Working independently on the dissertation proposal: experiences of international Master's students

PRINGLE BARNES, Gayle <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2857-9259> and CHENG, Ming <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-4981>

Working Independently on the Dissertation Proposal: Experiences of International Masters' Students

This paper explores the experiences of international students as they engage in independent learning through formulating dissertation proposals. It contributes new insights by focusing on the 'pre-supervision' stage, where students formulate a research project and write a proposal independently. The analysis draws on questionnaire and focus group data from a large cohort of international taught postgraduates in business disciplines at a UK university. Two types of experience become apparent: one in which students work through the challenges presented by more independent learning, and the other where difficulties in 'getting started' present a barrier to progress. The paper concludes by proposing a scaffolding approach, through which students can practise and complete key independent learning tasks involved in writing a dissertation proposal.

Keywords: independent learning; dissertation proposals; postgraduates; international students; scaffolding

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of a large cohort of international students as they develop Masters' dissertation proposals at a UK university. The early stages of the dissertation are key: having a clearly articulated research plan is central to success in the overall dissertation (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006). The production of a dissertation proposal tests postgraduate students' abilities to 'conceptualize and communicate' the process and reasoning behind the research they will subsequently carry out (Timmerman et al. 2013, 695). Students may choose from a 'topic pool' of research projects provided by teaching staff, develop projects through discussion with staff, or follow the 'student proposal' model where topics are identified and research questions formulated by students working alone (Harland, Pitt and Saunders 2005). To date research

into the dissertation has focused on the experiences of students who are working alongside a supervisor. Much less is known of the experiences of students working independently, before a supervisor is allocated.

The cohort in this study is following the 'student proposal' approach: no supervisors or topics are identified or allocated as they formulate a proposal. This approach may empower students and encourage active student participation, but also potentially disadvantage students if they lack awareness of what is feasible within a research project, or of the resources available (Harland, Pitt and Saunders 2005). Given the significance of the early stages of the dissertation for success in the overall project (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006; Malcolm 2012), there is a clear need for research into students' experiences of working independently to formulate dissertation proposals in a 'pre-supervision' stage.

This study contributes new insights through a case study of a large cohort (n=323) of international students studying in business disciplines at Masters' level. Working independently, the students were tasked with choosing a topic and formulating suitable research questions, using literature in their field to identify 'gaps' in current knowledge. They were also required to determine an appropriate and feasible methodology and compose a proposal for an academic dissertation, in which the research topic was presented and justified. This cohort had completed a lecture course which introduced the requirements of the dissertation and contained advice on selecting suitable topics and formulating a proposal. Students could approach lecturers or peers informally to discuss emerging ideas. This research aims to explore how the cohort experienced working independently on the formulation of the dissertation proposal and how they negotiated their initial research tasks without the support of a supervisor. The paper concludes by

considering how the findings might inform measures to enhance the experiences of international postgraduates as they embark on the dissertation.

The Dissertation and Independent Learning

Even when supported by a supervisor, the dissertation is commonly associated with a greater degree of independent learning than previous assessments (Todd, Bannister and Clegg 2004; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006; Greenbank and Penketh 2009). It is allocated more time and credit and students have a greater role to play in determining the topic and focus of their work (de Kleijn et al. 2016). Independent learning is central to university study in the UK, requiring students to take responsibility for and make decisions regarding their own learning (HEA 2014). Graduates of Masters' courses are expected to 'exercise substantial autonomy and initiative in professional and equivalent activities' and to 'take responsibility for [their] own work' (SCQF 2012, 28). This is consistent with Moore's (1973) conception of independent learning, occurring as the learner firstly determines the tasks required, then carries them out, and is finally able to reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of the approaches taken. Some of the perceived benefits of independent learning include developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter and enhancing graduate attributes (Thomas, Jones and Ottaway 2015). Crucially, students taking responsibility for their own learning is seen as not just a consequence, but an important aim of university study (Moore 1973; Boud 1988).

Developing and facilitating independent learning is, however, a complex task as staff and students are required to negotiate the balance of teacher support and learner independence. The level of support required with independent tasks will vary, as students react differently and unpredictably to a range of tasks and contexts through the course of their studies (Boud 1988; Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012; Christie, Barron and

D'Annunzio-Green 2013). Prior learning experiences are likely to impact on a student's readiness to embark on independent learning (Boud 1988) and this may pose particular challenges for teachers working with large and diverse groups. A lack of clarity at the institutional level can lead to varied and sometimes inconsistent understandings among staff and students regarding the practices of independent learning and the roles of teachers and learners (Thomas, Jones and Ottaway 2015).

