downgrades the role of knowledge in teaching. Nonetheless, it is striking that there was so little divergence between the UK and the international students.

Stress, Loneliness and How They Are Dealt With

Sawir *et al.* (2007) in Australia and Sawir *et al.* (2009) in New Zealand each carried out intensive interviews with 200 international students (per study). Both groups reported isolation and loneliness, especially in the early months, both because of being away from their families and because they found themselves without social networks; but also because of a yearning for their home cultural and linguistic environment. Schevyens, Wild and Overton (2003) found similar results for international postgraduate geography students in Australia.

In Brown and Holloway's (2008) previously mentioned study of a one-year UK Master's group, the pattern of culture shock observed in previous studies was replicated, and the stress was greatest in the initial stages of the students' sojourn. However, the level of stress did not lessen gradually, but decreased in unpredictable and dynamic ways, and ease in one aspect of a student's life might be accompanied by unease in another at a given time. In addition, there was a great deal of variation in experience from one student to another. In another report based on the same student sample, Brown (2008) reports that one aspect of stress was the perception that one's English was poor, and that a common response to this was to avoid interaction by socialising in mono-ethnic first-language groups.

Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen and Van Horn (2002) compared the relocation of home and international students at a mid-western US state university. 54% of the international students were postgraduate students. International students had more trouble adjusting; for both groups the strain of adjustment peaked three months after arrival. A high sense of self-efficacy contributed to greater adjustment. International students reported less social support than home students, but those international students who did interact with host nationals adjusted more and reported less strain six months after arrival.

There is a tradition of studies investigating how well international students manage to socialise with people from the local community, and some studies in this vein have focused on international postgraduate students. Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) used the social skills and culture learning model of culture shock (Furnham and Bochner, 1996) to examine the social interaction with hosts of 156 male international graduate students in a Canadian university. This compares the perceived degree of social difficulty in different situations in the home country and the host country. It was found that as more cross-cultural differences were perceived between country of origin and host country, interaction with host country

individuals decreased, and interaction with co-nationals increased; that the more interaction there was with host country individuals, the less culture shock there was. However, these postgraduate students had been in Canada for 8 to 166 months. As discussed earlier, it is difficult to compare the experience of these long-stay postgraduate students with that of one-year Master's students.

Neri and Ville (2008) analysed a questionnaire completed by 173 international students, of whom 40% were postgraduates, and investigated what activities and other factors (such as length of stay) had an effect on the participants' well-being. Students who renewed the social networks that their move to a new country had deprived them of experienced more well-being (although this did not correlate with an improvement in academic performance). Neri and Ville hypothesise that this was due to most international students' investing in bonding social capital with other international students, often from the same country of origin, rather than bridging social capital with students from the host country who might have helped them understand the culture of the educational system more readily. Interaction by the participants also tended to be with students from the same year of study, optimising well-being but losing chances for mentoring relationships which might have improved academic performance. Note that this was based on a very small return rate – 3% – from the 5500 students who were invited to participate, so there may be a selection bias in these results.

However, the studies reported so far in this section offer only two alternatives to the stress caused by loneliness in the new environment: socialisation with co-nationals and socialisation with host country individuals. There is a third possibility that has been explored by other researchers. Myles and Cheng (2003) studied twelve international graduate students (six males and six females) who were in mid-career and studying at a Canadian university. Here, students were part of a supportive network of international students rather than having much interaction with home students in their university. Likewise, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) investigated, in a UK university, two social networks of students of more than one nationality, having no British members, and found that they formed supportive groups Montgomery and McDowell point out that '[a]n implicit perception of international students is that they have difficulty in becoming involved in social exchange with other students who do not share their "culture" and language. ... The international community of practice described here presents a picture of a more positive and active international student experience, with international students as the providers of support and knowledge within a supportive and purposeful student community' (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009:455).

Wu and Hammond (2011) report on a group of East Asian Master's students at a UK university. 24 students completed a series of three questionnaires over the year, and eight students from five countries were interviewed regularly. The students reported a good level of satisfaction with their sojourn, and achieved academic success. The salient characteristic of their narratives was their membership of an international student culture where students from a range of countries establish a network where English is the medium of communication and academic success is a common goal.

Interventions

Interventions have sometimes been implemented in order to support international students in their adaptation to university study in their new country. In the USA, Abe, Talbot and

Geelhoed (1998) describe how international graduate and undergraduate students, the majority of whom come from Asian countries, participated in an International Peer Program (IPP). The IPP participants showed significantly higher social adjustment scores than non-participants. In Australia, the Communities that Care initiative (Baker and Hawkins, 2006) and the Integrated Bridging Program (Cadman, 2000) have proven effective in easing transitions.

In the UK, Robson and Turner (2006) describe an intervention designed to improve the experience of international postgraduate students in a British university, providing focus groups, staff awareness raising and an induction conference and skills programme for incoming students. They also aimed to support students in giving presentations by providing them with non-expert peer modelling, rather than expert modelling by a university lecturer. However, they were unable to recruit more experienced international students for this role.

There is evidence that a reductive and essentialist cultural attitude to international students is not productive; students challenge cultural stereotypes and seize agentive roles in maximising their learning possibilities. It has been proposed that Western universities should position themselves in a more open relationship with the learning discourses of other cultures. This may afford a way for international students to form new identities that will accommodate continuing change.

The supervisory relationship is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a frequent area of concern for the international Master's student. This is often due to a mismatch in expectations between supervisor and supervisee, and students do not always know how to clarify the confusion here. International students, like home students, value teaching skill and personal qualities above all in their supervisors and tutors.

Isolation and loneliness due to the absence of family, social networks, and native cultural/linguistic environment are common for these students. These feelings may not always evolve in a uniform or predictable way. Creation of a social network in the host country can help; but recent research has shown that this function may as well be performed by an international student network as by a network of host country 'natives'. Interventions to aid international students in transition to their new academic environment have been implemented in various countries, including the UK.

Widening Participation

A third transition refers to students from non-traditional backgrounds. A key issue for learner progression and success is the transition between differently structured learning environments, and transitions to Masters-level study may be particularly difficult for students from non-academic and non-standard backgrounds. For example, research has raised concerns that Widening Participation policies have paid too little attention to the academic structures, cultures and practices which might exacerbate, rather than combat, exclusion in higher education (Jones and Thomas, 2005). A growing body of research has focused on student experience, to identify and examine the multiple barriers and complex issues that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds might face when participating in higher education (Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Gorard *et al*., 2007). This body of work has helped to illuminate the key transition points such students need to negotiate as they move into

unfamiliar academic territory, which tends to privilege those forms of cultural and linguistic capital largely unknown to students from these historically under-represented groups (Reay *et al*., 2001; 2005).

Research focusing on assessment and feedback practices in higher education has considered the experiences of students undergoing these transitions, and shown that academic writing and assessment practices often operate in exclusive ways, particularly because of an over-emphasis on 'skills' and a lack of attention to writing processes, methodologies and epistemologies (Burke and Jackson, 2007; Creme, 2003; Lillis, 2002). Such research has contributed to approaches to support students to meet the requirements and expectations of traditional assessment frameworks, for example, through formative assessment and feedback (Burke and Jackson, 2007). However, it has also exposed the limitation of current understanding about the impact of different modes of assessment and feedback on students from these historically under-represented groups (see for example, Archer *et al*., 2003; Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Burke, 2007; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Clegg and David, 2006; Morley, 2003).

Such work highlights a range of issues for widening participation policies, including the problematic deficit constructions of students going through these transitions (Archer, 2003; Archer *et al*., 2001; Burke, 2008; Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2003; Reay, 2001; Webb, 2009); time problems caused by the intensive nature of the transition; the use of pedagogic, assessment and language (oral and written) approaches which do not take account of the needs of students from non-standard backgrounds (Clegg and David, 2006; Creme, 2003; Lillis, 2002; Lillis and Ramsey, 1997; Morley, 2003); and a disjuncture between forms of learning/experience of non-traditional students and forms of learning demanded by institutions (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Lillis, 2002).

Paul Wakeling (2010) confirms that there is very little research about the background of such postgraduate students, how they fund their studies, what motivates them and specifically whether access to postgraduate study can be considered unequal. He argues that postgraduate study has expanded to become a core part of a mass higher education system. For example, UK postgraduate numbers increased *fivefold* between 1990 and 2006. He notes that as access to initial higher education becomes more inclusive (of women, ethnic minorities, and the working class), inequality may simply be 'passed up' to postgraduate level. Conversely, he makes the point that if 'background effects' diminish at each successive educational stage; it is possible that access to postgraduate study is *not* conditioned by social inequalities once academic attainment has been taken into account.

Different national contexts, with different cycles, means it is not easy to ascertain the growth in postgraduate study everywhere, so this must be nationally contextualized. Educational class inequalities are *maximally maintained*: they remain at a given level until participation for the most advantaged social classes reaches saturation point. This may lead to the development of 'horizontal' differences within levels, so-called 'effectively maintained inequality' (Lucas, 2001, cited in Wakeling, 2010), whereby differences of institutional or 'track' prestige and status structure educational inequalities.

Wakeling notes that qualifications are valued as a means of securing entry to certain professions; so their value is symbolic rather than technical. There's a clear shift among the

postgraduates, with a much larger proportion of them being from a 'professional/managerial' background than is seen among first-degree graduates from the same institution who progressed to postgraduate study. There are differences between subject areas in the social groups accessing postgraduate level study. For example, Medicine and Dentistry has a very high proportion of students from professional/managerial backgrounds, whereas in Education, the figure is much lower. However, it seems that the effect of background variables declines with each successive educational transition (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993 cited in Wakeling, 2010). Higher education attainment tends to condition further progression and this is linked to the prestige of the first degree. Academic factors appear to be more important, and this is shown in the kind of degree and institutional track of that degree. However it is more likely that a working-class student will have graduated from a lower-status institution. There are differences in gender to note as well. In the UK, men of any social class are more likely to progress from a first-degree to doctoral study than women of any class, but within each gender, class differences remain and ethnicity adds a further layer of complexity.

Discourses of Widening Participation

Widening Participation often involves the targeting of certain social groups through different activities, including summer schools, outreach and other kinds of programmes designed to 'raise aspirations'. The targets, or subjects, of Widening Participation policy discourse are those individuals who are identified as both *disadvantaged* and as *having the potential* to benefit from higher education. The problematic nature of judging who has potential, and who does not, is silenced in the policy discourse. Potential is assumed to be an inherent quality in individuals that can be objectively identified through fair and transparent mechanisms and criteria. As Widening Participation discourse tends to be couched in deficit terms, a main focus is on changing individual attitudes, for example by 'raising aspirations' (Burke, 2006; Burke and Jackson, 2007). Widening Participation policy tends to locate the problem of higher education non/participation in those individuals who lack the right attitudes, aspirations and values, placing particular focus on those identified as 'disadvantaged' or 'excluded'. In this way, Widening Participation is tied to the politics of identity and subjective construction. The perspectives of neo-liberalism also significantly shape it. The taken-for-granted acceptance that the economy and marketplace are at the centre of the project to widen participation implicates different individuals and communities in different and unequal ways. Madeline Arnot and Miriam David explain that '[e]quality of opportunity [is] recast as the individualizing of opportunities, for economic and social enhancement' (Arnot *et al.*, 1999, 83).

Neo-liberalism emphasizes concerns with individual responsibility, self-determination and employability in the context of uncertain, unstable and fluctuating market forces. The emphasis is on self-improvement within what is constructed as a meritocratic system. Although policy makes reference to social justice, expressed through the discourse of inclusion, this tends to 'include those who are excluded into the dominant framework/state of being, rather than challenging existing inequalities within the mainstream system, or encouraging alternative ways of being' (Archer and Leathwood, 2003, 23). The discourse of inclusion constructs a diverse British society constituted of individual citizens who, regardless of their social position and background, share a set of universal values and perspectives. The implication is that all citizens should aspire to be included in a set of shared

orientations, ignoring that these tend to privilege middle-classed, white racialised, ablest and heterosexist subject positions. Differences associated with marginality, disadvantage and deficit must thus be regulated and controlled. Although 'diversity' is celebrated, and often used by universities to promote their profile, being 'too different' requires self-correction and self-regulation.

The intensity of focus of Widening Participation policy then is on changing individual attitudes. Far less attention is paid to the transformation of institutional structures, cultures and practices that unwittingly reproduce deeply embedded inequalities within higher education fields. Such inequalities are intertwined with longstanding cultural and discursive mis/representations, which produce what Stephen Ball calls 'discourses of derision' (Ball, 1990) and Beverly Skeggs names 'pathologised subjectivities' (Skeggs, 2004).

Widening Participation, Habitus and Socio-Cultural Inequalities

Although there is very little research on widening participation in postgraduate level study, there is a significant body of work on widening participation in undergraduate and pre-degree level education. Research on widening participation has drawn extensively on Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives to understand the reproduction of socio-cultural inequalities in education and their relation to the production of student identities. For example, Diane Reay (2001), drawing on an ESRC-funded study on student choice (Reay *et. al.*, 2001; 2005), has explored the contradictions that working-class students experience in terms of their sense of self and their aspirations to participate in higher education. Her analysis suggests that this causes confusions and ambiguities about 'the sort of self they are seeking', and the research participants' accounts of accessing higher education 'hint at a delicate balance between realizing potential and maintaining a sense of authentic self'. She draws on the notion of 'pretention' to highlight the ambiguity connected to being aspirational, arguing that 'almost by definition, aspirant working class-ness is pretentious - a hankering after `the other', rather than an acceptance of the self. Reay explains that Bourdieu defines pretension as `the recognition of distinction that is affirmed in the effort to possess it' (Bourdieu, 1986: 251). Building on this insight, she argues that there is a threat of 'losing oneself' in the search to find a university where one has a sense of belonging. Although the university sector 'epitomizes middle-classness' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), there appears to be 'an attempt to match the habitus of the home to the habitus of the university' (Reay, 2001: 338).

Research has also shown though that students seek to find a place to study where they might feel a sense of belonging. Reay *et al.* (2001, 2005) theorise students' choice of higher education institution by drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'objective limits' and how choices become 'transformed into a practical anticipation of objective limits', which lead to processes of self-exclusion (Reay *et al.*, 2001: 11). They argue that 'choices are governed by what it is 'reasonable to expect' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 226)' and that their research participants have a strong sense of their 'proper place in the world' (Bourdieu, 1986: 474). They draw on Bourdieu's work to demonstrate that habitus operates not only at the level of the individual but also the institutional. Crozier *et al.* (2008) build on the concept of institutional habitus (Reay *et al.*, 2005). They argue that the institutional habituses of universities and colleges are connected to organisational culture and ethos, as well as wider socio-economic and educational cultures (Crozier *et al.* 2008). In their analysis of students' experiences in four higher education institutions, with a focus on social class and students'

identities, they found that there are 'greater differences between student experiences at different universities than between the experiences of students from different backgrounds in each university' (Crozier *et al.*, 2008).

Reed *et al.* (2007: 23) suggest that forms of misrecognition present 'unequal access to cultural capital as something natural when it is in fact a social construction underpinned by differential access to economic capital'. They further argue that experiences of traumatic and highly negative formal education, including bullying and violence, humiliation and shame, often contribute to the formation of a particular habitus, for example what they call 'disengaged learning identities', which represent in part self-protection strategies (*ibid.*, 2007: 29). Similar to Crozier *et al.* (2008), they argue for the 'establishment of *respectful* and *relational practices* as the basis for improving educational engagement' (Reed *et al.*, 2007: 33).

The concepts of habitus, capital and field enable the researcher to disrupt the problematic focus of much Widening Participation policy on individual attitudes, which tends to construct those targeted by widening participation policy as deficient and needing remedial help through the intervention of the (middle-class) professional. Rather, such concepts highlight and emphasise the strengths of working-class students, for example, of their great resilience and commitment to their studies, which is often in the face of adverse structural discrimination and oppression (Crozier *et al.*, 2008). The problem of widening participation is thus reconceptualised as a need to understand the ways that socio-cultural inequalities are reproduced within educational fields, as well as to identify possibilities for transformation of institutional and academic cultures and practices.

Identity Formation and Becoming a University Student

Identity formation has been a key conceptual focus in research on Widening Participation in higher education. This has included attention to the complex ways that forms of gendered, class and racialised identities, as well as other sets of identification (such as religion, for example) profoundly shape the processes of becoming a student in higher education. This is interconnected with social practices, power relations and the emotional dimensions of subjectivity.

For example, Archer *et al.* (2001) explore the impact of formations of masculinity and religious identifications and practices, on decisions not to participate in higher education. They show how some young Muslim males position higher education participation as ideologically incompatible with some forms of Muslim masculinity since university is often seen to involve drugs and drinking, which are in tension with the kinds of familial and cultural dispositions signified, valued and practised through the Muslim religion. Similarly, Archer *et al.* (*ibid.*) argue, drawing on their research data, that some young men from minority ethnic backgrounds view higher education participation as incompatible with a 'cool' identity since it often involves impoverished lifestyle and financial hardship, and therefore lacks the kind of immediate material and monetary rewards made available by going to work (see also Archer and Leathwood, 2003). In this way, participating in higher education appears to interfere with practices of maintaining residual or emerging versions of masculinity for some men, since it locates them 'within an arena where middle-class men exercise greater power/competency' (Archer *et al.*, 2001: 441), leaving them struggling with

feelings of dispossession and exclusion. However, in Burke's research on masculinities and aspirations to participate in higher education, most of the men, including those from Muslim and minority ethnic backgrounds, saw higher education as a potential space of transformation and social mobility (Burke, 2006; 2010).

Archer and Leathwood (2003) found that the main motivation shaping working-class women's participation in HE was the desire to improve the self through cultural and academic learning. The working-class women in their study tended to frame HE participation in positive terms as a way of improving and reshaping the self to fit with those images of the self often presented as more desirable in hegemonic discourses of 'success'; including being educated, middle-class and aspirational (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Yet, Archer and Leathwood (2003) also point to the way in which women students are often more likely than men students to talk about 'feeling alienated by the academic culture within the university' (p. 190), especially aspects of academic practices, conventions and language, highlighting the contradictory experiences of higher education participation in relation to identity formations. Burke's research on working-class women supports this; women in the study often found formal educational institutions intimidating places where they did not have a sense of 'fitting in' (Burke, 2002).

Archer and Leathwood argue that working-class students often resist and challenge the 'middle-class transformative ideal' (2003: 178) that shapes the culture and ethos of many higher education institutions, choosing instead to sustain their subjectivities as working class. Indeed, Reay *et al.* (2001) highlight the processes of disidentification among some working-class and minority ethnic students with certain higher education institutions and the forms of middle-class belonging and attachment made available through those institutions. Drawing on qualitative interviews with higher education applicants conducted as part of an ESRC project on access to higher education, Reay (2001: 337) explores working-class higher education applicants' engagement in complicated practices of 'trying to negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding onto a cohesive self'. Reay is interested in the different kinds of emotional investments shaping working-class students' transition from further to higher education, and those dimensions of experience that inform class feeling – the place of memory, feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority and the distinctions and markings of taste. According to Reay (2001) a central problem facing working-class students as they enter higher education institutions, especially the pre-1992 'elite' HEIs, is the 'problematic of reconciling academic success with working-class identity' (Reay, 2001: 339). This is because being aspirational and working-class often demands having to negotiate competing sets of pressures and seductions based on distinct forms of class identification; being aspirational might involve a risky process of 'losing oneself' (Reay, 2001).

Reay argues that formal educational institutions and practices are structured in relation to a middle-class imaginary, where middle-class values are treated as the norm while working-class students are constructed through a deficit model which positions them as lacking aspirations, information or academic preparation. Thus a concern has been raised in feminist and critical research of the ways that higher education operates to pathologize working-class experiences and identities, since it facilitates forms of recognition that afford little pride and respect to gendered, working-class positions, identities, relations and practices. Indeed, the explicit denial or rejection of working-class history and identity is central in such processes

of exclusion and misrecognition. It is those elements of middle-class subjectivity that are positioned as the norm, as something to aspire to, and this directly contributes to the inferior construction of many working-class people, feelings, which often cut a deep wound in the psyche (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2001; Burke, 2002). Although Reay's research is focusing on transitions to undergraduate level study, such complexities, ambivalences and distinctions continue to impact the transitions to and experiences of postgraduate level study for students from working-class, ethnic minority and other under-represented backgrounds.

Students constructed as 'non-traditional' are caught up in the politics of recognition, knowledge and identity, and the literacy practices that are privileged are often unfamiliar and intimidating. This reinforces exclusionary forces, not only at the structural level, but also at the emotional level, in which students talk about 'not being good enough', or not fitting in (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2001; Burke, 2002; and Bowl, 2003).

Academic Literacy Practices

Academic practices, and particular practices of writing, have also been a major focus of work on widening participation in higher education. Particular constructions of 'academic knowledge' regulate what can be claimed and who can claim certain meanings in their writing. Knowledge that is seen as 'subjective' or 'personal' is at risk of being discounted and there are certain rules of the game that must be adhered to if a student is going to succeed in higher education. 'Other' bodies of knowledge that the student might bring to their work are often invalidated if the student does not construct that knowledge to fit in with the expectations of the institutional and programme assessment frameworks. For example, students often must frame their understanding not in terms of practical or professional knowledge but in relation to academic knowledge, the literature or 'the field' that will then validate the points they want to make. In speaking 'the field', the complex processes that might constitute 'the field' are silenced; who is seen as 'in' and who is seen as 'out' of the field. Complex processes of selection and regulation are rendered invisible through hegemonic discourses of writing as 'skill' or 'technique'. For example, referencing is largely taught in higher education as method: 'how to' cite, 'how to' construct a bibliography. However Burke and Hermerschmidt (2005) argue that referencing is a social practice which involves meticulous processes of selection, editing and 'orchestrating the voices' (Lillis and Ramsey, 1997) in a contested 'field' of study.

Importantly, hegemonic discourses about 'good academic writing' create the boundaries around access to and participation in higher education and this is increasingly linked to notions of a skills-based society and the 'knowledge economy'. However, the politics of knowledge production in relation to discourses of 'skill' and 'knowledge' is largely hidden. Research conducted within universities is seen as of major strategic importance in policy on higher education in terms of the 'knowledge economy' (DfES, 2003). However, the implications of an increasingly hierarchical, diverse and differentiated higher education terrain; for example, institutions seen as 'research-intensive', and recruiting a mainly 'traditional' student body, and those seen as teaching-intensive, recruiting a larger proportion of 'non-traditional' students, is not being explicitly addressed. Who is seen as worthy of higher education access and to what forms of higher education (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.* 2005)? Who is associated with 'knowledge' and who with 'skill'? Who is able to participate in producing knowledge and in what contexts (Burke, 2002; Burke and Jackson, 2007)?

Different forms of writing (and reading) that students participate in are tied to such issues and questions. Furthermore, different forms of literacy determine the kinds of institutions that students might aspire to, and this is made quite explicit in the 2003 white paper on higher education (DfES, 2003). Standards, quality and access become entangled in problematic ways, without clear consideration of the assumptions behind what counts as 'quality', 'high standards', and how and why this is inextricably linked to issues of access, participation and in/equality.

Teresa Lillis argues that the dominant literacy practice within western higher education is 'essayist literacy', which operates around particular taken-for-granted practices. Essayist literacy 'privileges the discursive routines of particular social groups whilst dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in other practices' (Lillis, 2002: 39). The dominant practice of essayist literacy, Lillis argues, exposes that students are expected in formal educational institutions to take part in a very particular kind of literacy practice. Those students who are unfamiliar with this practice are often misrecognised as intellectually inferior or lacking ability. She also points out that this practice 'involves and invokes particular ways of meaning/wording, and can consequently serve to exclude others' (Lillis, 2002: 40).

Laurel Richardson introduces the useful notion of 'writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson, 2000). Rather than be separated out from subject or disciplinary knowledge, writing in this framework is recognized as part of the process of constituting meaning. Writing is a key part of the learning process rather than simply an objective tool of assessment to measure achievement. Writing is a pedagogical tool and research practice that creates meaning and ways of knowing and understanding.

> I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable.

> When we view writing as a method ..... we experience 'language-in-use', how we 'word the world' into existence. And then we 'reword' the world, erase the computer screen, check the thesaurus, move the paragraph, again and again. This 'worded world' never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying. Writing as a method of inquiry honours and encourages the trying, recognizing it as embryonic to the full-fledged attention to the significance of language.

> Writing as a method of inquiry ... provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science. Writing as method does not take writing for granted, but offers multiple ways to learn to do it, and to nurture the writer (Richardson, 2000).

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Understanding writing as part of the process of learning and meaning-making, rather than as a reflection of what one knows, radically alters teachers' and students' pedagogical and assessment approaches to writing in higher education. Issues of power become foregrounded as students have the opportunity to consider how certain texts and certain writers represent their knowledge claims and how these are recognized as il/legitimate and in/valid. This moves away from hegemonic approaches to the teaching of writing, such as bringing in models of 'good essays' to explain to students what 'good writing' looks like. Such an approach suggests to students that there is only one way of writing in higher education and misses the opportunities for students to develop the critical perspectives required to develop their writing and sense of authorial voice.

Work Intensification

A fourth transition focuses on part-time study. A literature review on the experiences of part-time students is inevitably problematic because a full-time/part-time distinction cannot easily be drawn. Many full-time learners work and are for practical purposes part-time, while those taking part-time courses may be able to devote much of their time to study depending on work and other arrangements. Nevertheless the categories are widely used and accepted. Such a literature review is further compounded by an emphasis on the experiences of full-time undergraduates in much higher education literature (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b). In the UK, the Smith report (2010) concludes that postgraduate study in general is under-researched and under-valued. Yet, in the UK more than half of postgraduates are part-time and numbers are growing (King, 2008), so research of this nature is particularly needed.

To address the paucity of literature that provides a close match to the issues addressed in this study, the net will be cast widely in this review to include studies which address the part-time undergraduate experience. But, this approach requires some caution because while undergraduates who work and study part-time may have similar experiences to working postgraduates, we cannot assume this to be the case. Postgraduates are inevitably mature students and the literature on adult education also has something to offer. Here we must be mindful of the distinctive type of study being undertaken: taught postgraduate courses aimed at part-timers are both usually professionally orientated and highly academic and this may generate very different experiences from the many adult learners who engage in post-compulsory education.

There are two aspects of transition which are of interest. Firstly, there is a life-experience transition from a working life to working plus studying part-time. Secondly, there is the intellectual and emotional transition from previous study to study at taught post-graduate level. These transitions are not straightforward and need some theorising and further attention.

Theorising Transitions: Learning Careers and Learners

A key feature of part-time study at any level is the managing of work, family and other commitments alongside study (Callender *et al.*, 2006; Kember, 1999; Kember *et al.,* 2005; McGiveny, 1996; Simpson, 2002; Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b).

It is widely agreed in this literature that 'lifelong learning' is not a sequence of learning events from cradle to grave; the social context in which learning takes place is significant and learning is not merely a cognitive process but is socially mediated (Brennan *et al.,* 2010).

However, Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) argue that recognising that learning is culturally embedded at the time it takes place is not enough. A longitudinal perspective on learning which incorporates past as well as present learning experiences and contexts is needed and they introduce the term 'learning career' to capture this. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' they argue that in a learning career learners acquire dispositions to learn which are shaped by the social position or social class that they inhabit. In a learning career, dispositions change over time but are often entrenched in patterns associated with class, ethnicity and gender. A career is usually associated with patterns of work over a lifetime, but a learning career is:

> ..a career of events, activities and meaning, and the making and remaking of meanings through those activities and events....in which other relevant human experiences, and ways of experiencing them, are described in terms of their relationships with the pivotal concept, learning. (pp. 590-591)

The relationship between being a learner and other aspects of a learner's past and present life in a 'learning career' is complex and cannot be understood without consideration of the learner's identity construction and indeed identity transformation (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). As such the learning career concept has resonance with what Barnett (2007) refers to as an 'ontological turn' in higher education, in which being a learner at more advanced levels is about living with intellectual uncertainty and involves an identity transformation which impacts upon all aspects of life. A learner who becomes a critical thinker through academic study will take up new critical perspectives on work, leisure activities such as watching a film, politics etc. which are unlikely to be reversed.

In a learning career there are no clear-cut transitional stages as these blur and merge depending on a learner's trajectory and identity. Thus, individuals will experience different ways through an educationally constructed transition such as embarking on Masters study in accordance with the timing and nature of previous educational experiences. Similarly the transition from a previous life before taking on the Masters programme *into* Masters study will vary and every individual will have their own story to tell.

It might appear that within a learning career, the concept of a clear transition, or stage, becomes redundant. Yet, key transitional 'stages' have been identified: the first year undergraduate experience is one example and Yorke and Longden (2008) have examined this closely. The danger here is to view these stages as discrete. Viewing such transitions from within a learning career means that we can argue that they are not discrete or uniformly experienced, but fluid and variable, yet we may find some features that have enough generalisability to be of value to research and practice. Embarking on Masters level studies could be viewed as a key transitional 'stage' of a longitudinal learning career in which particular intellectual, social and emotional challenges are likely to arise.

What is a Part-Time Taught Postgraduate Student?

Given the unique experiences learners have of a learning career and the wide variation in their social identities and backgrounds, how can we make sense of categorising part-time Masters' students and conducting meaningful and useful research on their experiences? We may be able to identify some widely recognisable discourses which frame Masters level study that might help. Here we will explore briefly some examples and discuss the limitations of each.

Firstly, part-time students are commonly assumed to have demands on their time which impact on study. But such assumptions are problematic because there may be some part-timers who do not have family responsibilities and/or have a financial position which means they do not work, or they could even be retired. So, some of those taking part-time courses may be able to devote much of their time to study depending on work and other arrangements which may fluctuate over time.

Secondly, there are other unifying discourses for part-time students. Noble (1989) in a study of Canadian students suggested that what officially recorded part-time students have in common is maturity and motivation to study and such assumptions have become widely established with particular resonance for postgraduates. However, in a learning career a disposition or motivation to learn is a complex construct and needs further unpacking. For example, Dweck (1999) has explained how different beliefs about innate ability mean that some learners are demotivated by poor performance while others resolve to do better next time. Family socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender influence these beliefs.

Thirdly, the intellectual level at which postgraduates engage might be assumed to be a unifying factor. However, uncertainty about degree standards between institutions and huge disciplinary variance means that what it is to be an undergraduate, graduate or post-graduate are hard to define. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requires that Masters graduates:

> …..should be capable of demonstrating a systematic understanding of knowledge, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of the discipline, field of study or area of professional practice. They should be capable of demonstrating originality in their application of that knowledge and in addressing problems. They will have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship. In relation to future employment, Master's graduates will be expected to possess the skills needed to exercise independent learning and to develop new skills to a high level. (QAA, 2010, p.4)

While this definition highlights the development of high level disciplinary knowledge and skills that include professional practice, the generic themes are more contentious: originality, understanding research techniques and being an independent learner. Most Masters include a dissertation or report which might be expected to address these generic themes, but that by no means guarantees uniformity of practice even within a discipline, as interpretation of such skills is inevitably subjective.

Finally, the term postgraduate itself provides an identifiable category. The level postgraduate only makes sense in relation to undergraduate (or pre-graduate) students. Postgraduate students are distinguished from undergraduates because of the academic level of study which depends on previous study, and to a lesser extent the maturity of students and the increasing likelihood of part-time study. However, even this classification is not without complexity. Postgraduates might be assumed to have a degree, but this is not the case with some professional Masters programmes which accept prior experience as equivalent to a degree. Postgraduates are sometimes divided into taught and research students but these categories are not clear cut either. Taught students are predominantly taking a Masters although some professional doctorates have taught elements. Meanwhile, some Masters students are enrolled on taught research degrees such as an MRes.

We might assume that through their extended learning careers postgraduates will have acquired an increased level of confidence and social skills compared to undergraduates and school leavers. In a study of 'what is learned at university', Brennen *et al.* (2010) concluded that gaining confidence was more important than acquiring disciplinary knowledge. There is other evidence that graduates acquire skills to manage the social, health and financial aspects of their lives as well as engage in citizenship and voluntary activities (Hancock *et al.*, 2012). Because postgraduates might have a successful learning career to draw upon in developing confident learning identities, we might expect that this would be significant for their study at this level. However, it is not clear how far what is deemed to be a degree-equivalent experience such as working or volunteering might provide an equivalent outcome for those whose learning careers are unconventional or have been achieved with considerable struggle.

A key feature of a learning career is that it is about identity transformation and this helps us in dealing with the problem of placing students in an overarching category. While we cannot say that over the year a group of students have experiences in common because of their common identity, we can claim that these students might undergo identity transitions which might have some similarities because of a degree of commonality in their starting position as beginning part-time Masters students and an end point of persisting for at least one year (the length of the study).

Despite the problems with categorisation, part-time and postgraduate students are recorded as such by their institutions and these categories have been widely used. Much of the research on part-time students does assume an uncritical homogeneity of this category with minimal acknowledgement of variations that might depend on other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, gender, maturity and class background. Nevertheless, it is useful to have an overview of this literature as some of the over-arching themes are of significance to this study.

Retention, motivation and persistence of undergraduates have been of wide concern in the UK and US and have been a driver for research on part-time learner experiences (MacFadgen, 2008; McGiveney, 1996; Peelo, 2002; Yorke, 1999; Simpson, 2002). A common theme is the importance of learner integration into both the institution and their course of study. The main debates concern how far this integration is academic and how far it is social. Most studies and reports consider learning in its wider context rather than viewing academic issues in isolation, but the relative significance of the social and the academic is variable.

Academic and Social Integration

Several studies of both part-time and full-time undergraduates assume that social integration is very important. For undergraduates developing a sense of 'belonging' at university is the key to persistence (Beard, *et al.*, 2007; Gourlay, 2009). McGiveney's (1996) work suggested that for mostly part-time adult learners personal and financial problems influence their motivation to persist more than academic ones, and Callender *et al*. (2006) also concluded that for part-time students balancing busy lives with study is a particular issue. However, others have recently shifted towards the importance of academic integration. For example, although Yorke (1999) critiqued the Tinto (1994) persistence model for its lack of acknowledgement of the wider social context, he more recently argued that while social integration is cited as important for motivating first-year undergraduates in transition, a lack of academic integration is a common reason why learners withdraw (Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b).

The literature on Open and Distance learning also very thoroughly addresses persistence and learner support for second chance and part-time students, but again mostly at undergraduate level (Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2003). Despite the wide recognition of social issues that influence study opportunities, academic integration is once again the key to success. For example, Simpson (1999) points out that mature, part-time, learners' complaints of time pressures may mask underlying academic difficulties. The arguments about integration are further compounded by the debate on how far the academic difficulties stem from the cognitive difficulty of the discipline studied, the intrinsic motivation of the learners or the quality of the learning and teaching.

Learning Careers and Academic Integration as a Social Phenomenon

From a 'learning career' perspective, distinctions between academic and social integration are superfluous because academic activity is viewed as inherently social. Academic activity in a learning career is firmly located in a learner's social context and is both the product of an identity trajectory and shapes that identity. For example, Hughes (2010a) in a study of learner engagement with groupwork has suggested that engagement with disciplinary knowledge depends on appropriate emerging identities and developing 'identity congruence' with a learning group or disciplinary community.

Identity construction is an emotional process and developing learner identities is no different. There is also acknowledgement in the literature of the relationship between affective and cognitive challenges that learners face particularly when in transition. Beard, *et al*. (2007) provide evidence that undergraduate students worry about making friends and about failure and they do not know what to expect when embarking on an undergraduate course. As they settle in they feel more comfortable, but are still worried about a lack of guidance and keeping up academically. Assessment is a particularly emotive area at all levels (Broadfoot, 1996) and will be discussed separately below.

Most of the studies discussed above refer to undergraduates and some of them are officially part-time students. We have already suggested that a distinct category of part-time student

and particularly part-time postgraduate student is problematic and so it is difficult to assess how far these findings might be pertinent for postgraduate transitions. However, there are some themes which have emerged from the literature that have focussed on more mature or advanced students which needed to be highlighted.

Mature Students, Persistence and Satisfaction

There are indications that older students are both more motivated and better informed about their studies than the younger ones (Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b) and this might be of significance for the more mature postgraduates. Part-time postgraduate students may also be particularly motivated to study for vocational reasons through employer support, and many also value the confidence they gain through study at this level (Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b) and the potential reward on their financial investment through improving career prospects (Callender *et al.*, 2006). Mature students may also be more willing to voice dissent. Yorke and Longden's (2008b) report on UK part-time undergraduates indicates that part-time mainly mature students may be highly critical of course arrangements such as timetabling, particularly if they are studying on predominantly full-time undergraduate courses.

However, Smith *et al.* (2010) report that postgraduates are generally highly satisfied with their courses indicating that there might be a difference between undergraduate and postgraduates. Yet in another UK survey of postgraduate satisfaction (Park and Wells, 2010), students report that although overall they are very satisfied, they have concerns with the organisation of their programmes of study, thus echoing the views voiced by part-time undergraduates. But, as with all these generalised findings from large scale surveys there are methodological issues to take into account before assessing how relevant the findings are for exploring individual students' learning careers.

Some Methodological Issues in Researching Learning Careers

Much of the UK literature on part-time students draws on large-scale surveys because survey data is often easily available to researchers, such as the Open University survey data that form the basis for studies of distance learners (see Tait, 2003, for example). However, it is not possible to collect sufficient data on each student's learning career in this way and a qualitative methodology is essential to understand the complexity of individual's past and present lives. Surveys may offer some broad themes to assist with understanding learning careers for students who have been categorised as having aspects of their learning career in common, such as studying part-time, and so should not be dismissed outright, but such generalised findings and any recommendations which arise from the results should be treated with caution. As well as gathering detailed qualitative data on part-time learners, an exploration of transitions as part of a learning career context requires the collection of longitudinal data rather than the snapshot approach taken in surveys and single interview qualitative approaches. At the very least, a significant period of time needs to have elapsed between the earlier and later stages of the transition and this is lacking in almost all the studies cited above.

Enabling Transitions for Part-Time Students

A few of the studies cited above have made useful suggestions on how to support part-time learners. These approaches to assisting part-time learners with transitions usually recognise both the academic and wider social aspects of learning. Recommendations include working with employers to arrange study release time (Tait, 2003), helping learners develop strategies for coping with study by understanding the personal and social sacrifices that may be required (Kember *et al*., 2005), helping learners respond to critical feedback (Burke, 2009), improving learner support mechanisms (Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2003), and developing confidence through academic literacy (Gourlay, 2009).

The extent to which an institution should be involved in managing transitions and learning careers is debatable because self-direction is paramount for part-time learners and especially for postgraduate who seek to become autonomous learners. On the one hand, students may need help with autonomous learning: a study by Li *et al. (*2000) showed that while such learners expect to be autonomous, they are not always efficient and successful at self-management, although this ability appears to develop over time. On the other hand, too much support might encourage dependency. In any case, self-direction is not supported by rigid and opaque institutional arrangements, and Yorke and Longden (2008b) recommend that part-time undergraduate students should be given plenty of advance warning of organisational and administrative matters. Given that there is evidence that problems with organisational arrangements for part-timers continues for postgraduates, providing advance warning would appear to be important for them too.

Assessment Careers

Few of these critiques view assessment in a wider context of the student's prior experience, external influences and identity transformations. Much of the work focuses on students immediate and out of context experiences of assessment and feedback. For example, large scale surveys often indicate that learners request better and more timely feedback and part-time students; postgraduates, campus-based and distance learners all echo this view (Park and Wells, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b; Simpson, 2002). What is missing here is an appreciation of how assessment fits into a complex individual learning career.

Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) suggest that it is helpful to view an assessment career as a significant part of a learning career. Assessment is an emotive process and we have already suggested that dealing with success or failure forms part of a learner identity (Dweck, 1999). Peelo (2002) also suggests that learners are often overloaded with assessments at key transition points, resulting in additional emotional burden. Carless *et al.* (2010) take a longitudinal view by stressing the importance of engagement in feedback over time in multiple stages of assessment. Continuous quality feedback thus has great potential to influence learners' dispositions away from grade dependency and negative emotions towards viewing assessment as a developmental process.

A focus on an assessment career highlights an underlying problem with many assessment regimes: that assessments are undertaken on a piecemeal basis and that there is little continuity. Feedback tends to focus on the immediate task and not surprisingly does not

routinely include feed forward to future assessment. Meanwhile, any impact of feedback on a learner's performance is rarely monitored as part of an assessment career. Hughes (2010b) has suggested that ipsative assessment (assessment which is based on a learner's previous performance) which is cumulative over time might provide an alternative and more helpful approach to feedback than the dominant model of feedback which is directed by immediate marking criteria and standards. A study of part-time distance learners has indicated that ipsative feedback would be helpful and motivational, particularly for those learners who do not achieve highly (Hughes *et al.,* 2010).

Assessment and Transitions

We have suggested above that the role of feedback in enabling students to persist through transitions is under-developed and we therefore propose that viewing an assessment career as part of a learning career is helpful for understanding the influences of assessment on transitions at Masters level. Indeed it would be inconsistent to view assessment any differently. Furthermore, it would seem likely that the de-motivating effects of poor assessment outcomes in earlier learning experiences will persist in post-graduate study, although there is evidence that the more academic learners at this level might respond more favourably to feedback and critique (Carless, 2006).

