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

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

Executive Summary

Final Report

Table of Contents

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This project is the combined work of members of staff from Colleges of the University of London:

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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 modes 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.

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_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 capability 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 needs 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.

1. Introduction

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.

1.1 The Transitions

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.

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

1.2 Research Questions

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?

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

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1.3 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.

- 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.

1.4 The Data Base

Our data-base 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.

- 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.

- In their diaries, students were encouraged to write about the same set of themes, and in addition, to add some reflections about their entries.

- Each of the four 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.

1.5 Data Analysis and Ethics

We analysed the data throughout the project by using progressive focusing methods, identifying new themes and refining the research questions. 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.

1.6 Overview

Each section of this report reflects a stage or phase of the research we undertook. The next section identifies the conceptual frame used and in particular how we made sense of 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 the fourth section we present our analysis of the data from the first year of the project, and in the next two sections we provide accounts of the four site-based projects and the consultative interviews. Finally, in the last section 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.

2. Conceptual Framing

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.

3. A Literature Review

The review of literature offered here 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.

3.1 Professional Knowledge

The first of these transitions referred 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 modes of knowledge have been identified: disciplinarity, technical rationality, dispositionality, and criticality. These four modes of knowledge are idealised and operate in different ways in Masters-level programmes. Indeed, hybrid versions of each may be produced. Programmes are 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 take precedence. One of the consequences of this is that the knowledge which is produced has different impacts in the workplace.

3.2 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 *et al.* (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.

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).

An area that is frequently cited as problematic for the international Master's student is the supervisory relationship (e.g. Schevyens *et al.*, 2003). 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% UK, 37% International), relationship with students (11% UK, 14% International), and lastly knowledge (9% UK, 8% International). 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 home and international students.

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, 1982) 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 the country of origin and the 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, 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).

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 environments 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.

3.3 Widening Participation

A third transition referred 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, 2001). 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; 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.*, 2003; Burke, 2007; Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2001; Reay, 2001; Webb, 2010); time problems caused by the intensive nature of the transition (Burke and Dunn, 2006); 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; Creme and Lea, 2001; Lillis, 2001; 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, 2001).

3.4 Work Intensification

The fourth transition focused on part-time study. A literature review of 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; 2008). 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).

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. 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 postgraduates who aim 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.

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, 2008b; Simpson, 2003). 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 burdens. 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 a great potential to influence learners' dispositions towards assessment 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 (2010) 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).

We have suggested above that the role of feedback in enabling students to negotiate their way 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 differently. Furthermore, it seems likely that the de-motivating effects of poor assessment outcomes in earlier learning experiences persist in post-graduate study, although there is evidence that the more academic learners at this level respond more favourably to feedback and critique (Carless, 2006).

Finally, much of the evidence on the effects of feedback practice emanates 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 means that 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, the development of learner autonomy, the importance of cumulative and useable feed forward, and working with peers.

3.5 Formative Assessment

We have focused so far in this report 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).

Learners have shown themselves to be highly grade dependent and this has occasioned criticism of the emphasis on 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, 2008). 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 dialogue 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 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 draft work, but the study suggested that these are not routinely provided to learners.

4. Transitions and Trajectories

We focused on the learning trajectories of students undertaking Masters-level programmes of study. Four groups of students from the core institution were invited to take part in the project in its first year:

- 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 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;

- 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.

4.1 The Pure-to-Applied Knowledge Strand

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, 2011; Yorke and Longden, 2006; 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.

Specific feedback issues included: 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; the authenticity of feedback and how it was valued, and their level of preparedness for feedback.

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, 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. 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.

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, were 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 take up opportunities within the environment, whereas others were more constrained by what they perceived as its limitations. 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.

4.2 The International Strand

The participants in this strand 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 central to participants' discourse. Most aspects of the student learning experience were included in the discussion in this area. Relationships with supervisors and tutors were considered to be highly important for a 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 for this strand are five-fold. Firstly, early information about all aspects of the course is a significant factor in the quality of the one-year international Masters student's experience. Secondly, there is a need for awareness training for academics to avoid unintentional discrimination against international students in teaching and learning. Thirdly, 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. Fourthly, relationships with tutors and supervisors are paramount in combating loneliness and isolation for international students. And finally, we suggest that international students should be encouraged to form multi-nationality networks.

