Much of the success of the curriculum design initiative can surely be attributed to its original ethos. Throughout, it was made clear that the process and all decision-making was owned by the academic school and directed by the programme team themselves. Academic Developers were there to facilitate the activities, and to encourage discussion around the ten design principles, drawing in evidence and examples from the educational literature; however, it was for the programme team to apply these principles in the context of their own discipline.

The curriculum design process has left a considerable legacy. Ongoing curriculum development is now embedded into the institutional programme proposal quality processes, and we have now collected a valuable archive of good teaching and learning practice across the institution. The process has also enabled us to identify a need for further work around digital fluency, authentic assessment and work-based learning. In the following academic year, the Academic Developers are building on the successes of the ICZ readiness workshops to provide further spaces and opportunities for collaboration and learning within programme teams around these areas.

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A dialogic collaborative approach to developing academic literacy among postgraduate students

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Introduction

There are a number of difficulties facing postgraduate students at university that present a challenge to their learning. They are likely to be at a stage of their professional and personal lives where responsibilities and commitments can have an impact on the efficiency of their study and their ability to fully engage. Furthermore, whilst undergraduate study is a three-year course, allowing for a certain element of 'bedding in' for new students, postgraduate study often comprises one year of intensive study, necessitating students to be confident in their ability to study from the outset of their course. Postgraduate students often study a subject out of interest, but this does not ensure that the student has the prerequisite specialist understanding of the subject or academic study skills for Masters level study. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that every student has transitioned seamlessly from undergraduate to postgraduate level. Many have taken a hiatus from higher education, possibly leading to a lack of confidence and understanding in their academic abilities. However, it

is inappropriate to argue that postgraduate students must start anew as they have done at the beginning of their undergraduate course, as that would ignore the (possibly neglected) skills and qualities that they already possess.

This article presents an intervention used with postgraduate students to support them in their academic writing, which involved a collaborative ongoing dialogue between staff and students mediated by a student intern.

Context

The study was carried out in a newer university in the Northwest of England. To accommodate the personal and professional needs of the students (many working as school teachers), the classes for the postgraduate programmes in this particular setting are arranged in the evenings. Whilst the postgraduate students are admitted onto Masters programmes on the basis of their undergraduate degree classification (with an expectation that they have achieved a

minimum 2.1 degree classification) and personal statement, often they lack the required level of, or confidence in, their academic literacy. Also, advice outside classes from tutors, librarians and writing mentors is much less available during the evenings. This leads to many postgraduate students feeling less supported in relation to academic literacy and study skills. This concern was identified in the course evaluation surveys that showed a clear desire among many postgraduate students for more support in their academic skills development, particularly in relation to critical analysis, structuring essays and referencing. These key areas of development were also highlighted in follow-up surveys and focus group interviews.

This student voice became the early inspiration to consider how students could be supported in a way that was better suited to their needs, as well as being mindful of their personal and professional circumstances. The efforts to alleviate such concerns and enhance the student learning experience ultimately led to the intervention detailed in this paper, namely a dialogic collaborative process for developing study guides for the postgraduate students to support the development of their academic literacy.

Dialogic collaborative approach to academic skills development

Inspired by the understanding of effective staff-students partnership as outlined by the QAA (2012), the approach sought to foster a genuinely student-mediated partnership between students and staff. It was based on 'the values of openness, trust and honesty, agreed shared goals and values, and regular communication between partners' (QAA, 2012, p. 5). A student intern worked in partnership with staff and students to develop a sustainable approach for academic support for students. The creation of the guide involved a step-by-step process where both staff and students were consulted at each stage.

The process involved:

a) *Identifying the areas of need* – This involved careful scrutiny of the generalised course evaluation surveys (2016), followed by a more focused survey at the end of the academic term (2017) identifying the academic literacy skills with which the students felt they needed particular support. This was followed by a further focused survey undertaken with the incoming cohort in September 2017, requesting that students rate the areas of support identified by the previous cohort in order of priority and identify any other areas of academic skills/literacy with which they felt they needed support.

b) *Staff input to support academic skills/literacy* – Following the student feedback, staff voluntarily delivered sessions on the four areas of academic literacy which the students had identified (referencing, plagiarism, structuring essays and critical reading). Each session was followed by an evaluation survey to obtain feedback on the session, along with the offer for the students to obtain further one-to-one advice from writing mentors. All the resources and feedback from the sessions, along with advice from the writing mentors, were collated and made available via the virtual learning environment (Moodle).