Finally, much of the evidence on the effects of feedback practice stems from studies of mostly full-time undergraduates and, while there is little reason to suppose any significant differences for postgraduates, the lack of research on post-graduates provides a stark contrast to the growing data on undergraduates. There is, however, some indication that peer feedback might be more accepted at post-graduate level, for example, Crossouard (2008) explores successful use of peer formative feedback for facilitating the transition to doctoral study and peer feedback may well be important for Masters students too. The maturity and extensive work and learning careers of the students may mean they have had more experience of collaboration to draw upon.

The concepts of learning career and assessment career are potentially very useful for capturing the complexity and diversity of experience of this group of learners and for recognising that there is not a distinct group of part-time postgraduates, but rather individuals who may have commonalities with others because of the transitional 'stage' of their learner career, their maturity and some overarching expectations for developing expertise and autonomy in Masters- level study. Themes emerging from the literature that have particular relevance for this group in advancing learning careers are maturity and motivation, the importance of situating learners in their complex life-worlds, the role of the institutional organisation and structures, development of learner autonomy, the importance of cumulative and useable feed forward, and working with peers.

Studies of part-time taught postgraduates are fairly limited. Firstly postgraduate taught courses are even less researched than postgraduate research: supervising and supporting doctoral students receives much more attention than taught Masters which tends to be subsumed within either doctoral or undergraduate studies despite its vital transitional position between the two. Secondly, in the UK where there have been reports which cover part-time students including postgraduates, these are large scale surveys of student views taken as snapshots at an unspecified moment in their courses. The studies are largely quantitative with

a small amount of free response and thus give an overview of the sector rather than provide much detail. Such studies do not therefore give a sense of the transition to this level of study and because there is no longitudinal element, and there is little indication of the journey learners undertake in their learning careers.

Finally, the motivation for many of the large scale reports which cover part-time study is to ensure that students are satisfied and are gaining value for the money invested in their studies and these are not directly about enhancing learning. But, this in-depth study with its focus on assessment and feedback practice has a very different aim of improving learning and teaching practice and ultimately changing individual learning careers.

Formative Assessment

We have focused so far in this chapter on the four learning transitions. We now turn our attention to the issues of formative assessment and feedback processes. There is a growing recognition that assessment is an area where learners at all levels express dissatisfaction and this has prompted an interest in the relationship between assessment and learning. There is evidence that assessment regimes have a significant impact on learners because assessment drives both learning and motivation. Learners are motivated both by external rewards such as grades, i.e. extrinsic motivation, and by personal development in the subject or discipline, i.e. intrinsic motivation, although the extent of intrinsic motivation varies widely (Higgins *et al.*, 2002).

If learners are unhappy with assessment practice they may become de-motivated. In an Australian study of learner perceptions of unfairness in assessment (Flint and Johnson, 2011), students perceive assessment to be unfair if they have not had the opportunity to demonstrate capability or if capability is unrecognised. The main cause of dissatisfaction is that the judgements made and the criteria used in summative assessment are highly subjective, yet assessment is presented as transparent and unproblematic. Some learners appeal or find out where they have gone wrong, if they feel their grade is lower than expected, but most are passive and some are de-motivated enough to opt out altogether.

In this study, learners show themselves to be highly grade dependant but there has also been criticism of the emphasis on the summative purposes of assessment. Supporters of assessment *for* learning, particularly in secondary education, have argued that formative assessment and the provision of feedback is more important than grades (Stobart, 2008). However, in higher education, although there is evidence that students value feedback, feel that they deserve it and sometimes claim to pay it close attention (Higgins *et al.*, 2002), there is little evidence of a shift away from summative towards formative feedback and assessment for learning (Crisp, 2007; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008; Rust and O'Donovan, 2007). Studies from both the UK and Hong Kong suggest that that students and staff are confused about the purpose of feedback often linking it strongly to justification of a grade (Handley *et al.,* 2008; Carless, 2006). Staff claim to write good quality feedback, but students disagree. To compound this, many students do not feel that they can approach their teachers to ask for clarification and advice, although this depends on their relationships with their teachers, teacher credibility and their own confidence or level of desperation if they have failed (Poulos and Mahony, 2008; Flint and Johnson, 2011).

To address these issues, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) explored how effective formative assessment has the potential to shift learners away from the extrinsic motivation associated with summative grades towards intrinsic motivation, self-reliance and autonomous learning. Carless *et al.* (2010) have also emphasised the importance of feedback which enables learners to become self-regulating. They use the term sustainable feedback to describe feedback which supports learners in becoming self-monitoring and argue that sustainable feedback involves learners in dialogues about their learning and provides learners with the skills necessary for peer and self-assessment. Examples of sustainable feedback practice include verbal dialogue between learners and assessors (Nicol and Macfarlane Dick, 2006), feedback on student presentation, online feedback and two-stage assessments (Carless *et al*, 2010).

To be motivational and promote sustainability, feedback must also be helpful to learners. Developmental commentary, or feed forward assessment, is usually indispensable if learners are to improve for the next assessment. Feedback can be generic and refer to transferable skills, or be task specific and relevant only to the content of individual assignments. A model of effective feedback developed by Hattie and Timperley (2007) indicates how feedback and feed forward at the generic level is much more useful to learners in the longer term than very task specific feedback.

But Walker's (2009) study from the Open University suggested that much feedback is not useable, not only because learners do not understand it, but also because it is not clearly developmental. Feed forward is only useful if accompanied by some explanation or detail which is often lacking. Generic skill-development comments are most useable: these can be used for future assignments as well as improving on draft work, but the study suggested that these are not routinely provided to learners.

A focus on assessment feedback from a higher education perspective is poignant given those debates on enhancing student access, retention, completion and satisfaction rates within college and university contexts (Eckel and King, 2004; Grove, 2011; Hunt and Tierney, 2006; Rosenstone, 2004). Key themes and dominant discourses will be explored including an examination of the 'feedback gap'. Relevant theoretical perspectives will be drawn upon and extended to conceptualise the "feedback landscape" in order to provide a valuable framework for considering the issues and processes implicit in implementing effective assessment feedback designs within higher education contexts and to signpost future research agendas in assessment feedback.

Defining Assessment Feedback

Few studies have systematically investigated the meaning of feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). In relation to the role of feedback, it can be viewed as a consequence of performance: 'information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007: 81) and in terms of process it is 'what happens second' (*ibid.*: 104), after instruction. It can also be seen as feeding-forward and as feed-up. Building on the work of Ramaprasad (1983) and Sadler (1989), feedback has a scaffolding function to bridge the gap between actual performance level and a reference level, which is subsequently used to alter that gap (Lizzio and Wilson, 2008). Significantly, for many, however, it is only feedback if it 'alters the gap' and has an impact on learning (Wiliam, 2011).

Student and tutor dissatisfaction with assessment feedback is reported extensively within the literature. On the one hand, students are dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of feedback received (Huxham, 2007) and from the lecturer perspective, the issues revolve around students not making use of and / or acting on feedback; both perspectives leading to a feedback gap.

Dominant Discourses: What is Known about Effective Feedback Practice?

Feedback can have both positive and negative effects as identified by Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Shute (2008) and Bennett (2011). It could be argued that the question 'what works?' is dependent on the nature of the task, the context and the respective roles of student and lecturer in the feedback process. For feedback to work, DeNisi and Kluger's (2000) offer their own feedback intervention theory, highlighting the affective dimension of feedback in how feedback is received; this is an important and under-represented area of feedback reviews within higher education.

A review of the higher education literature reveals a large degree of consensus in relation to principles of effective assessment feedback practice. Useful frameworks include Gibbs and Simpson's (2004) 'eleven conditions under which assessment supports students' learning'; an outcome from the Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (FAST) project (2006); Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick's (2006) twelve principles of effective assessment arising from the *Re-Engineering Assessment Practices project* (REAP (2007) and Handley and Den Outer's (2008) seven recommendations to enhance assessment feedback practice from the *Engaging Students with Assessment Feedback project* (2004-2006). However, there is less consensus and detail within the literature on how principles of effective feedback can be applied to practice within and across different subject domains (Crossouard and Pryor, 2009).

Dominant discourses within the feedback literature focus on the development of self feedback to support self regulation (Boud *et al.* 2010), the use of peer feedback (Topping, 2010), and the role of technology in mediating feedback (Dippold, 2009). The body of work examining the importance of developing self-feedback as a key component of self-regulation building on the work of Boud (1995) is significant (Nicol, 2009). Self regulation can be defined as 'a multilevel multi-component process that targets affect, cognitions, and actions, as well as features of the environment for modulation in the service of one's own goals' (Boekaerts, 2006: 347). Proponents of self-assessment argue that it enables students to take an active role in the management of their own learning and may play a key role in lifelong learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Lew *et al.*, 2010)); ironically, there are few longitudinal studies exploring the transfer of learning to new contexts. However, the difficulties in developing self-assessment skills are evident in relation to the time students need to make sense of instruction (Bloxham and West, 2004; Quinton and Smallbone, 2010) and to develop self-monitoring capacity (Nicol, 2009). The role of discourse to facilitate such understanding is championed by Black and McCormick (2010), although the varied ability of students to access such support is highlighted by Wingate (2010).

The literature on peer feedback within higher education is both vast and diverse (Gielen, Dochy, and Onghena, 2011) Peer assessment has been defined 'as a method in which students engage in reflective criticism of the products of other students and provide them with

feedback, using previously defined criteria' (Van der Pol *et al.*, 2008: 185). There are mixed opinions regarding the value of peer assessment (Liow, 2008). The value of peer assessment as an element of holistic assessment design has been articulated by Nicol and MacFarlane Dick (2006) and by Handley *et al.*, 2008. Advocates of peer assessment feedback argue that it is motivational; helps the development of meta-cognition by enabling students to engage in their own learning to know which learning, teaching and assessment strategies work best for them; how to monitor their own progress and that of others. Peer feedback can be a positive experience for students (Chen, 2010; De Grez *et al.*, 2010; Fund, 2010; Vickerman, 2009), leading to enhanced performance (Bicen, 2009); Carillo-de-la-Pena *et al.*, 2009)

Alternatively, peer feedback is perceived to be ineffective (Boud, 2000); unpredictable (Chen *et al.*, 2009) and unsubstantiated (Strijbos and Sluijsmans, 2010). The perceived benefits of collaboration have been questioned along with concerns about the lack of or variable impact of peer feedback practices on performance despite positive feedback from students (Ballantyne, 2002; O'Donovan, Price, and Rust, 2004).

To support peer feedback practices; the importance of the authentic use of peer assessment feedback is stressed within the literature (Keppell et *al.* 2006) along with clarification of the varied roles of students within the peer assessment process. Furthermore, the importance of student choice (Bloxham and West, 2004); variety in modes of assessment and creating appropriate conditions for peer assessment (Liu and Carless, 2006) are highlighted. Individual preferences related to individual differences in relation to student acceptance of peer feedback practices in conjunction with design are not sufficiently explored within the assessment feedback literature. Whilst training students in the use of peer feedback is widely advocated (Bloxham and West, 2004) others argue that training alone will not suffice if there is not constructive alignment between learning objectives and methods of teaching and assessment (Topping, 2010). Alignment of peer assessment with other dimensions of the learning environment is important.
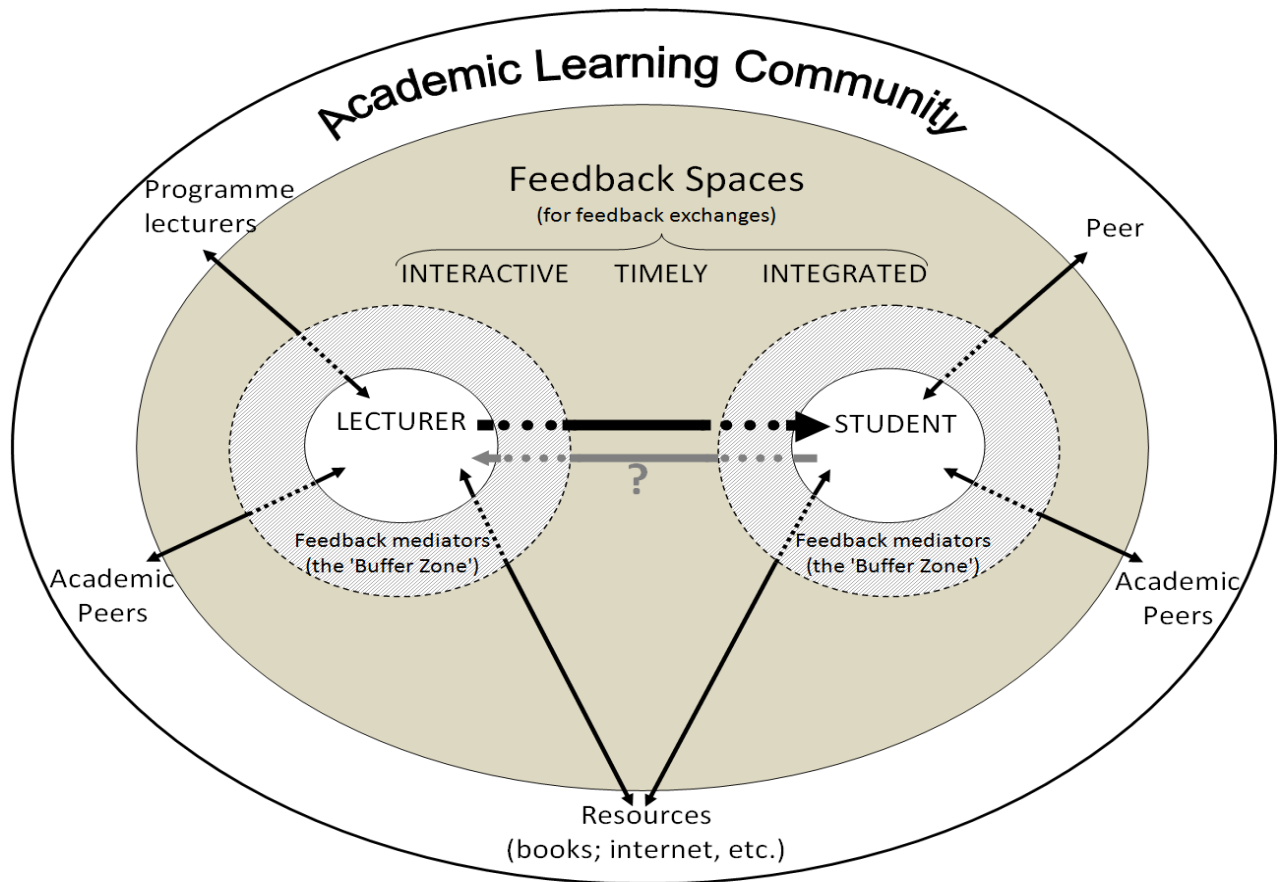
Exploring the Feedback Gap

There are numerous examples within the literature of student inability to capitalise on feedback opportunities (Crisp, 2007).Even when 'good' feedback has been given, the gap between receiving and acting on feedback can be large given the complexity of how students make sense of, use and give feedback (Taras, 2003). The lack of ability to capitalise on feedback may reflect the fact that some students lack the critical ability to be able to do so and/or lack the requisite subject/generic domain knowledge and understanding (Quinton and Smallbone, 2010). The role of individual differences (i.e. gender, culture, social class) in explaining the variability of students to use and act on feedback is under-explored within the feedback literature. It is known that there are cultural effects in relation to access to and processing of feedback and more work is needed (Crossouard and Pryor, 2009; Draper, 2009; Evans and Waring, 2011b, c; Freestone, 2009).

To better understand the impact of feedback, we need to know more about how it is received and acted upon; work considering the role of affect in relation to student receptivity to feedback is lacking in this respect. The consideration of student individual goals along with levels of emotional investment are important to facilitate understanding of student acceptance and use of feedback (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000). The level of investment made by a student is

an important mediator along with their expectancy of success and value they attribute to a task (Wingate, 2010). How feedback contributes to the development of identity (Stryker, 1968) and to the role-related behaviour of students is an area that is not represented in the assessment feedback literature and needs attention. This may be especially relevant to those part-time students and those fulfilling multiple roles across contexts. To address such a feedback gap attention needs to be given to assessment feedback design and to enhancing understanding of how students see feedback; this involved a high level of investment from lecturers in developing their assessment practice and in creating appropriate conditions to facilitate 'feedback exchanges' with students. Black and William, (2009: 26) argue we need to know more about the inter-relationship between 'the teacher's agenda, the internal world of each student and the intersubjective'. The nature of these inter-relationships can be conceptualised within *the feedback landscape*.

The Feedback Landscape

The feedback landscape (see Figure 1) draws on the work of Hatzipanagos and Warburton's (2009), Gipps (2002) and Butin (2005) from constructivist, sociocultural and socio-critical perspectives. It allows consideration of the nature of feedback exchanges; the roles of those involved; the nature of networks; exploration of facilitators, barriers, and mediators of feedback within an academic learning community. Feedback is moderated by a number of mediator variables for both the giver and receiver of feedback. The role, interrelationships and importance of specific mediators within the 'buffer zone' will vary temporally and spatially. The academic learning community encompasses both academic and social exchanges as part of the immediate academic community associated with the students' programme of study and also acknowledges feedback flows beyond the community to other academic and social networks (personal and professional). In conceptualising the feedback process the term feedback exchange is valuable in stressing the on-going and iterative nature of the process and consideration of the relative position and needs of lecturer and student within the dialectic.

Academic Learning Community

Feedback Spaces
(for feedback exchanges)

INTERACTIVE   TIMELY   INTEGRATED

Programme lecturers

Peer

LECTURER   STUDENT

?

Feedback mediators
(the 'Buffer Zone')

Feedback mediators
(the 'Buffer Zone')

Academic Peers

Academic Peers

Resources
(books; internet, etc.)

(Evans, 2011)

Student and Lecturer feedback mediators:
1. Ability/intelligence/levels of understanding of academic content and process;
2. Personality;
3. Gender;
4. Culture / ethnicity;
5. Social and cultural capital;
6. Previous experiences of learning and schema;
7. Attributions/motivation/self-efficacy /resilience;
8. Perceived relevance of the task / support;
9. Ability to navigate the learning communities and filter relevant information;
10. Beliefs about learning and expectations of the learning environment;
11. Cognitive styles / approaches to learning;
12. Perceived role(s) within the academic learning communities.

Lecturer (only) feedback mediators:
13. Awareness of other contexts students are working in;
14. Alignment with other modules;
15. Knowledge of student and level of adaptation / affordances.

Figure 1: The Learner Feedback Landscape

Within this model, a number of elements are identified as being of paramount importance, however the difficulties involved in developing these is also acknowledged given those reported constraints that higher education imposes on lecturers (increasing student numbers; increased administrative responsibilities; increased demands to innovate; difficulties in implementing change).

Important elements include:

1. A focus on student and lecturer of beliefs about learning and how these impact on the learning process for both giver and receiver. Implementation of formative assessment practices calls for deep changes in teachers' perceptions of their own role in relation to students'. Evans and Waring (2009, 2011a) propose in their personal learning styles pedagogy, a focus on student and teacher beliefs about learning and also acknowledge the difficulties in changing conceptions of feedback.
2. Importance of student and lecturer developing shared understandings of the feedback process, their respective roles within the process as well as a shared understanding of what constitutes quality (Sadler, 1989).
3. Importance of the lecturer in accurately diagnosing the student feedback issue and ensuring appropriate support and not dependency (Rae and Cochrane, 2008).
4. The importance of training for both student and lecturer in developing feedback capacity Price *et al.*, 2007).
5. Examination of student agency and genuine choice within the assessment feedback process (Nicol, 2008).
6. The social dynamic of feedback needs more attention. The networks of support the student values, establishes and engages in, and how the lecturer supports development of these to encourage learner independence is important to investigate further (Black and William, 2009; Webb and Jones, 2009).
7. The role of ICT in assessment feedback and varied use by students needs consideration. Importance of holistic and iterative assessment feedback designs, incorporating theoretical and practical perspectives on pedagogy (Gipps, 2005).

Assessment feedback can enhance performance, however, not in every context and not for all students. Drawing on an extensive review of the research literature involving detailed scrutiny of approximately 300 papers, the notion of *the feedback landscape* in higher education informed by relevant theoretical frameworks, extends the conceptualisation of assessment feedback practices and theory with a view to enhancing the implementation of assessment designs in higher education.

In the next chapter, we focus on the learning trajectories of the sixty students we followed through their programmes of study.

Chapter Four: Learning Trajectories

In this chapter we focus on the learning trajectories of students undertaking Masters-level programmes of study. Four groups of students were invited to take part in the project from the core institution:

- A group of PGCE students (n=15) with degrees from a range of pure disciplines undertaking applied education studies courses in preparation for a teaching career;

- A group of full-time international students studying on the MA or MSc programme who had not had residence in the UK before (n=15);

- A group of part-time home students (n=15) who were full-time UK teachers with at least a five year gap between this period of study and a previous period of study who were enrolled on the first year of an MA or MSc;

- A group of students (n=15) from non-standard backgrounds either full- or part-time, and therefore in either their study year or their first study year across the range of courses on a Masters programme.

The students from the four groups were interviewed at two points during the eleven months of the first year of the project (at the beginning of their programmes, and eleven months in); and programme tutors were interviewed to determine the extent and type of formative assessment currently taking place, and appropriate documentary material was collected. In addition, the students were asked to complete a journal during these eleven months, to share their understandings of their learning and assessment approaches with the project team.

Pure to Applied Discipline Pathway

This strand investigated postgraduate student teachers' experiences of transitions from previous study and/or employment onto a one year post-graduate certificate in education programme (PGCE). The overarching aim of the study was to consider factors impacting on student teacher experiences of an initial teacher education (ITE) programme through the specific lens of student teachers' experiences of formative assessment and feedback, to inform programme development and the student and lecturer experience.

In supporting student teacher transitions, the focus on assessment feedback is important given the potential power of feedback to impact on performance (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). This study is pertinent given the extensive literature reporting on student problems in accessing feedback (Evans and Waring, 2011a; Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b; Young, 2000). It is also timely given the reported high dropout rate (30%) of UK student teachers between their final year of teacher training and the taking up of a teaching position in school (Smithers and Robinson, 2009; 2011; Forsbach-Rothman, 2007). As reported by Evans and Waring (2011), student dissatisfaction with feedback is a global issue. Problems with feedback highlighted by Huxham (2007) include a lack of access to feedback (Orsmond *et al.*, 2002) including ambiguity and opacity (Hounsell, 2003); lateness of feedback (Yorke and Longden, 2006); the inability of feedback to be able

to feed forward; an over-emphasis on negative feedback (Young, 2000), as well as student uncertainty about criteria and contexts (Higgins *et al.*, 2001; Hounsell, 2003).

An interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was adopted (Smith, 2003) whereby the subjective experiences of the student teachers to inform programme development was the focus. The sample involving fourteen student teachers (from a range of subject areas including Modern Foreign Languages; Religious Education; English; Music; Science and History) was both opportunistic and self-selected. Student teacher perceptions of their programmes including feedback were captured via group and individual interviews both face-to-face and via the phone at regular intervals, with one member of the research team, throughout the one year PGCE programme. All the student teachers were invited to participate in email discussions as well as being asked to provide evidence of written feedback they had received from mentors in school and their tutors. In addition, the student teachers mapped their own experiences of the programme through the production of living line graphs with annotated notes to explain the 'highs' and 'lows' they experienced. They later discussed these in groups with their peers. Data gathered via group and individual interviews, as well as email communications were analysed using content-analysis procedures (Krippendorff, 2004).

Student teacher experiences of the programme varied, with a number of *key issues* emerging from the data: the relative agency and autonomy of the student teacher whilst on placement within a school; the importance of their relationships with their mentors; their capacity to negotiate differing cultures of learning within and between schools; conflicts between student teachers' values and beliefs and those of the placement school; the volume of workload; the need for more concrete experiences and opportunities to practice ideas; and the impact of student teachers' prior experiences of learning and employment in enabling effective coping mechanisms. In addition, a series of *over-arching themes* were identified: *level*, including how the standards were set, the interpretation of assessment criteria, previous experiences of academic work, and how students were able to understand and monitor their performances; *identity*, referring to what happened to the student as a person in this new environment, and how this was assessed against models of others, i.e. peers, teachers and mentors; *housekeeping*, in relation to what can and should be expected of the practical arrangements for the course, and in particular how these impacted on the participants; the *technical and learning environment*, including the provision of resources, assessment requirements and support; *cultural sensitivities* arising out of the starting-point, transition and final destination of the student in each case; and *resilience* in relation to previous experiences, coping strategies, and cognitive styles.

In examining the relative importance of the areas identified above, it is important to note the differences found between PGCE students on the two different programmes in phase 1 and phase 2. For those PGCE students involved in phase 1 of the project, their PGCE involved concurrent experience of school based training and higher education instruction from the beginning of the one year programme, whereas Phase 2 PGCE students had one whole term within the higher education institution before having any sustained school experience. For those students in Phase 1, trying to manage their dual identities of trainee teacher and higher education student was problematic. For students in Phase 2, most found the focused phase within the higher education environment and separation of school and HEI components

beneficial; there were of course also individual differences in relation to curriculum design preferences.

Issues of power were highlighted in relation to the relative agency and autonomy of the student teacher whilst on placement within a school. In addition, transition issues such as, negotiating differing cultures of learning within and between schools was found to be important in affecting access to feedback. The varied ability of individual student teachers to navigate school and university contexts was noted with some able to find affordances in environments that were not particularly supportive whereas others were more constrained by what they perceived as the limitations of the environment. All the students demonstrated considerable resilience in 'getting through' the year, but for some this was much harder than others, partly because of their boundary crossing abilities and degree of comfort in the identities they had developed in the different areas of school, higher education and home that they inhabited. For some, trying to juggle different identities was difficult, being a teacher one day and a student the next.

From detailed examination of student transcripts and associated information (feedback diaries; email correspondence, line graphs of experiences; group and individual interviews), a number of *meta themes* emerging from the data have been identified. These include the emotional dimension of feedback; trainee resilience in managing a very intensive one year programme and their relative ability to make the most of feedback exchanges; importance of realistic and evidence-based authentic feedback and the importance of feedforward activities in promoting understanding.

The Emotional Dimension of Feedback

Within the assessment feedback literature, the affective elements of feedback are not given sufficient attention. The importance of students' reception to feedback is fundamental and as identified by Yorke (2003), this cannot be over-stated. The role of individual differences in explaining the variable responses of students to success and failure has also not been sufficiently explored. For DeNisi and Kluger (2000) one explanation given for the varied impact of feedback on student outcomes is that feedback may be interpreted at the self-concept level rather than at the task and task learning level, affecting how individual's see themselves and thus the potential for the negative impact of feedback is high. This argument is used to advocate the greater value and potential impact of feedforward activities compared to feedback (Goldsmith, 2002). Whilst Hattie and Timperley (2007) advocate the greater value of task, process and self regulatory feedback over personal feedback in impacting on student outcomes, in reality it is not possible to separate these different types of feedback especially in relation to how students perceive such feedback. The students in this study stressed the importance of personalised feedback, wanting the feedback giver to 'step into their shoes'. The difficulty of 'proving' the impact of feedback on student outcomes is also complicated by the goals the students had chosen to pursue. In both Phase 1 and 2 of the project, approximately 50% of students admitted that their goal, in relation to Masters level work, was to pass in order to manage the competing demands of learning to teach. This also brings into question the authenticity of assessment in relation to the extent to which students saw the written assignments as either supporting or interfering with their teaching practice within the classroom. For many students, timing of assignments added additional stress given their need to prioritise lesson planning. The need to clarify with students the purposed of

assessment to enable shared understandings is also highlighted within the literature (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

The importance of individual differences in affecting student teacher feedback preferences and experiences is highlighted by Evans and Waring (2009). Whilst much is known about how cognitive styles influence learning preferences (Zhang and Sternberg, 2009), little of this work has been used in relation to the design of assessment. Within this study the issue of *style match* was identified by some student teachers as an important variable impacting on how they perceived they fitted within a school in both positive and negative ways. A particular conflict was teaching to the style of the mentor in school where this did not fit comfortably with how the student teachers wanted to teach. From a different perspective, it also raises the question as to whether student teachers seek out those environments that match their style to perpetuate what feels safe rather than extending and developing their teaching skills.

> The school matches the way I see myself as a teacher, so it is really kind of strong on subject knowledge and I don't foresee any kind of behavioural issues, and that is somewhere I see myself working, so I am really looking forward... (David)

> I found that bit about pleasing your host teacher or whatever which is a good way of putting it, ... in [school placement 1[you had to please each different teacher, however, I think at SE1 the teaching style wasn't too different from my sort of natural teaching style, but in [school placement 2] it was very different. (Eugene)

> Because I wasn't teaching her lessons okay I wasn't doing it her way so I couldn't please her, so I didn't know what she wanted me to do in that kind of way. (Sofia)

For some student teachers entering into teaching having worked in alternative employment, they found the experience could be deskilling especially where it impacted on their self concept:

> I didn't really feel they draw enough on our previous experience and stuff it is like it is all set up and then you are talked at as if you are just pupils or students a b c and d and what we had done previously wasn't taken into account. It would be good if they could say well here we have a group of people who have previously worked in industry for example... (Moira)

For other student teachers the need to balance the varying demands placed on them during an intensive one year programme was difficult.

> The stress of thinking about whether you will have a job next year or not. You have completed your second assignment and you haven't made a start on your third one yet when you should be halfway through it, and also the pressure from teachers to show real improvement in your development as a teacher, so all those things I found at times was quite stressful. Trying to balance all these... (Mary)

A key factor impacting on student receptivity to feedback was how the feedback was framed; the importance of creating the 'right climate' for feedback is highlighted accepting the role of individual differences within this:

I started from what I thought was a very low point to actually being I think to having the potential to be a very good teacher and that was all due to the really good guidance of the teachers in school and everyone was really helpful in providing ways of doing things, how it would improve my teaching, rather than just saying, 'that's rubbish'. (Michael)

The timing of feedback in relation to the type of feedback acknowledging individual needs is also mentioned as part of creating this 'right climate':

The fact that you are critiqued straight after the lesson when you are observed so the formal observations I am talking about, that is quite difficult because you are all kind of charged up for a lesson and then suddenly you – all the focus is on you, I find that quite difficult at times...you needed some time just to go, okay that was terrible, put it in a box and try again tomorrow, whereas if you are just recovering from something that is horrendous you can't take anything on board about it because you just think, okay I need to calm down so that I can take it as criticism, because even if it is constructive criticism you are just going to take it as oh I did this really badly, you are telling me I did really badly, that confirms it. But the next day when you have thought about it, you can say yes that was rubbish, I could do this better and come to it with your own ideas, then I think that probably would have helped in something like that. But as regards taking on nothing major, one way or the other, straight after the lesson would have been really helpful in some cases. (John)

For one student teacher, a focus on positive, balanced and much focused feedback facilitated her ability to take on board this feedback:

... if we were looking at behaviour management. [my mentor] would do a tally chart of all the different behaviour management things I was doing in the lesson, so because I was working with the bottom set year eight that was quite a big thing. I think the first lesson in I had about three or four ticks – tally points and then that kind of focussed me for the next lesson, yes this is something that I can work on, and then I think about three lessons later, there were maybe 20 or a good two dozen things and then I realised that okay, now I need to start focussing on something else. Obviously not forgetting those things but that kind of something quantitative to show me what I needed to work on was helpful ... (Ruth)

So he just had all these little tips, just tiny things that were just helpful to know and silly things like my body language or the way I was standing, but I really like the line and the tick thing rather than. The line thing, I don't know it is just psychological it just felt like it was something to improve on not like a big X that was wrong.... it is a really subtle thing but it really really worked and the feedback would be a balance of about half and half, of things to improve and things which were good, which was really nice. Yes, the ticks were important because they would confirm things that I was doing naturally and didn't know I was doing in some cases but also sometimes things that I had genuinely really been trying to improve upon like questioning for example or particularly time management in music when you are doing a practical

session. That is a nightmare, having a tick for that where is something conscious was great. (Sandy)

For some student teachers, oral feedback was seen as less formal and less threatening than written feedback and therefore more accessible:

I benefitted far less from written things whereas a quick informal discussion at the end... maybe a five minute chat, where the teacher said 'these are the things I would like you to improve on' was valuable. I enjoyed that because I felt that it was less formalised and I wasn't being scrutinised, so I think I responded well to that. (Michael).

A fundamental issue in taking on board feedback, was the trust the student teacher had in the mentor as well as the perceived availability of feedback:

My subject mentors were both really good, really helpful my subject mentor in my first experience did his PGCE at X like five years ago so he was quite like on the ball with what needed to be done and how difficult it was to do assignments at various times and the second subject mentor he has been doing it with X students for a very long time, so he was very prepared for all types of feedback and tutor visits and all that sort of stuff. (Lara)

My tutor was brilliant at giving feedback so any time we felt we could email and get comments and that always helped to in our mind crystallise what they wanted, what things they were looking for. (Amin)

Interestingly, student teachers did not use the potential peer support available in relation to essay writing and lesson planning. Peer support was seen as most important in relation to emotional support although even in relation to this, student teachers discussed being guarded in what they shared to protect their self worth.

I'd got really upset, and I came in today and said, "Wednesday was just Black Wednesday. It was awful." And one of the other girls was saying, "What happened?" And she was saying that Wednesday was a really bad day for her as well. I think there was something about Wednesday. I think we were all tired, and we'd all reached a point. And she was saying, you know, "Several times this term I've had that," whereas for me it was the first time, and actually I felt quite reassured by sharing that. I'm quite focused. I really, really want this, and I want to be a better teacher, and a lot of people on my course feel the same. I think as a group, as well, actually, this year, everyone feels quite cohesive, and quite together, and quite willing to share. (Sarah)

Although....

We're not discussing the intricate details of it. It's so much... I think it almost comes to the point where we're so tired we don't want to talk about it. But it's more about different experiences, different things you had happen in your class or... it's more general. You don't actually end up talking about "Wouldn't you do this? How would you deal with that?" It doesn't come down to that sort of detail and I don't really know

why that is, because we're all pretty good friends and everything, we just don't seem to talk about it in that detail...There's also, slightly, a little bit of an ethos of not talking about it if you're having a problem with things, in that I think everyone wants to be seen as being successful, as though there isn't a problem. They shy away from discussing it with each other, a little bit. (Olin)

In summarising student teacher responses in this study with a focus on the emotional dimension of feedback, a number of related themes permeate accounts including:

1. The impact of the relative *level of investment by the student* related to self-worth attributions (Dwek, 1999). Negative feedback following high levels of student investment was seen as especially problematic with some students being too scared to seek out feedback;
2. The *emotional* rather than academic support *afforded by peers* within the feedback process;
3. *Timing of feedback*: The inability of some students to take on board feedback immediately following a lesson especially if the lesson had not gone as well as they would have liked – they needed 'time out 'to be able to access feedback – this links to the concept of setting the climate for feedback;
4. *Setting the climate for feedback* to include appropriate timing of feedback and importantly a demonstration of what was done well in their work. To be able to take on improvement points they needed to know that they had done some things correctly;
5. *Organisation of resources not fitting with a student's cognitive style caused additional stress* (importance of whole programme being available on-line; importance of not changing deadlines etc; clarity of requirements etc);
6. The emotional stress of trying to satisfy the requirements of different teachers and *reconciling conflicting feedback*;
7. *Previous negative experiences of assessment and feedback* impacted on their ability to take on board feedback;
8. *Perceived fit* of own style with that of the mentor and school impacted on their ability to take on board feedback;
9. The importance of *realistic feedback* requiring lecturers / teachers to understand the situation from the student perspective;
10. *Authenticity of feedback:* they wanted feedback to be evidence-based;
11. They needed to *trust and respect the feedback giver*;
12. Student perception of the level of investment by the feedback giver in the feedback process impacted on engagement.

Developing a Deep Approach to Feedback

It is acknowledged that not all student teachers learn from experience as well as others. Mutton *et al.*, (2010) identify a number of potential mediators that fit into five dimensions of their model (intentionality, frame of references, response to feedback, attitude to context and aspiration as opposable orientations. e.g. deliberative or reactive; able to draw on a range of sources v only relies on classroom teaching; uses feedback to develop v disabled by critical feedback; acceptance of context and ability to capitalise v seeing context as restraining; aspirational v satisficing. In considering whether student teachers find contexts as full of opportunities and/or limiting requires consideration of socio-cultural theories focusing on the

interplay between individual and contextual variables. The extent to which student teachers learn from immersion into new learning environments (Hanson & Sinclair, 2008) is debateable given the multiple cultural environments of schools and higher education environments that they experience. If learning is the product of situated attunement to environmental constraints and affordances (Greeno, 1997), the processes by which student teachers navigate these is an important area of study. Learning to teach requires STs to become involved in their community in order to critique and reflect on their beliefs and practices and those of others (Carrington and Selva, 2010). The extent to which student teachers are able to act as brokers bringing new ideas into existing practice is also questionable (Wenger, 1998, Wenger et al., 2002), leading to the question as to what extent is mutual engagement and shared repertoire possible? Furthermore, if professional learning is situated within specific communities, can knowledge of how to teach in one context be easily transferred and *adapted* to another one (Shulman and Shulman, 2004; Yandell and Turvey, 2007).

In examining ST responses, it is important to consider their perceptions of the PGCE year and their preparedness for teacher training. The majority were well informed about the intensity of the PGCE but were variably equipped to deal with this.

> I started the year running at a full pace and I feel like I finished the year running at full pace as well. To be really honest I kind of expected the PGCE to be like some kind of sick initiation test basically, if you can pass it and get through the year then they will give you QTS at the end of it. But I suppose I know quite a lot of teachers who have been through it, because I graduated in 2002 and so I lot of other people I know have done the PGCE and so I kind of did know what to expect. (Abel)

> I think perhaps the way that you are sort of dipped into school and then taken back out again quickly and then chucked back in again, sort of feels like I haven't actually taught that much in a way, and that I have been through a mill. (John)

Being able to self-manage, what were often viewed as competing demands from different teachers and the school and HEI was critical and some STs were able to adapt to this much quicker than others. In asking STs to explain the coping mechanisms, most referred to strategies they had developed in previous learning and or work contexts:

> I have always had a kind of cut off point, whereas other student teachers I hear saying they are burning the midnight oil at one in the morning. I get to bed at half past ten and that is it, I stop working and I make sure I have enough sleep, and I know how much I can put into something before I will start to make myself ill or whatever, so I kind of have this self regulatory mechanism that stops me going too overboard. (Brian).

> Telling myself that this is going to be the hardest year and just get through this, but now I know it is not, it is going to be hard for a couple of more years yet. Then it will get easier. But step at a time kind of thing, so get through this and then you have got the holiday, recharge and then take next year as it comes. (Ruth)

Some student teachers were highly skilled at noticing and recognising opportunities and making the most of these. In discussions with student teachers about effective feedback, the importance of specific and targeted feedback was highlighted as evidenced in the transcript below:

> I think my subject mentor is probably a very, very strong mentor. Speaking to other people, I don't think that everyone's had this experience, and also, I have to say, I'm really trying to milk it at the moment, because I know I'm really lucky at the moment ... So I go with a list of questions as well. And I feel very fortunate that quite often he will pick up on something. Because my classroom management is something I know I need to work on, but also I do have quite strong subject knowledge, still, particularly at the upper end of the school. But sometimes, at lower school, it's not about the subject knowledge, it's about how I'm phrasing things, and he's very good at suggesting ways in which I can re-phrase things. So, for example, there was a lesson last Wednesday where I talked about 'crescendo,' as in 'increasing sound.' He said, "The word you need to use is 'gradually,' to make that much clearer." And how to get the terminology across in ways that eleven year olds will understand, because I'm much better at doing that at A-level than I am with eleven year-olds. That's just me. (Moira)

Attributes of those student teachers who managed the school experiences very effectively included their ability to filter, rationalise and contextualise feedback. The issue of power is again dominant with student teachers identifying the need to 'please their teachers in school'; which for some provided constraints and limited development of their teaching skills.

> I took the feedback from the two teachers who didn't really like my teaching style but because ....I wasn't really achieving what they wanted me to achieve, even though I thought I was doing it, so I really took what the other teachers were saying, positive things, and the things they were pointing out and just tried to apply it across the board, because if I was having good classes with four other classes in the week, surely by applying that to the other ones it should improve. (Lorraine)

> I came to a point where I realised that there is such a wide variety of feedback, so I actually had an experience where a teacher said, 'oh your questioning technique is very good'. That was the comment on the form and then another teacher said, that is one of the areas I would like you to work on, your questioning. So then I kind of realised that okay different teachers based on their own preferences based on what they picked up over the years, they look at different things, so at that point I started taking things with a little pinch of salt and not taking it too personally. I realise that it is just, you have to find a way that works for you and that is one of the things that my mentor ... said is that this year is just a matter of pleasing your host teachers and then in subsequent years you can start kind of moulding your own teaching style (Mary)

However, student teachers also commented on the way that schools had facilitated the development and finding of their own teaching style and for those more resilient student teachers, they were able to see the benefits of different approaches:

 I have been in two schools that have been very keen on you developing your own style and lots of very good feedback and although that sometimes conflicts, it is just about experimenting and finding out what works for me. (Laura)

In the first placement ...I was given more of a free rein and the school was like a grammar school and it matched the way that I saw myself being very stern and didactic and the kids expected that kind of teaching style. Whereas in SE2 the teacher was always looking for ways of improving, so although at the time it seemed to me to be over critical I think there were a lot of good things, because when I spoke to other student teachers back at the [HEI] they felt that often they weren't given enough criticism in their second placement. (Steven).