4.3 The Work Intensification Strand

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 may be viewed as idealistic and are unlikely to be effective if they are not readily embraced by tutors.

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 students and teachers. 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, 2011).

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.

4.4 The Widening Participation Strand

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.

However, when students started making transitions into M-level assessment and writing, a different account emerged. Transitional experiences became problematic in the study 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. 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.

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.

Good Practice Models

In developing models of good practice in this strand, we suggest the following:

1. ***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.

2. ***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 admission tutors/staff; and the induction process and positive experiences of this seemed to be the key to easing the initial process of embarking on a new Masters programme.

3. ***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.

> **4. *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, should 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.

5. Site-based Projects: 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:

- An area of practical concern was identified;
- An intervention was designed, in relation to one of the themes of the project;
- The 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.

The four site-based intervention projects were: implementing ipsative feedback processes; writing transitions; developing supervision and project-based management processes; and supporting students in the practicum.

5.1 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 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 their progress. This awareness stems 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 confidence and feeling respected. Narrow conceptions of assessment and feedback need to be challenged if ipsative feedback is to have a full impact. Although some students were beginning to take a more long-term view of assessment, and value continuous informal feedback, others viewed feedback as strongly linked to performance. There also needs to be a programme wide approach: innovation in a single module is not enough for students to notice a change, particularly if that module has other unique qualities.

5.2 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).

We have suggested previously that approaches to teaching writing in higher education tend to construct writing in mechanistic ways (Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005; Burke, 2008). 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.

We are suggesting here that pedagogical practices that move beyond the notion of barriers to inclusive, interactive and participatory pedagogies are to be preferred. These 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.

5.3 Developing Supervision and Project-based Management Processes

The project was modest in ambition, but focused on providing support for students completing projects and dissertations at Masters-level. 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 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 (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.

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.

5.4 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 first year of the project. 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 a 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 in developing their own self-regulatory practice by modelling with students approaches to accessing and using feedback; enhance understandings of students' experiences of transitions to inform higher education 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.

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.

6. Consultation

A small number of consultative interviews were arranged with invited groups of students. During the group interviews 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 issues 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; ii) an Oxford University College perspective on the transition to M-level study.

6.1 Trajectories and Transformations

Four themes were explored with the students: i) progression; ii) learning; iii) bureaucratic knowledge; and iv) theory-practice relationships.

Progression

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 particular ways and within particular time frames. 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.

The norm works by disciplining the student, so that they strive to be independent. Normalising students also involves an overt process of standardisation. 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. '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 (p. 33), our emphases). 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. The transition 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.

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. In the second, a different form of scaffolding operates, 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 varied between programmes, and is thus 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.

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. 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).

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 original idea, that of 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 some focusing by the learner. These focuses are: attributes, dispositions, or inclinations, that is, more permanent states of being of the person; knowledge constructs; skills; virtues or ethical dispositions; meta-linguistic 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. 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; thus, in order for learning to take place, there must be some dissolution of certainty. 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; in other words, there are forward *and* backward steps. Finally, there is an expectation that confusion is imminent; an expectation of it is a pre-requisite of learning.

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 matter. They are operating at different levels, on the surface they seem to be about the same matter, 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 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. The consequences are: confusion within, and therefore resentment by, the student; and a plurality of equally valid 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). There may be a sense in which the social actor is also fabricating by pretending to be committed to something and actually going through the motions of doing something when in fact they are 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. 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. 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 a reluctance to change.

6.2 Feedback and Formative Assessment for International M-level Students

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, was undertaken. 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 offering a view that formative assessments should be more styled around the unseen written examination format used at the latter stage of the course.

6.3 Transitions to Postgraduate Study

An Oxford University College perspective on the transition to M-level study was elicited. The principal concerns which were identified relating to the four transitions were (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); and *cultural sensitivities* (arising out of the starting-point, transition and final destination of the student in each case).

7. 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_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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