c) *Packaging of the academic literacy resources into academic skills guides by the student intern* – A student intern was appointed in January 2018 to develop the resources into guides. The process of the development of each guide followed a cyclical process.
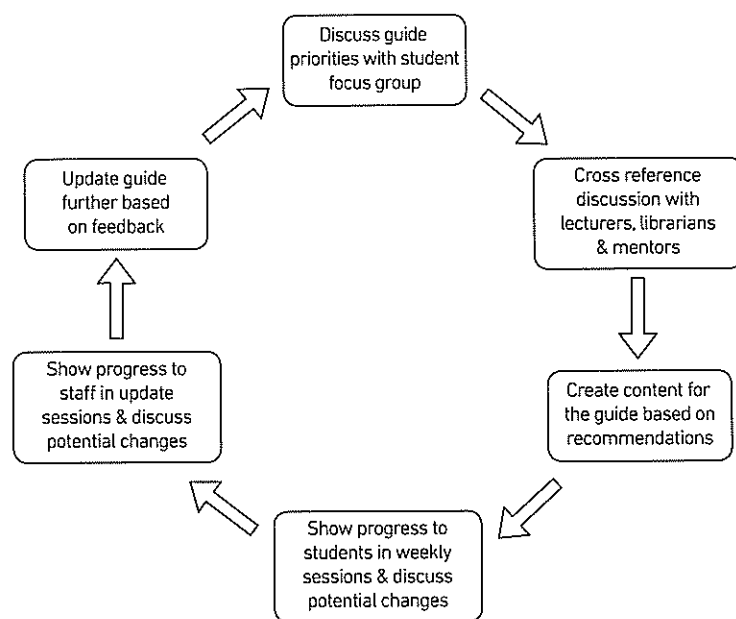

Figure 1   *Process of academic literacy/skills guides development for postgraduate students*

The process (Figure 1) started with the intern consulting a focus group of students who had recently enrolled on the postgraduate programmes to ascertain the areas where they felt they needed support and what resources they felt they would like in the guides. This was followed by further consultation with the tutors who had delivered the various academic literacy sessions to identify what resources were already available and what resources they considered would be particularly useful. A draft version of the study guides advising students on the various academic literacy skills was developed. The resources were both created by the intern and drawn from free online open-access resources.

The intern then shared these with students from the focus group to gain an understanding of how useful these resources would be. The focus group consisted of five postgraduate students who had started the course recently (in the January 2018 term). Often these discussions would be on a one-to-one basis due to the differing nature of the students' schedules. Then the intern liaised with five tutors who had delivered the academic literacy sessions, as well as the faculty librarians, to secure further feedback on the guides. These were then revised in light of the student and staff feedback.

The draft version of the guides was shared with all students in the cohort and feedback was obtained via an online survey. The student intern also showcased these guides at the university-wide Academic Literacies Community of Practice (CoP) to obtain further feedback from staff from across the university. These versions were also shared with all the tutors who had been involved in advising the intern in the developmental stages. This feedback from the wider student and staff community was then assimilated to produce the final guides, which were presented at the university-wide learning and teaching day to showcase the work and facilitate university-wide dissemination.

Reasons for the success of the dialogic process of development of study guides

The success of this project was due to the ongoing communication and collaboration of a wide range of parties. This was informed by the principles of the 'pedagogy of partnership' (Peters, 2016). The perspectives of a varied range of staff associated with supporting academic literacy skills development (tutors, librarians, writing mentors), and those of students themselves, were sought throughout the process:

> 'A strength of partnership working is the recognition that our diversity is a strength because it brings together a vast range of experience, knowledge and understanding from which we can learn...Students and tutors do not have to be working together in groups all the time but there has to be a sense of collective purpose and of pooling our ideas.' (Peters, 2016, p. 9)

The students in the focus group met with the intern once a week to discuss the inclusion of potential resources and to assess the general quality of the guides as they were updated. The meetings were informal and on a one-to-one basis, with the intention of encouraging the students to be more forthright with their honest thoughts and concerns. While the one-on-one approach worked well for all of students involved, it was also highlighted that, as this was largely a dialogic approach, meeting the students as a group might also have been beneficial to invoke more discussion and debate. One of the interviewees from the student focus group, reflecting on the process, commented: 'One-on-one worked. Groups up to about four might work as well'. However, while each student in the focus group was studying the same subject, they all varied in terms of the times they were available to meet.

This scheduling difficulty again draws attention to the need for the guides among postgraduate students. The complex issues surrounding scheduling, and the difficulty in ensuring sufficient time for student/staff liaison, are a recurring issue among not only students but staff too (McConnell, 2016). This highlights the evolving nature of modern-day postgraduate study and its potential pitfalls with regards to consistent communication and partnership.