In summary, some students were able to navigate different environments more successfully than others. Within communities of practice, they could be viewed as effective *boundary crossers* (Wenger, 2000). They were able to filter feedback effectively; seek out feedback even though not readily available and were able to transfer and importantly *adapt* feedback to suit different contexts. It could be argued that these individuals had cultivated a deep approach to feedback in that they could:

1. Focus on meaning making (understanding principles versus going through the motions' through appropriate use of learning strategies)
2. Were able to self manage (prioritising workload/targets)
3. Demonstrated perspective (were able to make sense of feedback through effective filtering)
4. Were good at noticing (making the most of opportunities)
5. Demonstrated Resilience (self awareness – self monitoring)
6. Were able to manage their personal response to feedback (fit within organizations/ personal adjustment – self-concept/ identity)
7. Demonstrated personal responsibility in FB/ FF process.
8. Were adaptable (ability to transfer and adapt feedback to different contexts).

The student approaches to learning literature (Marton and Saljo, 1997) including more recent work by McCune and Entwistle (2011) on student dispositions to understand is relevant in considering the role of individual and contextual variables in influencing feedback behaviours. As noted by Evans and Kozhevnikov (2011), if we are to develop the self regulatory skills of student teachers we need to train students in how to be more aware of their learning approaches in order to develop their metacognitive awareness to ensure more effective strategy use including better use of opportunities afforded to them and created by them.

Student Teachers Feedback Preferences

Specific feedback issues for the student teachers included: the need for concrete and specific feedback; the need for a clear bench mark of how they were doing in order to understand the meaning of this feedback; clarification regarding technical issues, such as the requirements of assessment/styles of writing and the timing of assessment; the authenticity of feedback and how it was valued, and their level of preparedness for feedback.

What the student teachers did not find useful were general comments that they were doing alright as they felt that in such instances they were not being challenged. They welcomed honest and direct feedback:

> Having someone tell you [the harsh realities of what it would be like], for me it was reassuring...you would perhaps think that maybe, actually, that would be the kind of thing that would be off-putting, but actually, having it all laid out as "This is how it's going to be" was really great for me. (Peter).

Concrete opportunities to enable 'pedagogies of enactment' (Grossman *et al.*, 2009: 283) were seen by the student teachers to be of vital importance to their development as teachers. Grossman and colleagues emphasize the importance of providing what they refer to as 'approximations of practice' defined by them "as opportunities [for student teachers] to rehearse and enact discrete components of complex practice in settings of reduced complexity". I would argue that more feed-forward opportunities involving opportunities for student teachers to work with peers and importantly, experienced teachers are invaluable in helping them to learn to teach. To facilitate this, initial teacher education programmes need to consider what constitutes the essential information trainee teachers needs to know (Kosnick and Beck, 2009) and what are the most appropriate forms of assessment. In guiding student teachers through this process, student teachers need the support of a 'knowledgeable other' to make the most of affordances offered as much of the teaching process is tacit rather than explicit. The selected extracts below draw attention to these concerns:

> I don't feel that we have got much from [the HEI] on how to be teachers. A lot of theory on constructivist theory but actually not much on how to stand up in front of the classroom and I know that there are a few that can be thrown in and they have done it. (Angus).

> No. I don't think I was challenged by nearly enough...because I had almost complete freedom in effect. I designed the scheme of work for the whole time I was there for a lot of my classes and I was left with most of my classes most of the time, by myself, and they just relied on the fact that I would do everything correctly. And that might be okay for me in terms of that I think I am probably capable of doing it, but it won't help me improve. (Sarah)

> I've still got that sense of not completely still knowing what I'm doing and finding it frustrating that I don't think everything's been structured to get me there yet, but I'm not really sure if that's meant to be happening, either. And I'm very reflective, and I'm very critical of everything I do anyway, generally, so that might be just what's happening here, that I'm thinking, "Well, I'm meant to be getting this, sort of, this magic moment's meant to be coming and it's not coming." I'm positive; I do think that I will be a good teacher and that I will be successful. I'm not going to give it up or anything. I do feel a little bit like more could have been done, but I think that has a lot to do with the character of my [my first] placement. (Ruth).

> We did something on behaviour management which was really really good but there has never been an attempt to show you, perhaps a modelling situation, so your peers

are the class and you stand up and go look – and they are throwing things at you. (Michael).

I was trying to take on board some of the things that he said but he was saying just useless things like, 'make it more interesting' or 'try to engage with them more' and I was doing that and I think that particularly the behaviour in that class was quite bad as well in my first experience. But it wasn't until the very end of the practice where he started giving me specific things to do that I realised that what he wanted me to do was plan like seven ten minute activities and if something wasn't going right just discard it, whereas if he had said that to me two months previously all of the classes would have gone much better, but he didn't until like two weeks before the end of the experience. (Elaine).

The importance of understanding the requirements of a task and what constitutes a good response is highlighted in the literature. As outlined by Sadler (1989) if a student does not have a clear idea of the standard needed to be successful it is not possible for them to make the progress required. This sentiment is echoed clearly in the ST comments below from both positive and negative perspectives on the instruction received:

So we had to do a piece of written work, a critical review of a journal article, and that was very useful, just in terms of gathering thoughts and getting used to using journals. And it wasn't marked, graded, but we did have some summative feedback that was ungraded about what we'd been doing, and that's been really useful. Some points about style and the way that we write. Very much modelling assessment for learning in that sense, I suppose, actually, and that was very useful. (Angus).

I was taking a stab in the dark as to what the standard was for a masters and what I would have liked is [to be] given a high quality master's level and maybe a less good quality pass at higher to contrast what the difference is between master's level and higher and I think, because we talked a lot about criteria in the department, how you assess in music and we picked to pieces National Curriculum levels for being vague and yet the master's level and the higher level criteria that we are supposed to work towards are literally 'good referencing' for a B and 'excellent referencing' for an A, and I don't know what the difference between these two things are and I just really felt I did not know what an A at master's level would look like and therefore producing a piece of work to that level was just impossible. (Ruth).

In considering *implications for programme design*, student teachers commented about the volume of work and the 'need to get through the course', along with balancing the requirements of teaching practice and written assessment. It is relevant here to consider the extent to which initial teacher education has become balkanized, as well as the extent to which forms of assessment are aligned to curriculum goals (Grossman *et al.*, 2009). In considering curriculum design, it is worth noting that for some students, the lack of previous experience in classrooms meant that they could not access ideas discussed within the higher education institution at the beginning of the programme. The student teachers wanted more practice in the practical aspects of teaching and greater integration between school and academy elements of the programme. They also welcomed more opportunities to practice and share ideas with peers. In order to have greater access to feedback, student teachers wanted

further training in how to make the most of feedback opportunities with their mentors. As identified by Burn *et al.* (2003) some student teachers indicated a much less positive phase towards the end of the PGCE year which also raises questions as to the nature of work at this stage in their development. The importance of gaining access to and developing understandings of different communities of practice was of paramount importance to student teachers, and the notion of distributed mentoring is an important aspect of this.

Within teacher education, feedback is mainly focused on reviewing what has been done (e.g. feedback on a lesson and piece of work). It could be argued that whilst reflection on work is important; greater gains may be achieved by placing greater attention on feedforward activities including elements of personal learning styles pedagogy where an emphasis is placed in exploration of student beliefs (Evans and Waring, 2009). Such elements would include:

1. Pre-course preparation focused on tasks relevant to the level of experience of the student;
2. Extended induction into the requirements of assessment with integration of assessment requirements into all teaching sessions as part of a holistic design;
3. Authentic opportunities for students to practice elements of their teaching (questioning skills; behaviour management etc) (Grossman et al. 2009).
4. Involvement of student teachers in design of assessment – importance of perceived choice is fundamental;
5. Enhanced opportunities for student teachers to plan lessons with peers and experienced teachers with a focus on what can be achieved rather than what was not;
6. Less whole class teaching and more focused learning activities to explore specific dimensions of practice with colleagues;
7. Increased opportunities for student teachers to observe good examples of practice with knowledgeable others to be able to deconstruct 'what was there' – use of video is invaluable in this respect;
8. For feedback: agreeing the timing of feedback between feedback giver and receiver;
9. For feedback: prioritising and focusing on specific areas for development rather than an 'overfull shopping bag of feedback' which may be dropped by the student teacher.
10. For feedback: acknowledging the strengths of performance prior to focusing on areas for development.
11. For feedback: asking the student teacher to first reflect on their own performance and examining feedback giver and receiver perspectives and reasons for variations.

Internationalism

This section will focus on international transitions by investigating the experiences of sixteen international students from a range of countries who were undertaking one-year master's courses in the UK. The focus was on students' subjective experiences of their courses, and data were collected using interviews, journal entries and email exchanges, over an academic year. The data were analysed qualitatively using a grounded theory approach, to identify factors that influenced transition processes, and to themes that would contribute to the overall project aim of developing an improved basis for formative assessment practices.

The key questions for the empirical study carried out in this strand of the project were:

1. Can the characterisation of international students in the UK be more finely delineated?
2. Are there useful ways in which these students challenge both cultural stereotypes and the discourse of the academy?
3. How do these students negotiate their relationships with tutors and supervisors, and are there any lessons to be drawn from this?
4. What social networks do these students establish, and how do they serve them?
5. How do these students cope with disappointment and loneliness?
6. Are there implications for practice?

Theoretical Considerations

International Master's students arriving in the UK are moving from an environment where they have typically been high achievers who communicate well and understand the rules of the educational culture, to an environment where their knowledge of conventions, written and unwritten, is partial, and where the means of building new knowledge of conventions is not always clear. This means that the transition to Masters-level study for these students is particularly arduous and can put their perception of their own 'intelligence, personality, and sense of control in jeopardy' (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005:10). This is a heightened example of the phenomenon that Bourdieu (1991) observed in his seminal study of students from working-class backgrounds acceding to university education in France, with the linguistic and social capital of their home environment (*habitus*) not affording them the means of dealing with the new environment (*field*). This move has also been associated in the literature with a shift in the level of discrepancy between the perceived *real self* and the perceived *ideal self* (Tedeschi, 1990): in the final phase of the first degree, or after a period of professional success in the home country, the discrepancy between perceived real self and perceived ideal self may be small; in contact with a new environment this discrepancy is suddenly augmented by the perception of lack of expertise and skill.

In the first stage of the study, after ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institution, a list of MA students with a range of nationalities and from a range of courses in the field of education was established by a case study institution in London. Students from the initial list were invited to take part by means of an information letter explaining that they were free to participate or not, and to withdraw without needing to give a reason at any point. We explained how all personal data would be anonymised. If students agreed to join, they were asked to sign and return a consent form. Students who did not agree to join were replaced as invitees by students with similar nationalities and courses, by the case study institution, and invited in the same way to join. Sixteen students participated in the first stage of the project. Each participant was invited to participate in two focus groups and a series of face-to-face or telephone interviews. They were also invited to keep a reflective journal from November to May of their MA year.

Critical Reading and Writing

Participants from a range of Western and non-Western backgrounds were conscious of and embraced the discourse of critical reading and writing. At the same time they acknowledged difficulties in owning this new way of working, and were aware that they were undergoing a transformative process. This perception was not limited to participants from countries traditionally considered as less favourable to these ways of working.

But the more different thing is here we easily talk about critical writing and reading, so it's like back home in [my country], and also thinking other Asian culture, we usually tend to believe what is printed, so we tend to believe it's true. But here, I mean I am, personally, whether it's true or not, to try to be critical, so sometimes I am quite confused, I don't know whether it's true or not when it's printed on paper. It's a totally different change in my mind, and my way of thinking. (Thu Hong, first focus group)

Yeah, being critical, I think, is going to be one of the harder things in my work, because I've been out of an academic setting for seven years, and I don't feel like I had to be that critical in my undergraduate work. (Charlotte (North American), Interview 1)

Other respondents, like Muse, had experience of these genres of discourse already:

I did a course [in my East Asian country] where we had to do a lot of reflection journals every week. And my tutor I must say, it was very good, he encouraged us to be critical, and even…I think one thing that I liked was he told us that you should not accept everything that has been taught to you as biblical truth. … I think that helped me, when I came here, to have this idea that critical thinking is valuable. I enjoy it. (Muse, Interview 1)

Richard reflected about how he could take these ways of thinking back with him when he returned to his home country to teach in higher education:

I learn a lot of things and I realise that I can do something different when I go back to my country to continue my…maybe to do the same, do the same job but with a different approach. I mean that I can make my students to think different, to show that there are more things about thinking and there are of course differences in the way that we were understanding the healthcare as students in scientific and healthcare thinking, if I can say that, and the social one. I'm learning a lot, and I realise that I can apply my experience in my area. (Richard, Interview, February)

However, Esther, a North American, was less enthusiastic:

I … find my program extremely topical and not very critical, which is very different from my previous education. (Esther, Journal, beginning of November)

and Joanna, from Southern Europe, was even more precise in her critique of standards of class discussion:

Yeah, in my Master, because we don't discuss a lot about what we are reading, I think that sometimes people is using the same words, but from a very different position about the theme, and I don't like that, because if we are Masters about [title of Master's programme] everyone should position themselves in a clear place and, from that, discuss, and see pros and cons, and challenge others' positions. If we don't do that everything is in a theoretical magma and doesn't go anywhere, because you have the general idea, but you cannot take it home. I do not know what to say. And I think

if we were doing more discussion groups, and *discussing* things, it would be much, much constructive, much going deep. (Joanna, February focus group)

This small sample of the many and varied statements about critical reading demonstrates not only the range of views in the group, but also the distribution of awareness about critical thinking in a way that does not correspond to tidy geographical divides. It shows Joanna resisting the institutional claims for collaborative learning in favour of a more demanding interactive discourse.

In the literature review, it was pointed out that international students' struggles with academic writing are often attributed to a lack of English language proficiency. Writing problems can have other causes, and native speakers of English like Charlotte are in just as much danger of these as students whose first language is not English.

> I put off writing until the last minute. I find it hard to stop reading and start writing. The writing style for essays is different than in [my North American home country] and it has taken awhile to get used to. I write more tentatively because I want to be sure to reference appropriately and compose my essays in a similar style to the academic writing. I'm embarrassed to say that I have run out of time with all three essays that I've submitted up to this point. I get so anxious and stressed around my essay deadlines that it sometimes prevents me from being able to write at all. I get stomach aches, can't eat and my tension headaches have unfortunately returned. (Charlotte, Journal, March)

Charlotte's experience with writing is not unlike Tomoko's experience with speaking, when a fellow student indirectly impugns her ability to express herself in English:

> … one day when we were preparing a group presentation, and deciding which part we should speak between me and other classmate, the one person said to me that because the other student was fluent in English (well, she is a native speaker) it would be better she spoke a main part and I should speak some outline as we only have about 2 minutes each to speak. I could not respond any to his comment and my mind went completely blank for a second. Later I was so upset about his comment. And interestingly he is not a native speaker, although he is quite fluent in it. … So I have had a very mixture of feeling. I am confident in a sense but the incidents above made me feel unconfident. (Tomoko, journal, December)

Frequency and Organisation of Classes

Another topic that provoked much discussion was the frequency of classes. Some respondents found this liberating.

> I like the style of just the two classes a week here. Maybe, some other countries, like someone said [have] a lot more classes, but here, because I have to manage myself, and I don't feel like I am pushed to do something, because I have been working quite long, so I am away from uni, like ten years, and I feel more responsibility, and I feel more controlled by myself. And if all the classes, every hours, you know, every day,

or even four times a week, that's too much, and maybe I can do reading by myself. (First focus group)

Others found the class schedule isolating, and yearned for more discussion with peers.

Well, the fact that you've got so, such a few classes, … Maybe it is that I am just arriving, and I don't know about it for sure, could be, but I find it quite individualistic, because you work on your own, you have to do the readings, you have to interpret the readings, you have to deliver an assignment, but there's not so much space to discuss what you have read. (Joanna, first focus group)

Respondents reflected on the organisation of their courses and read this as a sign of the degree of respect they were afforded:

About my particular MA programme, I could experience from the beginning a great sense of organization and care for the new students. (Sally, Journal, November)

I find it extremely unstructured as thesis timelines and tutors are not specified, lectures are short and the seminars are mostly structured around student opinions. I find it interesting to listen to my classmates' contributions, but I am also keen to receive specialized knowledge and educated opinions from my professors. (Esther (North American), Journal, beginning of November)

The teachers lead us into the field, but we should look for ourselves where to go further. How to start? Too many choices mean no choices! (Jessica, Journal, November)

Actually I applied in 2007, so they gave me a place, but I couldn't get the funding. The good thing about it was they were always keeping in track, like they already gave you your student number, something like that. Whenever there's something happening around, they could include you on the email list. So that kept you in mind to say – I think this is a school which is really concerned about me. (Sparta, Interview 1)

Awareness of Formative Feedback

The presence or absence of formative feedback was noticed and its quality commented upon.

Interviewer: How would you change the course if you had a magic wand?
Student: Magic wand about my course…maybe more assignments. LAUGHS … Because I don't have any sort of feel for what my professors are looking for in our writing. So it's left to chance, after I've handed it in, at the end of the module, and then there's no turning back, there's no chance, you know? It's either pass or fail from that point on. (Lin, Interview 1, February)

Sparta and Muse are impressed with tutors' uses of feedback.

I think we have, like, the course leader, is a person who is a motivator by natural, I think, she is a motivator, so she comes to class, she never talks you down, even if you

have done the wrong thing she will make you understand that all you had to do was to correct it. You were wrong, yes, but you can still move on, so she is that kind of a person who really motivates you. And I think that spirit has spread in the class, so that, you know, we freely mix, really discuss things, without, you know, any kind of reservations. (Sparta, Interview 1)

Recently for one of our modules' assignment, in a bid to develop formative assessment practices in the classroom, the tutor organised us into groups of three to give peer feedback on one another's assignment. After that, she collected all the assignments to give us what she termed 'provocative feedback' (no correction on what is wrong or lacking, just probing questions asked along the margin and an affirming comment given in the beginning) followed again by peer feedback on the tutor's comments. (Muse, Journal, December)

Not all of Muse's classmates are as impressed as she is.

Another interesting observation about mental models is that although most of us appreciate that the tutor was guiding us along in our assignment in a formative way, some verbalised that they actually prefer to know exactly what they have done right and gone wrong in the feedback so that they can then work on the specific areas for improvement in their final submission. This came from a mixed group, both British and international students alike. (Muse, Journal, December)

The ever-aware Joanna is dissatisfied with formative feedback that in her view is too positive and lacks detail.

Another thing which strikes me is that, although we are asked to read a lot and as a foreign student is being hard for me to follow the rhythm, when they correct they are not very exigent. The reply I got from my essay was extremely positive and I just felt that there wasn't any comment that helped me to challenge myself and go further what I had already written. Isn't their job to force me to be better? To cast doubt on my statements? (Joanna, mid-December, Journal)

Discriminatory Practices

Respondents identified instances of classroom practices that had the effect of discriminating against international students.

My first month was a little difficult. It was not easy to feel comfortable to participate in my course, I know because most of them are national students, they use acronyms and information about this country that is new to me, on the other hand, there is a lot of new information that make the class interesting even that I cannot participate in the discussions as I wish. (Richard, journal, end November)

Richard, a health professional and university lecturer in his own country, reflects on how this exclusionary practice might be mitigated.

… It's not easy, because they are not going to change their curriculum, or the design, for one, two, three, five percent of the students. I mean, most of the students work here, so it's… maybe some reinforce[ment] besides the classes. I mean, not as a part of the class, an additional information class…. Not as part of... not taking time off the class, something different. (Richard, Interview 1)

North American Esther talks about how classwork requirements can be used to discriminate.

…the topics generally revolve around British education which I am keen to learn. However, we are challenged to write essays that discuss our personal experience in the changing context of education. My international counterparts and I feel as if we are on double duty as in order to locate ourselves in the discourse and within the extra-local relations, we are not only reading the articles provided, but unlike our English counterparts we also required to research policy and historical documents outside the course that relate to our home country.' (Esther, journal, beginning of November)

In some cases participants could not find adequate responses to discriminatory behaviour.

I wanted to borrow as many books as possible [to prepare my qualifying essay]. Coincidently, I heard [the librarian] talking with her colleagues when I left the library; she said 'it is ridiculous to borrow so many books just for such a short qualifying essay! I cannot believe her, can you?' She noticed me then turned away quickly. I felt so embarrassed, upset and really sad. Since then, I became unwilling to use the library a bit, but as I found that she seemed no longer to work there, I now able to use it without any fears.' (Mikako, journal, early November)

However, Muse reports more and how she and other international student classmates took agentive stances in response to openly discriminatory behaviour.

In one particular module, some of us international students (from Latin America, Russia, Middle East and Southeast Asia etc) find ourselves isolated and at times ignored and eventually we came together and formed our own clique. As the quote above suggests, it is often not an outright rejection but subtle non-acceptance such as when we express our opinions in class or group discussions and some of our British classmates just dismiss our comments (most of which were valid). (Muse, Journal, November)

Quiet and sometime indirect discrimination against international students was widely reported by the respondents, and among themselves respondents use humour to assert verbal control over the discriminatory behaviour. The following dialogue takes place in a focus group conversation of ten conversational turns where all five participants in the conversation give examples of this kind of discrimination.

Student 1: Sometimes going to a class, with a discussion, I don't know, maybe because I'm an international and the majority of the class are British, so they tend to talk about the British system more often, and I feel like I am an outsider, I don't get it, and I am not going to keep cutting them – oh what did you say, what does that mean, how was that?

Student 2: Yeah.
Student 1: So sometimes I just feel I wish they'd talk about something else, the weather, maybe, or something. LAUGHS

Wanting to Know in Advance

A desire that was more frequently mentioned than any other, and by almost every participant, was the desire to know in advance what was going to happen in the course. Some students were delighted with the information they got:

> We had a special meeting, also, for the modules, and each optional module was explained by the teacher who was running it. And except for one that was absent, but he sent a leaflet, and we had enough time to choose, we didn't have to choose right away, we had like a month since we enrolled. So if not I think it was super early, and…but that was it, it was very well described. (First focus group)

> [On the first day] they assigned us our personal tutor. So it was really nice, because I knew immediately that the person who I had to talk to was Dr X in my case, and I think it was very, very, well organised. I felt that. (Sally, Interview 1)

Tomoko took the initiative to arrive early in order to be well informed in advance.

> Well, I came here a bit earlier, because the settling down before getting the course is quite important, you know, my friends suggest – oh you should go a bit earlier. I also wanted some good time before the course start. But that was good, because I have internet programme problem or I had quite a few things I had to do before. (Tomoko, Interview 1)

Sally had a friend in London who was already studying at the same institution and helped her with advance information.

> I have to say that in my case I maybe came with a little bit of an advantage, maybe, because I arrived here to live with a [compatriot] friend, and she already studied here. So I think she, even though I'm not sure if that was really crucial for me to really go well with everything, because I really think that everything in the university worked very well. But I think I have that advantage, because she was giving me all these tips in advance about the Underground, or where to buy or…So that also, for me, worked like a very strong support. (Sally, Interview 1)

Charlotte was likewise aided in her battles to sort her visa documents by a co-national student who had attended the institution before

> I spoke to two different [North American] students, before coming here, via email and by phone, and I know that one of them had had a lot of trouble getting here, and with her correspondence, with admissions, so, erm, she'd given me some good advice, (Charlotte, Interview December)

Mildred was delighted that she could access handouts prior to the sessions.

So it's…I've not seen that kind of, you know, it's different, completely different, from what it used to be in my country, you know, that I can have an access to what the lecturer intends to teach before the time, so it's really great. (Mildred, Interview 1)

However, there were many other instances of distress at not knowing something sooner, and this across a broad range of issues.

My course is a new course, starts this year, and I really appreciate they just prepare it, in the handbook I got it long before I came here, but that's not the latest one, they modified it again, and we just cannot get the new information. And due to such lack of information one classmate in our class transferred to another course, and another just quit. So that's appalling. (First focus group)

[W]hen you read the course information, I mean they are good, but you don't quite get enough information about what you are signing up for, and I guess, because you are here, you are interested in a lot of things, so you have to decide then which [module] to really take and which one not to take, and I felt that it would be useful if there had been, like, say in the first week, we could just sit in on the modules, and just listen to what is going to take place, and then make our choice after that. I thought that would be really useful. (First focus group; Muse voiced a similar concern in her first interview, as did Xiao)

With regards to the induction I thought it was a great session. However as I had never experienced an induction, I wish on the international website it could have clearly stated that everything would be explained then and there. It may sound silly but at the time, it would have been helpful at to me.' (Esther (native speaker of English), journal, November)

I wanted some practical skills together with theory knowledge. … I am now engaged with loads of theories. No practical skills are mentioned. … when I leave school one day, how many of these theories are still useful to me? (Jessica, Journal, November; Fowza in Interview 2 likewise expressed disappointment with the lack of practical skills on her course.)

Supervisory and Tutorial Relationships

Relationships with supervisors and tutors were highly important. Students situated their own real selves, and looked forward to their ideal selves, through the eyes of the tutor. The theme of mismatched expectations that abounds in the literature is replicated here. Students want a tutor they can turn to; they are delighted when this happens, and aggrieved when there are delays in assigning a tutor. At the same time, they lack the knowledge of means of achieving their goal, or when they do make an attempt it meets with failure.

I've been meeting with my course leader and I think that's great, every other week, and that's also helping a lot. It's more of, it becomes, I don't know, the relationship between the student, which is me, the learner, and the tutor, and that's nice, because it

breaks the boundaries, and, you know, like you can talk instead of having the fear to speak, or something. It's nice. (Fowza, Interview 1)

And about the personal tutor, I've met her and we had a nice talk, but the problem is that when I ask her idea, her advice, about what the optional module is, what it's about, just it's not my module, I know nothing about it. I understand, but really she is my personal tutor, I prefer to get more useful advice or suggestion from her. (Focus Group 1)

Even that most of the academic information is written in the student manual and in the Institute web page, I consider that there are some gaps between what is written and in the practice. For example I read about group tutorial for international students during first weeks but it has never happen. The communication with your tutors, after 1 month I still do not know who is going to be my report supervisor, I asked about it but I was told next week they are going to talk about that... (Richard, Journal, end November)

Well, I think one thing that I am not very satisfied about is the personal tutor, because we don't…I think it's because of our tutor, our course leader's quite busy, he is busy himself, so he hasn't assigned any personal tutor for us, to do the assignment. (Xiao, Interview 1)

I was supposed to, and the person said – oh, you don't have a personal tutor? And I say no. And he told me – maybe you should look in the corridor, maybe it's written on there, it should be. And I look at the corridor and there wasn't any paper on there, so I have no personal tutor. In the other module we had two teachers, and depending on what we wanted to write about they assigned one of the teachers to us, to make the tutorial and guide us, and that's been done. So in one course I have one person responsible for my essay, but on the other course, which is my Master, I have no personal tutor. (Joanna, Interview 1)

A positive supervisory experience can change a student's perception of the course and reposition them as a student dramatically:

Yeah, well actually my tutor was really helpful, because I told her about all these personal things that have been going on, and because I didn't, I wasn't able to hand in a very good draft as well, and I was really frustrated because I thought there was, like, better opportunity to see how I was going on. But she was really supportive, and she said don't worry. I handed in like a main structure, and she was supportive, and she said don't worry, we are going to have a tutorial, so we will be able to discuss some things, so that was really good. And that helps, because actually if not you really start feeling every day more, I think, more frustrated and maybe lost, so that was really helpful. (Focus group, February)

It is not easy solely from students' accounts always to determine how a mismatch has occurred or how it might be remedied, but students' distress is palpable.

I e-mailed my tutor to request a change of modules, and my tutor send me immediately to speak to the leader of the module that I wanted to change to. I wished my tutor had talked to me first in order to listen to my reasons and make sure that I was making the right decision. Because in fact after changing the modules, I realized I had made a mistake and I had to undo everything again to go back to the original module. I am aware that I am an MA student, and I should be responsible for my decisions, however I think personal tutors need to pay attention if they realize someone is struggling or making sudden decisions, and see what is happening there. (Sally, February Journal)

I found assignment tutorial being not very helpful. It might be because of the tutor isn't very familiar with the topic I am going to look into. He just asked some general questions and said he looked forward to my 5 page outline, which should be the last chance for me to get my feedback on my assignment. I don't quite like that idea. (Xiao, Journal December)

The thing that, for me, is more hard, is here it is very individualistic, and teacher methods doesn't offer a lot of guidance. Since I am here, in one of the modules, I just happen to have one tutorial, which we are supposed to comment on the drafts of our essays, to get a chance to improve it. But the teacher didn't have time enough to read it, so the tutorial wasn't for that, and we were told we are going to have a tutorial later on, but then they say there was no chance. In the end we had no tutorials to improve our essays. So that's a bit hard, because if people don't give you advice, or criticise what you have done, you don't have a lot of chances to improve it yourself. (Joanna, Interview 1)

Disappointment: Loss and Coping

Aspects of the educational culture can cause homesickness. Joanna longs for a more collaborative environment.

The thing that…in here I feel that the educational system is very competitive. I got the feeling that am doing Master's to be someone in life, and, you know, step like competing with others, it's the kind of feeling I've got in discussion groups. I mean, people is not sharing ideas for the sake of learning, and collaborating with each other, and constructing together. I just get the feeling that everybody is showing off. And in the educational system I had this experience before coming here, it was much more about collaboration, and constructing together, and that makes me feel a bit bad. (Joanna)

Richard misses the class sizes he is used to in his own teaching situation.

Yes, I think it is because of the number, for example, a supervised thesis, my group, I mean, [on the course I teach in my country] my Master students are only eight, and we have a lot of teachers. I can be with them…I am with them from Monday to Friday, so…I mean, I teach them, theory classes, and they can ask me at any time. They don't need to ask me for an appointment, and I answer them. And maybe this way I'm not... I think here it's more difficult, and they say only I have two times opportunity, and

two half an hour, for my essay. So I think it's more difficult to be in contact with them, for example. (Richard, Interview 1)

Sparta enjoys the classroom environment but sometimes feels alienated on the street.

I am coming from a culture where I'd rather call it conservative, so when I walk around the streets, I find, for example, people holding hands, maybe couples kissing. I found that has shocked me, but I had to accept it, because…I actually went to the international officer to say – is this acceptable? Why do people do this? (Sparta, Interview 1)

Esther experiences extreme loneliness from the beginning of the course, until she is assigned the perfect supervisor for her. Suddenly she can reclaim her place in the context.

The only difficulty I am having is bouts of loneliness as I study at home and only see my classmates once a week. Sometimes I wish my classes were more frequently so that I could make greater connections with my schoolmates as I live far from campus and have a limited number of friends in the city. That is perhaps the hardest part of my transition for now. (Esther (NSE), journal, beginning of November)

Anyways, okay, last semester, I was extremely pessimistic and negative about the program. I was a little depressed because of it and could not see a light at the end of the tunnel. However, good news, I am now loving it. This is due solely to my dissertation tutor. She is fantastic. She has a background in [discipline X], like myself, and understands my language, thoughts and interests. It is the first time that I feel comfortable stating my opinion as she likewise takes a critical stance on most topics. She is great to talk to and is very inspiring. Furthermore, I have read her articles before I came to the school and admired them so it is very exciting to work with her. I now feel I am embarking on the academic journey I had hoped for. (Esther, January, Journal]

Others, like Sally, begin the course on a high but then have a period of feeling completely out of place in the learning environment.

Lately I have had strong feeling of insecurity and misplace, because I feel everybody 'got it', that they know what to do, and sometimes I feel I really do not, especially regarding the essay writing. I feel I have to read everything again. I have realized that I have to really understand the aims of each class and ask when I do not understand something. But also I have realized that I have to organize my work in a better way. I have made myself a calendar with short goals for each day, in order to feel that I am having achievements everyday. (Sally, February, Journal)

Tomoko overcomes perfectionism to accept a 'good enough' solution to her problem of having too much to read.

Yes, so it's good to read, so I can join in the discussions, but sometimes, maybe, you don't have to read everything, but one, and you can get in that discussion. And the

course leaders say maybe read two readings thoroughly. Then some just to skim. Yes, so I thought about that. (Tomoko, Interview 1)

Social Networks

Participants placed themselves in different kinds of networks in order to build and exploit their social capital. Only Charlotte appeared to depend on friends in the home country for support. Before going home for Christmas she said,

> I wish that I could easily talk to my friends that I've known for a long time. When I'm feeling stressed and anxious, they're good at distracting me. (Charlotte (NSE), journal, end November)

All of the other networks that participants mentioned were mixed-nationality student networks. It is striking that there was no mention of a desire to integrate into British society.

It was interesting to see the kinds of networks that participants formed. Myles and Cheng (2003), Montgomery and McDowell (2009) and Wu and Hammond (2011) reported on social networks of international students. In the present study, there were three kinds of international student networks, which can be characterised as *social networks*, *study networks* and a *neighbour network*.

Many of the participants reported social groups of international student friends.

> Apart from study, life here is good. This is because I am making good friends. In the beginning of the course I felt a little alone not knowing people but two factors below have changed this feeling. First, I share a kitchen and kitchen mates have become very good friends to do things together in my spare time. Second, the course had a study tour to Paris and two thirds of the course mates joined the course. It was a good opportunity that we got to know each other. After the trip I feel a closer relation with my course mates. (Tomoko, journal, end November)

> [M]y classmates are wonderful people. Everybody's got different experiences, and it's really exciting to be with them. … We meet up every now and then after a class, we'll just go down to the student union, or go out to dinner, just grab a bite. We try to stay in touch via email very often, so we keep each other updated on what's going on at work, if there are any special events available for teachers, that sort of thing. (Lin, NSE, Interview 1, February)

> In my case we are not encouraged to meet each other, and it's true that there are some people who you hang with, to go to see exhibitions, and it's very constructive, because you know that you are talking to someone who is doing the same reading, so it's very nice, conversation about an exhibition, but it's not really like people getting together to talk about what they are reading, it's much more informal, and based on personal relationships, it's not that people really want to share what they are doing, I don't think so. No. In fact it's something that I miss, because when I was doing my PhD classes in [my home country] there a was much more closer sense of group, and helping each other, and sharing things. (Joanna, February focus group)

Other participants reported on the classroom communities of international students that they were members of.

I can feel the difference between a [master's] session and [an academic literacy] class, that is because all are international student, we feel more comfortable among international student. (Richard, journal, end November)

About my peers, I love the fact that we have a very diverse group. Especially for me, because I am the only [geographical region] student and the only one who speaks [my language] as a first language. I have felt really comfortable among the group, I have learned a lot from my classmates, from their experiences and backgrounds. (Sally, Journal, end November)

I think maybe I'm lucky. In my class we are about twenty two, from different…most of us are international students, I think there are only three students within…local students. But the interaction is quite good, by now I know almost each one's name (Sparta, Interview 1)

There are some things you may not understand initially, but when you go into the smaller group, and there are no crowds, and you are free to ask questions, nobody thinks that maybe you are asking a stupid question, you know, so I think it's really good, for that concentration, it's nice. (Mildred, Interview 1)

So far, though, it has served even beyond my expectations and I have enjoyed every meeting with my classmates and tutors. My course leader, tutors, administrator and classmates are all very intelligent and kind-hearted people. Our experiences vary immensely, yet we all wish to achieve the same goals in our professional fields, which is a bond I won't forget. (Lin, Journal, January)

Some of these groups continue outside the classroom, to great effect.

Yeah, a discussion group, that one of the students sponsor it, and we get together every week, and discuss about the readings and what we've learned in class etc. (Xiao, February focus group)

[My peer group has] organised to get together as well, and I think that's a really good and helpful opportunity to share maybe doubts that I could have, and discuss things that maybe, in class sometimes, you are not able to do it, you don't feel confident enough, you feel that there are things that you should know, and you don't really know, but you are not very brave enough to ask them at that point. So I think that the peer support is really important, as well, has been. So tomorrow we have our second meeting. (Sally, February Focus Group)

Honestly I do not have an idea what the whole [Z] module is about ? Why should it be structured in the way like that. Why we first learned about [A], next [B], then turned to [C], [D], [E] and now [F], [G]. What is the logic here? On the way back from [the institution] to our hall today, I talked to Marta, my classmate and she helped me

answer the question. So great! The logic is clear: it is all about the triangle of text, production and audience. During my course, we do not have much teamwork, which is a pity for me. I always learn a lot from my friends, I prefer to discuss with them, work with them in a team. But here, it is quite independent! All is individual work! (Thu Hong, Journal)

Lastly, Richard, who felt himself as a peripheral member of his course group of part-time UK students, resourcefully positioned himself as neighbour.

I really enjoyed [the induction], because it was not only information about all the issues, but also we could meet other people, other international students, so it was nice to see that there are some people who have more or less the same problems, or doubts, or worries, and experiences and so on. (Richard, Interview, October.)

I like [the hall of residence], I see people there, and seeing people in the library, and it's nice. We are not friends, but it's nice to see people that every day the same people, but it's something different, because when I came here the first time you meet people and you never see them again, so here I think it's comfortable to see people at least once a week, twice a week. I feel like my environment. (Richard, Interview, November)

Interviewer: So is there quite a community, is it kind of a national community, or a disciplinary community? Do you have friends who are doing the same Masters as you, or..?
Richard: No, no, it's just friends, in [the hall of residence].
Interviewer: In [the hall of residence], yes.
Richard: Friends that I met in [the academic literacy classes] … Because I don't have contact with my, with person who are doing my Masters, because they are taking different courses and they just come one hour a day, I mean because they are doing part-time and they are working here, and they don't have time to share or to… (Richard, Interview, February)

Without establishing links of intimacy, Richard appears to have established a community of friends he can chat with and count on in a neighbourly fashion. This seems to be an appropriate solution for a student who is keenly aware that he will soon return to his full professional and academic life in his home country.

The participants in this study did not correspond to the stereotypes of international students that feature in literature such as Hofstede (1994) and Cortazzi and Jin (1997). Some non-Western students embraced critical reading and writing practices, and some Western students found these challenging. A non-UK student found the critical practices on her course naïve and undeveloped in relation to what she was used to in her home country.

Participants showed a refined awareness of formative feedback practices and an ability to evaluate them. Incidences of discrimination against international students were not uncommon, and in some cases participants used their resources to deflect or mock the discriminatory practices. Instances of wanting to know in advance were salient in participants' discourse. Most aspects of the student learning experience were included in the

discussion in this area. Relationships with supervisors and tutors were highly important for learner's sense of belonging and identity. It is not always clear to students how to resolve mismatches in perceptions of the student-supervisor/tutor relationship.

Students experience loss and homesickness, though it is more often their academic than their actual home that they appear to long for. Course conditions can cause students to feel isolated and distressed, and this can occur at different points in the course. Tutors are important in helping students cope with these moments. Finally, students formed three kinds of networks: social networks, study networks, and a neighbour network. All of these were mixed-nationality networks. Students did not speak of integrating into British society, nor of a desire to do so.

The main implications of this international strand study are:

- Early information about all aspects of the course is a significant factor in the quality of the one-year international master's student's experience.
- There is a need for awareness training for academics to avoid unintentional discrimination against international students in teaching and learning.
- The conventional picture of the international student as mainly hampered in their academic achievement by a lack of language proficiency does not correspond to the findings of this study, where there were many commonalities between first-language English international students and international students with other first languages.
- Relationships with tutors and supervisors are paramount in combating loneliness and isolation for international students.
- International students should be encouraged to form multi-nationality networks.

Work Intensification

This transition focused on the addition of part-time study responsibilities to full-time work. Students may encounter a number of problems in making this transition, including those related to time, energy, and commitment. Students are likely to experience work-intensification and stress during their studies; however, we are suggesting here that learners develop coping mechanisms for this work intensification and that there are a range of other factors which influenced the transition to taught postgraduate study. We begin with a review of the concept of 'learning career' which is used in the analysis. Three principal themes are identified: the characteristics of the transition, managing learning careers, and assessment.

Learning in higher education is widely accepted to be a social process, particularly in the professional, social science and humanities disciplines. Wenger's (1998) proposal that learning occurs through participation in multiple communities of practice has been influential. Although postgraduate learning communities may not be communities of practice using Wenger's definition, since they may not have a common enterprise or goal, his ideas about mutual engagement (belonging) in communities and negotiation of practices and rules are relevant. From this perspective, a learning transition is not an isolated individual experience: it is about entering and participating in new communities (of practice) which relate to, in this case, study at Masters level.

