**Written Assessment and Feedback Practices
in Postgraduate Taught Courses in the UK:
staff and international students' perspectives**

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Abstract

In recent years UK universities have attracted an increasing number of international students. Their socialisation into different academic practices greatly depends on their ability to write in English since writing is the main way in which students demonstrate their learning at university. This paper looks into the widely-shared view that tutor feedback can help students develop their academic literacy and argues that academic writing and feedback-giving are social practices influenced by cultural, institutional and departmental contexts. The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods to explore academic expectations, experiences of feedback and perceptions of its impact on international students' academic literacy. The study found that non-UK students on full-time postgraduate taught courses seem to be at a considerable disadvantage because of factors like limited English language skills, or lack of familiarity with cultural, academic, disciplinary or professional conventions. The research found no evidence of a systematic approach for tutors or institutions to measure the impact of feedback on student learning. In this study, feedback seemed to make a limited contribution to students' understanding of literacy practices due to a number of both individual and institutional factors.

Keywords

Assessment, feedback, academic literacy, international students, postgraduate.

Introduction

The UK has seen a considerable rise in the number of international (non-UK) students in the last decade. This trend has been more evident in postgraduate taught programmes where recent data show that between 2005/06 and 2012/13, the proportion of full-time taught masters entrants from outside the UK increased from 66% to 74% (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). As a result, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has stressed the importance of this segment of the student population, particularly in terms of how sustainable postgraduate taught courses would be without a constant influx of international students, concluding that 'this aspect of postgraduate provision is therefore increasingly exposed to changes in overseas demand" (ibid, p.5). As universities focus on enhancing 'the student experience', the need to examine current academic practices from an international perspective seems to be a valuable endeavour.

Literature review

Higher numbers of international students pose a number of challenges for UK HEIs, especially in terms of their integration into their academic communities. Research by Banford (2008) on international students' educational experience in the UK found that one of the biggest challenges in adjusting to their new environment was interacting confidently and effectively in an English speaking environment. However, what is often perceived as just a language deficit may also be rooted in a lack of understanding of the communicative expectations within a certain academic community.

Citation

Northedge (2003a, p.19) highlights the fact that 'any grouping that regularly communicates about particular issues for particular purposes develops shared ways of talking about and understanding those issues'. Therefore, in order to succeed in academia, students must develop an understanding of the particular ways of thinking, communicating and practising in their own academic context. In the particular case of academia, writing is the primary channel of communication and constitutes a key element of the student experience. Goodfellow (2006, p.481) argues that writing is 'integral to students' induction into academic cultures and discourse communities, and is the principal way they demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their studies, and their fitness for accreditation'. One major difficulty is that expectations about writing and other literacy practices can vary considerably across disciplines (Becher, 1989; Hyland, 2009; Lea and Street, 1998), and across institutions and tutors (Baynham, 2000), so students must learn to adapt their writing to meet specific requirements and use 'the variety of forms of language, and different communicative genres, required for different aspects of their studies' (McCune and Hounsell, 2005). Consequently, the real challenge for many international students is not just to develop their English language skills but also their academic literacy, defined here as a set of disciplinary and professional knowledge, skills and attitudes that allows individuals within a particular academic community to understand and engage with its particular discourse and practices in ways that are acknowledged and deemed legitimate by its other members.

The development of academic literacy often involves improving -or at least reconfiguring- an existing set of linguistic, cognitive and social skills in order to communicate effectively, negotiate meaning and interact with others in accordance with a certain group of conventions and expectations. That is why students need to gain a good understanding of their context and must try to ensure that what they say and what they do is 'situated' accordingly so that it meets the demands of a specific audience, especially when writing. The production of texts, as observed by Swales (1998, p.118), is 'comprehensively situated' in institutional spaces, 'in disciplinary traditions and conventions' and 'within the textual careers of their authors', and certainly within the textual careers of those who read such texts. The development of academic literacy can then be a long and arduous process, so students may need a considerable amount of support.