These complexities give rise to potential points of tension. Offering 'too much' guidance can cause learners to become frustrated (Boud 1988), lose confidence in their autonomous abilities (Overall, Deane and Peterson 2011) or become reliant on teacher support (Verenika 2008). Yet, expecting 'too much' independence at the wrong point can leave the learner feeling unsupported and prevent learning from occurring (Boud 1988; Silén and Uhlin 2008; Knudsen 2014). Problems can occur 'where the freedoms, options and expansions implied here [by independent learning] are not matched by knowledge and resources', leading to 'bafflement and isolation' (Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012, 613; 618). It is to be expected that the journey to independent learning will include moments of uncertainty. Silén (2001, as cited in Silén and Uhlin 2008) theorises a dialectical relationship in which students swing between 'chaos' and 'cosmos': points of frustration and confusion working alongside points at which learners are able to use and construct knowledge. The challenge, then, is in recognising when this 'chaos' is productive, and when it works actively against independent learning.

This tension is apparent in earlier studies of students' dissertation experiences. Empirical studies emphasise that both students and staff value the dissertation as an opportunity for students to exercise more autonomy, but also highlight the central role of the supervisor in supporting this process (Grant 2003; Todd, Bannister and Clegg 2004; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006; Greenbank and Penketh 2009; Heinze and Heinze

2009; McGinty, Koo and Saeidi 2010; de Kleijn et al. 2012). Consequently, the balance of guidance and autonomy remains key during the Masters' dissertation. Evidence here is mixed, with some studies reporting positive experiences based on an appropriate balance (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2008; Drennan and Clarke 2009), while others point to a lack of support from teaching staff (Strauss 2012; Salter-Dvorak 2014). Negative experiences can, however, be as a result of a desire for more independence, or for less (Heinze and Heinze 2009; Chang and Strauss 2010). These findings support the contention of Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006) and de Kleijn et al. (2012) that the balance of independence and guidance offered by supervisors should be adapted according to the needs of individual students. However, tensions may remain where students and supervisors have different conceptions of the appropriate level of support.

Students value highly positive and friendly relationships with supervisors, where the supervisor is accessible and available to offer advice (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006; Pilcher 2011; de Kleijn et al. 2012; de Kleijn et al. 2014). A dialogic approach, where supervisors do not simply give feedback on completed drafts but also discuss the work in progress, is particularly effective (Vehviläinen and Löfström 2016). Through this interaction with a more experienced researcher, students can progress on to work that they would be unable to complete independently (Augustsson and Jaldemark 2014). Nonetheless, providing more dialogic support is potentially more demanding of supervisors' time (Dysthe 2006), which may already be limited by the conflicting demands of staff workloads (Brown 2007; Belghitar and Scataglini Belghitar 2010). This demonstrates that external factors, beyond the needs of individual students, impact on the level of guidance available to support the development of independent study facility.

Masters' students may have little prior experience of planning and conducting independent research, despite having completed undergraduate degrees (Belghitar and

Scataglini Belghitar 2010). Challenges for novice researchers include establishing feasibility and realistic scope (Franken 2012) and situating a research topic in the literature, by identifying gaps in existing knowledge and developing research questions which build on previous studies (Cooper 2011; Franken 2012; Timmerman et al. 2013). Students must demonstrate independence in these tasks, but must do so while working in accordance within pre-existing disciplinary conventions (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit 2010; Wendt and Åse 2015). Supervisors have highlighted their central role in inducting students into the academic culture of their discipline (Dysthe 2002; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2006).

This growing body of research reflects on how the tensions around independent learning emerge and are negotiated as students work on dissertations projects in conjunction with academic staff. It might be posited that these tensions will also emerge as students work without supervisor support, on the 'student proposal' model of the early stages of the dissertation. However, this has not to date been explored in the literature. O'Donnell et al. (2009) note that a lack of opportunities to receive feedback on new tasks associated with the dissertation can negatively affect students' effective development of independent learning. There is, therefore, a need to explore how students working without supervisor support negotiate these challenges.