Learners inhabit communities of practice outside the academic sphere that might be of particular significance to them. These learners may be undertaking other transitions relating to work and social or family interactions, alongside academic ones. But, although there were some reports of career enhancement plans as growing academic confidence spilled over into the workplace, these learners did not experience radical changes in their working, social and family communities during the year. The predominantly academic nature of this transition is to be expected from this group of mature and working students who are relatively settled in their approaches to life and work.

In a social theory of learning issues of identity and belonging are paramount. Wenger acknowledges the importance of the re-negotiation of identities *in situ,* which must occur in order for students to move into new learning communities, but he does not focus on structural issues of exclusion and inclusion. Transition requires considerable negotiation with self, with family and friends and with tutors and other staff who are positioned in the bureaucracy of the institution. Social class, gender and ethnicity are highly relevant in developing an identity congruent with groups and communities (Hughes, 2010). Learners also bring with them a variety of dispositions and experiences from previous learning contexts and backgrounds which may be significant and not easy to shift or challenge. The concept of learning career (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000), which places an emphasis on the identities and dispositions that learners bring with them to new communities from the past, adds another dimension to any analysis of social learning experience and is particularly relevant for mature students.

Even in a study which focused on a targeted group of students, in this case part-time postgraduates, the range of identities emerging in new and unpredictable contexts inevitably provides a variety of transitional experiences for learners, but it is also possible to identify some generalisable themes. After exploring some of the individual M level transitions over a year in detail to illustrate how varied these learning journeys were, we will focus in more detail on the nature of this academic transition for becoming a postgraduate drawing on the concepts of communities of practice and learning careers. There are two relevant communities of practice here: Masters, or taught postgraduate, learning communities and the established disciplinary communities to which lecturers and other 'experts' belong but in which students might become legitimate peripheral participants (Wenger, 1998). Autonomous learning might be expected within the postgraduate learning community but this might involve a dependence on experts for knowledge transfer and assessment, while in the disciplinary community all members are autonomous and engage as peers. The differential access that learners have to both these communities was important as it became apparent that engagement to some extent with both is necessary. The study particularly sought to investigate the role of assessment and feedback and this also emerged as significant in the transitional process.

New Learning Communities

Although the students in the study were all part-time taught postgraduates, they started the Masters year from different positions and they experienced different types of transitions through the year to finish up in different places. The accounts below not only illustrate differences in academic and professional identities, but also demonstrate that transitions are not necessarily smooth and linear: there are peaks and troughs and shaky starts before, sometimes but not always, learners settle into a steady state.

The Emotional Rollercoaster

Although she had been out of formal education for more than ten years and had not experienced much support as an undergraduate, Janet had clear expectations that she would be supported now because she worked in higher education quality assurance and she was aware of some of the shifts towards providing better guidance for learners. Yet, she described peaks and troughs in her feelings of confidence throughout the year, for example:

> Yet another whole weekend spent on this essay! 6 hours yesterday and 7.5 hours today! And I'm still not there! ....The panic is starting to subside now as the essay is beginning to take shape

This was her first essay, however, overall there was a sense of her making progress and she began to feel more content after completing her next assignment:

> ..it wasn't such an emotional roller coaster as writing the first essay, as although I haven't yet had any feedback on the first essay, I did get the grade, which was good, and so gave me confidence that what I was producing was up to scratch.

The reassurance of a good grade is a theme that we will return to in the section on assessment.

Sara also found the year to be stressful at times, but her negative comments were cushioned with some positive experiences of synergy between work and study. After initially planning to take on study because her job was not too demanding, she obtained a new post just before being accepted for the MBA programme. This meant that she was taking on two transitions simultaneously. She started the residential week in London feeling under pressure:

> ...you're just taken out of your comfort zone and your environment, right down to being in London and not knowing how to get from your hotel to the Institute.

Early on she admitted to 'having a crisis of confidence almost every day'. She also experienced peaks and troughs:

> More stress through IT induced self-doubt. (It wasn't my fault, of course, but I was out of step with my peers). The (residential) week was exhilarating, even if I did only get a few hours sleep each night. I loved it. My syndicate group are all great and very supportive.

She felt herself to be less competent with IT than her peers and had to ask a tutor for help, but she found the teaching and supportive group work exhilarating. Eventually she became aware of making progress academically throughout the year by managing one deadline at a time:

> I think one deadline at a time is the way to tackle the course, and not to think too far ahead, as that could be depressing!

It seems that she was able to pace herself and reach a steady state.

Overcoming a shaky start but remaining on the fringes

Like Sara, Rachel had a shaky start this time because she enrolled late and missed the summer reading list and she even thought about leaving:

> I applied late and got on to it late, and my mind sort of wasn't in the right mind frame. And then when I heard that if you quit within three weeks you got nearly all your money back, so I kind of had that idea as well (laughs).

Her very practical fine arts background meant she did not bring with her experience of reading and writing academically. However, she soon began to find out what was expected in terms of reading and she began to enjoy library work:

> I didn't go in to the library for a month. I just didn't step foot in to it. I just put it to the back of my mind and did all the other things I had to do, whereas as soon as I started going to the library, because I really enjoy sitting in libraries, so now my days are, I just spend it in the library... I'm really enjoying it, and I've kind of forgotten about, you know, going shopping and, you know, stuff I'd liked to do on my days off.

She found the academic writing support unit helpful and sharing with students her doubts about how to write an essay was reassuring.

However, she did not reach a steady state. After making a successful foray into the postgraduate learning community, she began to coast along and was now less certain that she was making any progress:

> ...the first essay I had to write I got so scared, and (thought it was going to be so awful, but I made this massive leap in my academic writing. But now it's tailed off a bit, and I'm kind of a bit more comfortable, and actually I'm not sure that I am going upwards in that sense of progression.

This was partly because she worked as a freelancer and although she was able to have control over her workload by alternating freelance work with times of study pressure, she took on more work when she thought the expectations for academic reading decreased:

> ..in November I was really focussed, but then my work hours got cut in January so then I took on freelance work to cover that which actually has given me more work and because this module - we don't have lectures here – we just go out to museums where people speak to us, so I have realised that we don't actually have to do any reading because no one is going to pick you up on it if you haven't done the key reading for the seminars, so I haven't been doing any.

Without the structure of lectures she did not engage with the reading. She also did not want to participate in classroom discussion:

And they (the lecturers) ask questions, but I'm not very good at answering questions in that kind of environment, so I kind of don't enjoy that much, so I just kind of duck and they can't see me.

While Rachel seemed to remain on the fringes of the postgraduate learning community, there were two students in particular who reported very smooth transitions.

Clear Goals Throughout

Patricia presented her experience very differently from the rollercoasters and shaky starters. As a mature student with a grown up family and working part-time as an Further Education lecturer, she had enrolled on the Masters for 'intellectual curiosity' after recently completing the PGCE now required for FE teachers, but which she did not find challenging enough. Her academic identity emerged strongly in her journal:

In a way I'm a true academic, because I've only done it for academic reasons....when I did my PGCE, quite frankly it felt a bit superficial. I just thought, "It's not going deep enough." And I suppose everyone in the class said, "You should go and do a Masters." I couldn't quite work out why; it doesn't do anything job-wise. But, so, I really do love learning in whatever capacity.

She did not report experiencing peaks and troughs and was very positive about study throughout the year and was aware of making good progress. She described the course as:

...a golden opportunity to study and think and so I want to capitalise on it as I may never be able to 'indulge' in such a way again!

Interestingly, she viewed study for academic growth, rather than for career enhancement, as an 'indulgence' perhaps because she was aware of being different from others learners and unlike them she was not seeking career development and was less pressured for time. She appreciated the effort that those teaching full-time had to make, but would not have wanted this for herself:

I just really can't believe people do this on a fulltime teaching job. I just don't think it's possible. Out of my group, I'm the only person who had the essay in really early; they still haven't finished theirs. And intellectually, there's no way I could cope with that, because I'm in a different world at the moment, in this module (a difficult sociolinguistics module).

Patricia clearly viewed herself as belonging to an academic community intellectually, but described a rift between the practices of this community and the community of part-time learners who have full-time jobs and have not completed assignments; she is in a 'different world' from them.

But, others who were seeking professional enhancement and who were grounded in the postgraduate learning community also experienced a smooth transition. Like most of the others, Rodney was taking a Masters to enhance his career as well as for intellectual satisfaction:

After I started teaching... well, I'd enjoyed the academic side of my teaching degree, which is a BA. So that was one reason, and I was interested in it, I suppose, for my career, fundamentally. ... (the MA) will give me more of an insight in to the sort of bigger picture of managing schools.

He coped with work intensification by reducing his effort in his job:

I know what I'm doing, I can keep the class ticking over, without putting the same effort in that I would if I didn't have to write an assignment as well.

He, like Patricia described a fairly smooth transition without the emotional rollercoaster described by many others consistent with a confident academic, and in his case an aspiring managerial professional identity consistent with masculine subjectivity.

The Importance of Identities

An overview of these transitions begins to give a sense of the variety and complexity of the different journeys experienced by this group of students. It shows how the different learning careers of these individuals result in different experiences of transition. Those who established and maintained academic and professional identities were able to fully participate in the postgraduate learning communities of their Masters programme, even after a shaky start and/or emotional ups and downs. However, younger students, who began with less well established academic and professional identities such as Rachel, ended the year in uncertain positions, and in her case remained on the fringes of the learning community.

Wenger (1998) argued that participants in communities of practice must negotiate and agree those practices. He describes how communities also capture or 'reify' practice. But, the research findings suggest that Masters level practices may be unclear even when these are documented or reified. We will consider the academic transition in more detail next and explore how lack of agreement over the practices of taught postgraduate study had a significant influence on the transition into the community for some of these more vulnerable students.

Disciplinary Practices of Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking

The mostly uneven transitions discussed above depended not only on academic and professional identities and learning careers, but also on the positioning of Masters level study, or taught postgraduate study, between taught undergraduate study and largely independent research-focussed doctoral study. Marie, another confident professional, had a clear idea how Masters work is different from a PhD:

On a Masters degree you've got pre-determined learning outcomes. So somebody is wanting you to address the learning outcomes they've developed...When you do a Doctoral study you are the predeterminer of your learning outcomes.

With a similar background, Debbie viewed Masters writing as a clear progression from her degree:

…the formulating your own ideas first, from literature, and then putting that into something where you are not saying it subjectively, so you've both got to have your ideas, but they've got to be backed up, and if it was like degree level, or A level, and you can have your point and your evidence, and it's very simply laid out, but I wanted to weave it in…….that was the whole point of doing the Masters, was to get more creative in my writing.

However, the evidence below suggests that a taught Masters course in a social science such as education does not neatly bridge undergraduate and doctorate study and there is lack of clarity over what constitutes Masters level with differing practices even within the single discipline of education. This uncertainty over the end points of the transition they are undertaking was an underlying feature of many of the learning experiences that these students described.

Students identified key transitions in their reading, writing and editing skills and the ability to think independently and critically and these will be discussed next. While these are all practices which are core to both student learning communities and established disciplinary communities to which tutors and lecturers belong, this does not mean that there is a clear overlap or demarcation between the different communities.

Reading, Writing and Editing

Reading was enjoyable and the students developed routines for managing the reading expected at this level, such as reading the night before class, reading on the train or allocating time at weekends. Gemma expected to be less guided and supported at Masters level than at undergraduate level and was pleasantly surprised:

It's good that you're still supported by good lectures and reading lists. I wasn't expecting that, I thought it might be, really, totally independent study. But you are directed and guided, which I did find really helpful.

But excessive guidance can produce dependency for the conscientious student and a feeling of being over-burdened. For example, Sara was confused about the reading list when extra readings were added at a later stage:

The reading list was daunting, but I tried to buy all the books and read about 5-6 before realising that this was impossible. I read what I thought was essential reading, but found that new items were being added to the (VLE) under the different lecture headings, which I wasn't expecting.

Reliance on set readings has disadvantages, not only because of the unpredictable volume of reading, but also because of opportunities to follow one's own interests.

However, Patricia seemed to have struck a balance between following the guidance on a taught course and following her own lines of enquiry in accordance with her strongly held sense of academic identity:

And what's been really stimulating is, every week, apart from the set readings and suchlike, there's been some things that have come up that I've gone off on a tangent and done more reading on that I hadn't anticipated. So this week, I just read a whole book in bed on Donald Winnicott.....just because she mentioned him last week. And in a way ....it's not directly to do with what we were talking about, but it's been really interesting.

The problem of selectivity in reading was paralleled by selectivity over what to write for assignments. Editing and cutting down writing to meet assignment word lengths was often painful. Even Patricia, who was very confident that her writing was good, found this difficult. Debbie summed this up nicely:

I feel like I'm caught in an ever-evolving nuance of more and more meaning that you're trying to distil in to five thousand words linked together. And I just know I can't. Every point I put, I think, "You could write a whole essay on every single point."

Marie showed further insight in her journal about why it is so difficult to manage content for an assignment of limited length, and she suggested it was because of the emotional investment in effort and ideas:

The skills lie in developing the approach to assessed work that results in doing enough good work rather than just 'lots of work'. Lots of work can constitute a lot of 'random' unfocussed reading, writing too soon – committing thoughts, ideas and data to paper that then have an emotional value. Once on paper – it is hard to then junk these ideas in favour of more focussed ones.

But she had clearly progressed by the third assignment:

Up until the third assignment I was still writing twice the number of words needed and then being too precious to properly edit (and indeed forgetting how long the iterative and content editorial process has to be).

Academic writing style as differing from professional writing was also raised as an issue for students on professional courses. Marie was used to writing reports at work but realised she needed to follow the style of the published literature:

...it isn't report style writing that is required and that is very clear and one of the things that was most helpful is looking at the style in which a lot of the reference books are written.

However, Maria did not feel that she could emulate this style:

There is an eloquence isn't there to some academic writing that I think is really wonderful to read?...Mine tends, in my own view to be very pedestrian.

Lucinda also had to write very clearly and concisely at work; but, initially at least, she found this did not give her confidence for academic writing:

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You see I have a view that I am quite a good writer and I write a lot in a way that is supposed to engage people, and I am worried that my writing style would not be viewed as the correct style for this kind of (writing).

Thus, while these students could distinguish between writing for professional communities and academic writing, these postgraduates were uncertain about how far they as novices were expected to acquire the practices of published academics in the field.

The institution recognised that writing is a problematic area and has a support centre for academic literacies which offers courses and individual support in academic writing. Those who attended writing sessions, such as Rachel, found that this helped their writing enormously, but George perceived this as being targeted towards international students until he heard another speak in the focus group:

But the (centre for academic literacies) thing, I think, and structuring essays, there ought to be something, that needs to be more highlighted, because it was you (another student in focus group) who told me about them, but we had been told, I just don't listen...I think I heard ...it was ...couched in terms of overseas students, and English.

So the practice of academic support is not altogether clear. Another area that students identified as very important was criticality but again interpretations of what this meant varied.

Ability to Think Critically

Thinking critically is cited as essential to higher education (Barnett; 2007; Moon, 2007) and is considered a prerequisite for Masters study, demonstrated by its prominence in Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) descriptors and local assessment criteria. The meaning of criticality required exploration. Janet clearly expressed that development in her critical thinking has led to challenging previous beliefs:

I have been introduced to a world of ideas and theories I had neither been familiar with, nor knew how to access. This has shaped the way I think and inform my thinking. Not only do I find that I'm better informed about current debates and their historical precedents, but I am able to think differently as a consequence. I have discovered some surprising anomalies, such as that the promotion of lifelong learning has led in some ways to greater exclusion of those it was meant to reach out to.

Students experienced in their learning careers such as George and Janet believed critical analysis to be a key difference between educational policy discourse and academic discourse for assignments. Janet explained:

.. if I was writing a report at work, where I don't have to be critical, I just write it. Whereas here I have to try and be more conscious of that and make sure that I am not just talking or writing, and try and use the word count wisely because critical analysis is quite a big part of the assessment.

Marie went further and linked a relativist epistemology with the ability to think and write critically:

> ..there's a story to each module, and the story has alternative views within it, .. And once I've got the story I can then decide whether I've actually got a position that does contest any of it, that makes it an easier write, but if I can't contest any of it, it makes it harder to write, really, because you start to diminish the opportunity for criticality.

However, Patricia attacked the relativistic elements of knowledge, that arise from constructivist teaching. She appeared to take a critical realist perspective (Young, 2007), that some knowledge is more reliable than others, even in a 'soft' discipline such as education because of its provenance:

> The only thing I would say here is it gets that time where it's so collaborative, you sort of think, "Oh, gosh, there's no answers to anything," and we're all treated like equals to the lecturer, but, actually, I want to learn from other people's expertise, which is probably why I enjoyed that lecture from Professor X. I think the other thing is, having had some kind of medical training, there is that thing about facts. I mean there are no absolutes, are there, in education? But actually, I'd definitely like some facts as well. And I sort of think, "Well, if other people have done the research we can learn from that.

In a reported dialogue with her lecturer, she associated a high level of critique with Masters level and beyond:

> I said, "We're really enjoying the challenge of this, but it really is stretching us so far." And he said, "Well, actually, to be honest, I think I'm stretching you beyond even a Master's level. And I said, "Why are you doing that if you don't know we've got the ability to cope?" And he said, "Oh, you have. I read your critiques." So I think he really is challenging us at a very high level, which is good.

This tutor appears to open up a trajectory towards more central membership of the academic education community, for some students at least, by implying overlap with doctoral level.

These students were able to engage in discussion of 'criticality' and 'critical analysis' and articulate their positions, but others remained silent on the issue suggesting that they were not able to negotiate this practice. Rachel revealed her confusion about a distinction between putting policy into practice and theory into practice and when asked tried to explain:

> I just think of policy as to how we are meant to like put government policy into essays, and theory is all the other stuff isn't it? In books? I don't know.

While Rachel did not have a clear idea of the practices of a postgraduate learning community, others were developing clarity about what distinguishes Masters level and beyond from undergraduate study by engaging with disciplinary communities of practice as well. We now turn to the issue of membership of the different communities.

Peer and Expert Disciplinary Communities of Practice

Another important transition at this level is from viewing learning as being dependant on transmission of knowledge by experts to self-reliance in constructing knowledge, in other words developing as an autonomous learner. Again different interpretations of how far this aspect of academic transition is expected at Masters-level were evident. Working with peers was helpful for developing learner autonomy, but some were marginalised even in their peer learning communities. Others were clearly moving towards autonomy through starting to engage with expert disciplinary communities and displaying the important Masters' attribute of critical thinking.

Participating in Peer Learning Communities

For most students it was clear that participating in peer formal learning communities was expected. The MBA students worked on assessed presentations in syndicate groups which are generally regarded positively, as Sara suggests:

> Working with some second years on the second syndicate task also helped enormously to understand how to tackle them in a more structured way, to get to the key issues quicker and convert the thinking into a presentation with less emphasis on the presentation and more emphasis on the discussion and learning process.

Christina described groups working on readings as a useful insight into the perspective of others:

> One or two people do questions on the reading for everyone else each session, and that works really well, because I think it makes it much more interesting to sort of see what questions other people come up with.

Others such as Frances, Debbie and Rodney also described working in pairs or groups for written assessments positively.

However, peer learning communities can also be excluding (Hughes, 2010). Lucinda described a kind of 'rites of passage' activity that occurred on the MBA where year 1 and year 2 students worked together on a task culminating in an assessed presentation and the year 2 students withdrew from the formal presentation at the last minute:

> Our team got completely stitched up by half of our group, on the final morning, in as much as on the final morning the year twos in our group announced that they wouldn't do the presentation..... and when I said – look guys this isn't fair – they said – well you can do it to the year ones next year.

While this could be interpreted as an attempt by the year two students to help their less experienced colleagues learn to cope without them and become core members of the peer learning community rather than a "stitching up", it does seem unfair not to have given a bit more warning and explanation when there is a risk of failing the assessment, and it appears that power relations between cohorts are being played out here.

Rachel was, by contrast, very uncertain about the expectations of any peer collaboration. For example, study groups were suggested on Rachel's course, but she was unsure whether these would be set up for her or whether students should take the initiative.

> And they kind of suggested that we went to, like, study groups, but I didn't really understand what that meant. And I thought that was something that they'd put us in to groups, but I think maybe we're meant to see to that independently, but we haven't done that yet.

Another tension over peer co-operation that occasionally surfaced was between peer feedback and plagiarism. Learning dispositions carried over from previous experiences can be very significant, for example, Rachel had been told in the past not to read others' work:

> I have had a few offers to read my work but I don't know, it is something I have always had from my mum I suppose that you should never let other people read your work, so I have just got that ingrained in me.

There was also some debate in a focus group on whether or not peers should provide feedback on outlines of assignments or near completed draft essays. Underlying this too was a fear of plagiarism, to which George made specific reference:

> But I think ....at the outline stage, it was difficult to comment on them, because they are only saying this is what I am going to do. Whereas at the draft stage it would have been better. But then we were hammered on plagiarism.

These comments suggest that the two communities relevant for postgraduate study can be quite distinct: there are peer learning communities, to which the students mostly have core membership, and communities of academic experts such as tutors and supervisors, who make judgements about plagiarism, and for which legitimate membership is therefore problematic.

Participating in Learning Communities with Experts, Tutors and Supervisors

There were, however, opportunities for engaging with both peer communities and communities of disciplinary experts, and we are suggesting here that this dual membership is the key to developing postgraduate learner autonomy. Rodney and Patricia were stimulated by expert lectures and in Patricia's case she wanted to make a strong move away from peer learning communities to engage with experts:

> This term it's all collaboration, and you read your articles and then you just get into groups, and honestly it's quite tedious, because the fact is I'm sitting with people who don't know much more than me. And I feel that I really kind of feel actually we'd like to hear a bit more expertise (from guest lecturers).

But, Lesley recognised that a lecturer who strongly asserts his/her expertise could get in the way of engagement with experts and becoming an autonomous learner:

> So I think part of the problem is, she (lecturer) has some very strong beliefs about what's right and wrong, and we're trying to work together towards it, you know, about

all these theories and stuff, but because she's so sure of her theory, you feel we're *not* learning in the way she wants, almost, because you can't work through the other theories to see whether you agree or disagree. ...I think you're really aware that....... she's, like, the knowledge-giver, whereas actually the better thing would have been for us to work through and decide for ourselves.

As a compromise between constructivist learning and expert input, George suggested that lecturers were valuable in giving an overview of the topic before learners start exploring it for themselves. Debbie agreed that this would be helpful:

If you want us to get to grips with a difficult one (concept), then just a summary at the front, or some potted diagram or something.

These learners are moving towards autonomy, in a similar way to Patricia and Marie describing their developing autonomy in selecting readings and material for written work respectively in the previous section, but Gemma, who had started on her dissertation, was even at this stage unsure about how autonomous she was expected to become. Her account reveals some interesting tensions between learner independence and entitlement to tutorials or supervisory contact. She explained:

I think my supervisor's approach is that we are adult enough to do it on our own. I don't think he likes us constantly bothering him. If he asks you to do something he asks you to do it, and that's it. ...for me it's OK, if I need him I'll email him. I do try to figure stuff out on my own, because I sometimes feel that when I go and see him with a problem he feels like I am wasting his time.

There is an inconsistency here between being a self-reliant 'adult' and her position in a teacher/ student relationship that she brings from her previous study experiences. Contrast the statements on taking the initiative to email or 'figuring stuff out on my own' *with* the feelings of 'bothering him' or 'wasting his time'.

When she asked for tutor support, her supervisor suggested working with a peer:

But he was still saying that his approach is he gives it (draft dissertation) to other students to read, because he doesn't see the point of reading it himself, because he knows what the topic's about, and he's sort of biased. So he told me that I'd rather that I met up with a girl over the summer, who is doing a similar topic, and we helped each other out, but I wasn't sure about that, I said to him "I've never really had, I don't really work really well, I guess, with pairs". I would prefer it if he checked it. But he said that in the past his method has worked, so I think that is what will be happening in the summer, I will be sort of on my own with this girl, she will be checking, we will be checking each other's work. I don't know if he'll even give me any feedback.

Gemma was unconvinced about whether peer feedback would be helpful, partly because she has not done this before, but also it seems because she feels she needs input from a tutor: 'I would prefer it if he checked it'. She hinted at feeling resentful: "I don't know if he'll *even* give me *any* feedback." (our emphasis). Underlying this is a fear of being 'on my own' which

suggests a lack of readiness for independence from the expert. Lack of clarity and opportunities for negotiation over support arrangements at postgraduate level compound this tension between autonomy and dependence on experts, and leave students with less experienced learning careers such as Gemma floundering.

Here we have demonstrated both the variety and unevenness of the transitions to Masters study for this group of learners. Although those with strongly established learning careers had a smooth ride, other journeys through the year were characterised by emotional highs and lows, difficult starts and uncertain final positions. Examining these transition in more detail goes some way to explain this complexity. The transition to Masters is for most of these students an academic one. It is about moving into new academic communities of practice associated with postgraduate study. We have demonstrated that how the academic transition is perceived by learners depends on individual learning careers, the clarity over the transitional positioning of postgraduate courses between undergraduate and doctoral study and the accessibility of postgraduate and disciplinary communities of practice.

Uncertainty about Masters level practices frequently arose perhaps because taught postgraduate study is a transitionary phase between undergraduate and doctoral study. The potential for overlap at either end provides for multiple interpretations of the positioning of Masters learning communities and each new cohort or grouping or learning community will need to negotiate their way into and through the practice. The ambiguity over Masters levelness is reflected in the uncertainties the students describe in their accounts of transition regarding: selectivity in both reading and writing, critical thinking and related epistemologies and learner autonomy.

Marie, a mature student with an advanced learning career had a relatively clear idea of the academic transition she was undertaking. She viewed a Masters level of study to be less autonomous than doctoral level, but nevertheless acknowledged that she was developing her independent writing style during the year, facilitated by her disposition towards a relativist epistemology. Moon (2007) argued that such a relativist position is necessary for developing the critical thinking that is valued in Masters level writing. In keeping with her views on knowledge, Marie also appreciated that there are different types of writing for different purposes and she felt she needed to glean from academic texts the style required for writing the assignments.

Different positions in the hierarchies of knowledge constructed by experts and novices also give rise to varying degrees of learner autonomy. Becoming an autonomous learner who does not rely solely on experts or teachers is another disposition that learners either brought with them or started to develop. Mature and experienced learners such as Rodney and Patricia valued the knowledge of those in powerful positions, but were independent thinkers too. Such learners do not always value peer input and critique because of their self-reliance, but Rodney however did seem to be shifting his perspective by engaging in the 'thinking aloud' groups set up on his first module, and later in other modules.

These students were comfortable in their postgraduate learning communities and engaged peripherally with communities of experts too. Other mature students such as Sara and Lucinda became more comfortable in the postgraduate learning communities as the year progressed, but were less clear about being autonomous and engaging with disciplinary

practices. Sara struggled to manage her own reading and Lucinda expressed confusion and self-doubt over her writing. This suggests that maturity alone is not enough to provide a trajectory into academic communities of practice and previous learning experiences as well, as lack of clarity over learner expectations are relevant here.

But lack of maturity did appear very significant for some. Rachel, a younger student who had recently completed an arts degree, had unclear expectations about the academic transition and was marginalised even within the postgraduate learning community. She did not realise how much reading and preparation was expected, perhaps expecting to be 'taught' in an undergraduate style. She also appeared confused about the difference between policy and theory which suggests some epistemological naivety, and theorising may be a disposition underdeveloped in her disciplinary learning career.

Gemma also struggled to make sense of being self-reliant and was still very dependent on her tutor at the end of the year when articulating her dissertation topic. She did not view her tutor as someone with whom to negotiate, describing contact as 'bothering him'. She was also dismissive of his suggestion to work with a peer, indicating that she was still very tutor dependant. Both these students appeared to be insecure in their postgraduate learning communities and had little or no engagement with a disciplinary community of experts.

We have stressed how academic study cannot be understood in isolation from wider social and learning contexts. Although these students were relatively settled in their lives regarding work, social and family arrangements, the social context was still very relevant.

Managing a Learning Career

Here we explore how a group of part-time postgraduates managed their busy lives as part of their learning career transition over the year, including those factors which helped and conversely hindered the academic transition. One mostly positive theme that emerged was the resourcefulness in their planning and negotiation of study time. A second theme was negotiating bureaucracy and developing the mutual respect with tutors, that is essential for taking part in academic learning communities. Students here were less positive as unhelpful bureaucracy and lack of mutual respect clearly acted as hinderances, but there was also evidence of some helpful pedagogic practices.

Planning and Negotiation of Study Time

In keeping with reports from other studies of part-time mature students (Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b; Callender *et al.* 2006), these students were highly motivated, studying for career or personal goals or both, and they put a great deal of effort into planning their work, and they were prepared to make sacrifices to succeed. The longitudinal aspect of this study allows greater sensitivity to the issues. Planning and developing routines, creating flexible working spaces, making sacrifices and negotiating with partners, were all helpful, but there were also setbacks and emotional costs.

Although many students started off feeling unprepared, they persisted, and each one developed a routine that worked for them. For example, the first week was particularly testing for the MBA students, according to Marie,

In summary, I would say the first week was a test of survival and I felt very desolate midweek and contemplated going home. A couple of others whom I shared breaks with felt the same, but I was determined to carry on (mainly at this stage because my fees are being paid by my employer so I felt a great sense of duty)....

And I'm, you know, just a real perseverer. I give up on nothing unless it's an absolute dead horse, you know?

Rachel, with her fine art background, also had a shaky start and struggled to develop strategies for reading in advance of taught sessions. But she soon realised that Masters level expectations were different from her BA and began to plan in advance:

..we didn't have any seminars on our BA. And I didn't realise...that it was a good idea to do key readings *before* the seminar.

Many students were advance planners who started on assignments early. Gemma wrote in her journal:

I am also working on an essay which is not due till March but I think that working on it from now would be best instead of putting it off. I am hoping to have it completed by the end of February.

Marie described how her planning increased as the module progressed:

Over the past few weeks I have taken a different approach to the academic work load – trying to gather all sources of material well in advance.

Sara even planned for the intensity of study she felt she would experience:

I would be working until eight o'clock at night on my day job or much later. So in order to try and do something at night, the most I can do is possibly a little bit of background reading...

Others were last minute planners who did their preparation for classes the day before. For Christina this was because there wasn't enough time for her to get everything done:

It's difficult. If I don't get time at the weekend, then it really is, sort of, Monday evening, because our session's on Tuesday.

For Rodney this was because of his (perceived) capacity for working late, and having the time to recover at weekends, a practice that had presumably worked for him in the past:

Rodney: I'm able to, well, stay up late and do work (laughs).
Interviewer: Right, and then get up the next morning (laughs).
Rodney: And then sleep at the weekends.

The use of humour does suggest that there is an underlying discourse that this practice is not for the 'ideal' student.

But, planning was not always a key feature of a learning career. Lucinda was more of an opportunist and did not attempt to plan beyond a daily schedule. She had completed her degree part-time and continued a pattern of working by fitting it in where she could:

> I'm not able to timetable. I don't work like that anyway. So it's really just making sure that the way that I manage doing the reading and the work is the same…OK, I am going to do three hours today, and see where I get to, or I am going to have this piece, this finished up until this point today, and do it that way. But that's the way that I've always studied.

While her lack of longer–term planning might produce difficulties in a tightly managed programme, she recognised that learning cannot be completely controlled and that there are 'eureka moments' or crossing a threshold (Land and Meyer, 2006) into a new way of thinking:

> ...I have to go when the muse takes me. I mean the best three paragraphs I wrote was on the train on the way to work where for one minute, for one train journey, everything was clear.... it was just a sort of falling away of the scales..

Thus, the students settled into routines of organised or last minute working in continuation of their previously established working patterns, although some like Rachel and Marie were keen to change. There was evidence of being flexible too and even the advance planners had to take up opportunities where they could and create suitable working moments.

Flexible and Mobile Working

It was important for these learners to find appropriate learning spaces (Savin-Baden, 2008) where they could work and reflect. Sara summed up the importance of creating comfortable and quiet working spaces:

> I have provided myself with a number of spaces where I can work uninterrupted: in a sunny conservatory, so I don't feed as if I am missing summer, in a study where all my books are and can be left out undisturbed, and a warmer spare room where I can sit still on winters' nights without getting cold. Physical comfort and appropriate spaces that are conducive to work seem to help enormously.

Primary carers of children had even more to manage. For example, Marie who demonstrated how resourceful she could be using technology for mobile working when she had to drive her son to musical performances far from home:

> ...the biggest dictate I have, is that I still have a non-driving teenager... He's a musician and a performer, and so the last three weeks I've been out every night. Now, some of those nights I've taken my laptop, and my materials. I've got a dongle, so I can do wireless anywhere. I've got internet access wherever. And so I've been using

the opportunities of waiting for him to start something and finish it in his school a million miles from where we live to do some work.

Working, while travelling, was also common. Frances described her routine:

I have to manage my time more effectively, like I have a certain period on a Sunday afternoon when I do my background reading and my note taking, and then refresh myself on the tube before going to my lecture on a Wednesday.

The institution provided some online modules to help part-time learners. However, making modules even more flexible by going online was not considered favourably by Janet, even though she travelled to London from Gloucester to attend an evening session after work:

I was almost tempted to do an online module this term, just to see how it works.…
but I didn't, because I, for me, personally, the actual, having the focus of coming to the classes and taking that time out means that I am focusing on this and not everything else, and I probably wouldn't have the same level of discipline, if it was online and I could do it any time. And I wouldn't give over the same amount of time.

It is interesting that while flexibility in managing complex lives is consistent with commitment to study above, with e-learning the reverse has happened and the flexibility to learn at any time reduces commitment. It appears that a myth that e-learning does not need any contact with, and therefore commitment to, other humans persists (Njenga and Fourie, 2010). Creating the time and space also meant making sacrifices and all the students were clear about what they were prepared to give up in order to cope with work intensification.

"Darling this is your pension": Sacrifices and Rewards

Like part-time students in Kember's (1999; 2005) studies, these learners were all prepared to make significant sacrifices. They gave up combinations of holidays, weekends, social life and leisure pursuits. Negotiating time to study and agreeing these sacrifices with partners and family was important for the older mature students and partners were described as supportive. Lucinda gave an example:

...like Sunday morning wake up in bed and he (spouse) would say, 'What are you reading?' and I would say, 'Finance and Accounting for Non Experts' and he looked at me and said, 'In bed?' and I said, 'Darling this is your pension', and he said, 'Okay I will go and make a cup of tea.' But it is renegotiating that.

Sometimes these mature students with domestic responsibilities found that giving themselves study time enabled them to favourable renegotiate gendered domestic duties with their partners:

Angela: Also we can get out of things that you don't want to do.
Sara: Phil has done the shopping without me and he has made meals quite often and had responsibility for the dogs. Not all the time but when I am in this intense (periods when) I'm writing or reading.

However, there were some more unexpected sacrifices. Debbie, Gemma and Patricia opted to work part-time so that they could manage study time and were willing to sacrifice financial rewards. Debbie prioritised this chance to study over work by reducing her working hours and sacrificed all but the basics for her family:

> Yeah. I mean, I *could* work more and study less, but then it wouldn't be for me.... I won't get this opportunity again....It's getting your bills covered, with my husband...for the kids, getting the shopping done. That's it. So, there's no additional luxuries. Holidays, clothes, shoes...

Rodney preferred to reduce his effort at work to ensure that his home-life and work-life stayed balanced:

> I think, if I'm honest, there are times when there's just perhaps, you don't take your eye off the ball at school, but it's slightly sort of OK, I know what I'm doing, I can keep the class ticking over, without putting the same effort in that I would if I didn't have to write an assignment as well....... I think otherwise there would probably be no balance between home life and study. It wouldn't be home work and study, it would be work and study.

Rodney expected a balance between home life and study (he was not prepared to give up holidays) and so had to make reductions to his teaching load. He was confident that he could do this and did not express the guilt that the highly conscientious female students expressed over cutting corners, suggesting gender is significant.

Sacrifices were rewarded. Barnett (2007) has described a sense of well-being that students gain through study in a 'therapeutic university' and there was evidence of this. The intellectual stimulation they received from M level study was important for these students to justify these sacrifices as well as the extrinsic motivation of gaining career related qualification. The MBA students found the residential (study) weeks stimulating: Marie described a: 'feel good factor which has increased with each study week.'

However, a student feeling better about her/him self could be marred by uncertainty over what is 'good enough'. Lucinda viewed the pleasure of doing intellectual work as compensation for not having a social life, but underlying this was an ambivalence over an academic identity which she associated with hard work and pain rather than pleasure:

> ..but when I am locked away by myself in my study and I am writing or in the library, I get a real pleasure from that. A kind of intellectual – but I wonder if that is what is making me feel that it's not good enough because I am kind of enjoying it..... I don't know if it is a reverse psychology, I am obviously not working hard enough if I am enjoying doing it.

There also was some ambivalence over whether the effort and sacrifice was worth it from Gemma and Rachel, the younger students. Rachel commented:

> I wasn't sure what I was meant to be getting out of the readings. And I kind of, yeah, because I've just moved in to a new flat, and I had art work to do as well, and I had

my job to do and my work at Tate Modern. So I think I just thought, "Oh, what have I done? My life was quite happy before, and now I've just given myself this burden.

So, for these students identified in the previous section as those who remained outside of academic communities of practice, the confidence that they were doing the right thing in making sacrifices to study is quite fragile because of their uncertainty about being and becoming an academic. Even for those experienced in their learning careers and where their sacrifices were clearly rewarded, there could be hidden costs.

Setbacks and Emotional Costs

Given that these students were often stretched to the limit, as Marie put it: 'I've got every hour of every day filled, to the power of... could do another eight hours every day', it is surprising that unexpected interruptions to study such as illness and even a burglary did not create more than a temporary setback and these resourceful students apparently coped well. However, there was some evidence of potential emotional damage. Debbie described lowering her aim because of the range of reading she was required to do:

> In order to get a good result you need to read extensively......As I only have time to read a selection I'm struggling at the moment to make my choices....This has led to the realisation that I just need to pass this one and learn from it. I had high expectations of myself before I started but, now I realise what it entails, I've lowered my sights, which is regrettable but more realistic.

Sara described her neglect of her family as feeling guilty by under-performing in her feminine role:

> I have a basket full of washing, I have a dirty house, I have no food in the cupboard, I haven't visited my mother for months and I don't watch telly anymore. And my garden needs doing........ I just feel constantly guilty, but I'm sure that's the normal thing, isn't it?

Such a gender identity is neither congruent with academic nor with postgraduate learning communities, both of which have high expectations of time commitment.

At times, particularly when assessments were due, the pressure was clearly intense and exhausting for Rachel:

> The effort it's taken just to get from beginning to end has left me exhausted (probably yesterday's train journey hasn't helped) and I don't have any more mental energy to review it at the moment. I hope that in a week or two I'll be able to look at it afresh.

So, although these students appear to be tired but coping well, that is not to say that under the surface there are not some potentially damaging emotions and threats to well being.

There is an institutional process for asking for more time because of unforeseen circumstances or pressures and for some this was a better option than struggling on. Lucinda asked for a week's extension enabling her to meet the demands of the course, and Rodney

deferred an essay for several months to cope with a lack of helpful feedback as well as work pressures:

> The feedback..was…towards the ideas that I had...., as a learning tool (was) not very useful...... it was the first and only bit of feedback. So to the point that I have deferred my (assignment) because of various things, work pressures as well, but actually not really knowing what I was writing about.

Because these students made huge personal sacrifices to study, with a fine balance between the rewards and costs, and they made enormous efforts to manage their learning careers, they expected this to be recognised by the institution, its bureaucracy and its staff.

Negotiating Bureaucracy and Developing Mutual Respect

Wenger (1998) has explained how mutual engagement is a necessary condition for membership of communities of practice and we suggest that mutual respect underpins this engagement. Without mutual respect, equality in negotiation of community practices is not possible resulting in disaffection or exclusion of members or potential members. Both lecturers and students have busy pressured lives, but without mutual respect there cannot be equitable negotiation of bureaucratic practices which might alleviate these pressures.

Barnett (2011) has described how universities are many things at once: bureaucratic, entrepreneurial, professional and corporate. The institution in the study was clearly professional because of the nature of much postgraduate study, but it was also highly bureaucratic. Most of the time the students described the institution as well organised. Some programme designs and institutional arrangements helped them combine study and work. However, when the bureaucracy of the institution let them down they became easily dissatisfied and for some their opportunity for learning was affected. Negotiation of bureaucracy included: dealing with changes to schedules, synergy between work and study, and for some sharing the study load with peers.

Changes to Published Arrangements and Schedules

We gave examples previously of how students valued reading lists in advance. But, Debbie was inconvenienced when the published readings, which she had read assiduously, were not the ones needed for the taught sessions:

> So we had a whole handbook of reading that was given out and then, the first two sessions, that *wasn't* the reading,.... and we could go and find it, it was two e-journals..on the internet... and that was fine, but it felt a bit last minute, the planning, especially as we'd already done the reading that was in the handbook.

Sara and George agreed that changing readings was unacceptable as George put it:

> The presentation of reading materials as a pack seemed at first to be great. Statement – the course is well organised. A second pack then appeared modifying the first. No,not good organisation.