Research in the last 10 years has produced a considerable amount of literature to support the view that tutor feedback can help students understand academic expectations and improve their academic literacy (e.g. Carless, 2006; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Poulos and Mahony, 2008; Prowse et al., 2007). Feedback often conveys implicit messages about values and beliefs of the academic community and can help students understand the expectations and requirements of the course (Ivanic et al., 2000; McCune and Hounsell 2005). Orsmond and Merry (2011) found that students used feedback to identify what the tutor wanted and to develop their own views. Northedge (2003b, p.178) also claims that 'commentary in the form of brief remarks or questions gives important clues as to how ideas might be reframed to achieve greater force and clarity within the terms of the discourse'. In a study by Bloxham and West (2007, p.85), students reported that feedback had helped them 'to reference more effectively, improve the structure of their essays, use more sources, answer the question and increase their confidence'.

However, other research has suggested that feedback itself can be a barrier that students (both home and international) need to overcome if they are to fully benefit from their studies. Higgins (2000, p.1) claims that many students 'are simply unable to understand feedback comments and interpret them correctly', perhaps because 'feedback is generally delivered in academic discourse which students may not have full access to' (Carless, 2006, p.221). This could explain why feedback has traditionally been the aspect of students' academic experience that they are the least satisfied with. Part of the problem may stem from the traditional conception of feedback as information that is 'delivered' to students, rather than as a process that involves a measurable student response to

input either from tutors or other sources. In other words, there is often an emphasis on the point of delivery (e.g. timing, quality of information) rather than on what the student does with it. As pointed out by Boud and Molloy (2013), input from teachers or others should be judged not just in terms of content, timing or style but in terms of whether that input makes a difference to what the students can produce.

Therefore, feedback in academia is seen here as an adaptive process whereby information feeds into and interacts with existing knowledge, attitudes and skills, enhancing or reconfiguring these, so that individuals can perform in a way that helps them achieve their goals and is acknowledged and valued by other members of their academic community. The underlying premise here is that activities such as academic writing and feedback-giving are social practices influenced by cultural, disciplinary and institutional contexts as these practices are 'embedded in the values, relationships and institutional discourses constituting the culture of academic disciplines in higher education' (Lea and Stierer, 2000, p.2). Given the intrinsic connection between academic writing and feedback, there seems to be a need to generate a clearer picture of the impact of feedback practices on the development of academic literacy, particularly from the perspective of international students on postgraduate taught courses, where they represent the large majority of learners.

This paper is based on data from a wider study looking into teachers' and students' conceptions of academic literacy, the types of written assessment (i.e. genres) that students are expected to produce and the sort of feedback that students experienced in different academic departments. The main aim is to shed light on the role that tutor feedback may play in helping students understand and engage with writing practices in postgraduate taught courses.

Methods
The study draws on Academic Literacies (Lea and Street, 1998) as a paradigm that places great emphasis on both texts and their context by focusing on practices surrounding the production of texts and the 'participants' perspectives on the texts and practices', instead of 'focusing solely on written texts' (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.11). The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods under the premise that despite stemming from different paradigms, qualitative and quantitative methods are actually complementary and, as Lieber and Weisner (2010, p.560), argue, when combined, either concurrently or sequentially, they bring 'a wider range of evidence to strengthen and expand our understanding of a phenomenon'.

The research involved 2 main methods of data collection: surveys and semi-structured interviews with academic staff and students. The questions for the semi-structured interviews and the survey were based on the literature and initial findings from a focus group conducted during the pilot. The main themes included the context of learning, academic expectations in each programme, types of written assessments, experiences of feedback and views on the impact of feedback on developing academic writing. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were all recorded. The survey contained a mix of closed questions, likert-type items with both factual and value statements, and multiple response questions where participants could choose more than one option. Respondents were also given the opportunity to add their own answers.