To ensure the outcome of the project and to alleviate the concern regarding time coordination among students and academics, the intern sought to act as an intermediary by relaying ideas between both groups when time constraints did not allow them to meet. A staff interviewee, who was also consulted in the process of the development of the guides, acknowledged that as the intern was very recently a student they were able to understand and empathise with the student perspective, ensuring their opinions and concerns were properly heard and validated.

As highlighted in Figure 1, after discussing potential changes to the guides with the students from the focus group, the intern then made adjustments. The next stage involved informal meetings with the academic tutors. At these meetings, a dialogic rapport was established to understand the tutor perspective concerning the content of the guides. While the students were able to provide first-hand experience of their accounts regarding what should be included in the guides, the tutors were able to provide an overview ensuring consistency by drawing from trends they had noticed over numerous years across varied cohorts of students.

Once the tutors had made their suggestions, similar to the student focus group, the intern would then make the appropriate changes.This process helped articulate the organic, supple blend of differing perspectives that were invoked in the creation of the guides, via constant, informal, inclusive conversation. The intern would then meet with the students the following week, and the process would continue, slowly fine-tuning the guides through a collaborative, informal, dialogic process. The nature of this process ensured that the guides that were produced were grounded firmly in the ethos of communication and constructive discourse.

In keeping with the intermediary focus that the intern was able to maintain, the peer academic writing mentors at the University were also consulted in the creation of the guides. In a similar guise to the intern, they were able to offer a perspective in terms of the development of the guides that lay somewhere in the middle, being both postgraduate students and academic writing mentors.

Implications for practice

Bovill and Felten (2016) state that communication between student and staff is something that is hard to get right, regardless of the intentions. They note that this process of communication and partnership between staff and student is still relatively new in the culture of higher education and, as a result, is hard to turn from theory into practice. Concerns over time constraints can be alleviated by employing an intermediary who, vitally, is able to be flexible with their time. An interviewee, who was one of the staff members involved in the process, commented: 'If you weren't doing this, this would be the kind of thing that gets dropped on one of our desks, and you want to give it your full attention

and effort, but you never can because you're busy doing other things'. Imperatively, the onus has been to ensure that the opinions of both the student and staff were given the proper attention they warranted and that all involved in the collaboration truly felt the inclusive nature of the practice. As Bovill and Felten (2016) note, this is something that can be hard to capture, regardless of intentions, and a major reason is time constraints.

The process of collaboration between the intern, the postgraduate students and staff through a dialogical approach proved to be popular with all involved. Staff and student alike found the process of working with the intern to be straightforward and simple. The mere inclusion of an intern as an intermediary between student and staff helped avoid the potential issues that Bovill and Felten (2016) illuminate. As time and flexibility often seem to be the biggest issue regarding communication and collaboration between staff and student, we can suggest that in similar future endeavours, such as the creation of postgraduate study guides, the use of an intern, or peer academic mentor, should be considered. The ability to have somebody available who is flexible and can circumnavigate the issues regarding time and placement is valuable in the accruement of input from various sources. Additionally, this intervention is key to ensuring the mediation of input from student and staff, to reassure participants that their opinion is noted and valued.

Vitally, it is the consistency of the dialogue and the involvement of a student intermediary, 'the student intern', which proved the most valuable aspect, rather than any particular characteristic. The 'pedagogy of partnership' (Peters, 2016) lying at the heart of this intervention formed the very essence for its success; namely, the shared understanding that student academic skills need to be developed through a collaborative and constant dialogue leading to the co-construction of academic skills support resources. This can be undertaken by a student intern in collaboration with students and tutors whilst engaging in a collaborative ongoing reflection concerning the resources produced. An accruement of feedback on a consistent basis will undoubtedly prove more useful than an inconsistent or staggered mode of dialogue.

Acknowledgements

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Who does well when assessed reflectively?

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Introduction

Recently, the authors undertook a project that collected feedback from the past three years of graduates from Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education (PgCHE) courses at four different institutions. At one of the meetings to discuss this, as the conversation meandered, we began to speculate about whether the academic disciplines from which candidates came correlated with the results that they got. In short, were students from different discipline or subject areas advantaged or disadvantaged by our assessment instruments based on written reflections? We also considered the possibility that the type of assessment might favour, in some way, male or female students. This led us to consider the results profile for participants from one of the institutions of the original project, as part of the established quality enhancement processes, and it is this work that we report on here.