Sara also suggested that the difficult time they have of balancing work and study was not respected when changes were made to the Virtual Learning Environment:

> .. when it comes to having to proactively log in to the blackboard to find out what's changed, that shocked me, to find out that something had changed. Because, again, we've got the day job, we've got the emails making demands on us all the time. So (we have) to remember to go in and check something when you think you already know everything that you've got to do

Gemma's lack of clarity about the role of her dissertation supervisor has been mentioned in the previous section and tutorials were an area where other students felt that they were not being respected. Although handbooks provided information on how many hours of tutorials they can expect, they felt that tutors were not approachable. From the start Gemma did not have scheduled tutorials and she did not feel it was appropriate to approach her busy tutor:

> We are supposed to go to her but I just feel like, because mine is the Head of Department and I just feel that she is really busy and I don't want to disturb her and I haven't had anything really serious as yet, so if I see her I smile and that is it. She has offered to come up with a study plan but I just think when will we have time to do this.

Rachel had a scheduled tutorial but described her annoyance at it running late:

> We had tutorials last week to discuss our assignment. This was the first time we would speak one-to-one with our new tutors on this new module. We all had 15 minutes each but unfortunately by the time of my scheduled tutorial they were already running 45 minutes late. This meant I missed a discussion at a gallery that I would have used in my assignment!

Tutoring varied between modules. Rodney was critical that one of his teaching modules was not as well organised as his others:

> I've had barely any input from the course tutor and as a cohort we've had no time to discuss it (an assignment). Thankfully from my point of view I feel I received excellent guidance during my previous two modules and will be able to call on these experiences this time round.

But, while lecturers appear to take some bureaucratic arrangements quite lightly and changed them at will, they often stuck rigidly to published deadlines for draft assignments. Debbie and Marie for example, would have liked to submit drafts, but the timing of the deadline was not right for them. Debbie suggested in a group interview that a series of staggered deadlines might be mutually beneficial for students and tutors:

> ...because if I'm doing that reading I'm ready to write, now .. I'd like a little bit of feedback. And if you have a deadline that means everybody gets that in then, so for the one giving the feedback it's not that helpful either, because it could be more staggered.

The different approaches to rules indicate a lack of mutual respect but there were more serious and direct ways in which some teachers signalled a lack of respect for the learners. Being treated as what George described as a "naughty child arriving late" did not engender respect for busy lives and signals exclusion from an academic community of practice. Debbie agreed:

> I was terrified was because I arrived late, but only by like two minutes. And I got a proper, you know, and it just upset me a bit, because, well, I have just come from work. And that's why I was late, because the train was a bit late.

Once more the sacrifice she has made in combining work and study had not been respected.

Not all students had complaints and some were tolerant of changes in course arrangements and described good relationships with tutors. Sara pointed out that the requirements for a report they had to prepare for a group assessment was changed but was prepared to see the positive side to this:

> I also prepared some pre-work, to read and assess a report, to find that later this was changed to an alternative report to comment on. Fortunately a shorter document!

Patricia also took it lightly when the 'goal posts' for a peer assessment changed and disrupted her carefully managed learning career:

> Unfortunately, because I'm so organised, I had got mine done early, because I knew this was a busy time with my husband's fiftieth birthday. So I had it done, two weeks ago, this bit. And then she just changed the goalposts each week since (laughs). I'm just like, "You changed the essay." So, you know, it wasn't quite what was written down, it was changed slightly.

It sounds as though she was able to talk to her tutor and express her views as a member of the academic community. It seems likely that such mutually respectful relationships with tutors and lecturers and opportunities for negotiation and dialogue prevent irritation or feelings of disrespect when teaching arrangements are altered.

Janet was very clear that tutorials have to be negotiated and managed:

> The module leader last term was very good and he said you have to manage your supervisor and he said you have to negotiate with your supervisor and work out how you are going to engage and he said although the Institute has this rule of something like one or two hours for supervision per term that is just rubbish and you must negotiate with your supervisor what you need and have to find a way of working together because they have their way of working and you have yours and you have got to try and bring the two together.

Lack of mutual respect clearly signals that both parties do not belong to the same academic community of practice. Lack of mutual respect keeps established academic communities inaccessible for the most vulnerable members of a postgraduate learning community. It is no coincidence that Patricia, who has a strong academic identity and sense of belonging, did not

find changes of practice disrespectful and was able to challenge her tutor, although it might also be that this tutor was particularly approachable. By contrast those least confident in their academic status were not able either to negotiate with tutors or begin to gain a foothold in academic disciplinary communities.

But, structure is not always a hindrance for learners, particularly for those who are able to negotiate, and there were ways in which the bureaucratic arrangements at the programme level could help learners manage their learning career. These included creating synergy between work and study and enabling peer working to share the load.

Creating Synergy between Work and Study

Work-based or work-related learning is likely to be of value for postgraduates on professional courses (Lester and Costley, 2010) and there was some evidence of this. Although many students described having heavy workloads to be managed alongside study, there were opportunities for them to reduce the work intensification through creating synergies between work and study and linking practices in work communities and academic practices. Frances described the positive impact of study on work:

> ....I think it makes me think in a different way. And I'm already taking aspects of it and bringing it in to work. And I'm already using it for the basis of a project *within* work, as well....So I find it complements, in a way, and it's nice to have that release away from my work, as well.

Rachel described a synergy that was developed in the introduction to a new module:

> We started by each of us saying why we wanted to do this module- I was able to cite a very relevant project we are currently developing in my job for the reason why I wanted to do this module which made me feel very happy I was doing the course part time and able to contribute to my job and vice versa at the same time.

The result was that she felt more positive about her job as a gallery assistant:

> ... that's not that stimulating as a job, but being able to learn around the histories and around sort of the contested sites, the conflicting interests.., about representation and all these ideas of access..., yes, made it more enjoyable I guess, and made it that I'm bettering myself, fulfilling, yeah, things that my job wouldn't be able to fulfil.

Several students reported that they felt more secure in their knowledge at work, as Janet explained:

> That (having solid evidence) gives me sort of a feeling of more authority in what I say, I suppose, because I can recourse back to evidence and other sort of studies, to help me inform arguments. And we are doing quite a lot of development work at the moment, shaping organisation and developing new methods of review, so I find that it's definitely helping.

For some the synergy extended to assessments. Rodney described how he used his work in completing assignments and applying ideas from his essays to his work, although these ideas were not always taken up by others in his school:

> Last year both my modules I wrote assignments that were absolutely based around school, and issues at school, one was about the leadership structure, and yeah, so we've, the school's changed the leadership structure in light of the observations made. .....and the next one was about student voice, and again, you know, observations, working with the children this time, rather than the adults. And there is scope there, I mean I use it personally, setting up (inaudible) teams, but it's not really acted on yet by the school.

Sara even chose an assignment title because of its synergy with work, which is possible for the professional Masters she was undertaking:

> I've chosen this first assignment because it's what I'm having to do through work anyway........ so my day job is informing the assignments, but what I've done in order to illustrate the assignment has made me realise I need to do something slightly different in the day job....... I'm very pleased with this and am hoping for a similar reciprocity from the finance (next) module in January.

Her delight and appreciation of this synergy suggests that assignments which are designed to encourage synergy are respectful of working student's lives.

However, although many of the students had some financial support or time off to study, Angela felt that there was not enough of an employer investment for a course that contributed directly to her professional knowledge:

> But it (employment) has interfered...horribly with the work, because it makes me feel sad I can't devote the time I want to devote to it.. The overwhelming feeling is I just feel sad that I'm not ...absolutely drinking this in. I'm not doing it particularly for career purposes, I am doing it because I've got some significant gaps in my knowledge.

So, although she acknowledged the synergy between work and study, she was disappointed not to be able to reap the full benefits, with an underlying view that this is the employer's responsibility for not giving her sufficient time to study. Her position as a relatively junior employee on the fringes of working communities of practice, and possibly being a non-native English speaker, meant that she was not easily able to negotiate with her employers. Finally, there were some indications that sharing the study load in group tasks was helpful.

Sharing the Study Load

Data presented earlier suggested that some, mostly younger students, were unclear about the transition into the postgraduate learning community. The MBA students, however, were very clear that they were expected to engage with a learning community for assessed group tasks and that sharing the load with peers was helpful in managing their studies. Marie described

the group's negotiations which enabled members to contribute at the level they were able to and to dispel anxiety and guilt over not doing enough preparation:

> But then Jane from our syndicate group emailed the group didn't she? And said, 'this isn't making any sense to me guys, shall we split up the task?' ...and after a few emails Jane had decided which bits who should look at... I was so glad that once we got into the syndicate working.....that I didn't spend too much time on that (preparation) before. I did the right thing and it was only when Jane sent this email through that this terrible guilt of feeling inadequate fell away.

These experiences suggest that a strong position within the postgraduate learning community is a good one from which to negotiate the practices of academic communities which students like Maria were able to do. However, those with weaker participation in the postgraduate learning community found this more difficult.

These part-time mature learners were very resourceful and in the main managed the external factors which impinged on their learning careers successfully. The study supports Kember's (1999) findings on the coping strategies that part-timers develop and the sacrifices they are willing to make. The study also supports other general findings that part-time learners develop confidence as they progress within their learning communities (Li *et al.,* 2000). Unlike other reports and studies of part-timers, this suggests that part-time postgraduates' working and family responsibilities do not impede study.

However, there were some indications that coping might result in emotional damage and stress in the longer term and that this risk was gendered. Female students may make more of an emotional investment in domestic duties than males and that led to guilt and anxiety about not being able to meet expectations from both self and partners, as was reported by several of these students. Cutting corners at work was another approach to coping in a complex learning career.

In keeping with the literature, these part-time students complained about unsatisfactory bureaucratic arrangements (Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008a), but this study goes further to show that lack of respect, particularly given the enormous effort that these learners put in and the respect they showed the institution, is one of the underlying reasons why students are so vocal in this context. Lack of mutual respect is shown when the bureaucracy is given elevated status over learner needs, when readings or schedules are changed without consultation or negotiation with learners and as we will show in the next section, when learners are given negative or unhelpful feedback without any feed forward or recognition of effort.

For established academic students such as George, a lack of mutual respect is irritating and provokes complaint, but for those whose learner identities are more fragile, such as Lucinda, and the younger students Sara and Rachel, a lack of respect is more serious. A lack of mutual respect locks these learners into a subordinate and dependant position in relation to their tutors and excludes engagement with academic communities beyond the immediate learning community.

We have suggested that the main transition for these part-time postgraduates is to develop an identity as an independent and critical thinker who is on a trajectory towards membership of an academic community of practice, and mature students such as Patricia and Maria understood this well. Respect from the institution in which the learning takes place and from the academics within that institution is essential for such new identities to be consolidated.

But, a continuation of teacher-dependent learning careers at school, and possibly undergraduate study, inhibits those students from developing identities as competent, critical and autonomous postgraduate learners, leaving them vulnerable, described by many of the students as an "emotional rollercoaster" of an experience. This does not mean lengthy tutorials and creating dependency as George neatly expressed:

> Nobody's saying 'help me, help me', it's not that kind of dependency, it's actually a commitment to you as a learner I suppose.

Such a commitment could also be demonstrated by pedagogies which provide opportunities for synergy between work and study and encourage peer collaboration.

Effective Feedback and Assessment Careers

There is a growing literature on the key role that assessment has in learning at all levels and we would therefore expect assessment to be relevant for the transition to taught postgraduate study. The significance of formative feedback in higher education has been quite widely discussed (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Carless, *et al*, 2010) and this study provides some useful further evidence on effective practice in both giving and receiving feedback which is particularly applicable to postgraduates. Key themes discussed below are: the role of dialogue in feedback, the usability of formative feedback and self-monitoring of progress. We explored above how critiquing the work of others is an important academic practice for postgraduate students. We then discussed the importance of mutual respect for legitimising participation in disciplinary learning communities. These issues are also pertinent to assessment for postgraduate students. We will suggest in the next section how both over-critical feedback and poor critical feedback signal a lack of mutual respect and can de-legitimise participation in disciplinary learning communities for the more vulnerable learners.

We also discussed previously how learners bring learning dispositions and practices from their past into new learning communities, using the terms *learning* and *assessment careers* to capture a longitudinal perspective. While these learners mostly progressed their learning careers by engaging in new academic practices, their assessment careers were problematic and we will argue that this is a consequence of assessment regimes that are widespread in taught postgraduate education. Postgraduate assessment has more in common with undergraduate assessment, with its dominance of competitive grades over formative assessment (Gibbs, 2006), than with doctoral assessment which is largely formative and based on a final threshold pass rather than a grade. In the final section, we will explore the idea of sustainable assessment (Hounsell, 2007; Carless *et al*, 2010) and suggest new ways, such as the use of ipsative assessment, to take this forward.

Dialogue with Peers and Tutors

A key principle of effective feedback is that is must be understood by learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). There is evidence that dialogue with both tutors and peers can help learners interpret feedback (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010; Handley *et al.,* 2007). In the study, dialogue featured in connection with peer feedback, but not with feedback from assessors, suggesting that dialogue with peers occurred more frequently than dialogue with tutors perhaps because as part-time students they would have little informal or 'corridor' contact with tutors.

For example, Christina described helpful dialogic peer feedback:

> So what we did was work in some groups and read each other's answers, and then we gave, it was constructive feedback, in terms of we had to ask each other questions on what we'd written. So it wasn't judgemental, it was just asking each other questions so we could come up with other areas that we might include or explore in more detail.

But, Patricia was critical of the peer questioning Christina referred to as not 'judgemental' because it did not provide evaluative feedback:

> One week we read each others' essays and asked provocative questions but were not allowed to give evaluative feedback. My group did not find this restriction to be helpful at all as they said they came away with little information about whether they were on the right lines or not.

 'Being on the right lines', as mentioned by several students in the study, means having access to a disciplinary community and its knowledges and practices, as well as peer learning communities. Yet, the implication here is that only lecturers are allowed to make judgements about the quality of work. This de-legitimises Patricia's academic identity as a member of the disciplinary community and not surprisingly upsets her.

The impact of feedback depends not only on learners' opportunities for dialogue, but also on how well constructed the feedback is, otherwise dialogue might be ineffective. In the study, formative feedback from lecturers was nearly always described as written comments on draft assignments. The usability and value of the feedback and developmental comments (feed forward) was variable and worth exploring in more detail. The balance between task-specific and generic comments was significant in this context of few opportunities for dialogue with assessors to assist with the interpretation of feedback.

Usability of Feedback and Feed-Forward

Hattie and Timperley (2007) identify three types of feedback: feedback on goals, feedback on the learner's current position and feed forward which guides the learner on what to do next. Feed forward can be task-specific, in that the comments can be specific to a piece of work, or generic and applicable to other pieces of work, or a combination of both.

Feedback is not only given, it must also be received and there are many reasons why feedback might not be received, or might be received but dismissed, which might relate to

organisational arrangements, timing, tone and clarity. Effective feedback will be useable to the recipient if it can inform future actions. We are suggesting here that the relationship between generic and task-specific feedback influences the clarity and therefore the usability of the feedback.

Making Links between Task Specific and Generic Feedback

Marie valued a distinction between task specific and generic feedback because she could apply it to later assignments.

> My feedback was it had two parts that I read, one was the specific feedback on that piece of work and then the other was there was some general, well, I read them as general pointers for subsequent work, so that was very helpful.

She explained how she converted the task-specific feedback into generic feed forward to change her approach to the next assignment:

> And so the first feedback (on a draft of the first assignment) had indicated that…these weren't the words that we used, but kind of there were some bits that looked a bit more random, and they looked random because I'd moved things around them and cut them, and then I didn't leave myself enough time to either remove the random thing or to try and merge it more into what had been written.... So the second time I started the editing process, I could have carried on writing, and enjoyed doing so, but I stopped myself and started editing.

Thus, useable feedback addresses, or can be interpreted as addressing, both immediate and longer term goals.

Debbie's description of helpful feed forward from tutors that was both task specific on how to improve the assignment – by underlining the weaknesses - and generic feedback in its use of 'voice', supports this:

> (The feedback) was things like underlining bits which you could do more of, so hearing your voice more...

But, when there was a strong emphasis on task-specific comments without generic guidance, others were not able to take a longer-term view.

Task-Specific Feedback without Generic Guidance

Highly task-specific feed forward can be unhelpful for several reasons. Firstly, it is readily interpreted as a corrective for a specific piece of work rather than helpful for developing practice. Lucinda found suggestions for additional material to put in a word limited essay confusing without any guidance on how to manage the quantity of material:

> But the feedback on the ... essay was such that, even though I was at word limit, kept suggesting more stuff to put in.....because I was thinking – you are saying this is fine,

....but then you are giving me more stuff to put in without telling me what to take out. Now, that can prove quite challenging.

Secondly, we can also see how this kind of very specific feedback produces tutor dependency rather than learner autonomy. Lucinda is looking to her tutor to tell her what to include in her essay and not being encouraged to make her own decisions and rise to the challenge. She, like others, was seeking reassurance, rather than advice for her learning:

I just want him to see the outline to make sure that I haven't either gone off, a) completely at a tangent, or b) it's not just completely lame.

Finally, it is also possible that feedback viewed as task-specific and for immediate action will be ignored. Handley *et al.* (2007*)* have argued that many undergraduates disregard feedback unless it is very carefully integrated into the teaching programme. There was evidence that some postgraduate students continue to ignore feedback. Angela viewed formative feedback on drafts as a short-term and therefore optional extra:

I always work close to deadlines, and I know the draft deadline is an artificial deadline..... As I understand it we don't have to get the feedback, it's something the course offers as a nice addition.

She was confident that she did not need it because she had worked close to deadlines in previous assessment careers, also at postgraduate level.

But assessment careers can shift. At first, Debbie also interpreted feedback as being task specific and she did not need to see the summative feedback of her first assignment to inform the next because of the second assignment question:

...feels as though it has a different emphasis than the first question that I chose which I had to read very widely to understand. As a consequence I didn't feel I needed to see the feedback and grade from the first assignment in order to inform writing the next.

But, much later in the year she became aware of transferable generic study skills in her self-assessment:

All in all I think this module was so successful for me because of its long term effects. I feel that I can transfer some of the things that I learned about my own learning (e.g. how I put of (off) the writing part because I lack confidence) and make some changes that will effect (sic) how I approach the next assignment (start earlier regardless if I feel that my ideas are not fully formed)....

This suggest that, although Debbie eventually realised that she could turn task-specific comments into longer-term generic ones, she might have benefitted from a combination of generic and task-specific feedback early on.

Generic Feedback without Context

While over-emphasis on task-specific feedback is not always useable, generic feedback without some context is also not helpful. Gemma suggests that giving generic feedback to the whole cohort is not useful:

> ..(feedback) for the whole (group of) people doing the course, just saying stuff like critique, make sure you cite properly. That doesn't help me.…because how I was doing the plan... Introduction I was going to say I read this, this is what I thought of them ... and I never got any feedback on that, so I was never knowing .. if it was the right thing to do, or the right structure.

An overview of Masters' requirements for critiquing and citing was not helpful: she has heard this already. She wanted task specific guidance on structuring the essay and she did not have an opportunity for dialogue with her teacher. Again the phrase 'right thing to do' appears, indicating that this experience did not help her gain insight into the practices of the disciplinary community which knows what is 'right'. This confirms Hughes *et al* (2010) proposal that to be helpful, generic feed forward needs to be supported by task-specific examples and vice versa, to encourage a long-term impact on assessment careers, and this might be of particular relevance for part-time students whose opportunities for informal dialogue with tutors is limited.

Self-Assessment: Grade Dependency and Ipsative Feedback

Students with successful assessment careers such as Maria were able to apply feedback to self-assess, but in a stagnating assessment career a learner will repeat behaviours from the past that are not helpful for learner autonomy. For example, Lucinda and several others looked to their teachers to provide 'right' answers. Hughes (2010) argues that an ipsative approach to assessment (assessment based on a comparison with a previous performance) makes progress more visible and assists with self-assessment. However, in the study there was little evidence that students received any ipsative feedback from tutors on their progress and so they relied on self-assessment and grades.

Self-Assessment

Some students were able to self-assess their progress using both grades and feedback, for example Janet wrote:

> The first essay felt like climbing a mountain, and was a real struggle. The second was hardly a walk in the park, but I felt more confident tackling it, as I didn't feel quite as 'in the dark' as I had the first time. I feel the second essay was more successful than the first (although the grade I received for both was the same). The assessment grade and feedback help to confirm my own self-assessment.

The aside in brackets hints that she might have expected a grade improvement but overall it is her own judgement that the second essay was more successful than the first that counts.

Rachel took this a step further and was highly critical of grade dependency, and had

previously found the use of grades disempowering in her first degree:

> I think it's a thing that comes from a fine art BA, that all the time you are working and all the time you are ....theory writing ....when you see the tutors once, and then they give you a grade. I think it kind of disempowers you a bit, and I don't feel that, like, in control of it. …It (the MA) sort of feels like you don't really care what grade you get at the end of it, because actually you've done the best that you can, it doesn't actually matter because it's such a vocational (course)…and like it's really helping me in loads of other ways, it's not like being at school anymore, where it all matters about the grade.

There is evidence here of a shift in her learning disposition away from the extrinsic motivation of school and her first degree, to Masters study, where doing one's best and tangible benefits, such as vocational benefits, are more important. However, others who were less confident about self-assessment continued using grades as an indication of progress and were often uncertain about their progress.

Grade Dependency, Limited Self-Assessment and Ipsative Feedback

Lucinda described not being able to judge her own work in a continuation from her undergraduate studies:

> Even at undergraduate I would put an essay in thinking, you know, oh that's rubbish, and it would come back with over ninety percent, or I'd put something in thinking that's really good, and it would come back sixty four. I can't judge.

Sometimes lack of self-assessment was because feedback was unhelpful. Gemma stated that minimal feedback on her draft work did not help her assess her position and she therefore needed to wait for her grade:

> ....there was like one point about something so I changed that, so that was good. But it is just (not) getting any idea of the standard at all. So that (an assignment) has gone in now so now we should get it back pretty soon, so I .. must .. wait and see what the actual number is or whatever. Which is a shame that I have had to wait until that stage to feel "right now I know what stage I am at".

Sara felt that even by the end of the year she had not received enough ipsative information:

> I only have one grade on which to base my ability and nothing on which to demonstrate progress.

Even Rachel, who claimed to be not grade dependant, described uncertainty over her progress and complacency setting in after initial progress, because she still had another year (dissertation) to improve further:

> I don't know if there's that much upwards progression, because I think the first essay I had to write I got so scared, and I thought it was going to be so awful, but I made this massive leap in my academic writing. But now it's tailed off a bit, and I'm kind of a

bit more comfortable, and actually I'm not sure that I am going upwards in that sense of progression, or if I'm just sat at the end of my first year knowing I've got another year to do.

Assessment in higher education has a strongly summative function and the potential for using assessment for learning is under-developed in undergraduate education (Gibbs, 2006). This suggests that the same might be true for postgraduate study and grade dependency continues for many students because information on progress is lacking. A more ipsative approach to assessment where progression rather than attainment is emphasised might help students move away from dependency on grades, develop self-assessment and discourage reaching threshold standards and then levelling off, as Rachel described above.

Assessment is potentially a highly emotional part of a learning career because of the high stakes attached to it and the performative judgements which are made. Current assessment regimes often have negative effects on learners' self-esteem (Broadfoot, 1996), and this in turn means students are poorly equipped to self-assess, encouraging continued tutor dependency in a vicious circle. Self-confidence and mutual respect were particularly pertinent themes emerging from the study and we suggest that these are the key to breaking out of negative assessment careers.

Identity, Self-Esteem and Respect

Students in this study were not surprisingly pleased with good grades but did not mention any negative impacts of low, or lower than expected, grades, perhaps because they had passed all their assignments to date. However, feedback had a significant influence on self-esteem. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that giving praise or encouragement is not the most effective function of feedback as it does not promote action. But, we might expect critical feedback to promote action at this level and therefore have a positive impact, especially since critique is fundamental to postgraduate work. Interestingly, both highly critical and very uncritical feedback both had negative effects.

Highly Critical Feedback

Lucinda was unhappy that a piece of summative feedback was critical for two reasons: firstly because of the effort she had made to submit the work, and secondly because it did not build upon positive formative feedback she had received from another tutor:

> I mean, there was long explanations as to why it was rubbish .. but I was tired, I was so pleased I had got it in on time, because I had failed last time....I'd put a lot of emotional investment into this. ..I can't just coast along and hope that I get enough to pass. This course has taken over my life in a way that I never anticipated it would. So when you put it in and you think – actually, I've gone for a really interested approach here – and what made it more difficult is that whilst my tutor had been ill I had discussed some of my ideas with another tutor who said they were great.

She had invested emotionally in the essay so excessive critical feedback that did not acknowledge effort was demotivating. The inconsistent feedback from two tutors made the negative impact worse.

Marie recounted another example of critique which does not recognise effort:

> ..that was a presentation where I think we all got harsh feedback, (tutor Y) said we'd just flopped over the line. I don't think he'll say that again about our presentations, because we were all totally demotivated. Because we'd all done the best we could at the time, we were all new, doing it for the first time.

Again lack of recognition of group effort was de-motivating, but Marie also recognised that the tutor might have learnt from the mistake of being over-critical. She sees her tutor as a peer in an academic learning community consistent with her confident academic identity as a member. Lucinda, by contrast, continued a more tutor-dependant learning career and used very negative language: she 'failed' to get work in on time. Thus critical feedback might have differential effects on learners.

Uncritical or Minimal Feedback

Quantity of feedback impressed some students. Rachel, for example, wrote in her diary, the following:

> I was really impressed by the amount of feedback written at around 360 words, as it seemed as though the lecturers had put a lot of time and effort into reading and writing comments.

Evidence of lecturers respecting students by putting in time and effort seems to the reason for this. It follows that uncritical or minimal feedback demonstrates a lack of respect, and for her first essay she was much less satisfied with the feedback, even thought it was positive:

> Whilst trying to rewrite my draft for the 12 January deadline I realised the feedback I was initially pleased with was not very useful as it only highlighted one very minor area for improvement. As this was my first Masters level essay I very much doubt that there was only one error.

If praise does not provoke action then this case shows that a lack of critique (or implied praise) is similarly not useful. But, the further implication above is that the marker has not bothered to find other 'errors' and give feed forward. Thus, uncritical feedback is not merely neutral, it also implies a lack of respect for the learner, even if the feedback is superficially pleasing.

We have already discussed how learners who are not respected by tutors are positioned as non-members of an academic community and for some this reinforces low academic self-esteem and tutor dependency. Feedback that signals to students that they are not respected therefore undermines learner autonomy. However, opportunities to negotiate with tutors about assessment related issues did signify mutual respect and could be very positive.

Opportunities for Negotiation of Bureaucracy with Tutors

As mentioned earlier, opportunities for dialogue with tutors over assessment were rare. Learners understood that time for dialogue with tutors is tight, and Rachel described how tutors were responsive to learner needs in re-negotiating tutorial time:

> However the tutorial was really useful, even though what they were attempting to cover was no way achievable in 15 minutes so I can see how they got behind. Because of this for the next tutorials we are having the tutors have requested we email in a revised plan so they can look at it before hand and use the time we have to answer questions and give specific feedback as opposed to having the time used up by us presenting to them. I'm really pleased with this progression.

While this is described by tutor dependent Rachel as an initiative coming from the tutor, it seems likely that other students expressing their dissatisfaction with the 15 minutes slots might have been influential. In any case this 'progression' signals respect for the learners from tutors who listen to learners.

By contrast, George was irritated when bureaucracy was presented by the teacher as non-negotiable, in this case concerning the statement of student entitlement to having feedback on one draft:

> The message needs to be, "We are here to support and help you." And then, if you hand in three or four drafts, it's "Hang on a minute, you need to be doing this yourself." The opening remark on this was, "I will only be able to look at one draft," which I thought was a bit of a negative way of going about it.

Such students appreciate the limitations of bureaucracy, but it is the respectful manner in which rules are presented as being beneficial to learners which matters to them.

Sustainable Assessment

The ability to self-assess using feedback and dialogue was more developed in some of the postgraduate students in the study than others. While this can be explained by learners being in different positions in their assessment careers, the assessment regime also contributed to facilitation, or lack of facilitation, of learner autonomy. In other words, the sustainability of assessment practice is influential on assessment careers. Carless *et al* (2010) have termed 'sustainable feedback' as: 'dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate on future tasks.' (p. 3). Sustainable practices shift the onus *from* the tutor to deliver feedback *to* the student to self-regulate their work. They argue that multi-stage feedback is essential for sustainability and a two-stage assessment process involving a draft and a final assessment, which was common practice in the study, is an example of this. Other ways to promote sustainable feedback include involving students in dialogues about learning and stimulating students to develop the dispositions of monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Peer feedback on oral presentations or using technologies such as discussion boards are good examples of self-evaluation.

There was some evidence of sustainable feedback practice in the study. Confident students who received useful feedback on draft pieces of work such as Marie, Debbie and Patricia were able to use that feedback to make longer-term improvements. Marie clearly described how the formative feedback helped her with editing her writing, and her experience is of sustainable feedback.

Sustainable feedback also needs to combine task-specific and generic aspects. Generic feedback focuses the attention on making improvements to future assignments rather than on the failings of the existing one and therefore appears to fit the criteria for sustainability, but not if it is too broad and unspecific as described by Gemma. She also needed a focus on her current assignment but was not able to enter into dialogue about this because of her weak position in her academic community of practice, or being a part-timer, or both. Equally problematic is feedback which is only at the task level. This discourages sustainability because the focus is on short-term improvements for a particular piece of work. Such task-specific feedback has remedial value if the learner has another opportunity to submit the work, but to be sustainable learners clear guidance on future actions is needed. Students like Angela who work close to deadlines and who do not therefore value short-term formative feedback may also be very self-reliant, but she and others might also benefit from a cumulative view of assessment.

Carless *et al.* (2010) propose that another condition for sustainability is dialogue. Although there were some examples of useful dialogue with peers there was little evidence of dialogue with tutors. This is particularly problematic when, as evidenced in the study, formative feedback is either very task-specific or too generalised. Without dialogue learners do not have the opportunity to fill in the gaps in the feedback they receive.

The study suggests some further criteria for sustainable assessment. Firstly, sustainable feedback must build self-esteem and not undermine confidence. Lucinda described how feedback did not help her confidence when it emphasised what was missing without guidance on editing or when there was excessive critique. Overly-critical feedback reinforces a low sense of self-worth for those who hold or have held the view that failure is indicative of lack of ability and not a need for development (Dweck, 1999). The findings indicate that either highly critical or uncritical feedback can reinforce any previous negative experiences in an assessment career and reduce sustainablility.

Secondly, the study indicates that sustainable feedback depends on mutual respect which gives learners permission to engage with academic practices in disciplinary academic communities. An example is respecting learners' judgements of standards by mutual engagement with grading practices such as use of peer or self-assessment. Another could be negotiation with learners over the bureaucratic arrangements that surround assessment. Learners may be participating in peer learning and assessment communities, but without such engagement with disciplinary communities they remain dependent on grades or comments from tutors to assure them that they are reaching the standard or 'doing the right thing'.

Finally, the study provides evidence for an argument that sustainable feedback practice is not encouraged in current criteria-referenced assessment regimes which focus on outcomes rather than progress. The elevation of summative over formative assessment discourages the sustainability of feedback. Students who focus on marks or those who receive unhelpful

feedback are not being given information about the progress they are making. A two stage assessment process is probably not enough for sustainability as some students are not receptive to short-term feedback. A better solution is to introduce ipsative assessment (Hughes, 2010) which could help students identify progress over several modules or assessments throughout the programme. Ipsative assessment also encourages development of self-esteem by diminishing the importance of high grades and a focus on progress signals respect for the learner's effort.

It could be argued that the taught postgraduate assessment scheme in the study worked well for most of the participants and that what is needed is wider sharing of existing good practice. However, this study has shown that for the vulnerable students who do not feel that they have a legitimate place in an academic community of practice, current outcomes focussed regimes assessment serve to keep these students as teacher-dependant outsiders and does little to prepare them for becoming independent researchers either for a dissertation or for future doctoral study. A prerequisite for sustainable assessment is that it is ipsative, or at least has an ipsative component, to develop learner autonomy and thus legitimise peripheral membership for all.

Rethinking Assessment Regimes for Sustainable Learning Careers

This strand of the research has illustrated how assessment emerges as a problematic area in Masters level study. Although assessment is an integral part of learning and it could be argued that the term 'learning career' implies assessment as well as teaching and learning, the distinct concept of *an assessment career* is useful. This is because for many students, managing a sustainable assessment career of self-reliance appears not to be compatible with summative higher education assessment regimes.

Assessment is also an important process for making respect for learners' emotional and intellectual efforts visible and helping them become more autonomous thinkers who are becoming peripheral, but legitimate, members of an academic disciplinary community. But, assessment regimes which prioritise summative over formative assessment, short-term over longer-term goals and thus encourage the unsustainable dispositions of tutor dependency and low self-esteem from previous learning, all serve to inhibit membership. The concern these students have about 'being on the right lines' indicates that they believe that the academic community to which they aspire has some rigid requirements for membership which excludes their identities as dependant novices. Yet at the same time the expectations for Masters level study in this discipline are *independent thought* and *autonomous working*. Wenger sums this up as a paradox for education:

> ..if one needs an identity of participation in order to learn, yet needs to learn in order to acquire an identity of participation, then there seems to be no where to start. (p.277)

Assessment appears as fraught with difficulties and contradictions at postgraduate level as it is at undergraduate level and may need a radical rethink to address the paradox. A shift towards ipsative assessment provides one possible solution.

The participants in the part-time student study itemised a range of transitional experiences to Masters-level study, and the variety of backgrounds and previous experiences which they

brought to study indicated that part-time postgraduate students are far from being a homogenous or predictable body. These postgraduate learners are experienced and do not need individually targeted interventions to help them with their transition to part-time postgraduate study: this is because it undermines the skills they have and the sacrifices they make. Nevertheless, each of the three areas explored in this study lend themselves to recommendations for improving practice to ensure that all students can become legitimate participants in their disciplinary communities.

Clarification of the Academic Transition

The study has suggested how learners' lack of clarity about Masters-level expectations illustrates at a deeper level the ambiguity over the practices of postgraduate study. A shift from teacher dependency towards a more negotiated curriculum where the students move towards autonomy and independence is implicit at this level, but not necessarily clear to all learners, many of whom continue to depend on grades and reassurance from experts. There is also confusion over the autonomous practices necessary for selectivity in reading and writing and the meaning of the key attribute of *critical thinking*. By the dissertation stage learners should be able to select a topic and study relatively independently. Learner autonomy is in tension with outcomes-led curricula that are required by the Quality Assurance Agency, and acknowledging this tension helps learners. The dissertation provides a particularly challenging transition for learners who are taking modules with strongly defined content and assessments, and again this could be made explicit.

Expectations of academic writing, critical thinking, and autonomous learning are not uniformly understood by the academic staff, teaching at this level. Although handbooks and documentation make clear statements about the 'level', this does not guarantee that either the lecturers agree on the standards or that the learners can interpret these. A key way in which standards are articulated is through the setting and marking of assessments and the giving of dialogic feedback (Sadler, 2005; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, the extent to which lecturers engage in discussion with colleagues or academic leaders over the meaning of *Masters-level* is not well understood.

Reducing pressure: what institutions can do to help with management of learning careers

While institutions offer help for students who are not coping with the pressure through extensions to deadlines and time out for illness, institutions may want to reconsider the length of time for postgraduate study by offering three year instead of two year Masters' programmes. This would help to reduce the risks of long term stress and coping in other aspects of life. Although most of the participants did receive some dispensation from their employer, this was minimal, and another approach, suggested by Tait (2003), is to encourage greater investment in postgraduate study from employers; although this is an unrealistic solution in the current economic climate.

Generating synergy between work and study is a more realistic solution to reducing the burden on working part-time students. There are personal and vocational benefits of linking higher learning to work experience (Moreland, 2005). While some postgraduate study consists of 'license to practice' programmes, often focussed on employment skills (Lester and Costly, 2010), we would expect work-based learning to feature strongly in all professional

programmes to encourage critical reflection on practice and career development. However, in the study, although learners were encouraged to draw on their work experiences, there was little evidence of explicit links being made between study and work in the formal assessment process. A few students reported that being able to use work-related activity as part of their learning helped, and an effective approach to reducing the pressure would be to design assessments that encourage synergy between work and study.

Improving Feedback

Formative feedback and feed forward were helpful for many students, but there was little evidence of the provision of sustainable feedback to support their sense of self-reliance, as recommended by Carless *et al* (2010). The two-stage assessment process was useful for some, but a lack of endorsement of self or peer assessment and little or no ipsative feedback meant that other learners remained tutor-dependent.

There are several possible ways of promoting sustainable feedback. Firstly, some feedback that learners received proved not to be useful because there was a lack of clarity over its purpose for improving the current piece of work, for applications in the future, or both. Generic and task-related feedback need to be explicitly combined to make the feedback clear and to stimulate both short and longer term responses. Secondly, dialogue with peers about assessment was helpful and could be integrated into inclusive pedagogies. Dialogue over feedback with tutors was rarely mentioned and again this could be explicitly integrated into teaching and learning approaches rather than restricted to often pressurised tutorial time. Part-time students particularly benefit from formalised opportunities for dialogue. Thirdly, some feedback was either too critical and de-motivating or uncritical and indicative of a lack of care and respect. Feedback which encourages self-critique but avoids negative self-esteem is important. However, these models of good practice might be viewed as idealistic and are unlikely to be effective if they do not fit readily into current practice.

Encouraging Mutual Respect

Teachers may intend to give their learners respect but their actions within bureaucratic learning, teaching and assessment regimes signals otherwise. Awareness of this problem is a first step towards mutual respect. There are three ways in which respect can be given to learners. Firstly, respect can be demonstrated through providing opportunities for negotiation between learners and lecturers. Examples of this include: negotiation and dialogue with learners over assessment processes such as formative deadlines. Practices which disregard learners' perspectives such as providing materials or readings late or lack of availability of tutors should be avoided.

A second way of demonstrating respect to learners is to value the contributions of peers. While many of these learners valued working with peers, some experienced mature students also valued expert input. Expert input stimulated such students, but not at the expense of peer expertise. However, for students who have neither developed confidence in their own expertise as academics, nor confidence in peer support, the value of peer collaboration needs to be made explicit, with plenty of opportunities for, and guidance on, critically evaluating the work of peers and experts alike. Finally, a careful examination of how feedback is provided and how this conveys respect or lack of respect for learners provides some

suggestions for interventions. Although, students associate detailed and lengthy feedback with respect, this encourages dependency and it might be more useful for learners to be shown respect for their personal learning and efforts through the provision of ipsative feedback (Hughes, 2010).

Ipsative assessment and challenging predominantly summative assessment regimes

Dependence on grades for self-assessment is a barrier to autonomous learning. We have argued that current assessment practices on these programmes are self-contradictory because a reliance on grades rather than self or peer assessment means learners remain dependent on assessors rather than being autonomous. A grade given by the assessor reinforces the idea that the learner is subordinate and dependent, and this acts to prevent postgraduate learning community members from identifying with the broader community of independent scholars.

Ipsative assessment which focuses on long-term learning and progression, rather than outcomes and meeting criteria, has not been given much attention in higher education. An ipsative approach to recognise effort is particularly important when students are inexperienced at self-assessment and/or have not reached a high standard. Ipsative feedback also helps those who are not confident about assessing their own progress especially early on in a course. A combination of ipsative feedback with feed forward is likely to be more motivating than feedback which is heavily weighted towards task specific comments on how to meet the standards and criteria. Ipsative feedback encourages mutual respect by valuing the effort and progress of the many rather than the highest attainment of the few.

This longitudinal study of a year in the learning careers of part-time postgraduates has provided some rich data on the different experiences of academic transitions. The findings demonstrate that these learners are mostly very resourceful and successful; and it is the uncertainty over academic practices at Masters level, lack of mutual respect and inadequate feedback, which can undermine confidence, and prevent learning careers from advancing. Learners bring learning dispositions with them, and the younger mature students who have recently experienced tutor-dependent undergraduate study found it more difficult to deal with the ambiguities of taught postgraduate study, than older mature students who had professional experiences and resources to draw upon, and who were more confident about engaging in new learning communities; and this encouraged their academic identities to flourish.

The following provides a checklist of good practices:

- Higher education providers should not attempt to micromanage learner transitions for part-time postgraduates. However, reducing the pressures by extending study time, or designing assessments to incorporate work-related projects, or critiques of practice to provide greater synergy between work and study, is advisable.

- Teachers and curriculum designers should provide clarity over M-level expectations of learner autonomy, underlying epistemologies and critical thinking, and indicate the level expected initially and the degree of progression expected throughout the course. This may create tensions with Quality Assurance agencies over the rigidity of curriculum design.

- Teachers should give full respect for effort and sacrifices: changing arrangements without negotiation, or an over-emphasis on bureaucratic requirements, does not lead to mutual respect.