Participants were invited to take part in the study during induction week and via an email distributed by departmental contacts. Although stratified and random sampling was initially considered, this was discarded due to limited access to personal data granted by some departments. Convenience sampling was used instead within a clear sample frame targeting students (both UK and non-UK) enrolled on postgraduate taught courses at the time the research started and academic staff involved with teaching and learning as opposed to research staff. This paper focuses on the experience of international students at two universities in the north of England, a research-intensive

Russell Group institution and a post-1992 university. The study received ethics approval from both universities and data collection took place during the academic year 2013/14. Data regarding both institutions and all participants have been anonymised. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted with the aid of CAQDAS to identify key themes within and across cases. Data from the survey was analysed with the aid of statistical analysis software. Univariate analysis was used to identify patterns in terms of frequencies and distribution.

Results
A total of 138 academics participated in the study (117 in the survey and 21 in the interviews) while 158 students volunteered to take part (140 in the survey and 18 in the interviews). As the paper focuses on the experiences of international students, data provided by UK students, have been excluded. Appendix A includes a table with further information about participants.

Language and literacy
There seemed to be clear evidence of the link between language development, socialisation and literacy:

> *'It's different now, because when I first came here, I felt not that confident. Now I can talk with more people, I can use better language, and I can show some knowledge. In some cases, I can lead a group, I can lead my friends and that make me more confident, I think.'*
>
> (Student A).

A common theme in the interviews with staff and students was the issue of limited English language skills. Most students felt that academic tasks demanded a higher level of English than they had anticipated, especially when it came to both reading and writing, something that tutors also found problematic:

> 'They [tutors] have certain expectations from the students, and when I read something like three or four pages, I should read it three times, as an international student, to understand what is in it'
>
> (Student B).

> 'I think it's the language [the main area of difficulty]. I have to organise the language, because it is not my first language. I saw some of my English classmates there typing English just like I type Chinese, the speed …, but I'm really slower than them in English. I have to think and to organise and I have to reconsider about if there are any problems with my sentence, about grammar problems'
>
> (Student C).

> 'It is quite possible that it is the English that it's making it very very challenging for them [international students] to read the textbooks and read general articles'
>
> (Tutor A).

Assessing learning through writing
In the survey respondents had a list of 13 different genre groups (figure 1) as identified in the literature (Gardner and Nesi, 2012) but they were also given the opportunity to add their own. The most common form of written assessment reported by students was essays, followed by tests or exercises and then research reports. The least common type of writing on their courses was problem question, where students are usually expected to apply theory and/or specific methods to a particular case or in a certain context. Both tutors and students mentioned other types of written assessment, some of which demanded a more technical or practical approach and might not

necessarily involve the use of academic conventions, for example, forum discussion contributions, reflective portfolios, book reviews, subtitling projects, or peer reviews.

Frequency of different types of written assessment as reported by students	Percentage	
	Responses	Cases
Essays (e.g. discussion, exposition, commentary).	14.6%	77.8%
Test or exercise (e.g. calculations, multiple choice, short answers, data analysis)	11.4%	60.6%
Research report (e.g. research article, research project, dissertation)	10.6%	56.6%
Case study (e.g. organisation analysis, single issue in an engineering process).	9.5%	50.5%
Critique (e.g. academic paper review, product evaluation, business environment analysis).	9.3%	49.5%
Proposal (e.g.business plan, legislation reform, research proposal).	8.7%	46.5%
Literature survey (e.g. annotated bibliography, summary of an article, literature overview).	8.2%	43.4%
Methodology account (e.g. laboratory reports, computer analysis, field report).	7.0%	37.4%
Explanation (e.g. business concept, instrument description, process explanation)	5.7%	30.3%
Non-Academic writing (e.g. letters, information leaflets, newspaper article)	3.6%	19.2%
Design specification (e.g. website design, game design, product design	3.6%	19.2%
Narrative or reflective account (e.g. plot synopsis, character outline, learning log)	3.5%	18.2%
Problem question	2.8%	15.2%
Other	1.5%	8.1%

Figure 1. Types of written assessment.