- Improvements in feedback strategies and approaches to give more information on progress (i.e. ipsative feedback) and to make it explicit how individuals can move through M-level study towards autonomy and self assessment (i.e. sustainable feedback) will assist motivation and confidence by demonstrating respect, in particular for less experienced learners.

- While detailed feedback signals respect, excessive critical feedback may be counterproductive and not useful. Critical feedback needs to be incorporated into ipsative feedback and feed forward processes, so that learners can move on in their assessment careers. The balance between generic and task specific feedback also needs careful consideration.

- Collaborative working with peers can be valuable in helping learners to appreciate a wide range of perspectives and find their own voices. However, this needs to be facilitated by credible pedagogic experts.

Widening Participation Transitions

Widening access to and participation in higher education has become a central policy theme nationally and globally. In England, Widening Participation policy has attempted to address the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education (DfES, 2003a; 2003b). The landscape of higher education has undergone change and transformation partly as a result of the diversification of higher education, with new student constituencies and identities emerging and posing specific challenges for higher education practices. However, persistent patterns of under-representation continue to perplex policy-makers and practitioners, raising questions about current strategies, policies and approaches to widening participation.

Widening Participation policy has been most concerned with undergraduate level study. Postgraduate level study is often seen as beyond the concerns of policy and practice. This is partly due to notions of 'standards' and 'quality' and the privileging of the 'academic' in postgraduate levels of study. In policy documents and media coverage, Widening Participation has been continually juxtaposed with anxieties of the lowering of standards. Hence, a key strategy of Widening Participation has been to create new forms of higher education. This has largely been the creation of two-year, work-based Foundation degrees. Masters degrees and doctoral programmes are constructed as primarily academic spaces (although there are professional postgraduate courses, including for example the EdD) where concerns about Widening Participation are seen as less relevant. Additionally there is an assumption that the 'Widening Participation student' becomes transformed through the process of participating in undergraduate level courses into a different kind of subject and participant. By the time the Widening Participation student graduates with a BA honours degree, it is assumed that she or he will be reconstituted as 'the same' as the 'standard' or 'traditional' student. It has been argued that Widening Participation in (undergraduate) higher

education is about changing working-class individuals into middle-class subjects and this upholds the view that access to postgraduate level study is irrelevant to the Widening Participation project (Archer and Leathwood, 2003).

This is framed by post-structural theories of power, difference and subjectivity to deconstruct the complex workings of inequalities and misrecognitions, which shape students' transitions, experiences and identities. Such perspectives are combined with the body of work that develops an understanding of academic literacy as social practice, to emphasise the centrality of methodological concerns in understanding literacy practices and students' experiences of these. In drawing on post-structural concepts of subjectivity, we want to highlight relations of power, difference and inequality in transitions and processes of becoming a postgraduate student. Constituted through discourse and what Judith Butler calls 'performativity', subjectivity disrupts notions of identity as fixed and stable. Rather identity is made and remade through action and discourse.

> Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make. … [g]enerally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares (Butler 1993: 107).

Subjectivity highlights the relational, discursive and embodied processes of identity formation; of becoming recognized and included as a viable subject. This helps to rethink transition as a linear process of moving from one context or position to another. Transitions include significant and defining moments of change, and sometimes discomfort and disruption, in which a subject takes up a different positioning from before. However, transitions are also tied to everyday and ongoing processes of becoming, which are less explicit and identifiable, in which subjects move across and between fluid and contradictory contexts, relations and positions. Transitions are embedded in discursive practices and ways of doing as well as ways of being and this is always tied to complex relations of power and embodied intersections of difference. Transitions thus are complex processes of change, resistance, re/positioning and subjective construction.

The subject of Widening Participation policy is positioned through difference and the 'polarizing discourses' that are entangled with the imaginary ideal-student subject of higher education (Williams 1997: 26). In making transitions to become a recognisable subject of postgraduate study, the subject of Widening Participation discourse attempts to avoid becoming the identifiable 'non-standard' student of the often derogatory discourses of Widening Participation, embedded in classed and racialised assumptions about lack and deficit. In order to achieve recognition and inclusion, the subject of Widening Participation must practice both agency and intent whist also being subjected to the discourses that name and position her. Bronwyn Davies explains that: '(c)entral to the dual process of submission and mastery in the formation of the subject are the mutual acts of recognition through which subjects accord each other the status of viable subjecthood' (Davies, 2006: 427). Post-structural approaches deconstruct the hegemonic discourses at play in policy and practice to develop deeper level understandings of inequality and misrecognition at play in higher education and in the formation of student identities. Such perspectives aim to reveal the multiple layers of injustices that operate around processes of identity formation and subjective construction, in relation to embodied intersections of age, class, ethnicity, gender and race (Mirza, 2009). Post-structuralism sheds light on the multiple, contradictory and

shifting sense of self that unsettles hegemonic versions of the individual as a coherent, rational, knowable and stable self.

The fluidity of processes of identity formation means that the naming of a subject as 'student' does not in itself guarantee the subject will be read off as 'student' because 'every identity is constituted in relation to who may not occupy the subject position as much as who may occupy it' (Winstead, 2009: 132-133). It is through complex processes of 'doing' as well as 'being' and the embodiment and performance of particular identities that an individual may or may not be recognised as a 'student' and this is shifting across space and time and according to social, political and cultural context. It is not only the process of naming or being named that constitutes the identity position as 'student'; it is through the taking up of particular practices and ways of doing and being within particular cultural contexts that the subject may be recognised as a student. Furthermore, these processes are not purely rational; they are entangled in emotional as well as structural, cultural and discursive relations and practices. The complex web of discourses, relations, practices and emotions that constitute subjectivities and identity positions profoundly shapes educational transitions and experiences, and thus access to and participation in higher education.

Fitting In, Belonging and Being Confident

Many of the student participants had non-standard entry qualifications but had accessed their courses by virtue of their experience in the field of education. They might have a senior management responsibility, for example, and have decided to study at M level to develop their professional and theoretical understanding. Importantly, many of the participants in the study (although they might not have a standard undergraduate qualification) have successfully completed a PGCE, enabling them to develop a familiarity with postgraduate level education and with the institution itself before embarking on the Masters, and giving them a sense of confidence. For example:

> I'd already studied my PGCE there, so I was aware of some of the systems. And then I just found out about the course. I managed to get through to the course tutor, the course leader, you know, almost immediately, who clarified anything for me. So it was really quite an easy process, and then I attended the interview and assessment. So it was all quite easy (Christine, Interview).

Interestingly, the research participants with such transitional backgrounds have largely presented a highly confident self in their first interview accounts, where they seem to have quickly mastered the practices of postgraduate study and easily fit in with the community of learning on their course. Their accounts have presented then a transition into M level study, which is constructed as smooth and easy, with key concerns being external to the course; for example, juggling multiple responsibilities and demands. Their accounts are very different from the kinds of accounts emphasised in the body of literature on widening participation; which tends to focus on student experiences just before or during undergraduate level study. Rather, for these MA students, there appears to be a sense of confidence and belonging, for example:

> Following last weekend's signature pedagogies session, I was so much more confident about delivering this than I would have been previously. What is particularly

interesting is the contrast between the theories of teaching and learning studied at level 4 and those at level 7. This class will also be part of my research for Researching and Improving Professional Practice and it was fascinating to observe their engagement with theory relating to signature pedagogies (Mary, reflective journal).

Mary presents herself as a confident and competent student, who has experience of value to bring to her learning. She talks about her understanding of theories of teaching and learning in quite confident ways, for example being able to contrast different theories and to observe the engagement of her peers with these theories. This suggests an included and 'masterful' subject positioning in relation to the others on her course.

Some of the students had quite different sets of experiences than those above, and tended to present a less confident self because of a keen sense of not fitting in, with an emphasis on the feeling of being different. Such students might or might not have non-standard entry qualifications but have a strong sense of marginalization or exclusion from the community of learning to which they don't necessarily feel they belong. For example:

> I thought I'll update you on my trip to the library. As I arrived I was determined to get help so I approached one of the staff at the library counter and explained that I was new and that I had some problem using the library at home. With a big smile the lady directed me to one of the computer desk and asked to follow the instructions. She added that it was straight-forward and usually students find it very easy to use and she pointed to some leaflets which were self explanatory (according to her). At that point I felt too shy to express my despair to have more support. So I used the computer, obviously got confused and ended up annoying the student next to me who was more helpful. I am probably 'thick' and computing is definitely not my strength (Aisha, reflective journal).

Aisha presents a sense of student subjectivity around themes of exclusion, not understanding the practices of higher education and feeling an outsider. She presents a self in despair and draws on the deficit discourses of widening participation; as the confused, annoying and 'thick' student.

The differences in experience reflected in the students' accounts, the ways that Widening Participation is conceptualized, and the analysis produced in relation to this, has significant implications for Widening Participation policy and practice. If students from 'non-standard qualifications' appear to have smooth transitions into M level study, this supports the view that access to postgraduate study is not a major concern for widening participation policies. However, if students from traditionally under-represented groups (who might have standard qualifications) continue to struggle to feel included in the cultures and practices of higher education at postgraduate level, then this suggests widening participation policy must pay close attention to issues of access to and participation in postgraduate level study.

One of the ongoing dilemmas of conceptualizing widening participation is the ways that it then constructs students; sometimes reproducing deficit subjectivities and homogenizing students who are constituted as different and as problematic. This tends to exacerbate rather than disrupt inequalities at play in higher education and tends to focus the problem on individual students who are constructed in deficit terms. Yet, it is important to understand

widening participation in terms of persistent patterns of inequality, which relate to embodied intersections of social differences of, for example, age, class, ethnicity, race and gender.

Research focusing on assessment and feedback practices in higher education has considered the experiences of 'non-traditional' students undergoing transitions mostly as undergraduate students, and has shown that academic writing and assessment practices often operate in exclusive ways, particularly because of an over-emphasis on 'skills' and a lack of attention to writing processes, methodologies and epistemologies (Burke and Jackson, 2007). Such research has contributed to approaches to support students to meet the requirements and expectations of traditional assessment frameworks, for example, through formative assessment and feedback. However, it has also exposed the limitation of current understanding about the impact of different modes of assessment and feedback on students from historically under-represented groups.

In the students' accounts, their transitional experiences through M-level study were often presented in highly positive ways. They often talked about their initial transitions as smooth, linear and straightforward. Overall, their relationship to their tutors was seen in positive terms, and tutors were reported to be highly supportive in facilitating the transition in to study.

> [My tutor] was very supportive during that. I think not just for me, but for several people during the enrolment process. He made sure he was available to take us over to the centre where we had to enrol. The day when I did finally enrol, he arranged to meet me before hand to make sure that I had absolutely everything necessary with me. He spoke to someone in enrolment before I got there to tell them that I was coming. So that was very supportive (Mary, Interview 1).

> I explained that I didn't have a BA yet and my background and the tutor advised me on how to do the application and told me I was a good fit. Support was received by email and that was fine. I submitted my transcript to date for the BA I'm working on and reference letters and writing samples and a bio. I had to write an essay after I was offered conditionally. I received deadlines in the post for this and it was straightforward (Diane, Interview).

However, when they started making transitions into M-level assessment and writing, a different account emerged. Transitional experiences became problematic when assessment processes presented a disruption to M-level student identity. Importantly, we found in later interviews with all the participants, even those who initially constructed themselves as confident and competent subjects, that as they reached another transition point – that of writing within the M level assessment criteria frameworks, quite different sensibilities emerged. For example, in her second interview, Mary explains:

> I'm having a crisis of confidence to be honest – before Christmas I felt quite confident and that it was going to be quite easy - and I think I underestimated how difficult studying at this level is and having a full-time job (Mary, Interview)

Mary's changing sensibilities as she moves through different transition points challenge the idea that transitions are linear and smooth. Rather, transitions are experienced in different

ways at different key moments and in relation to the student's positioning and previous experiences and are deeply connected to ongoing formations of identity and processes of mis/recognition in the constitution of Masters student subjectivity. Transitions are both about key moments of change but also about everyday processes of becoming. This is experienced in the wider context of the student's multiple social identities and positions, including their autobiographies and family histories, their professional identities and other aspects of the self that are often marginalised or silenced in discourses about educational transitions.

> Finding time to do the reading is proving more difficult than I thought – I have a family and my son's doing A levels as well – and that's added more demands on my time (Nicole, Interview).

Many of the students moved from making the transition into M-level study, which initially was experienced as relatively comfortable and stable, to a sense of instability and uncertainty. For example, in his first interview, Victor presents himself as confident and able, an active participant and a fully recognised subject of M-level study.

> I didn't find any difficulties. The PGCE was a very smooth sort of transition into the MA and during this I read a lot of education theories and stuff. Although the PGCE is more focused on reading pedagogic stuff, the MA is more abstract; it was really a smooth transition into the MA (Victor, Interview).

In his second interview, he had moved from this sense of included subjectivity to a position of significant insecurity, tempting him to leave his course. The PGCE, which had been constructed as a solid resource and grounding from which to make the transition to M-level study, was now seen as a very different form of higher educational participation. He describes himself as unable to focus and as being stuck:

> At the moment I'm not really able to look from a particular angle to define a theme for my essay and to get to any particular point…I had a tutorial with another professor but it didn't really help and I just feel stuck. I've read so much but there are so many different theories and I can't find a focus. "I'm not sure what they expect at M level and I really want to write about what I understand. On the PGCE, the writing was more concrete – we looked at curriculum and the theories were related to my practice. At M level it is more theoretical (Victor, Interview)

We have suggested previously that approaches to teaching writing in higher education tend to construct writing in mechanistic ways (Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005). Students who are seen to 'have problems' with their writing are often advised to seek additional help through remediation programmes, such as academic writing and study skills courses. In this model, writing is often constructed as a set of techniques that are separate from methodological concerns and that can be straightforwardly taught to those individual students seen as having poor literacy skills (Lea and Street, 1997). It tends to be embedded in a deficit construction of students seen as lacking the appropriate understanding and skill. Those who struggle to express their understanding in the privileged epistemological frameworks are often reconstituted as 'weak' and 'at risk' students. Such discourses often make problematic and flawed links between widening participation and lowering of standards. Such approaches have the effect of re/locating issues of access and participation with the individual student's

writing, rather than understanding that particular literacy practices narrow who can be recognised as a legitimate author/student in higher education. I would argue that this might become intensified at the Masters level, where certain conventions become increasingly taken-for-granted. Pedagogies of writing in academic contexts tend to ignore that the production of text is discursive and constitutive of knowledge. Modes of assessment that rely on written text and yet assume that student writing is decontextualised and separate from disciplinary and social practices and relations play a key role in re/producing exclusions and inequalities. The students' experiences in this study suggest that such concerns are relevant to understanding transitions through M-level study and to the development of strategies to widen participation in postgraduate programmes.

We have argued here that a key issue in researching Widening Participation involves a nuanced concept of widening participation, with attention to power, difference and subjective construction. We have drawn on the data to demonstrate how different conceptualisations have implications for the kinds of data collected and analysis produced. This will have increasingly significant implications as struggles to access postgraduate education become fiercer in a context of decreasing public funds and increasing private costs of higher education across undergraduate and postgraduate stages.

Drawing on this data and insights from the body of literature that conceptualises writing as a social practice intimately bound to inequalities, power and identity formation, we suggest that widening participation strategies must move away from discourses of individual deficit and towards the creation of inclusive pedagogical practices. Pedagogies in higher education need to create dialogic spaces for students and teachers to critically re/consider the implications of different writing practices in the context of their courses for inclusion and participation. In a participatory pedagogical framework, the assumptions underpinning privileged ways of writing and representing knowledge would be critically examined to unearth taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as knowledge and who participates in meaning making. Rather than be separated out from subject or disciplinary knowledge, writing is understood as a key part of understanding. In Laurel Richardson's words, writing is a 'method of inquiry' (Richardson, 2000); a pedagogical tool and research practice that creates meaning and ways of knowing and understanding.

We have drawn on the students' accounts to argue that transitions are not linear or straightforward. Although most of the students talked in highly positive ways about their initial M-level transitions, they also highlighted points of crisis, particularly in relation to academic writing and assessment. The accounts suggest that transitions are not only significant moments of change but also tied to ongoing processes of becoming.

Chapter Five: Site-based Interventions

In the second year of the project, four small-scale intervention projects in a range of higher education institutions were completed. Each project had a series of stages or phases of activity: i) an area of practical concern was identified; ii) an intervention was designed, in relation to one of the themes of the project; iii) the intervention was made; iv) the effects of the intervention were investigated (i.e. the site-based project was evaluated); and v) amendments were made to the original resource deployments and teaching/learning processes implicit in the intervention. The four site-based intervention projects were: i) implementing ipsative feedback processes; ii) supporting writing transitions; iii) developing supervision and project-based management processes; and iv) an holistic feedback intervention.

Ipsative Feedback

The aim of the first of these interventions was to provide learners with clear ipsative feedback that acknowledged progress irrespective of achievement. Since tutor and peer feedback on online activities is a key part of online and blended learning, the intervention to provide ipsative feedback included both formal feedback on assignments and tutor feedback provided more informally during student online discussion activity in a virtual learning environment (VLE). Although informal peer feedback was also provided online, this was not expected to be ipsative and was not included in the evaluation of the intervention.

The module selected for the intervention was part of two programmes: a *Certificate in Teaching in Learning in Higher and Professional Education* (training for new lecturers in a range of disciplines) and an *MA in Clinical Education* (aimed at lecturers in medical disciplines). Thus all students on the module were working professionals. The aim of the module was to develop learners' ability to make use of ICT in their teaching. An ipsative approach was particularly relevant because learners began with different skills: some had already used ICT in their teaching, while for others this was new. The first half of the module was taught in a day workshop and the second half was completely online making it easy to capture feedback given to learners.

Learners were informed that their progress in developing ICT use would be assessed and that it did not matter whether they had prior experience or not. The criterion for the ipsative assessment process: *an increase over the period of the course in their ability to innovate in ICT for learning and teaching* was read out to students and was included in the assessment information. Students' existing skills and knowledge was captured using a Reflective Tool. This tool not only enabled learners to reflect on their existing knowledge of ICT use but also could be used by the assessor for evidence of the progress students made in the module. In addition, students reflected on their progress in understanding use of ICT at the end of the module as part of their assignment which included a reflective statement on what they had learnt about ICT use. They were informed that these reflections would be anonymised before being used in the research.

Informal ipsative feedback was provided to students via the online discussions. This was to inform learners, particularly those new to online learning, how they were progressing with using a discussion forum to exchange and discuss ideas with other students. An example of

ipsative feedback for the discussion from the principal tutor was: 'your postings are becoming more detailed and you are all drawing on your own experience well. Some of the threads are developing as people reply to others. However, the longest thread is four messages and I would expect to see some even longer ones in future'. Finally, drafts of written assignments which were submitted online were also provided with ipsative feedback, as well as developmental feedback and guidance on meeting the assignment criteria. An example of such feedback included the following:

> You have demonstrated in the first reflective statement that you have increased your awareness of technologies available to use and that you are aware of some of the strengths and weaknesses ....Your second section on designing an activity was based on video and multiple choice questions and you could explain why you chose these technologies and did not consider others that might be more interactive ....

There were twenty students taking the module, but of these only thirteen submitted assessments. Three students did not submit and four were not required to do so. Not all students submitted a draft assignment for formative feedback and eight out of the thirteen who submitted final assignments did so. Students were interviewed by telephone about their experiences of the intervention after they had submitted their final assignment, if they did submit, but before they had received summative feedback and grades. Students were invited to be interviewed by signing a consent form and so these interviews were voluntary. Out of twenty possible students on the module, fourteen agreed. Interviews were transcribed and themes identified. Student reflective statements were also analysed with the aim of gaining insight into the students' self-assessment and motivation. The interviews and reflective statements were coded into broad themes and then into sub-themes.

This site-based project emerged from the work undertaken with a group of part-time Masters students in the first year of the project. The aim was to implement a key recommendation from the study: *Feedback should reflect progress as well as outcomes through ipsative feedback processes (feedback based on a comparison with a previous performance).* This recommendation drew on previous exploration of the learning and motivational benefits of ipsative feedback (Hughes and Crawford, 2009; Hughes *et al.*, 2010). The module was selected because the module was taught partly online and this helps make learner progress visible.
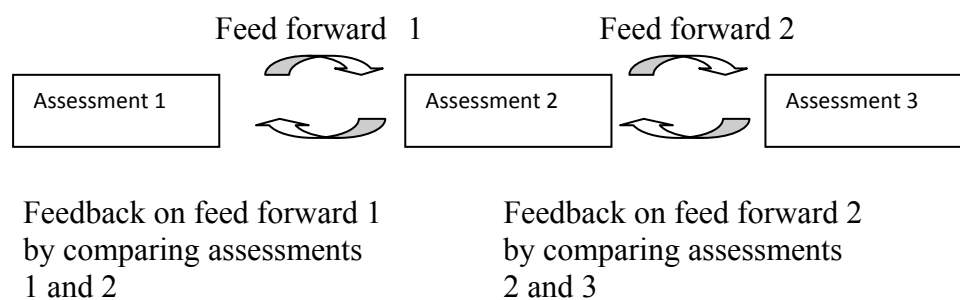
Feedback, Autonomy and Respect

Formative feedback aims to reduce the discrepancy between performance and desired goals by informing learners where they are now and where they need to go next (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 2005). However, feedback for these taught postgraduates was, in continuation from undergraduate studies, aimed towards short-term goals of helping learners meet criteria and make the grade rather than taking the longer-term view of feedback recommended by Carless *et al.* (2010) for developing self-reliance. The results indicated that acknowledgement of a learner's efforts and recognition of progress in reading and writing at this level is important for learners to develop the autonomy and confidence to engage with experts and peers in a disciplinary community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Feedback which clarifies such progress and helps develop learner confidence and autonomy is therefore likely to be motivational particularly for those who do not achieve high grades. The study

concluded that although students associated detailed feedback with respect, excessive critique might have negative consequences, and it might be more useful for learners to be shown respect and encouragement for their personal learning and progress through provision of ipsative feedback (Hughes, 2011).

Ipsative feedback has been proposed as a new approach that might address some of the current problems with formative assessment (Hughes, 2011). There are several possible benefits. Firstly, ipsative feedback closes the feedback loop in that learners are informed as to how far they have responded to previous feedback and progressed (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Ipsative Cumulative Scheme for Three Sequential Assessments

Feed forward 1   Feed forward 2

| Assessment 1 | | Assessment 2 | | Assessment 3 |

Feedback on feed forward 1
by comparing assessments
1 and 2

Feedback on feed forward 2
by comparing assessments
2 and 3

Feed forward 2 can build on feed forward 1 if remedial action has not been completed.

Ipsative feedback is longitudinal and readily gives learners and their assessors a way of capturing progress over time involving several assessments. It builds on an assumption that all assessment, even when designated as 'summative', potentially has a formative element. This is particularly helpful in a modular system where learners can select modules which are not necessarily strongly interconnected. In addition, not all learners will be high achievers and ipsative feedback may be motivational for learners who do not receive immediate rewards for effort through high grades. Ipsative feedback also encourages respect for learners by valuing the effort and progress of the many rather than focusing on the highest attainment of the few.

Formal and Informal Feedback

Much of the research on feedback addresses formal written feedback, probably because this is easier to capture, but learners can also receive valuable informal feedback. Sambell (2011) includes informal feedback in a model of feedback to encourage learning and provides examples of how informal feedback on classroom activities is well received by learners. In online learning, feedback on online interactions and tasks is written and therefore appears more formalised, but it has much in common with informal classroom feedback since it is not directed at summative assessment. Online the boundaries between formal and informal feedback are blurred, and this makes an online or blended course particularly suitable for studying the effects of feedback.

Four of the students interviewed did not recognise the term ipsative feedback or did not discuss it. Others, however, did discuss the concept once it was explained by the interviewer, although most did not fully understand it. For example, one student did not immediately

mention ipsative feedback. However, when prompted, he explained that he was not submitting the assignment so did not receive formative feedback. The interviewer pressed this further:

Interviewer: What about ipsative feedback in the VLE?
Student: I just thought it was nice feedback.

Another student also recognised and appreciated the continual feedback on tasks given in the VLE, although again not necessarily that this was ipsative:

Yes, well you see because the online weekly assessment situation, when you get feedback on what you submit each week, and so I got feedback through her (the tutor's) informal feedback way that she did through that course, which was great.

It seems that because receiving informal online feedback was new for these students they conflated this with ipsative feedback without recognising that the feedback was a comment on their progress. However, one student recognised the term 'ipsative', and she also assumed this referred to a longitudinal approach to feedback:

Interviewer: Does that term (ipsative feedback) mean much to you, or make any sense to you?
Student: Did at the time. I think it refers to that kind of ongoing gradual feedback.

However, she also had an appreciation that a learner's starting point is important, albeit using research as an example not the module. She went on to explain:

...I think the people on the Masters, they are all coming from very different backgrounds…and different, I guess, yardsticks, which they need to be measured, so someone who's starting off with a lot of qualitative experience might be wanting to gain further experience in the quantitative stuff, and vice versa, so yeah, that does make sense in principle. It's difficult to say whether it's been applied specifically to me though.

She was also prepared to replace grades with feedback:

Interviewer: I just wondered if, for example hypothetically, your tutor decided not to give you any grades, and they simply gave you written comments on your work, whether you would feel there was something missing?

Student: I wouldn't, but I think the written comments on the final submissions are fairly minimal, they consist of three or four lines, and it's not that detailed, so it would be…I'd be happy with that because I don't think the grades mean that much in the grand scheme of things, as long as there is feedback telling you how you'd done. But I think it would need to be replaced by more detail, perhaps more structured feedback ... I would love that ... But I know they mark a lot of essays, so it's very difficult to do, but it would be fantastic, and the more detailed the better.

However, she viewed feedback as *telling you how you'd done*, rather than it having any developmental or ipsative form. It seems that students' rather narrow and conventional views of feedback are not easily changed.

Another student claimed to recognise the term ipsative but again interpreted this as continual feedback online:

> *Interviewer*: (Tutor name) used this term ipsative feedback?
>
> *Student*: Sorry, I know about the ipsative, the idea, sorry, what did you say?
>
> *Interviewer*: Well the question was has (Tutor's Name) used this in any of your sessions with her?
>
> *Student*: Well she did, she did give us some feedback in an interactive session we did, so I think she did give some feedback as we were going.

When the interviewer explained that ipsative assessment is a comparison with previous work, she was concerned about how it might work:

> Well I suppose for me, for me I suppose each of the module, it would be somebody differently assessing me, won't it? So they won't know what I've done before?

Nevertheless, self-awareness of making progress was clearly very important even though the term *ipsative* was not a familiar one.

Self-Assessment

This student was aware of making progress on the module:

> I would hope that towards the end of the course my performance was better than at the start, because I'd learnt more ... and I sort of realised some of the strengths, I've been able to look at my teaching in a different way, and I see some of my strengths ... I understand my strengths better through the module.

The reflective statements gave further insight into the students' ability to self-assess. There were a few reflective statements which clearly described progress. However, other reflective statements described technologies, rather than giving personal accounts of learning. On this programme students were expected to provide a reflective portfolio and were given guidance in writing reflections, but not all the students taking the module received this, and in any case many students found personal reflection difficult (Hughes, 2009).

There was evidence of self-assessment from those who started as novices:

> Before I started this course I had never looked at a blog, never participated in a discussion board, had heard of a cloud but didn't know quite what it meant and whilst I knew about Wikipedia I did not know that there was such a thing as a wiki and more importantly that I could both start and contribute to one.

Prior to course enrolment I thought that this course would help to improve my understanding of ICT that could be used in education (teacher-centred education). On reading the content of the course I started realizing that this course was designed to give me a chance, as a learner, to decide for myself what I thought the learning process encompassed and how best to tackle it using the latest social software's, giving me guidance and direction when necessary. I was being introduced to student or learner-centred education through this highly structured and well-organized course.

A student who was already familiar with the basics was also able to articulate the progress she made:

In terms of distance travelled on this module I feel my initial conclusions from the first paragraph were fairly quick to assume myself as a Digital Native because I felt comfortable with using technology and I had a certain degree of experience using it, however on balance, at the end of the module I feel I would be further down the spectrum between the middle and Digital Native, but more because I have used the literature to develop my understanding rather than thinking that the technology used in the module were too complex.

These students responded to the ipsative assessment task and possibly the ipsative assessment criterion. Two students described radical changes in their views:

This module has been an excellent opportunity to reflect on previously held misconceptions and afford some insight into the potential benefits of current technology for teaching ... I have been encouraged by all that I have learned in this module that not only can I utilise modern technology to enhance my teaching but I should.

While it was a personal view prior to taking this module that use of Web 2.0 technologies should be avoided it has now made way for a personal dilemma on what makes Web 2.0 a good academic source and despite being able to see how and why these would be utilized.

Such willingness to admit past mistakes indicates that these students felt respected and confident, and understood that they were being assessed on progress as well as outcomes.

Tension between Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

There was evidence of an underlying tension between motivation to progress and learn *and* motivation to comply with the workload pressures students were placed under. Not all students saw value in submitting a draft for formative feedback.

I think slightly problematically I do a very busy clinical job, so I haven't been able to submit essays very often before the deadline, so largely my feedback has been after the…so I submit the essays on time but I haven't submitted drafts. I would say it's more a case of moving on, to be honest with you. It's a bit crude to say, but sometimes

you've ticked your box, you've done that assignment, it's a bit of a relief, you've got your mark.

However, he did recognise the potential for progress:

Because there's always room for improvement. I mean everyone, no matter what level, I'm sure there's always something.

Students at this level are likely to be both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated (Higgins *et al*., 2002), but here there is a tension between the extrinsic motivation of getting a professional qualification which they need and the intrinsic motivation of personal and professional development.

This blended module was the only one of its kind in the programmes and this might have influenced this student's view of feedback:

Well with the ICT course that would have been core blended, but I felt it needed more blending, because it started off with face to face, then it was, then it just, that was it, the rest was online, and I felt if there was another face to face halfway through, you know, we could have got some real feedback. And, you know, just some little problem that might, I might spend an hour trying to sort out, somebody could tell me in about two seconds, you know, what the problem was, you know, with technology.

In other words learners were grappling with new pedagogies and new technologies; and expecting them to take on a new approach to assessment as well created problems. This is another example of a limited understanding of feedback: by implication 'real feedback' is given face to face and not online.

This site-based study of transitions for part-time postgraduates illustrated an ambiguity over the practices of postgraduate work. A shift from teacher dependency towards a more negotiated curriculum, where the students move towards autonomy, is implicit at this level, but not necessarily clear to all learners. Effective feedback was particularly important for the transition to Masters level; and because these learners put in so much effort to combine study and work, they had high expectations of feedback. However, students were not always respected for the effort and sacrifices they made.

The impact of this set of interventions is difficult to interpret because this module differed from others in the programme in being partly online. This meant that it was easy for students to conflate online feedback with ipsative feedback. Narrow views on feedback and the motivation to cope and pass might also have limited their recognition of ipsative formative feedback. In addition, the significant proportion of students not completing the assignments or submitting drafts for ipsative feedback limited the scope of the interview findings.

However, it appears that the overall ipsative approach to assessment was influencing some students, even if they did not recognise the concept or the term, by helping them become more aware of making progress. This awareness may stem from the ipsative assessment design, or the online ipsative feedback, or a combination. The willingness of some students to self-assess in reflective statements also indicates a confidence and a sense of feeling

respected. It is not possible to attribute this directly to the ipsative feedback included on the module, but it is probable that the emphasis on progress in the module had some impact.

Writing Transitions

The second small-scale intervention project focused on writing transitions. In the second year of the project, twenty-four students participated in an intervention of an integrated writing workshop, and six students took part in focus group interviews. This intervention was designed to explore some of the emergent themes from the first year's data set. Many of the students interviewed in the first year suggested a strong sense of confidence in their first interviews and constructed their transitions into M-level study as relatively smooth, easy and straightforward. They talked about their relationships with tutors in highly positive ways, explaining that overall there was a strong sense of being supported through the transition into M-level study. However, follow-up interviews with the students suggested a second moment of transition, which caused a sense of a 'crisis'. This was the transition into M-level assessment and in particular the process of writing at M-level.

The intervention consisted of an intensive writing workshop provided as part of a module for students undertaking an M-level dissertation, within a broader Continuing Professional Development programme for teachers held in their school and taught by university staff from a second case study institution. The module was held in the Spring term and followed on from a research methods module taught in the Autumn term on which students produced a research proposal for their module assessment.

Two intensive workshops were held in February 2011 aiming to support the students in refining their proposal and for writing their dissertation. The workshop drew on the body of work that understands writing as a social practice and that emphasises the importance of epistemological and methodological issues in writing practices. The workshops were designed to engage students in writing activities designed to support the development of their writing for their courses and to draw on Richardson's (2011) notion of 'writing as a method of enquiry'. As well as producing their own writing in the workshop, they also examined other pieces of student writing and provided peer support in the development of their writing plans.

Following the workshop, focus group discussions were held to explore the students' experiences of writing at M-level, to consider their expectations, concerns and perspectives and to explore the usefulness of the workshop and the pedagogical approaches taken for developing their understanding of writing at M-level. The aims of the intervention were: to critically engage students in writing workshops that explored the methodological frameworks and approaches underpinning the assessment task(s), criteria and disciplinary and course expectations; to help develop an understanding of the assessment criteria in relation to their writing practices; to provide practical and conceptual resources and tools for the students to draw on in their writing; to encourage critical and reflexive approaches to writing, which consider deeper level questions about writing including processes of referencing and 'orchestrating the voices' (Lillis and Ramsay, 1997), the ontological and epistemological frames underpinning writing and the disciplinary conventions and expectations shaping and

constraining writing practices in particular contexts; and to engage students in focus group discussions about their experiences of writing and of the writing workshop.

Several readings of the data were undertaken to enable multiple layers of consideration, including: the overall aims and research questions of the project, the interview questions, the themes emerging from the students' accounts and the theoretical and conceptual perspectives from the relevant literature on widening participation. In order to take a reflexive approach to the data analysis, 'voice-relational' readings were undertaken, which involved exploring the researcher's own reactions and responses to the students' experiences, the students' perspectives and accounts, the ways the students positioned themselves in their accounts, the different relationships of the students to others and how their relationships were constructed and thinking about the significance of different contexts in their accounts (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

Writing Transitions – Assessment Practices and Frameworks

Research focusing on assessment and feedback practices in higher education has considered the experiences of 'non-traditional' students undergoing transitions mostly as undergraduate students, and has shown that academic writing and assessment practices often operate in exclusive ways, particularly because of an over-emphasis on 'skills' and a lack of attention to writing processes, methodologies and epistemologies. Such research has contributed to approaches to support students to meet the requirements and expectations of traditional assessment frameworks, for example, through formative assessment and feedback. However, it has also exposed the limitation of current understanding about the impact of different modes of assessment and feedback on students from historically under-represented groups.

In the students' accounts, their transitional experiences through M-level study were often presented in highly positive ways. They often talked about their initial transitions as smooth, linear and straightforward. Overall, their relationship to their tutors was seen in positive terms, and tutors were reported to be highly supportive in facilitating the transition into study.

> [My tutor] was very supportive during that. I think not just for me, but for several people during the enrolment process. He made sure he was available to take us over to the centre where we had to enrol. The day when I did finally enrol, he arranged to meet me before hand to make sure that I had absolutely everything necessary with me. He spoke to someone in enrolment before I got there to tell them that I was coming. So that was very supportive (Mary, Interview).

> I explained that I didn't have a BA yet and my background and the tutor advised me on how to do the application and told me I was a good fit. Support was received by email and that was fine. I submitted my transcript to date for the BA I'm working on and reference letters and writing samples and a bio. I had to write an essay after I was offered conditionally. I received deadlines in the post for this and it was straightforward (Diane, Interview).

However, when they started making transitions into M-level assessment and writing, a different account emerged. Transitional experiences became problematic when assessment processes presented a disruption to M-level student identity. Importantly, we found in later

interviews with all the first year participants, even those who initially constructed themselves as confident and competent subjects, that as they reached another transition point; that of writing within the M level assessment criteria frameworks, quite different sensibilities emerged. For example, in her second interview, Mary explains:

> I'm having a crisis of confidence to be honest – before Christmas I felt quite confident and that it was going to be quite easy - and I think I underestimated how difficult studying at this level is and having a full-time job (Mary, Interview)

Mary's changing sensibilities as she moves through different transition points challenge the idea that transitions are linear and smooth. Rather, transitions are experienced in different ways at different key moments and in relation to the student's positioning and previous experiences and are deeply connected to ongoing formations of identity and processes of mis/recognition in the constitution of Masters student subjectivity. Transitions are both about key moments of change but also about everyday processes of becoming. This is experienced in the wider context of the student's multiple social identities and positions, including their autobiographies and family histories, their professional identities and other aspects of the self that are often marginalised or silenced in discourses about educational transitions.

> Finding time to do the reading is proving more difficult than I thought – I have a family and my son's doing A levels as well – and that's added more demands on my time (Nicole, Interview).

Many of the students moved from making the transition into M-level study, which initially was experienced as relatively comfortable and stable, to a sense of instability and uncertainty. For example, in his first interview, Victor presents himself as confident and able, an active participant and a fully recognised subject of M-level study.

> I didn't find any difficulties. The PGCE was a very smooth sort of transition into the MA and during this I read a lot of education theories and stuff. Although the PGCE is more focused on reading pedagogic stuff, the MA is more abstract; it was really a smooth transition into the MA (Victor, Interview).

In his second interview, he had moved from this sense of included subjectivity to a position of significant insecurity, tempting him to leave his course. The PGCE, which had been constructed as a solid resource and grounding from which to make the transition to M-level study, was now seen as a very different form of higher educational participation. He describes himself as unable to focus and as being stuck:

> At the moment I'm not really able to look from a particular angle to define a theme for my essay and to get to any particular point…I had a tutorial with another professor but it didn't really help and I just feel stuck. I've read so much but there are so many different theories and I can't find a focus. "I'm not sure what they expect at M level and I really want to write about what I understand.
>
> On the PGCE, the writing was more concrete – we looked at curriculum and the theories were related to my practice. At M level it is more theoretical (Victor, Interview)

We have already suggested that approaches to teaching writing in higher education tend to construct writing in mechanistic ways. Students who are seen to 'have problems' with their writing are often advised to seek additional help through remediation programmes, such as academic writing and study skills courses. In this model, writing is often constructed as a set of techniques that are separate from methodological concerns and that can be straightforwardly taught to those individual students seen as having poor literacy skills (Lea and Street, 1997). It tends to be embedded in a deficit construction of students seen as lacking the appropriate understanding and skill. Those who struggle to express their understanding in the privileged epistemological frameworks are often reconstituted as 'weak' and 'at risk' students. Such discourses often make problematic and flawed links between widening participation and lowering of standards. Such approaches have the effect of re/locating issues of access and participation with the individual student's writing, rather than understanding that particular literacy practices narrow who can be recognised as a legitimate author/student in higher education.

We suggest that this might become intensified at the Masters level, where certain conventions become increasingly taken-for-granted. Pedagogies of writing in academic contexts tend to ignore that the production of text is discursive and constitutive of knowledge. Modes of assessment that rely on written text and yet assume that student writing is decontextualised and separate from disciplinary and social practices and relations play a key role in re/producing exclusions and inequalities. The students' experiences in this study suggest that such concerns are relevant to understanding transitions through M-level study and to the development of strategies to widen participation in postgraduate programmes.

Writing as Methodology

In the workshop, the students worked with pieces of writing to ask questions of the text and to try to understand what it might mean to 'be explicit', 'be critical' and 'orchestrate the voices' through referencing practices. They also used Laurel Richardson's idea of 'writing as a method of enquiry' (Richardson, 2000) to explore their experiences of writing and to develop their writing plans and material in the context of the MA course assessment framework. A key aim of the workshop intervention was to move beyond a 'barrier' approach to widening participation, which tends to conceptualize academic writing as a set of skills and techniques with the need to provide remedial and additional support to students perceived to have 'problems'' with their writing. Rather, we aimed for the workshop to take an inclusive pedagogical approach that acknowledged the complicated processes that writing entails for all students, including the intellectual and emotional struggle of crafting and producing a piece of writing for assessment. We deliberately organized this as a workshop embedded in the course, rather than as additional support for students identified as 'needing help' with their writing. The workshop emphasized the importance of the different contexts in which writing is produced and also the identities and perspectives that profoundly shape the student/authors' experiences of and approaches to writing for assessment at Masters level.

After the workshop, the students in groups were interviewed about their experiences of writing, the transitions this involved and also of the workshop intervention itself. In the discussion they raised a number of key issues in relation to writing experiences and processes and considered the value of the workshop intervention. Mark, who felt quite confident about

his writing, explains the significance of the workshop being embedded in the course, rather than as an additional option:

> I think writing is one of the things that I feel able at, so that I wouldn't perhaps have chosen to go to an extra course, but it is actually really useful in enlightening me to the different styles of academic writing that were needed for this particular course. So it is perfect that it is embedded into the course.

Gary explained that the workshop would have been useful to him as an undergraduate, as well as postgraduate, to help explore 'thought patterns' and ways of structuring his writing.