Interview participants also reported a wide range of writing tasks within and across modules, which was often viewed as a problem by students as there were different expectations for each task and it was often unclear what they were supposed to do:

> 'Well, for the other class I was expected to have like a blog of things that we did. But it's not really clear what kinds of things we're supposed to write down there or what it should look like'
>
> (Student D).

> 'Personally; I have difficulties with the recommendations, with the number of words or what has to be pinpointed. I give a general thing, so I'm not sure; I'm still confused with the conclusion thing'
>
> (Student B).

The feeling among many students was that they do not always have a chance to become familiar with – and thus 'get good' at- any particular type of writing because task requirements are not consistent, so once they develop an understanding of what is required for a particular task, this may not be relevant to the next one:

'It's confusing because like, one day is for assignment, other day for exam, other one for interim report, so it was a little bit difficult for me to manage my time and it's different, you know […] I think in terms of the interim report it's a little bit different because you have methodology, in the assignment, I don't think you have any methodology. […] While for the assignment you are explaining, so maybe you have a broken sentence, maybe the structure, maybe you don't have enough references and so on, there's quite a lot of criteria in order just to mark this assignment and there's a difference from person to person. While in the exam we have equations, we need an accurate solution for it, that's it'

(Student E).

In general, tutors in interviews felt that the range of written tasks that they used aimed to better prepare students for the 'real world' and therefore some of the tasks demanded the type of skills students would need as professionals; for example, the ability to reflect, to work as part of a team to produce a website or a collaborative document, or being able to understand a client's brief to produce a project report:

'The second assignment is about recognising their decision making skills but reflecting on it. So there's a reflection skill and how do they make decisions; that is transferrable into work and then into the rest of their career'

(Tutor A).

However, some students felt they were disadvantaged due to the expectation that they should be either familiar with these professional or discipline specific genres, or should learn those by themselves:

'We have not received any such things like previous reports from our tutor, all I got to know is from the internet, what is a typical business report, essay exams, what should be there and what has to be written, it's not just writing everything and putting it together, there's a way to do it'

(Student B).

'…and, another thing which it's probably something more specific about the western type of education is that you were expected to do a lot more research on your own and it does not necessarily mean scientific theoretical research, it can also mean researching how to do this and how to do that. While in my system, if you don't know something you usually just ask your tutor. I guess it was something that I was trying to understand for a while. So it took me a while to realise that'

(Student D).

In the case of international students on postgraduate taught courses meeting these expectations could be particularly difficult. In the survey sample, only 11% of international students had previously studied in the UK, highlighting the fact that the large majority were new to a British academic setting. Also, over a third of these students, 37%, had studied a different discipline at undergraduate level, so they faced the challenge of having to quickly adjust to unfamiliar professional, disciplinary and academic expectations.

Feedback practices
Written feedback in all its different forms (e.g. typed or handwritten comments, annotations or corrections) is still the most common form of feedback representing over 60% of all feedback channels reported in the survey by both staff and students (figure 2). The least common form of feedback was diagrams, drawings or other visual forms. On the other hand, the study revealed the

importance of verbal feedback, which accounted for about a third of the responses. Other forms of feedback included audio, generic feedback via a virtual learning environment (e.g. Blackboard), peer-feedback, worked solutions to exam questions, and screencasts.

Tutors		Frequency of Forms of Feedback	Students	
Cases	Resp.		Cases	Res.
79.5%	12.5%	Spoken comments during a meeting/ individual tutorial	61.5%	13.7%
70.9%	11.2%	Spoken comments during a lesson or workshop	45.8%	10.2%
73.5%	11.6%	Spoken comments in general about all students' work during a lecture or workshop	56.6%	9.5%
	35.3%			33.4%
68.4%	10.8%	Handwritten annotations or corrections on a student's work	45.8%	10.2%
54.7%	8.6%	Handwritten comments with a general impression of student's work	45.8%	10.2%
65.8%	10.3%	Pre-designed feedback sheet or rubric with grades and descriptors	39.6%	8.8%
47.0%	7.4%	Typed annotations or corrections e.g. with a word processor	40.6%	9.1%
58.1%	9.1%	Typed comments with a general impression of student's work	38.5%	8.6%
72.6%	11.4%	General comments in an email	42.7%	9.5%
25.6%	4.0%	Comments or symbols generated online e.g. Blackboard or Turnitin	29.2%	6.5%
	61.6%			62.9%
9.4%	1.5%	Diagrams, drawings or other visual forms	14.6%	3.3%
10.3%	1.6%	Other	1.0%	0.2%

Figure 2. Forms of feedback.

Participants were also asked about other aspects such as the nature and content of feedback, experiences of formative feedback, the language used in the feedback and opportunities to discuss it (figure 3). The most noticeable aspect of the responses is the considerable gap between what was reported by academics and students. Staff seemed to be consistently positive about their feedback compared to what students reported, with some significant gaps in areas such as opportunities to discuss the feedback.

Tutors		Feedback focus and content according to staff and students (Feedback has…)	Students		
Percentage			Percentage		
Dis.	Agree		Agree	Dis.	Differ. Agree
0.0	100	highlighted both successful aspects of the work and areas that need improving.	61.3	20.4	-38.7
1.7	87.0	drawn attention to theoretical gaps and omissions of key points in my work.	54.2	14.6	-32.8
6.1	84.3	I/students have had the opportunity to discuss my/their feedback (with the tutor)	54.6	14.4	-29.7
2.6	86.1	drawn attention to problems with the organisation of ideas in my/students' work.	57.3	17.7	-28.8
4.3	80.9	has drawn attention to methodological or procedural issues in my/students' work	54.6	21.6	-26.3
4.4	79.6	pointed out problems in the presentation and use of academic conventions.	56.8	13.7	-22.8
5.2	76.5	identified problems with reasoning and argumentation in my/students' work	61.5	11.5	-15.0
25.4	67.5	I/students have received formative feedback on my/their drafts/sample writing before submission.	52.6	29.9	-14.9
7.8	79.1	highlighted issues with the language I used in my work e.g. errors in grammar, style, spelling.	64.6	14.6	-14.5
6.0	75.9	pointed to useful resources to improve my work e.g. websites, sources.	63.9	14.4	-12.0
2.6	79.1	I/students have understood the language tutors have used in the feedback	69.8	8.3	-9.3

Figure 3. Feedback content.

One area where both tutors and students seemed to coincide was in terms of the limited provision of formative feedback on drafts, suggesting that this type of practice is by no means commonplace, particularly on courses with large cohorts. This may also be related to institutional or departmental policy, highlighting the role that specific contexts can play in shaping feedback practices:

> 'Yeah, I mean, the general policy is we don't look at drafts unless there is a specific reason why we need to, like the student has a learning contract or in the case of a dissertation, obviously they'll send you draft chapters to look at and that's fine, otherwise, I just won't look at them, and sometimes they'll try and send them to me, and I will say I'm not going to read it, you can send me an outline, you can meet me and we can have a talk about it but I think the main reason is that it is unfair, because if we had to look at drafts of 4,000 words for every student and then mark the actual piece, you couldn't do it and get anything at all else done'
>
> (Tutor B).

The issue of the limited amount of time available for marking and feedback was a common theme in both the surveys and the interviews:

> *'The big issue with feedback is that staff workloads do not give sufficient time for considered marking and feedback, creating an implicit incentive to just 'get it off your desk'. Imposition of an arbitrary 3 week turnaround deadline has also been counterproductive'*
>
> (Tutor X1 anonymous from survey).