> I would have liked something like this in my undergraduate days. It would have directed me so much better… something actually in the course saying this is how we do it, this is how we expect the writing to be, because again I think the writing is very personal to a subject and like my writing now is very different to what I was doing in my undergrad and even in what I was doing in my PGCE. Like there are very different styles of writing and so it would have been useful. This [workshop] was excellent because I have actually realised what I need to do in terms of my dissertation and how I need to structure it, maybe what thought patterns I need to have instead, and obviously having that clear guideline will hopefully help.

In referring back to the anxieties she expressed about writing earlier in the focus group interview, Beth talked about the fear that she might be laughed at if her writing is not of the standard expected by her tutors at Masters level.

> I think it is really important actually to embed it and wish that it had been earlier on for me. I think it would have helped with the anxieties that I was talking about at the start. You know they are just going to laugh when they get these essays; it is just not at all the standard that they are expecting. Because if you have never worked at that level before, you don't know at all whether you are achieving the standard…

Tina talked about the importance of our deconstruction of key concepts in writing methodology, for example 'being explicit' and 'being critical'. She explained that these were ideas she often took for granted herself and that would be useful not only in her own writing but also in her teaching of writing to her sixth form students. She implies that she will take up a more critically reflexive position in her teaching and writing practices.

> *Tina*: I really liked the bit where you were talking about all the different ways of interpreting, be explicit and be critical, because I am an English teacher, so I find the writing bit okay and I mark people's essays all the time, so I find that bit fine, but I think as a teacher I write, 'be explicit' and it is quite useful to see it like that and I can imagine me writing a similar thing and then going back to that checklist and just sort of, it is that meta-cognition isn't it, I guess? Because I can always be too comfortable with what I am doing and it is making me think a bit more carefully I think.

> *Interviewer*: Well, actually that hopefully is where the connection between the research and the practice comes, because hopefully some of this will be helpful to your practice that way.

Tina: Well I could see myself giving those bullet points to my students, to my sixth form, to check against.

Two of the male students, Matt and Tony, also talked about the issue of student accessibility to concepts and ideas in relation to different higher education teachers and their pedagogical practices. It is notable that accessibility is equated to 'dumbing down', a derogatory discourse used frequently in every day talk about the anxieties of widening participation:

Matt: I mean for me, the way you deliver things is much more dumbed down academic speak and clarifies things for me than some of the other lectures that we have and I come away thinking, 'I know what these words mean now' and it actually does mean something to me, whereas in a lot of other sessions we have had, I go home with a headache thinking, 'What has happened?' But on your last session, I had a eureka moment; finally I get this.

Tony: Do you often think though that is sometimes the way it is presented at times, you have got nothing to put your hat on? You can't hang your hat on anything. Because actually it is not saying, 'This is it'. Sometimes, well me personally I want to know that that is it. Okay, some things are not as black and white as that, but I think people sometimes just make problems and say, 'Well what does this mean?' Well what do you think it means? I think that is what you did quite clearly today.

The students are referring to pedagogical practices that move beyond the notion of barriers to inclusive, interactive and participatory pedagogies, which aim to involve the students in deconstructing key discourses in relation to their 'thought patterns', perspectives and experiences. In this way, they have a sense of connection to those ideas; what seems distant and abstract and inaccessible now, the students suggest, had resonance with their own interests and subjectivities. Writing as a methodology allowed them to further explore these connections, building a sense of confidence as authors of their writing and learning. The students highlight the vulnerability attached to academic writing, through which access to higher education is often judged in relation to standards that require the complex decoding of unspoken expectations. Concepts of 'being explicit' and 'being critical' are often the explicit expectations shared with students and yet these are not straightforward writing 'skills' but rather complex social practices located within particular disciplinary and academic contexts.

From the evaluation of this small-scale intervention we can draw a number of conclusions:

The conceptualisation of 'widening participation' is central to developing inclusive and participatory approaches, practices and frameworks.

A broad view of widening participation that focuses on the cultures and practices of the institution and programme of study, complex inequalities and the politics of mis/recognition supports the development of inclusive M level provision and practice. This disrupts and challenges problematic assumptions and discourses of deficit and neo-liberal, individualist perspectives that tend to ignore complex social and historical inequalities and misrecognitions. This helps to create a framework for inclusive, accessible and participatory programmes of study.

The early experiences of a postgraduate programme, including admissions and induction, are important in shaping a positive initial transition into the programme of study.

The students who had a positive experience of the admissions and induction process seemed to have an easier transition into the course than those who did not. Well-designed induction programmes that aim to support the students' initial transition to the M level programme are important. Making the transition to M level study is an on-going process, however, many of the students greatly valued the support and encouragement they received early on through the admissions tutors/staff and the induction process and positive experiences of this seemed to be key in easing the initial process of embarking on a new MA programme.

Participatory pedagogical approaches help to support the processes of developing a sense of postgraduate student identity and of fitting in and belonging to a shared community of learning.

The literature and data highlight the importance of recognition, identity and a sense of belonging for widening participation. The development of 'participatory pedagogies' (Burke, 2011) helps to address these issues. Participatory pedagogies are underpinned by explicit sets of social justice principles and ethical starting points. In practice, this might involve, for example, that teachers and students initiate their pedagogical relationship with an explicit plan of the ways they will work together ethically, critically and inclusively.

This might also involve a commitment to creating interactive spaces for learning and teaching, where different forms of knowledge and experience might be drawn on and made available to help illuminate and make accessible the disciplinary or subject knowledge at the heart of the course. It might also involve an explicit discussion of the different perspectives, backgrounds and forms of knowledge of the participants whilst also subjecting these to critical reflection in collaborative learning processes. Participatory pedagogies understand concerns with curriculum and assessment as part of pedagogical practices and relations, not as separate entities. Thus, pedagogies are concerned not only with explicit practices of teaching and learning but also with the construction of knowledge, competing epistemological perspectives and the ways that learning and meaning might be assessed to support pedagogical and meaning-making processes.

Writing as a method of inquiry and learning should be integrated into the programme of study, rather than offered as separate, remedial, skills-based provision.

A commitment to widening participation in M level study requires the development of inclusive and participatory pedagogies and assessment frameworks in higher education that acknowledge the complex processes by which writing, and other related literacy practices (such as speaking and reading), is produced by students. This involves the pulling together, rather than separating out, of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, so that how we learn and teach is connected to what we learn and teach and how we then assess what has been learned and taught. Writing and other academic practices, such as reading and speaking, must be considered in relation to the development of pedagogies for widening participation. The students valued integrated approaches to the teaching of writing and other academic literacy practices, which supported their understanding of academic expectations and practices and

the assessment criteria and framework. Writing as a method of inquiry is a resource that facilitates such integrated approaches to supporting students in their learning and in the production of work for assessment.

Supervision and Project Management

The project was designed to supplement the individual supervision available to students, in this case on an MA in Japanese Studies programme, during the research and writing of their dissertations in two ways: providing them with the opportunity to prepare a formal research proposal; and providing comments about it from their peer cohort. The results of the project were mixed: all the participants agreed that both elements of the process were extremely useful in encouraging them to conceptualize the ideas in their dissertations and to plan its execution; but it is clear from some of the resulting dissertations that a limited intervention of this nature may be insufficient to overcome the structural barriers inhibiting students from successfully adapting to the challenges of postgraduate work.

Masters programmes in the UK in general are characterized by a number of features that make it difficult for students to make the transition to the kind of work that perhaps should characterize the dissertation, as the capstone of the degree. The degree has a one-year time frame, the bulk of which is devoted to taught courses, which tend to monopolize a student's attention during term time, reducing the time and energy available for the dissertation. This suggests the need for early interventions to encourage students to formulate projects alongside their coursework. There is a lack of familiarity with and inconsistent training in research design and project management: most students are reasonably adept at essay-writing, but underestimate the difference between this and a research project. This suggests the need for training in project design and requirements to produce preliminary proposals. Finally, there is a reliance on individual supervision for the dissertation itself: supervisory styles vary greatly, but most supervision is informal in its approach to research design and few supervisors have the time and/or inclination to provide the basic training that might overcome the first two problems. This suggests that there may be some economies of scale that can be gained by providing some elements of supervision through group work.

These problems are exacerbated in an environment where a Masters cohort typically includes students with an extraordinary diversity of backgrounds, in terms of ethnicity, nationality, first language, age and class, and previous educational experience. Those students who have not come directly from a UK undergraduate degree in humanities and social sciences often face a steep learning curve in adapting to the demands of the university environment, including the protocols of standard essay-writing and exam preparation, further limiting the time and energy available to devote to the dissertation. This is particularly true on area studies degrees, which are attractive precisely because of the range of courses on offer, but therefore lack a core course during which the general expectations of the degree, including the requirements of the dissertation, might be addressed. The MA Japanese Studies therefore provides a valuable subject for an intervention designed to address the various problems noted above.

Project Design and Delivery

The project was modest in ambition. It provided students on the MA Japanese Studies programme with three opportunities to meet to discuss their work for their dissertations: a preliminary meeting in January 2011 to introduce the project and for students to present and receive feedback on their early ideas for their dissertation; a meeting in March, prior to which students had submitted and read formal dissertation proposals, which were then discussed and critiqued during the meeting; and a follow-up meeting in July, at the beginning of the writing process, for which students had prepared a brief summary of preliminary conclusions, which were discussed, together with common problems in project execution, during the meeting. All the meetings were optional.

The project was greeted with a good deal of interest by the cohort of students, although subsequent developments suggested both the limits of the project and the seriousness of the underlying problems that it was designed to address. The preliminary meeting in January attracted about fifteen students, a comfortable majority of all students enrolled on the MA, most of whom already had a clear idea of their research interests, if not their exact topic, although few were formulating this in terms of research questions. The second meeting in March, however, only attracted eight students, with a number of others noting that the pressure of classes, coursework and exam preparation meant that they were unable to produce a research proposal. The research proposals, too, were mixed. The best provided evidence of substantial preparatory work, with clear statements of research questions, in relation to the existing work in the field, and of method and sources. At the bottom end, a couple of the proposals did little more than sketch a potential research interest, with a thin bibliography that was clearly the result of a last-minute, cursory trawl through the most obvious databases (library catalogue, JSTOR). Nonetheless, simply being able to read each other's proposals and to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses was clearly helpful to all the students involved, several of whom subsequently reported how the meeting had encouraged them to make substantial progress on their dissertations during the Easter vacation.

The third meeting was the most poorly attended, with only four students. Coming as it did at the beginning of the summer vacation this was perhaps to be expected. It was surprising, however, that none of the students had yet made much progress towards formulating an argument for their dissertation. Some had even abandoned their original proposals and were still formulating their final topic. In the discussion, it was also clear that all of them had difficulty in moving from information-gathering to thinking and writing and that most were somewhat trapped by their familiarity with essay writing, when the writing itself can be postponed until the last minute.

Outcomes

The following conclusions are based on observation of the meetings themselves, subsequent communication with the students involved, and the reading of some of the dissertations produced by those involved in the project. It was clear from all the students that there is a demand for a more formal, structured approach to dissertation research and writing, introducing the new skills necessary to succeed in such an assignment (including project management), requiring the regular submission of preparatory and intermediate materials

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(statements of interest, research proposals, and statements of findings). It is also clear, however, that such an approach is hostage to the other demands on students' time, evident in the fall-off in the number of participants and the inability of some of those who did participate to devote sufficient time to the various assignments.

It was also clear that meeting as a cohort, under the supervision of a member of the academic staff, is a useful way of supplementing the supervisor-student relationship, inasmuch as it modulates the diversity of individual experience, encourages students to develop their own ideas (rather than mirroring what they imagine their supervisor might want), and provides a formal support network during what can often be a rather unfamiliar and lonely process. Finally, it was clear that the meetings at least helped clarify the expectations surrounding the dissertation and encouraged the participants to accelerate their own research and writing. In three cases in particular, of students with non-UK undergraduate backgrounds, this seems to have produced a distinct improvement in the dissertation itself.

Again, the project was modest in design and, in some respects, did not achieve everything it could have done. But it has confirmed the problems identified at its inception and the potential of the kind of solutions outlined here. It is clear, however, given the changing environment of higher education as well as the diversifying constituency for Masters degrees, that without a more sustained attention to the demands of our students, we run the risk of failing to supply the experience and training that would justify their investment.

An Holistic Feedback Intervention

The aim of this small-scale intervention project was to implement a holistic feedback design within a naturalistic setting informed by feedback from students involved in the Postgraduate Certificate of Education referred to earlier. Interviews with students in the first year of the project (n = 14) identified a number of facilitators and barriers in their learning to teach. One of the key themes arising from this research was the need for more integrated assessment designs with feedback as a key feature of this. This concurs with the work of a number of researchers working within this area where feedback is seen as an integral element of assessment design (Bloxham and West, 2004; Weaver, 2006). The context of this site-based project was that of a professional studies primary PGCE programme in one UK university. The focus was on writing at Masters level.

Specifically the project sought to:

- explore with the students their experiences of feedback;
- support the students in their transitions by augmenting existing feedback provision through the development of a holistic and iterative feedback design model;
- support students to develop their own self-regulatory practice by modelling with students approaches to accessing and using feedback;
- enhance understandings of students' experiences of transitions to inform HEI practice;
- explore the impact of participative research working with students as co-researchers as an element of holistic feedback design; and
- build on the findings of the first year of the project in order to make recommendations for enhancing feedback practice.

Methodology

A phenomenological perspective was adopted with the intention of focusing on individual student's experiences and perceptions of feedback (Smith, 2003) acknowledging the role of the researcher in the co-construction of the research (Fox, Martin, and Green, 2007). A 'second person' perspective (Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld, 2008) was adopted whereby students were seen as active participants in research and not as objects. They had input into all the stages of the research process.

The study involved twenty students embarking on a one year Primary Post-Graduate Certificate of Education with Masters programme at one UK university. This opportunistic group represented ten percent of the cohort. They were representative of the whole cohort in relation to ability level, gender balance, subject specialism and age distribution. Students were invited to be involved in the project and had ownership of the development of it as co-researchers. They could withdraw at any stage of the programme and choose which aspects of it they wished to commit to. To ensure the integrity of the student feedback, face-to face interviews were also supplemented with questionnaire responses that could be completed anonymously. The sample comprised four males and sixteen females; all students had achieved a 2.1 or higher in their undergraduate degree; eight students were 'home grown' and continuing study at the same university. The average age of the students was 25.1 (SD = 4.2); range = 18 (21 – 39).

The intervention can best be described as a pedagogical tool used within and beyond teaching sessions to enhance understanding of Masters level assessment requirements within the context of a primary professional studies programme. To augment existing feedback provision, principles underpinning the intervention involving holistic feedback design included: enhancing the agency of students within the process; ensuring that feedback was iterative (on-going and an inclusive element of the teaching); and ensuring clear signposting of feedback in order to feed-forward (Boud and Associates, 2010; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Handley *et al.*, 2008).

Key elements in the holistic feedback design included:

* Student involvement in the design and development of the project including recommendations to enhance the programme;
* Integration of feedback discussions into the ten teaching sessions;
* Availability of email and one-to-one support with email support tools;
* Detailed and sign-posted feedback on formative assignments with the intention of feeding forward;
* Opportunities to meet individually or in groups with the lecturer/researcher to discuss their experiences of feedback towards the beginning of the programme (October 2010);
* Opportunities for the students to give feedback on the feedback they had received in the weekly sessions and face-to-face meetings;
* Opportunities for students to work with the teacher/researcher individually or in groups to gain face-to-face feedback on formative assignments and to also plan ahead for the summative assignment (December 2010);

- Arising from group and one-to-one discussions, a checklist of essential elements that needed to be addressed in the summative assignment was sent to all the students;
- Students were invited to analyse their experiences of feedback following completion of the summative assignment (February 2011);
- Students who had not been successful in their first summative assignments were given further one-to-one support both face to face, by email and phone to help them to develop their work;
- Students had the opportunity to meet with the lecturer / researcher to discuss their experiences having completed the programme (May – June 2011).

The questionnaire data was subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Themes within the various data sets were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data was coded and recoded to ensure consistency in the interpretation of key themes.

The student teachers had the opportunity to meet individually and in groups with the researcher three times during the academic year. The interviews were loosely framed and semi-structured with the focus being negotiated with the student teachers; they lasted from between thirty to ninety minutes. All interview data was transcribed and subject to descriptive, topic and analytical coding (Richards, 2009). Themes were checked on two separate occasions and cross-referenced to initial codings to ensure consistency in the interpretation of the data.

The questionnaire comprised 18 questions, (predominantly open-ended), on the student teachers' experiences of the holistic feedback intervention. One question asked the student teachers to rate the relative value of a number of different elements of the holistic feedback design from 1 to 10 with one being the most valued. The questionnaire data was subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics using SPSS version 18 were calculated for the closed self-ranking question, and thematic analysis applied to the rest of the questionnaire data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings were triangulated with those collected from the interview and teaching sessions.

Student teachers' experiences, perceptions and developing understandings of feedback

Good feedback was perceived by the students to be timely; realistic in relation to what was feasible for them to achieve within a given time frame and the context of learning to teach; things that could be worked on immediately; able to show what was valuable within the work as well as what needed to be developed to feed forward; specific and explicit; pinpointed and not overloaded, dialogic and fair. Such findings fit with those generally reported within the literature (Boud and Associates, 2010). The need for feedback to be realistic and based on mutual understanding and receptiveness to each others' needs was identified:

> For there to be a good system of feedback I think it's got to be a mutual thing. You have to want to seek it, and also the person who's giving it to you has to be prepared to go into detail with you as well, and to give you that time, I think that's really important. (Student Interview)

Facilitators and barriers in accessing and using feedback

It is possible to identify certain commonalities as well as differences in student perceptions of how elements of the programme assisted and/or limited the utility of feedback. The themes identified in this current study by students largely reflect those of the previous study undertaken in a different context lending support to the generalisation of findings. Mapping of the key themes demonstrated a focus on technical issues and aspects of assessment feedback.

Those who had been out of education for some time as well as those who had recently graduated, found it particularly hard to access the language and protocols of Masters requirements. Many already '*had a template in their heads'*; a clear idea of what was needed to write an assignment'. Some found it hard to override this established pattern of thinking. Significantly one‑to‑one feedback was felt to be very important in enabling students to make progress, however, not all students who rated this highly, took advantage of the one-to-one support offered suggesting that the opportunity to receive this was as important for some students as actually using it; knowing it was there was enough. They favoured early interventions especially those giving concrete and explicit examples of good practice, for example, writing at Masters level sessions. Some needed concrete examples and scaffolds; some, but not all, found the self check template work useful and adapted it for later work. They welcomed written feedback supplemented by verbal feedback to contextualise comments. They took the opportunity to receive feed-forward support and wanted this more than feedback. A group session conducted within the teaching of the area to look at this was thought to be useful in this respect. There were mixed feelings about the value of peer feedback, with some being sceptical about its value. They found it easier to seek feedback in schools finding it more natural and informal than Masters' work which they saw as formal. The self-regulatory skills of the students were highly variable.

For the students, trying to make sense of the difference between undergraduate and post-graduate writing was a dominant theme in discussions. Students wanted greater clarity from tutors on their academic programmes as to the requirements and relevance of academic writing, which some felt, at times, to be obscure, overly complicated; contradictory and unclear:

> what I do find about institutions such as universities is there is a very accepted way of doing things, and there's, you know, ways that are not acceptable. And I think if you make it clear what the acceptable ways of doing things are you can have people that will either work to them, or people that say this isn't for me, but it has to be made clear... .. the university does have a responsibility to make it very, very clear what they want (Helen).

The majority of student teachers found explicit support tools valuable (e.g. a Masters lecture on what good writing looked like) to negate the effect that one student teacher noted in relation to not being able to apply what was being said to their own practice:

> I find reflective writing really hard, and I still, although people keep giving us this information on how to write reflectively, ... I need an example to look at, and take it apart, and right, this is a really good example, this isn't such a good example. I'm still

really not confident in writing reflectively, I don't know how, and I may sound really stupid, because we've had so many lectures and things saying this is how you write effectively.

Self regulation capability was also linked to the emotional impact of feedback. This is an important but not unexpected finding. The emotional impact of feedback is one that is well reported but that needs greater attention in the design of feedback (Yorke, 2003). For some students seeking feedback was a high risk strategy that had significant implications for them:

I am sensitive, and I know I am, which is why I don't seek the feedback. And so I think that's what worries me, the fact that now I am going to be pushed out of my comfort zone, because I am going to have to go and do that, and then I can't, although I know I am going to get criticism, because obviously there are going to be things I need to work on, but I just have to get it in my mind that it's not a personal thing, they are helping me to get better, become a better teacher.

I felt sick sending that essay back in the post. I thought ... if I send this back and it's another fail it's game over. I really felt that way, I felt sick, and then to get the email back that it was all fine, and actually it was a very good resubmission, I was like…but I didn't really feel relieved about it... it was more like ...I can just get on with my life now. Not that everything stopped because of it, but it was a really tough time (Helen).

Some students felt disadvantaged compared to others in trying to navigate elements of the programme and felt the need for more guided support.

[those] who recently graduated from [home university] with an education-related degree have a huge advantage. There is a large amount of presumed knowledge that many of us have to struggle with unassisted.

But someone like me... or people that have been out of education for a long time, we do need to have our hand held a little bit, or shown the way a little bit more explicitly... Perhaps some others ...feel very confident in their writing, and feel confident as to what the university expects from them, but that certainly wasn't the case for me.

Students were asked to rank the value of the different types of support on a scale of 1 to 9 – with 1 being the most valued (see Figure 3 below). The areas of support felt to be most valuable included the focus group meetings feeding forward; enhanced feedback on formative work; one-to-one support; and coverage of general points in professional studies sessions.

Figure 3: Student teachers' perceptions of the value of the holistic feedback design intervention

Area of support (N = 18)	Intervention	Rank	Mean score	SD	Modal score
Focus group meetings feeding forward	√	1	2.9	2.5	1
Enhanced feedback on formative work	Core plus enhancement √	2	23.1	1.5	3
One-to-one support	√	3	3.3	2.5	1
Covering of general points in professional studies sessions	√	4	3.5	2.1	2
Support from other tutors	Core	5	3.7	2.3	2
Formative assignment process	Core	6	4.6	2.3	4
Support from peers within/ outside PS group	√	7	5.3	2.4	3
Self help grid	√	8	5.9	2.9	8
Feedback tracking sheet	Core	9	6.7	2.1	6

The technical support found most useful included guided support with writing including how to structure an essay; identifying a clear focus; supporting arguments with reference to the literature and using the literature effectively as well as how to effectively search for information. The collaborative and constructivist nature of the group learning process and the relative safety it afforded to enable the sharing of ideas and emotional support featured highly in student teacher responses:

> I think, there was a small group of us, similar to this, and you had read and marked, formatively assessed, and you gave us feedback about it, as a group, we could pick up on what each other had said, and pick up good points from each other, recognise where each other had made mistakes. So I think that worked really well.... I thought it was definitely a useful model. I can understand why people would not want to go in a group if they were insecure about their writing, especially as it was pretty much our first bash at doing it, but no, I think it was really, really beneficial. For that point that I made, just about sharing each others' successes, and falling down.

Sixteen of the student teachers found aspects of the formative feedback they received very useful in helping them to explore educational research, supporting reflection and in providing a framework that could be used within the summative assessment. They welcomed clear sign posting of priorities such as annotated comments in scripts highlighting areas to address. They also appreciated provision of a summary of key actions that they needed to make which was given as a bulleted list at the end of their work. Opportunities in both group and one-to-one sessions for dialogue to explicate written feedback, was felt to be very important:

> The fact that we've gone in there, discussed it... and then we've talked about it... I found that constructive (Lianne).

> Having one to one verbal feedback is ...one of the most useful things that I've had, because you can ask questions, with written feedback you don't have that person there in front of you to question how they've questioned your work (S2).

Dialogue afforded in group and one-to-one sessions enabled the students to understand more clearly what they needed to do and how what they were doing was relevant to their learning to teach. In seeking such opportunities in a more sustainable way in relation to the use of resource, an effective feedback intervention requiring little additional resource was that of using fifteen minutes of each taught session to focus on aspects of assessment with the group as a whole.

In relation to supporting student self regulation, the self help grid was sent to all the student teachers following the group interviews. In effect, this translated the assessment criteria into manageable and specific questions in relation to the assignment focus so that the student teachers could use this to evaluate their own work. Only seven of the twenty student teachers used the self-checking grid. Reasons for not using the grid included self reliance of some of the student teachers who wanted to use their own systems. For one student teacher she wanted help in how to apply it. For eight student teachers, it was about the medium in which the information was sent, i.e. via email. This raises questions in relation to how information is distributed and how activities are co-ordinated across the programme to maximize effects. For those that found the self-checking grid useful, some were able to adapt it and use with their specialist subject assessment, whereas others used it solely for the professional studies assignment reflecting different levels of self-regulation in their relative ability to complete the task:

> I went through ... have I done this,.... for me it came up with the areas that I thought ooh, I haven't included that, ooh I haven't done that, or I've done that but possibly not enough, or actually I've done too much of that. So that's the way I used it, as a checklist almost, what have I done, what have I included, what haven't I? And how well have I…what parts of that in there?... I almost felt what you'd given had almost pulled out, you know, made it slightly clearer than the guidance had, because the guidance would sometimes put it in more vague terms, not explicit like it is linked to the essay (Joanna).

This small site-based project was evaluated and the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Induction needs to acknowledge individual differences. Key questions for those involved in curriculum design include how can student teachers be given support prior to the commencement of the programme? How can levels of support be differentiated for those who are less self-regulating than others? What self support tools are available to support the students and how are the students made aware of them?

2. Support for the students needs to be given prior to and not after the event itself, for example, guidance on suitable topics and the focus for an assignment were especially valuable for those students who demonstrated weaker self-regulation skills. If students and lecturers are to fully exploit feedback opportunities, time is needed to explore their beliefs and perceptions with regards to the value of feedback.

3. In order to fully engage in feedback activities students need a sufficient knowledge base to be able to engage more equitably in dialogue.

4. Students' responses in this study identified the need to address existing schema early on in the programme. Many 'had a template in their heads' of how to write which required revision to accommodate the different requirements of the professional programme.

5. Feedback needs to be perceived as an integral and iterative element of curriculum delivery.

6. Clear direction needs to be given as to the requirements of assessment and its role in the feedback process. There needs to be clarity regarding the rationale underpinning how all the assessment elements fit together.

7. Timely and explicit sharing of examples of good practice is needed. Students need to be given opportunities to work with the assessment criteria to enable them to make sense of them.

8. Assessment should be authentic. There needs to be an alignment between the expectations of assessment and the levels of experience of the students. The timing of assessments needs to be manageable given the varied demands on the students.

9. Issues relating to choice, affordances and limitations of assessment feedback for students (degree of student involvement in assessment design; degree of assessment choice; ways of working with peers, etc.) need to be addressed.

10. Students' roles and responsibilities within the assessment process, and in particular, in relation to feedback dialogic exchanges, need to be clarified.

This study has focused on the perceptions of high achieving students who also have needs in developing their self-regulatory practice; it is important that this group is not ignored. The recommendations, as outlined above, were developed in relation to enhancing academic critically reflective writing as part of teacher education preparation, but could equally be applied to teaching practice in schools as well as more broadly to undergraduate programmes. To promote sustainable feedback with the students taking more responsibility for assessment including feedback, greater attention needs to be placed on ensuring the technical aspects of practice are in place. This includes comprehensive induction; realistic and relevant assessment; and attention being paid to individual needs as well as fundamentally reviewing the nature of feedback and feed forward.

Chapter Six: Consultation

A small number of consultative interviews were arranged with invited groups of students. During the time set aside for this we focused on: transitional experiences becoming problematic when assessment processes disrupt M-level student identity formation; the disjuncture between forms of learning/experience of non-traditional students and forms of learning demanded by institutions; the use of grades; students experiencing discipline-specific teaching approaches, and discipline-based interpretations of criteria and marking; turning points or critical incidents; organisational arrangements; moving between different cultures; the synergy between the students' work and assessment, and opportunities to collaborate with peers; assessment overload at key transition points; self-direction for part-time learners; and issue of *level, identity* and *cultural sensitivity.*

In addition, two other consultative exercises were conducted in two different higher education institutions: i) a survey of international M-level students focusing on feedback during their programmes of study, and specifically the role of formative assessment in supporting students at a higher education institution; ii) an Oxford University College perspective on the transition to M-level study.

Trajectories and Transformations

Students undertaking post-graduate study are required to perform in a different way or at a higher level than previously. A student here provides an example of this:

> I think I am much more independent and more critical now. In the very first beginning I tend to look for answers from teachers. I thought their answer would be the perfect answer, so I am an obedient student, I should jot down everything that they said and their answer is the absolute truth. But now we are trained to be very critical, to look for evidence and to investigate the same issue but from different angles.

This higher level refers to processes such as: a more comprehensive understanding of the field; employing a more sophisticated meta-theory of learning; the ability to write using a wider range of genre; a greater ability to articulate content; an enhanced capacity to use abstractive powers; and further penetration into the disciplinary matrix. In short, the student at the end of the programme of study is now able to operate in a greater range of contexts; and understand more examples of the construct or more applications of it, and can operate with a greater range of ideas. Indeed, their knowledge and skill base has undergone a deepening or intensifying. Whereas extension refers to the amount or range of progression, intensification refers to the extent to which a sophisticated understanding has replaced a superficial understanding of the concept, idea or framework. There is also a type of progression, abstracting, which involves moving from a concrete understanding of a concept to a more abstract version, with a further measure being an increased capacity to articulate, explain or amplify an idea or construct, i.e. the student retains the ability to deploy the skill, and in addition, he or she can now articulate, explain or amplify what they are able to do and what they have done.

Progression

Actual transitions, however, rarely conform to these forms of progression. In the first place, the end-point is understood in different ways. Expectations about what constitutes Masters level work are not clear in the minds of students. A student moving from a PGCE course to a Masters programme identifies this sense of confusion:

> For me it was the first assignment we did. It was quite confusing because I felt, I had done my undergraduate degree and I had done my PGCE straight afterwards so I kind of had an idea of what was expected for university level, degree level, but I did not know what was expected in terms of M for Masters' level. I felt a little confused as to what exactly should I include or what my boundaries were, and I spoke about it with the leading subject area and the leader explained to me what was expected. But I still wasn't confident in myself in terms of what I could do, so in the end I decided to do the best I could for my first draft, send it off and see what the consequences will be.

Nor is there unequivocal agreement between tutors as to what the standard is, and at what stage during the programme of study the student should be expected to meet this standard:

> I think just to understand what the structure that is expected is and what are some key elements that are expected. Because when you say, 'The world is your oyster, go ahead', but then you get the feedback and there is an expectation of 'Here is the structure that we are expecting, here are the elements that must be included for a higher mark'. So I mean, yes, it is great to have this but the reality as well is that you are going to have two markers who have different expectations. So you really do need to understand those and work within those boundaries.

The level itself may be understood in a number of different ways: as an abstract description; as an exemplar of a standard; as a process; or as a concrete description of a performance at this level. Different tutors will assess the performance of the student in different ways:

> Which is why I am not dwelling so much on it, why I am saying in terms of the higher level marks, what I am doing I feel is not so close to the criteria and if it isn't, therefore, what can I do? Would everybody be looking – well they made it very clear that that is what they will be marking us against, therefore I have to believe that. But you do question it because it is subjective and my marking will be very different to somebody who is marking according to these guidelines, they may read it very differently.

Students seek reassurance about whether they are meeting the new standard at various points in the course, and if they are not, how they can perform at the appropriate level. Here a student identifies a possible solution:

> And I think it is also dependent on the individual, how much work you take upon yourself to investigate within yourself. Talk to a few people within your department, and in the school who have a Master's level degree, and they were kind enough to show me an example of their work. So I knew from their work what a good grade looked like and what to do for the next level.

Another student suggests that experimentation or trial and error is an essential strategy:

> It was somewhat trial and error. You know, the first draft, submit it and then receiving the feedback. So meeting with my tutor and discussing okay this is the format that she was looking for. Then also signing up for a writing class and learning more about structure and form for different types of essays that were being written. Then, also discussion with peers. 'How are you doing this. This how I did this? Was it quite right? What did you do?' So collaboration with peers too.

However, what complicates the picture is the establishment of a norm of progression on all programmes of study and consequently a series of preferred actions to achieve it.

A norm of progression is understood in a number of ways. First, in terms of what is expected of students by the authority, with the authorial act being understood as the exercise of discursive or allocative powers. This is an output and performance model, so that students are expected to provide outputs which are constructed in a particular way and within a particular time frame. This is instantiated by the student in different ways depending on their past histories and current levels of understanding. Second, in terms of their own view of what constitutes knowledge development, where the criteria might include for example, their sense of security (i.e. not being disconcerted or uncomfortable) or their sense of positioned identity in relation to the educational setting they are operating within.

An example of this relates to the use of a notion of independent learning. This, we found, was an essential feature of the official discourse. How is this discursive configuration used by those with authority? The independent learner operates by themselves in relation to their mediations with people, practices, documents, texts, and objects. They have the capacity to perform on their own, including performing or being in a learning situation. The independent learner operates at a distance from their tutor (and this therefore suggests a restricted role for the tutor). The independent learner doesn't require help over and above a stipulated amount; this is a form of pathologising or normalising the learner, and a particular way of organising practice (i.e. through quantifying allocations of time for each student), to place pressure on students to perform and to perform in a particular way.

> I was going to say that I know my experience sometimes was unique because I would talk to peers and they would say, 'Oh my tutor was just rubbish and they didn't help me at all'. But my four different tutors that I have over all my courses, one was super supportive and that was you know, 'Why don't you rewrite this and email it to me', I mean she might have looked at three or four drafts, which is very unique. And then other tutors have just one hour of the entire term to give you and you have used the allotted, 'So far you have 55 minutes so what can I do in five more minutes for you?' That is like 'Whoa okay', so there is a huge variety.

The norm works by disciplining the student, so that they strive to be independent.

> Basically what happened with me was I was doing my dissertation and my tutor went off because her husband was ill. Prior to that I wasn't clear about what I was supposed to be doing and I didn't feel that I had enough support and guidance to be

clear about what I was doing. And I thought well I do need a lot of support and guidance I am not the brain of Britain, so I am not one of those students who can just go off and do it on my own. I do need a lot of support. And I felt intimidated to email her because she would be like, 'Well you have only got one hour left' or whatever, that is what it says in the handbook, she was always referring me to the handbook and so on. Every time I emailed her and she emailed me, she would CC: the head of the course. I don't know why she felt a need to do that. I found that intimidating.

Normalising students also involves an overt process of standardisation:

But of course if you standardise you tend to standardise in terms of one draft and that's. And for people perhaps, there was a point, I can't remember who made it, around the table. People who perhaps need a few more drafts don't get it do they?

However, we should be aware that "normalising processes produce norms and their agencies, which are rarely free of the contradictions, cleavages, and dilemmas they are set up to control" (Bernstein 1990, 159). So, 'normalising' never works in an essentialising and determining way.

What is the point of this discourse? It operates as part of an efficiency model and it can be easily captured to support a managerialist agenda. It fits with an econometric model; that is, it offers: value for money and reduced cost, by reducing workloads and intensifying work. 'The new 'subject of free-market neo-liberalism', the independent student, is thereby fully responsible for her own educational 'choices' and 'future', and the 'non-traditional' students [and others] are pathologised as being deficient because they are 'dependent' on their tutors' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). How is the notion of dependency understood? The dependent student is demanding of time, information, reassurance, feedback, models of good practice, and the interpretation of level criteria.

Learning

Then there is the learning of the norm. For example, a student said that she had learnt how to 'work' the system:

I have been here over a year now, and this is my first experience of Higher education, 25 years too late. I just came in through the vocational route and for me, the other day I was sitting down with my partner and got out my first assignment, my first essay and was reading it and thought, "What a load... What was that about?" but I passed it, I don't know how. And for me it is more about, I think I have learnt the system.

What does this mean? How to go on in the practice? What are the rules? Can the student instantiate these rules in terms of their own behavioural repertoires? Is it about learning to manipulate the system? Or is it about coping within the system? Coping in the system may mean more than simply becoming more skilful, with an assumption being made that the system is perfectly attuned to learning and the recognition of learning. It may be that coping means following a set of rules which the person does not believe in and perhaps does not even understand. This is rule-following learning. An example might be to do with making critical readings of texts, authorities etc. What are the possible ways that critical readings of

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texts and authorities could be made? First, there is what could be called an internal or imminent critique of the object, whereby implicit or even in some cases explicit criteria for making such critical judgements is derived from the piece itself. As we are suggesting here, in most cases the piece being criticised has an internal logic of its own, that is, this internal logic subsumes within itself a set of criteria which in this first scenario constitutes the grounds for making the critical judgement. We need to be careful about assuming that the object is perfectly integrated, and this means that any reading of a text, authority, object etc. is usually selective, incomplete, and partial. Second, the source for the criteria used in making critical judgements is external or non-imminent, and in addition, this doesn't imply that there is only one type of external source. The external source might be the reader of the text, authority etc., i.e. the person making the critical judgement; or it might be a set of explicit criteria produced by the institution in which the judgement is being made; or it might be from some other source, which appeals to the person making the critical judgement. If criticality is the standard, what is it? - a type of reading, a rationalisation of belief, an understanding of alternative perspectives (?):

> I have been inducted into this way of thinking or talking. Yes, of course it is, because it gives me another option. I would have liked a bit of an orientation perhaps earlier on, which could perhaps have speeded that process up. I now have a wider repertoire than of thinking. I have got another way of thinking.

Indeed this is an active process. In it one looks for alternatives, it is a pedagogic process, an ability to understand the provisionality of knowledge, and the need to test everything against experience or previous knowledge, what other people are telling you, or criteria of excellence; while at the same challenging these different constructs. Many students found this difficult to do:

> And I want to say something about feedback and grades, with my very first assignment, my module was interesting because my second marker commented on my writing. Which she said was very good but whose comments I wasn't actually sure where I had gone wrong. I went to the learning centre and then I understood, and I must commend the programme you have with the learning centre in terms of what the University wanted and I think if they could let us know that, in terms of writing, the critical analysis. It was really the critical analysis and how to critique very early on. I know the lecturer has to deliver his unit and that may not be part of his programme but if somehow they can inform students that the standard, this is the sort of standard that we will be looking for across the board. It is a critical analysis as opposed to say your first degree which is a different style of writing. So that we would be a little bit more aware of how to write.

The transition then involves learning a different set of parameters, new ideas, a different way of understanding in the field. It therefore involves a re-norming, a new expectation, a different determination of the task. If we take writing as an example, then these are some of the new characteristics: longer, more theoretically-orientated, and more abstract pieces; writing from a disciplinary perspective; comprehensive, referenced, argued, grammatically correct, relevant, and involving a rejection of certain types of writing. In short, the style of writing demands: complexity, formality, precision, objectivity, explicitness, an evidence base, accuracy and is written in a way which qualifies its pronouncements.

> It was particularly in terms of writing the assignments because I had written some things as a teacher before, things like the staff magazine, that sort of thing, and I felt quite confident in my ability to write as a teacher. Then when I wrote my first assignment for the Master's I was told that it was totally wrong, completely the wrong tone of writing. It was criticised for sounding like a practitioner, which was actually the thing that I was proud of.

A student therefore going through this transition is engaged in a learning process, that is, they are required to absorb or inculcate a new way of writing and the thinking behind it.

> For my subject, in terms of the content, and what to include, we had guidelines because they gave us a page of somebody's PGCE which was close to an MA kind of work, so they provided us with that information….I modelled myself on that. But I found that my writing style is very different from that particular example so I used it as guidelines, then again I didn't dwell on it so much because bearing in mind that it was PGCE work not Master's level work. So I think they have revised that and they have rectified that in the second set of work that we are doing where they have provided us with a guideline and they came in with an example of many different types of work from different subjects which was MA level, and showed it to us, saying 'This is what we expect, the kind of level you need to be writing'. So our concerns were taken into consideration and they did show us a way forward.

Writing is therefore always set within a new type of reasoning. This new type of reasoning has an enclosed discursive structure and thus the truth or falsity of the product emanates from within the style of reasoning. The justification for this is internal and the criteria for judging products such as dissertations, assignments and the like reflect this. Hacking writes as follows: 'there are three propositions – i) it is a given style of reasoning that determines the truth or falsity of propositions that necessarily require reasoning; ii) there exist many styles of reasoning; iii) we cannot reason as to whether alternative systems of reasoning are better or worse than ours, because the propositions to which we reason get their sense only from the method of reasoning employed. The propositions have no existence independent of the ways of reasoning towards them' (Hacking, 1982, pp. 64-5).