Students seemed to be aware of how 'the pressure of numbers' can affect the provision of feedback and sympathised with tutors:

> 'Maybe try don't put so much pressure on professors because I don't think it is because they don't want to, or because they are lazy […], if you only have that end exam and 100% for the module, it's not humane possible, so maybe help a little the teacher, so they can help us'
>
> (Student F).

However, students were also quite critical about the type of feedback that they received, particularly in terms of the timing, the level of detail and the fact there seemed to be a lack of consistency:

> 'Feedback have been given as mark and with a mark criteria that has been filled out with ticks. This is not useful to improve for future work'
>
> (Student A).

> 'The feedback given by lecturers is given too late and cannot be applied to the next assessment'
>
> Student X1 (Anonymous from survey).

> 'Tutors are vague with feedback and some feedback is completely illegible'
>
> Student X2 (Anonymous from survey).

There were also positive comments mixed with criticism, which reinforces the idea that feedback practices can vary to a great extent. Some students received detailed feedback and had access to tutors to clarify aspects of the course that they did not understand.

> 'Some of the tutors would give some requirements about the assessment, and make that clear enough for us to write them, but some courses are not that clear, I have to email to my tutors and ask them. I thought it should be blah, blah, blah, is that right? And they might reply, you should write in that way, or you should come to my office and we should have a meeting and talk about it'
>
> (Student C).

> 'The type of feedback varies on different courses. For example, some courses give clear feedback before submitting but some are not'
>
> Student X3 (Anonymous from survey).

The impact of feedback

Students often felt that they were unable to use their feedback not only because of the changing nature of the tasks but also because of the lack of consistency across modules and tutors:

> 'No standardisation resulting in feedback from one aspect of work, put in to practice for another piece can completely contradict the second work'
>
> Student X4 (Anonymous from survey).

> 'Because there are always different scenarios of different courses, like in this one, I have to analyse the case, and maybe another one I have to just answer questions. I don't think it helps, with this feedback, I only know how to improve my essays in the same scenario, but I don't know in different ones how could it help'
>
> (Student C).

This was something that some tutors acknowledged and attributed to the modularised nature of postgraduate taught programmes:

'I think it's difficult because we have the modules and, we've never been able to get away from this, it's that the students see the modules as standalone elements of the law, that they don't interrelate, and so what they're going to do in contract law will never again appear'

(Tutor C).

'I think sometimes they don't always connect the dots and yeah, sometimes I think they think that we don't talk to each other and that we don't teach across modules. […] I think sometimes they feel that they get told one thing by one staff member, and one thing by another and that we're all looking for completely different things and that's not the case, but I think perhaps we could communicate it better, and it isn't that we're looking at different things but it's just, kind of how it comes across to them'

(Tutor B).

Academics also perceived an issue with student engagement and they often felt that a lot of time and effort is put into feedback but students may not even read it:

'Again it's very individual to the student, there are students who engage well, yes, they've taken on board comments and you can definitely see the improvement and them developing over the five tasks. Other students, you just felt like you are saying the same things over to them again, and have absolutely taken no notice whatsoever'

(Tutor D).

This might be related to student motivation and the nature of the course. Some tutors questioned whether postgraduate taught programmes such as a full-time masters encourage deep learning because of the 'transactional' nature of the programme, often perceived by many students as a quick route towards a qualification:

'It's only a one year masters' course, so in that sense it's easy to see why the students are instrumental about their feedback and instrumental about their mark. They immediately leave behind what they have done to move on to the next thing, they're never likely to consider it as being an essential for next year's work because they ain't there next year'

(Tutor E).

Data from the survey also showed that tutors and students have very different views about feedback practices and their impact on learning. Generally speaking, tutors felt a lot more positive about the way that feedback contributed to students' learning experience while students adopted a more critical stance (see figure 4). For example, while 86.8% of academics felt that feedback had helped students develop and present arguments in a more effective way, only 45.9% of students agreed, a difference of more than 40 points.

Tutors		Impact of feedback on literacy according to tutors and students (Feedback has…)	Students		
Percentage			Percentage		
Dis.	Agree		Agree	Dis.	Differ. Agree
0.9	86.8	helped me/students develop and present arguments and propositions in a more effective way.	45.9	15.3	-40.9
0.0	89.7	helped me/students develop analytic and critical thinking skills.	58.2	15.3	-31.5
0.0	96.6	clarified aspects of the subject area that I /students did not understand	67.3	14.3	-29.3
0.9	94.8	helped to improve my/students' future work	67.3	9.2	-27.5
0.9	99.1	helped to understand standards and develop a sense of quality	72.4	8.2	-26.7
3.4	83.6	raised awareness and understanding of wider contextual issues and relevant theory.	58.3	10.4	-25.3
0.9	87.1	encouraged me/students to think independently and to develop own reasoned views and opinions	63.3	12.2	-23.8
2.6	86.1	provided enough detail for me/students to understand what I/they have to do to improve my/their work.	63.5	14.6	-22.6
6.0	78.4	encouraged me/students to evaluate and synthesize reading more effectively.	59.2	8.2	-19.2
2.6	78.4	helped me/students understand the particular ways of thinking in my discipline.	61.2	10.2	-17.2
6.1	81.7	helped to improve academic writing.	67.3	9.2	14.4

Figure 4. Impact of feedback.

There was little evidence of a systematic approach to assess the impact of feedback, so it was difficult for academics to determine whether their feedback had an effect on students, particularly on postgraduate taught courses, whereas this appeared to be the case on undergraduate courses:

> 'How would I assess the effectiveness of my feedback? I'm not sure I'd see it in the postgrad programmes because of the nature of the content of the assignments. There's not a formative approach because each bit of the assessment doesn't lead to the other, if that makes sense. But I'd like to think that the effectiveness of the whole programme is seen in the quality of the assessments'
>
> (Tutor A).

Even when there has been a noticeable improvement towards the end of the programme, modularisation of courses makes it difficult for tutors to determine whether tutor feedback or any other factors such as peer feedback or support from student services are responsible for any perceived improvements in students' performance:

> 'I see them, the MSc students I see them in semester one, I don't see them in semester two but I do see them for dissertations, and for me there is generally a marked improvement by the time I read the dissertations'
>
> (Tutor F).

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the tension between the use of feedback to support learning and the provision of feedback to comply with institutional or external requirements e.g. external examiners:

> 'There is a terrible thought that occurs, and that is that feedback is there to protect the member of staff, you know, "I told you and you didn't do anything about it". '

(Tutor G).

Discussion

Language skills have a considerable impact on key aspects of academic literacy such as the ability to read, speak and write in English in order to engage with others and demonstrate knowledge. There seems to be a clear link between language and literacy. They appear to coexist in a symbiotic relationship, shaping and possibly benefiting each other from their constant interaction. Language development contributes to academic literacy by allowing the interplay between its different aspects, from cognitive processes to social interactions. Conversely, limited language skills may hinder students' progress and engagement with their academic community.

There was evidence of students experiencing a wide range of writing tasks, which resonates with findings from other studies (Hardy and Clughen, 2012) where students also experienced high levels of anxiety because they felt unprepared to tackle the different kinds of writing they were expected to produce. The considerable range of writing tasks that participants experienced over a short period of time (about 8 months in this study) suggests that students face a steep learning curve, possibly made more challenging by the need to constantly readjust not just to fulfil genre specifications but also to meet different expectations across modules and tutors.

Although tutors may want to expose students to 'real life' tasks, there is often the assumption that students will either know or learn how to perform in a particular way. However, professional and disciplinary practices tend to be culturally bound too, so international students may be unfamiliar with such tasks and may require greater support. Learning to write for a particular audience is part of the development of academic literacy, but this is a complex process that occurs 'over an extended period of time in a complex, dynamic manner' (Braine, 2002, p.63). Assuming that students can learn to do this to the required standards, on their own and within a limited period of time, would seem definitely unrealistic and possibly unfair.