Inevitably the learning comprises a pedagogical process. However, there are two distinct ways of understanding this. In the first, the expert or scaffolder constructs, in relation to their understanding of the needs of the student, a scaffold or pathway to the acquiring of knowledge by the student, and presents it to the student. The student then follows the implicit and explicit rules of the scaffolding and acquires the new knowledge. There is no negotiation involved in the development of the scaffold with the student. Diagnosis of the student's needs and state of readiness is undertaken by the other or expert; they then construct a learning programme based on this initial diagnosis and support the student through this learning programme. This can be compared with a different form of scaffolding, where the student not only undertakes a programme of learning, but is involved in the development of this programme. Whether the form of the scaffolding was negotiated with the student or not varies between programmes, and is manifested either as an imposed or a negotiated settlement with the student.

Clearly, this model of scaffolding is dependent on the idea of the expert also being the facilitator; and it is hard to see within the constraints of this model what the role of the expert would be unless the programme of work was in some sense constructed and delivered by someone with a greater knowledge of the process of learning. The student is unlikely, given their developmental state, to be able to construct such a programme; because if they could then there would be no need for a relationship with an expert. In so far as this suggest an either/or picture of the process, it is misleading. There are a number of in-between-situations in which elements of negotiation are present. These might include: the desirability of involving the student in the diagnostic process because only they have sufficient knowledge of their learning needs; or the positioning of the student so that they take a full, engaged and willing part in the scaffolding process for it to work. These two in-between-positions reflect different views on the nature of the negotiated process that comprises scaffolding.

Scaffolding then is a form of guidance in which the novice engages with the expert to solve a problem or carry out a task. The Zone of Proximal Development refers to the gap between the novice and the expert and scaffolding is used as a way of bridging this gap. Clearly, the novice is incapable of bridging this gap on their own and thus the active intervention of the expert is necessary to allow it to happen. In this sense of scaffolding, the expert is understood as a pedagogic expert though they will also have expert knowledge of the process that the initiate is being inducted into. Bruner (2006) for example, using a Vygotskian meta-theory, argues that the internalisation of culture requires a particular set of pedagogic principles which underpin the exchange: a concordance between what a learner can do and what the cultural message which is being transmitted offers; an expert who intuits what the learner needs and then devises appropriate ways of delivering it; and a shared agreement between expert and learner about how such 'an inter-subjective arrangement is supposed to work canonically *in this particular culture'* (Bruner, 2006, p. 69).

While the literature on Assessment for Learning suggests that effective implementation has a significant impact on student achievement, there is much less agreement about how to implement it, or indeed, what is encompassed by the term. Bransford *et al*. (2000: 257) suggest that formative assessment 'involves making students' thinking visible by providing frequent opportunities for assessment, feedback, and revision, as well as teaching students to engage in self-assessment'. However, two further elements appear to be essential for effective implementation of Assessment for Learning. The first is that students must come to understand the criteria for success: 'The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is continuously able to monitor the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point' (Sadler, 1989: 121). A student expands on this:

> Those criteria, yes. Up to the moment, up to the middle standard, yes I can connect my way, but I am finding some difficulties into connecting into the higher level of criteria. So I'm going to speak to the course leader and see how I can navigate around it and try to improve my work. But it is a very good guideline to have in place, which I thought if we had had in the first place, if it had been pointed out to us. It did exist but we didn't know where it was, so if it had been pointed out to us we could have done much better. If it had been pointed out to us that this is what you need to be doing, I

think I wouldn't have felt so left alone or so confused in the first assignment. So I did like that.

The second is that peer assessment may be a necessary step towards effective self-assessment. Implementing assessment for learning clearly requires attention to a range of other features of classroom practice in addition to the originally simple idea - feedback. For example, the use of grades for marking assignments, though welcomed by some students, was also heavily criticised for not being able to act in a formative sense, for distorting the learning process, and for curriculum contamination.

There are different forms that learning can take. Learning implies some form of internal change and thus a focusing on some part of the person. These focuses are: attributes/dispositions/inclinations, that is, more permanent states of being of the person; knowledge constructs; skills; virtues or ethical dispositions; meta-language processes; meta-learning processes; and meta-cognitive processes. It also implies a disruption to one or more of these attributes. There is an element of scale here, so that learning may be more or less influential. There is also a sense in which that influence is manifested in different ways, with the more powerful the message the greater potentiality that learning has to cause disruption to the equilibrium of the learner. Of course, that equilibrium is firstly manufactured by the learner, and secondly may not necessarily be in perfect balance. There is then a sense of confusion, or at least there may be, and this has an impact on how that learning can take place; this means that in order for learning to take place, there must be some dissolution of certainty.

> But what about if they said learning was about in the first instance getting confused. Actually getting into a situation where I start to question all my assumptions is one way I see it going. And then of course I hope that I move through that to some more stable state? Yes, you go in and out, I call it the spaghetti theory. At some stage, I feel a sense of confusion. Complete. Where is this leading, what I thought I came for isn't of course what is there. But I think it has happened enough times to me that it doesn't throw me. I think I am just feeling a bit old for it and that feels a little bit – this is the first time that I have thought, I am not sure how much time I have to work this out. I have always loved the journey and I have always done that learning but maybe this has to be a little more directed. But that is probably a personal issue rather than a university issue. Everything is confused. I always expect to go there.

Good learning sets up a jolt to the system; not necessarily disabling. There is also the sense implied here that learning doesn't take a linear form; a notion of forward and backward steps. Finally, there is an expectation that confusion is imminent; an expectation of it is a pre-requisite of being conscious.

Cultural Transitions

There is some dispute as to whether there is or is not a pedagogical culture shock for international students. Certainly here is an example in which a normative practice of teacher-student relations is transposed to a different country and produces a distinct sense of unease in the recipient, i.e. the student is expecting something from the pedagogical relationship and

is disappointed. The pedagogical relationship has to be reconceptualised in the new cultural setting.

> No, to understand the education system in England as a foreign student 10 years ago I found it very hard to follow. To give you an example, in China or maybe Asian students and teachers are very strict to tell you what you didn't do well. But we don't encourage you, we don't say, "You are very good" we are very negative to point out what you are not praised… No positive, we don't do it in a positive way. That is to say I have discussed this quite a bit for a few years with different people. So if you are brought up in that way and you get used to teachers pointing out what you didn't do well. So while I was at Yu Yei I think I have a half year extension but when the English tutor tells me, "Oh well done" or "Very good", it gave me a wrong message and I thought I did quite well and actually it is

Students have different understandings of what they think is good pedagogy:

> In my experience I think Asian students do have a different way to learn compared with a western student because when we start a new term and we had argument and the American and Canadian students or English students didn't like the teacher, talked too much in the class, and they said three hours is too long and they can read the articles. But for me, and I emailed him as well and I disagree with them. They had a group discussion, but I don't like that because I think the way I am brought up, with a professor standing in the front, they have a lot of information and I can learn a lot for me. Because I think it is the way I was brought up, right? And I don't have a problem with sitting two or three hours with not moving and it is true. But the western students do not like that. They want to talk, they want to interact with each other and challenge presumably the views of the professor or teacher?

In addition, different students interpret what is happening to them in different ways; in other words, they give different labels or provide different descriptions of the pedagogy they are receiving.

Bureaucratic Knowledge

There is a dissonance between the actual process of learning and those technologies which are both intended to allow that learning to take place in a more efficient manner and monitor the effectiveness of that learning. The dissonance occurs because these technologies contribute little to the process of learning; in effect, they are different activities with a different focus, though they purport to be about the same thing. They are operating at different levels, on the surface they seem to be about the same thing, but at a deeper level they are not. Of course quality assurance mechanisms have as their purpose an intention or desire to change what is happening in the world, but this is because they act in an ideal sense so the programme leader conforms in an imitative sense, or is compelled to conform or comply because of a fear of sanctions, or because those sanctions have been applied. What may result is a simulative situation where the academic conforms on the surface to the imperative demands of the quality assurance process, but in fact operates through a different set of logics. Whether they do this successfully is a different matter because they have to be highly skilled in playing both games simultaneously; in effect operating discursively along

parallel tracks and making sure that the one doesn't contaminate the other. Their sense of direction however, is always primarily directed towards putting in place the optimal conditions for learning of their students. Though the purpose of the bureaucratisation is to act as a form of labour control, this term fails to explicitly explain the full import of the process, because the colonising process achieves its purpose through changing the epistemology of the setting. This entails a displacement of content through operating a standardised bureaucratic form of knowledge. The consequences are: i) confusion in the mind of the student; ii) resentment by the student; and iii) different descriptions of the processes the students are going through. There is a process of fabrication.

There is a sense in which the notion of simulation$_1$ (a positive learning experience for the student, whereby the student acts out the performative element of the learning construct within a constructed environment on the assumption that transfer to a real-life setting then becomes possible) actually merges into simulation$_2$ (a faux investigation for example, where the student conforms to the epistemological underpinnings of the bureaucratically modelled practice). The social actor may also be fabricating by pretending to be committed to something and actually going through the motions of doing something when in fact she is doing the opposite. Bureaucratisation anyway operates at a superficial level, and it is worth noting that the preferred type of data is reductionist; the imperative of bureaucratised knowledge is what works.

Theory-Practice Relationship

The relationship between theory and practice is central to the programmes of study undertaken by the students:

> For me it is the practice and the theory colliding and feeding on each other.

> I want the challenge not so much, not without the professor or the lecturer, but I really feel that there is so much experience in the rooms that I am sitting in that people are there for very interesting reasons who have a lot of experience, and what I am really interested in and it is probably because I have had quite a bit of university education, I am really interested in how the theory and practice work, the practice in a funny way. So sometimes I get really frustrated with the academic.

This is because theory is understood as distinct from practice and indeed as detached from it. So, one can talk about theory as emerging from practice, in that theory is a synthesis of a number of practices, and thus theory in this sense has no direct influence on practice; it operates as knowledge rather than practice. However, the more usual form it can take is that theory is taught on programmes, which is then converted into practice and the improvement of practices. A student reflects on the relationship between theory and practice:

> There is a lot of suspicion about academics in the workplace and a lot of suspicion about anyone who uses theory and I actually think that that is not a bad suspicion but at the same time I think there is a lot more that could be accepted in the workplace about the knowledge people have and about looking at the bigger picture in what you are doing. So you are not just isolated in your little patch and you meet other people who get to the same point in their little patch. I think this is where the academic world

really has a lot to offer and keeps kind of slightly – I don't know – missing the boat. Workplace practice is missing the boat, in some sense? If it doesn't draw in some way on theory, and then academics miss the boat. They are doing it in reverse and there's a lot of people in these Master's programmes who will leave the academic world and go right back into the workplace and that is what I am doing a Master's for. I am not doing it for an academic career; I am doing it to be able to defend practice, to be really able to talk about it, to enrich it. So that is what I am really interested in and some of the lecturers aren't in the workplace and that's where some of the experience in the room is incredibly important. At the same time what I want from the lecturers is some more of that linkage, or we could all go away and go back into work. And we bring in the practice and we are trying to do a link to but to me that – but that may not be everyone's view of a Masters.

It was noted that students experienced a frustration with academic knowledge, and expressed a desire to engage with practice. And what follows from this is a resistance to disengage from practice, and sometimes there is a reluctance to change.

Feedback and Formative Assessment for International M-level Students

In addition to the above, two other consultative exercises were conducted in two different higher education institutions: i) a survey of international M-level students focusing on feedback during their programmes of study, and specifically the role of formative assessment in supporting students at a higher education institution; ii) an Oxford University College perspective on the transition to M-level study. The intention of the former is to see if key findings from the earlier phase of the overall project, where the research was conducted with students in other institutions, were replicated among a different postgraduate student body. In particular, the diverse international (approximately eighty countries represented) student body drawn from a range of health-related professions, allowed for replicability to be looked at with respect to the perspective developed for the international strand in the first year of the project.

The School conducts an annual MSc student satisfaction survey as part of its array of mechanisms for gathering feedback on the student experience. This survey covers a range of general aspects of their study experience and is conducted towards the end of the academic year. In the Summer of 2011, additional questions were added to this survey aimed at eliciting feedback on the transition to Masters study, support provided for that and specifically the role of formative assessment in supporting students. All MSc students were invited to participate in the survey which remained open for completion electronically over a period of four weeks.

The extra questions they were asked were as follows: i) Which of the following did you have experience of in the five years before starting your MSc? ii) Overall, how did you find the academic level of your MSc? iii) During your MSc, to what extent did you feel you knew how well your studies were progressing (e.g. by means of written or verbal feedback from staff, groupwork or conversations with other students, etc.)? iv) Each MSc course has a number of opportunities to take assessments which don't count towards the degree result (for example, progress tests). How many such 'optional' assessments did you do? v) How did you feel about the opportunities you were given to take assessments or tests that wouldn't count

towards the degree result? vi) Can you suggest anything more the School could have done to give you a better idea of how your studies were progressing during the year? and vii) Can you suggest anything more the School could have done to help you cope with the demands of MSc-level study, or that you wish you had done yourself?

228 MSc students responded out of 643 sent questionnaires, a response rate of 35%. Responses were received from students on all 18 MSc courses. Respondents were broadly representative of the student body as a whole, including by course, fee status, mode of study and gender. The only exceptions were that students of White ethnicity, students from North America and students aged between 30 and 34 were all slightly over-represented, while students of East Asian ethnicity were slightly under-represented.

The Tables that follow report on the variables assessed, broken down by students' mode of study, region of origin and age group (other factors were analysed but showed limited variation in results).

Q.1 Experience in the 5 years prior to starting MSc (% respondents, multiple responses allowed)

	No. respondents	Undergrad	Postgrad	Med/Vet	Employment linked to MSc	Other employment	>6m gap	Other
Study mode								
Full-time	198	60	18	25	43	38	7	2
Part-time	30	60	20	7	60	40	13	0
Region								
UK	90	62	12	21	33	39	9	0
West Europe	34	62	32	23	56	38	3	3
Africa	24	54	4	42	54	21	4	0
North America	45	78	13	13	47	51	11	2
Age								
<25y	61	93	5	6	21	31	6	2
25-29	77	77	17	28	51	48	10	1
30-34	65	28	35	28	54	42	5	0
35+	24	12	8	33	62	21	8	0

Nb. The population has had a range experience before starting the MSc. Part-timers are more likely to have been in employment directly related to their MSc. More North Americans had been in undergraduate study, whilst the age profile is as might be expected, e.g. younger students are more likely to have been in undergraduate study.

Q.2 Academic Level of MSc (% of Respondents)

	No. Respondents	Harder than expected	As expected	Easier than expected
Study mode				
Full-time	198	25	61	14
Part-time	30	20	63	17
Region				
UK	90	18	70	12
West Europe	34	26	50	24
Africa	24	38	63	0
North America	45	16	56	29
Age				
<25y	61	18	64	18
25-29	77	21	64	16
30-34	65	31	55	14
35+	24	33	62	4

Nb. There is little difference according to mode of study whilst students from Africa and older students reported the academic level as being harder than expected compared to their counterparts.

Q.3 Ease of knowing re progress (% respondents)

	No. respondents	Very easy	Mostly easy	Mostly difficult	Very difficult
Study mode					
Full-time	198	12	69	12	6
Part-time	30	10	67	10	13
Region					
UK	90	13	71	9	7
West Europe	34	15	53	29	3
Africa	24	17	67	17	0
North America	45	2	47	44	7
Age					
<25y	61	13	62	18	7
25-29	77	15	53	29	3
30-34	65	12	55	28	5
35+	24	12	58	21	8

Nb. There are modest differences according to mode of study or age, whilst students from North America reported that they found it relatively difficult to know how they were progressing compared to their counterparts.

Q.4 Number of optional formative assessments completed (% respondents)

	No. respondents	All offered	Some offered	None of those offered	Not aware of being offered
Study mode					
Full-time	198	59	31	5	5
Part-time	30	63	23	3	10
Region					
UK	90	57	28	7	9
West Europe	34	59	38	3	0
Africa	24	58	38	4	0
North America	45	68	20	7	5
Age					
<25y	61	54	31	7	8
25-29	77	63	30	3	4
30-34	65	63	25	6	6
35+	24	58	38	4	0

Nb. There are no substantial differences between groups in the undertaking of formative assessments.

Q.5 Feeling about number of optional formative assessments opportunities (% respondents)

	No. respondents	Too many	About right	Too few	Not aware of being offered
Study mode					
Full-time	198	5	66	22	7
Part-time	30	3	67	20	10
Region					
UK	90	3	68	18	11
West Europe	34	12	71	18	0
Africa	24	0	67	29	4
North America	45	0	59	27	9
Age					
<25y	61	7	58	25	10
25-29	77	0	70	23	6
30-34	65	5	65	23	8
35+	24	12	79	4	4

Nb. There is little difference according to mode of study, whilst students from Africa and north America, and younger students, were more likely to report that they thought there were too few opportunities for formative assessments compared to their counterparts.

Written comments reinforced the quantitative findings, especially with respect to: understanding the assessment system compared to where they had studied previously; reinforcing the value of the personal tutor system for supporting students in understanding

their progress in their studies; and a view that formative assessments should be more styled around the unseen written exams format used at the latter stage of the course (in June)

Transitions to Postgraduate Study: A College Perspective (David Watson)

We close this chapter by offering an individual perspective on the themes and issues discussed above by one member of the research team.

Introduction

In October 2010 I moved from the Institute of Education to take up a new position as Principal of Green Templeton College at the University of Oxford. I have remained engaged with the IoE- based "transitions" project, as have the other two National Teaching Fellows (and a third "strand" leader) who have moved to other institutions since the project on "facilitating transitions to Masters-level learning through improving formative assessment and feedback" began. We have all found ways of both closing out the data collection and analysis that we conducted during the initial year and adding perspectives from our new environments.

We have characterized the types of transition under scrutiny in the project in the following way: pure to applied discipline; international context to UK national context; work intensification; and non-academic (or non-standard background) to academic setting. Both part-time (through a variety of modes of study, including distance-learning and short-term intensive attendance) and full-time students are included.

In my own case, in addition to working on the strand of transition from discipline-based undergraduate study to the special environment of the professionally orientated Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), I have been involved in collecting and articulating "emerging themes" from across the project and "reality-testing" both the themes and the interventions they seem to require with other groups of students.

In this latter endeavour I have also been presented by my new job with a serendipitous natural experiment. Green Templeton is a graduate only college, founded in 2008. This is how it describes itself on the College's website:

While Green Templeton is formally Oxford's newest College, founded in 2008, we draw on deep scholarly resources. These are brought together from our roots in Green College (especially in medicine, health and the social sciences) and Templeton College (in business and management). The result is an extraordinarily powerful community, of students, fellows and staff, dedicated to understanding the issues of managing human welfare in the modern world.

As a graduate-only college aiming to set a new Oxford standard for postgraduate education, GTC provides a friendly and supportive environment for Masters and research students, where they can focus on their studies as well as pursue other sporting, cultural and social interests in the company of their peers. It is a remarkably diverse and lively international student body: currently more than 60% of our students come from countries outside the UK.
The College is fortunate in its location and its resources. We occupy a beautiful site, with the iconic 18th Century Radcliffe Observatory at its heart. In a short time Green Templeton has become a place where people from all over the world wish to come together to discuss major questions of public policy, of professional practice and of community and cultural development. Members of the College learn from these exchanges, and crucially from each other. We have a particular commitment to the flow of ideas across traditional disciplinary and professional boundaries, a commitment which is facilitated by our egalitarian ethos which brings students, fellows and other academics together to mix freely throughout the College, at meals and social events, as well as in College-based academic initiatives. (See www.gtc.ox.ac.uk .)

In the academic year there were approximately 500 students registered with the College, on the following types of programme:

DPhil	214
MPhil	11
MSc by Research	8
MSc (taught)*	83
MBA*	64
Executive MBA*	21
PGCE*	11
Medicine	77
Medicine (pg. entry)*	16
Cert/Dip	3
Total	**510**

All of the students marked * represent categories of taught post-graduate work like those identified in the "Transitions" project's initial four groups.

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Collections

One of my duties is to conduct what the University calls "collections." These are annual meetings between the Head of House and each student. At GTC we do this through a 15-minute interview with each registered student, who is often accompanied by his or her College adviser (or personal tutor). This case study is based on over 200 such engagements.

In advance of each interview I will have read a personal file, including the student's application, details of any scholarship and other support (at Oxford, in advance of admission, each student has to file and have approved a "financial plan" covering the full length of their course), official records of academic progress (recorded on a standard system by the student and academic supervisor[s]), and termly notes from the College adviser. Students are invited to raise any issues of concern with either academic progress or College life. I am able to talk to them about their academic progress, career plans and ways in which the College may be able better to support them. At the end of each session (characteristically two or three hours covering between eight and twelve students) I compose a note on any actions required for the Senior Tutor (a College Fellow who is responsible for students and their progress).

The exercise is a considerable administrative burden but both I and my predecessors as Head of House have found it immensely worthwhile. I understand that other Colleges (characteristically those with large numbers of undergraduates) streamline it by having either group sessions (up to twelve students at any one time) or much shorter interviews (the shortest I have heard about is three minutes!).

Transitional issues

The principal concerns we have identified to date from the core project's research into the four types of transition relate to the following (they necessarily overlap and intertwine):

- level (including how standards are set, and how students are able to understand and monitor their performance);
- identity (what happens to the student as a person in this new environment, and how this is assessed against the models of other persons – peers, teachers, mentors, staff etc.);
- organisation (what can and should be expected of the practical arrangements for the course, and in particular how these impact on the participants);
- technical and learning environment (including the provision of resources and support);
- cultural sensitivities (arising out of the starting-point, transition and final destination of the student in each case).

Thinking about these issues from the perspective of GTC Masters-level students it is important to note that all are full-time; all experience the peculiar intensity of the Oxford 10-week term; all are formally members of a residential community (55% are in housing managed directly by the College, all are expected to take part in communal activities including meals); all experience the cultural effects of a community with a clear majority (60%) of members from outside the United Kingdom; all also have an "academic" home within a department, as well as often a laboratory, or a research unit; all have been required (as set out above) to project their anticipated financial and other support throughout the

duration of the course; for a substantial minority this is not their first experience of post-graduate study; for another minority the Masters course is part of a clear plan to proceed directly to a research degree; for further minority (the MBA students) an explicit part of the course is the identification and pursuit of new post-graduation employment opportunities; and all are conscious of the high degree of selection that has led to their arrival on particular courses. These features all provide interesting and rather distinct angles on the elements we have been able to observe and subject to analysis in Phase One of the project, including: resilience; autonomy; belonging; experience of power; collaboration (and competition) and a sense of satisfaction and/or progress.

I am able to talk directly to individual students about their understanding of these issues. I have also been able to draw upon a "student feedback" survey of GTC students conducted between 3 and March 2011. This elicited 148 completed responses (out of 505 invitations; a response rate of 29%). It included 54 questions, 42 of which required responses on a 7-point scale and twelve of which invited open responses.

Issues

Confidence is high, as might be expected from this selective group of students. However, it can also be brittle, and once lost hard to regain. Students on the taught courses have a palpable sense of being over-programmed, not least because of the short terms. As a result, the opportunities for formative feedback (although formally built into several courses) are significantly reduced: the student can frequently be onto the topic/subject/assignment "after next" before there is an opportunity fully to discuss performance on an earlier piece of work. Supervisors (of various kinds – including, for example, the leaders of labs.) have enormous moral and practical authority. They are invariably referred to with affection when things are going well and fear when it is not. This (along with the effects of item 2 above) can lead to a preference for informal pragmatic problem-solving rather than recourse to official channels. In these circumstances the *locus* and the resources of the College as an advocate (through the Senior Tutor, the Academic Registrar, or the Academic Advisor) can be very important.

When financial issues do arise, because they will represent formal changes from and agreed and planned position, they are likely to be more rather than less serious. At the same time, some of the escape-routes (like part-time, casual work or family loans) available to students in our core study are not as accessible (the timetable militates against the former; the latter are likely to have already been fully factored in). Somewhat counter-intuitively, the energy expended on extra-curricular activities, whether academic (like subject and topic-based societies, seminars and lectures) or social (like sports and charitable activity) is remarkable. There is a strong sense that each student relies on the College and the University to provide resources and opportunities to develop an individual "hinterland;" again in contrast to our core sample who more regularly rely on family, friends and other networks beyond the university. The question of the reputation of the institution and (particularly in cases like the MBA) of the course is hugely salient. This can have a number of effects: positively in terms of pride in simply being here; perversely in terms of not wanting (through criticism) to devalue the currency. Some students react to the reputational point by simply expressing satisfaction in "being here." This can be especially true of students on business courses who are older and more experienced than many of their peers. This can lead to a somewhat ironic

and patronising tone. The "badge" of success in being admitted to Oxford is the principal prize.

In addition, and from the student survey, it should be noted that there was frequent frustration about "induction" into the University, the academic department and the College (58% "largely" or "totally" dissatisfied with the University and 66% with the College). Here is one of the more analytical and moderate open-ended responses.

> The amount of induction days was overwhelming. I think there were 4 or 5 induction days, from the college, institute, department, medical sciences division and I think I may have forgotten one. I feel very welcome now, however maybe it is a bit too much. The last induction day was mid November, after having worked for 6 weeks already.

There were mixed feelings about the system of pastoral "advisers" organized by the College (who may or may not be in the same field of study as the student). Here the statistical evidence was in the middle (with 56% feeling the system was adequate, fairly satisfactory or largely satisfactory, surrounded by 10% totally dissatisfied and 12% totally satisfied). However, the open-ended comments ran between 47 that were critical, 15 positive and six neutral. Here are two contrasting examples:

> Make sure that the people who sign up to be academic tutors actually want to do the job, not like mine who said he really didn't care much about the college.

> I very much value my college supervisor's insights into the content of my work (as superficial as this may be) and his encouragement. Not least, I feel that if I ever encountered any kinds of problems with my Department, I could turn to him without hesitation. Knowing he can be a reliable source of support is important for me.

Further to this, it was noted how important the cultural context in which study takes place is for both academic and personal well-being. The survey suggests, for example, both very high levels of extra-curricular participation (82% taking part in College-based lectures, seminars, personal and professional development workshops, or social events) and isolated but deep feelings of alienation. Significantly the latter can often have to do with aspects of the dominant culture, especially for students who have religious, cultural or health-related concerns, about alcohol.

Returning to our five modal "areas of concern" from the overall project, there are some interesting elements of contrast and validation here. *Level* seems less salient, perhaps from a reduced likelihood of questioning it, perhaps as a result of selection and of having made some of the "transition" in advance. *Identity* is also apparently more stable (while recognizing that confidence can shade into over-confidence). *Organisation* can be equally frustrating (if not more, especially when tested against perceptions of cost and investment). *Resources* are not so likely to be criticized, with exception of student financial support; however, *Cultural Issues* loom at least as large.

Questions can thus be raised about the scaffolding of transitions in this particular institutional context supplied by personal resources, institutional support and the curriculum and

pedagogical differences of full- and part-time study. The College can learn from the lessons of the larger study, and the project can perhaps learn from the College.

In this chapter we have addressed a number of salient issues in relation to student learning transitions on M-level programmes of study: progression, normalisation, the use of grades, learning trajectories, cultural transitions, the development of bureaucratic knowledge, theory-practice relations, formative assessment processes and transitional experiences. In the final chapter we draw together our various conclusions from the different parts of our study, and offer an account of the most efficacious ways for students to progress through these transitions.

Chapter Seven: Policy and Resource Arrangements

The principal aim of this research project was to investigate students' transitions from undergraduate study or employment to Masters-level work, *and* develop and promote policy and resource arrangements derived from the investigation by improving formative assessment and feedback processes in higher education institutions. Our intentions at the beginning of the project were four-fold: to develop knowledge of these transitions and the particular problems associated with them; to understand how this relates to current forms of formative assessment and feedback provided on the programmes undertaken by these students; to develop models of effective feedback processes; and to develop models of effective transitions. This was a research-development-implementation-evaluation project.

The four transitions we chose to investigate were:

- *Pure to Applied Discipline*: this transition refers to students who, having taken a first degree in a non-applied subject such as physics or philosophy, then undertook a higher degree with an applied orientation. Movement is from a disciplinary base with an agreed set of methodologies and approaches to a new practice-orientated setting.

- *International Context to UK National Context*: this refers to the gap between an international student's expectations about learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and UK higher education approaches to learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

- *Work Intensification*: this transition focuses on the addition of part-time study responsibilities to full-time work. Students may encounter a number of problems in making this transition, including those related to time, energy, and commitment.

- *Non-academic and Non-standard Background to Academic Setting*: this transition refers particularly to current policy issues relating to Widening Participation agendas.

Students undergoing these single or multiple transitions are now common in UK higher education institutions.

We formulated a series of questions at the beginning of the project, which, in answering them, we felt would allow us to develop greater knowledge and understanding of the issues we were studying:

- How do transitions relating to disciplinarity, internationalism, work intensification and non-standard backgrounds currently operate?

- What learning problems do students encounter during these transitions?

- How do feedback and formative assessment processes currently operate in relation to these transition processes?

- How could these transition processes be remodelled so that they better meet the needs of students undergoing them?

- In what way could feedback and formative assessment processes be remodelled so that students are better able to progress their learning and more effectively meet the demands made on them by the transitions they choose to go through?

The aim has been to provide answers to the five questions listed above.

1. Those transitions which are relevant to postgraduate study, and in particular, Masters-level study, have a number of distinctive characteristics. These include: the transition's structure/agency relations; its compliance capacity in relation to formal rules, regulations and norms; movement through time (all transitions are characterised by movement from one time moment (T_a) to another ($T_\mathbf{b}$), and onwards to a series of other time moments (T_c to T_n)); the extent of its cultural embeddedness (this refers to factors such as duration, intensity, import, etc.); the transition's pathologising capacity (i.e. whether and to what extent the transition is understood as a normalizing and thus pathologising mechanism); its position in the lifecourse; its focus (for example, learning transitions, which refer to issues such as familiarity, receptiveness, assimilation, negotiation, rearrangement, formalisation, assessment/ accreditation, and the like); and how the transition relates to some end-point.

2. Students experience discipline-specific teaching approaches and interpretations of marking criteria, and, in addition, students conceive of the experience of study in different ways.

3. Transitions have in-built pathologising mechanisms. Pathologising mechanisms construct the student as initially diminished or inadequate, with Masters study being about repairing these deficiencies. This view of student identity fits with a training model for students currently endorsed by governments such as in the UK, in which the learning metaphor is that of acquiring a set of behaviours, called skills, which once acquired, enables the student to perform a set of actions which have been designated as appropriate or the norm for the workplace.

4. Transition processes have an official form (created in part by the rules and arrangements of resources of the institution in which the programme is placed) which may be in tension with the student's understanding and preferred view (implying a going-on in the focused area) of the particular transition.

5. There is a dissonance between the actual process of learning and those bureaucratic technologies which are both intended to allow that learning to take place in a more efficient manner and monitor the effectiveness of that learning. The dissonance occurs because these technologies contribute little to the process of learning; in effect, they are different activities with a different focus, though they purport to be about the same matter. What results is a simulation where the tutor conforms on the surface to the demands of the quality assurance process, but in fact operates through a different set of logics. Whether they do this successfully is a different matter because they have to be highly skilled in playing both games simultaneously; in effect operating discursively along parallel tracks and making sure that the one doesn't contaminate the other. Their sense of direction however, is always primarily towards putting in place the optimal conditions for

learning of their students. Though the purpose of the bureaucratisation is to act as a form of labour control, this term fails to identify the full import of the process, because it achieves its purpose through changing the epistemology of the setting. This entails a displacement of content by operating with a standardised bureaucratic form of knowledge.

6. If we put to one side the issue of time flows, i.e. linear, stepped, recursive, we can identify the life-course in different ways: i) life-course as a stepped system of statuses; ii) life-course as a stepped system of learning markers; iii) life-course as a stepped system of resource accumulations; iv) life-course as a stepped system of career events, and thus as age-related; v) life-course as a stepped system of identity moments. Transitions are integral to the life-course.

The International Strand

7. Students construct their own self-concept, but they do so in the context of their relationships in society. International students who come to the UK from a background of success and excellence as scholars and communicators to a place where they don't know the rules are particularly at risk.

8. International students were critical of unhelpful organisational arrangements and inadequate feedback as they deployed their unique personal and professional coping mechanisms. They were also highly critical of unhelpful organisational arrangements and bureaucratic assessment practices. Formal acknowledgement of learner progress and offering negotiation around published schedules were proposed as examples of showing such respect to these learners. In addition, early information about all aspects of the course is a significant factor in the quality of the one-year international Master's student's experience. For example, students' responses in this study identified the need to address existing schema early on in the programme. Many 'had a template in their heads' of how to write which required revision to accommodate the different requirements of the professional programme.

9. For some students, there are deeply-felt cultural sensitivities; not just about language, nationality, and ethnicity, but also class and prior preparation, disability and special needs. There is thus a need for awareness training for academics to avoid unintentional discrimination against international students in teaching and learning.

10. The conventional picture of the international student as mainly hampered in their academic achievement by a lack of language proficiency does not correspond to the findings of this study, where there were many commonalities between first-language English international students and international students with other first languages. Furthermore, the participants in this strand did not correspond to the stereotypes of international students that feature in the literature. Some non-Western students embraced critical reading and writing practices, and some Western students found these challenging. A non-UK student found the critical practices on her course naïve and undeveloped in relation to what she was used to in her home country.

11. Relationships with tutors and supervisors are paramount in combating loneliness and isolation for international students. To mitigate against this sense of isolation, international students should be encouraged to form multi-nationality networks.

The Pure-to-Applied Knowledge Strand

12. There is an issue of the appropriate level for students. This comprises not only concerns about how academic levels are set but also the question (probably the most frequently occurring) of "how am I doing?" This connects with other points about assessment criteria, assessment practice and feedback. It opens up questions, for example, about the relationship with prior academic work (formally at both higher and lower levels) and about a spectrum of performance (from "good enough" to "excellent").

13. There is an issue of identity. For example, it raises the very personal question: "what is this course doing to me as a person?" Or, "who am I becoming as result of this course?" How is any such change or transformation measured: against other students; against teachers, mentors and other staff members (including as role models); and against work colleagues?

14. There are house-keeping issues. Questions arose about how the group and individuals within it were being treated. Some quite intense concerns surfaced about mutual respect, about potential double-standards, as reflected, for example, in aspects of communication, of organisation, of rule-making and rule-breaking, of expectations and delivery (including of resources), and of administrative standards in general.

15. There is a bundle of technical issues, including IT environments, writing (format, style etc.), timetabling, and the scope of discretion and flexibility.

16. Resilience in relation to previous experiences, coping strategies, and cognitive styles, was understood as a key marker for success on the programmes. Systems of support for students are therefore considered pre-requisites for success on the programmes.

The Widening Participation Strand

17. The conceptualisation of widening participation is central to developing inclusive and participatory approaches, practices and frameworks. A broad view of widening participation that focuses on the cultures and practices of the institution and programme of study, complex inequalities and the politics of mis/recognition supports the development of inclusive M level provision and practice. This disrupts and challenges problematic assumptions and discourses of deficit and neo-liberal, individualist perspectives that tend to ignore complex social and historical inequalities and misrecognitions. This helps to create a framework for inclusive, accessible and participatory programmes of study.

18. The early experiences of a postgraduate programme, including admissions and induction, are important in shaping a positive initial transition into the programme of study. A broad view of widening participation that focuses on the cultures and practices of the institution

and programme of study, complex inequalities and the politics of mis/recognition supports the development of inclusive M level provision and practice. This disrupts and challenges problematic assumptions and discourses of deficit and neo-liberal, individualist perspectives that tend to ignore complex social and historical inequalities and misrecognitions. This helps to create a framework for inclusive, accessible and participatory programmes of study.

19. Participatory pedagogical approaches help to support the processes of developing a sense of postgraduate student identity and of fitting in and belonging to a shared community of learning. The literature and data highlighted the importance of recognition, identity and a sense of belonging for widening participation. The development of 'participatory pedagogies' helps to address these issues. Participatory pedagogies are underpinned by explicit sets of social justice principles and ethical starting points. In practice, this might involve, for example, that teachers and students initiate their pedagogical relationship with an explicit plan of the ways they will work together, ethically, critically and inclusively. This might also involve a commitment to creating interactive spaces for learning and teaching, where different forms of knowledge and experience might be drawn on and made available to help illuminate and make accessible the disciplinary or subject knowledge at the heart of the course. It might also involve an explicit discussion of the different perspectives, backgrounds and forms of knowledge of the participants whilst also subjecting these to critical reflection in collaborative learning processes. Participatory pedagogies understand concerns with curriculum and assessment as part of pedagogical practices and relations, not as separate entities. Thus, pedagogies are concerned not only with explicit practices of teaching and learning, but also with the construction of knowledge, competing epistemological perspectives and the ways that learning and meaning might be assessed to support pedagogical and meaning-making processes.

20. Writing as a method of inquiry and learning should be integrated into the programme of study, rather than offered as separate, remedial, skills-based provision. A commitment to widening participation in M level study requires the development of inclusive and participatory pedagogies and assessment frameworks in higher education that acknowledge the complex processes by which writing, and other related literacy practices (such as speaking and reading), is produced by students. This involves the pulling together, rather than separating out, of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, so that how we learn and teach is connected to what we learn and teach and how we then assess what has been learned and taught. Writing and other academic practices, such as reading and speaking, must be considered in relation to the development of pedagogies for widening participation. The students valued integrated approaches to the teaching of writing and other academic literacy practices, which supported their understanding of academic expectations and practices and the assessment criteria and framework. Writing as a method of inquiry is a resource that facilitates such integrated approaches to supporting students in their learning and in the production of work for assessment.

The Work Intensification Strand

21. Higher education providers should not attempt to micromanage learner transitions for part-time postgraduate students. However, reducing the pressures by extending study

time, or designing assessments to incorporate work-related projects, or critiques of practice to provide greater synergy between work and study, is advisable.

22. Teachers and curriculum designers should provide clarity over M-level expectations of learner autonomy, underlying epistemologies and critical thinking, and indicate the level expected initially and the degree of progression expected throughout the course. This may create tensions with Quality Assurance agencies over the rigidity of curriculum design.

23. Teachers should give full respect for effort and sacrifices: changing arrangements without negotiation, or an over-emphasis on bureaucratic requirements, does not lead to mutual respect. Self-direction is paramount for part-time learners, but showed that while such learners expect to be autonomous, they are not always successful at self-management, although this cability develops over time. However, there may be a need to improve learner support mechanisms to enable students to develop coping strategies and respond to tutor and peer feedback.

24. Improvements in feedback strategies and approaches to give more information on progress (i.e. ipsative feedback) and to make it explicit how individuals can move through M-level study towards autonomy and self assessment (i.e. sustainable feedback) will assist motivation and confidence by demonstrating respect, in particular for less experienced learners.

25. While detailed feedback signals respect, excessive critical feedback may be counterproductive and not useful. Critical feedback needs to be incorporated into ipsative feedback and feed forward processes, so that learners can move on in their assessment careers. The balance between generic and task specific feedback also needs careful consideration.

26. Collaborative working with peers can be valuable in helping learners to appreciate a wide range of perspectives and find their own voices. However, this needs to be facilitated by credible pedagogic experts.

Assessment and Learning

27. An assessment for learning model developed for the school sector (Black and Wiliam, 1998) is also considered appropriate for the higher education sector. This model suggests that five key strategies and one cohering idea are appropriate. The five key strategies are: i) engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks; ii) clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; iii) providing feedback that moves learners forward; iv) activating students as the owners of their own learning; and v) activating students as instructional resources for one another; and the cohering idea is that evidence about student learning is used to adapt instruction to better meet learning needs; in other words, that teaching is adaptive to the student's learning needs.

28. Specific feedback issues, including: the need for concrete and specific feedback, filtering mechanisms students employed when accepting or rejecting feedback that was offered them, the need for a clear bench mark of how they were doing in order to understand the

meaning of this feedback, clarification regarding technical issues such as the requirements of assessment/styles of writing and the timing of assessment, making authentic the feedback process, and preparing students for feedback, were prioritised.

29. Support for the students needs to be given prior to, and not after, the event itself, for example, guidance on suitable topics and the focus for an assignment were especially valuable for those students who demonstrated weaker self-regulation skills. If students and lecturers are to fully exploit feedback opportunities, time is needed to explore their beliefs and perceptions with regards to the value of feedback.

30. An over-emphasis on grades resulted in confusion between processes of formative and summative assessment, and subsequently had a deleterious effect on student progress. Dependence on grades for self-assessment is a barrier to autonomous learning.

31. Feedback needs to be perceived as an integral and iterative element of curriculum delivery. Clear direction need to be given in relation to the requirements of assessment and its role in the feedback process. There needs to be clarity regarding the rationale underpinning how all the assessment elements fit together. Timely and explicit sharing of examples of good practice is needed. Students need to be given opportunities to work with the assessment criteria to enable them to make sense of them.

32. Assessment should be authentic. There needs to be an alignment between the expectations of assessment and the levels of experience of the students. The timing of assessments needs to be manageable given the varied demands on the students. Issues relating to choice, affordances and limitations of assessment feedback for students (degree of student involvement in assessment design; degree of assessment choice; ways of working with peers, etc.) need to be addressed.

33. Those who were able to create synergy between their work and assessment benefited from this, and opportunities to collaborate with peers.

34. There is a problem with being overloaded with assessments at key transition points.

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