The variety of forms in which feedback is 'delivered' appears to be positive in principle as information is being 'conveyed' to students in different ways. However, this variety could also present a number of challenges for international students who may not be used to receiving information in a variety of formats, from lines and circles on a script to a set of symbols originated by computer, from informal language in an email to a set of formal descriptors in a rubric. Different channels of communication may also present particular challenges, as in the case of spoken feedback, which may be more difficult for students to understand, particularly for those who are not competent users of English. The wide range of methods of feedback in this small sample may also point to a lack of consistency in the approach towards feedback used on different modules or by different tutors. There is also the possibility that these methods reflect tutors' context, preferences and/or different conceptions of the role and purpose of feedback, in which case, such diversity may not be in students' best interest.

The considerable gap between students' and staff's perceptions and experiences of feedback point to a potential misalignment in terms of conceptions and expectations of feedback. Adcroft (2011) argues that academics and students have their own mythology of feedback and that this will inform their attitudes and behaviours with regards to feedback. Different mythologies can lead to

dissonance, where groups of individuals maintain different beliefs about -and explanations of- similar experiences. This dissonance may help explain student dissatisfaction with tutor feedback and academics' frustration with students' lack of engagement with feedback.

Personal and contextual factors tend to shape staff's and students' feedback practices. As individuals, tutors and students may have dissonant mythologies, possibly draw on different experiences of learning and socialisation into their academic communities, and may also be at different stages of their career, all of which can have an impact on their practices. Institutional factors such as modularisation of taught programmes, tutor-student ratio, assessment regime, student entitlement to tutorials or policies regarding the submission of drafts can all affect feedback practices.

There is little evidence of the impact of feedback practices on the development of academic literacy. The focus on what the tutor does (e.g. content, format, timing and quality of the feedback) rather than on what the student does makes it difficult to appreciate the effect that feedback has had on students. The lack of a formative approach in some programmes also means that there are fewer opportunities for students to receive feedback and incorporate it into their work. There is no evidence of a systematic approach to measure the impact of feedback and instead it seems that feedback practices tend to become ritualised and serve purposes other than supporting student learning and development e.g. compliance. However, there are also examples of 'good practice' at individual and programme level in the sense that some students engage actively with their feedback, have greater access to their tutors and there is a more consistent effort by tutors to provide formative feedback.

Conclusion

International students on full-time postgraduate taught courses seem to be in a particular situation, perhaps at a great disadvantage, because of their lack of familiarity with academic practices and the need to engage with a wide range of written assessments in English over a short period of time. These students lack the time that undergraduate students have to develop their academic literacy or the level of individualised attention and support that research students are usually entitled to. One of the key themes emerging from the data is the importance of the specific context where learning and teaching takes place. This study suggests that the effect of tutor feedback on learning is often constrained by a set of personal and contextual factors that requires further investigation. Misalignment between students' and staff's views and expectations with regard to feedback can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration and this potential 'dissonance' should be explored in more detail. The lack of a systematic approach to measure the impact of feedback on learning needs to be addressed by refocusing feedback on what the student does with it and how it contributes to achieving learning outcomes.

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Appendix A

Participants per source of data, discipline, country and contract/mode of study.

Sources of data				
Interviews			**Academics N 21**	**Students N18**
	per discipline	HASS	16	12
		STEM	5	6
	per country	UK	21	6
		Non-UK	0	*12*
	per contract/ mode of study	Full-time	19	16
		Part-time	2	2
Survey			**Academics N 117**	**Students N140**
	per discipline	HASS	73	78
		STEM	44	62
		NR	0	0
	per country	UK	77	31
		Non-UK	21	*99*
		NR	19	10
	per contract/ mode of study	Full-time	70	121
		Part-time	25	16
		Other	8	3
		NR	14	0
		TOTALS	**138**	**158**