For international students there may be additional challenges, particularly for students on one-year Masters' courses who are likely to be still adjusting to new expectations and study practices as they embark on the dissertation (Turner 2006; Brown 2007). Some students may be adapting to the requirement for more independent study outside of class (Coates and Dickinson 2012; Wang 2012). Some may have less experience of academic writing (Hills and Thom 2005; Wu and Hammond 2011; Coates and Dickinson 2012) or of searching independently for academic resources (Hughes

2013) and may lack confidence in using English to engage in critical writing (Chang and Strauss 2010). During their prior educational experiences, some international students may have been encouraged to remain quiet in classes rather than questioning the teacher or other academic authorities (Tian and Lowe 2013; Ai 2017). Expectations of the supervisors' role may be different from those established within the institution and international students may be reluctant to, or uncertain how to, approach teaching staff for help (Brown 2007; Strauss 2012).

Despite these challenges, numerous studies have also found international students participating very effectively in more independent study (Kember 2000; Kiley 2003; Gieve and Clark 2005; Burnapp 2006; Koehne 2006; Durkin 2008; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day 2010; Tran 2011; Bache and Hayton 2012; Wang 2012). These findings suggest that there may be diverse international student experiences of independent learning in the dissertation proposal, encompassing both challenges and means of overcoming these challenges. This study therefore explores how international students negotiate the challenges and opportunities of independent learning as they formulate dissertation proposals without the support of supervisors.

Research Design

The research uses a case study approach, offering an in-depth analysis of a clearly-bounded phenomenon (Denscombe 2010). A case study approach is suitable for this research, as the researchers are interested in 'how' and 'why' questions, and focus on detailed study of a complex phenomenon (Yin 2009). In taking this approach, the researchers accept that wider statistical significance cannot be claimed, but find much potential in the aim of case study research to generalise to theoretical propositions (Yin

2009). This study will conclude by proposing ways in which the findings can inform pedagogical approaches to supporting students who are writing proposals.

The study focuses on a large cohort of international taught postgraduates (n=323) in business disciplines at a UK university. This case has been selected as the numbers of international students studying on taught postgraduate courses in the UK continues to rise (Universities UK 2015). Business subjects are chosen because they attract the largest numbers of international students to study in the UK (HESA 2016).

Data were collected through a questionnaire and focus groups, after ethical approval had been sought and granted. The questionnaire was designed to gather data on students' progress on and attitudes towards the dissertation proposal. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions which sought to gain insights into the key challenges students were facing and the kinds of support which they would find beneficial. Open questions were used to ensure each respondent could express his or her own view without being restricted to responses pre-defined by the researchers which may not accurately reflect their experiences (Kelley et al. 2003; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011).

The questionnaire was piloted with a small group of Masters' students who were not involved in the main data collection. In response to feedback from the pilot group, the phrasing of some questions was altered to improve clarity. Questionnaires and participant information were then circulated to potential respondents at the end of a class two to three weeks before their deadline for submitting dissertation proposals. Paper copies were used, as this method can encourage a larger number of responses (Nulty 2008). 323 completed questionnaires were received: a response rate of 60%. 97.2% of respondents used English as a second or other language. As the aim of this research was not to compare responses from different nationality groups, details of participants' nationalities were not sought,

particularly as this would have caused individual students to be identifiable where there was only a small number of students from that country within the cohort.

All students in the cohort were invited by email to attend focus groups, which provided additional qualitative data. The focus groups took a semi-structured approach, with participants asked to discuss how they felt about working on their dissertation proposals. These were held after initial analysis of the questionnaire but before the deadline for the submission of the proposal, thus allowing the researchers to develop further questions on issues raised during the analysis of data from the questionnaire. Consequently, participants were prompted to discuss their experiences of topic selection, prior dissertation experiences, any challenges experiences when writing the proposal and any strategies or support which had helped or could help during the process. Two focus groups lasting between half an hour and one hour were held, involving five and four students respectively. Informed consent was sought to audio-record the discussions, which were later transcribed by the researchers.

While quantitative data is used to establish what students do as they work independently on dissertation proposals, this article focuses largely on their feelings and experiences as demonstrated in the qualitative data from both the questionnaire and the focus groups. This qualitative data was analysed using NVivo software, following the three-stage process outlined by Richards (2009): descriptive coding, topic coding and analytical coding. Initially, descriptive coding was used to record relevant demographic information about research participants. Topic coding was then used to categorise text. The data was then reviewed using analytical coding, which 'comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning' (Richards 2009, 102). Where quotations are presented in the text, the source is indicated using (Q) for questionnaire and (FG) for focus group.

Research Findings

Analysis of the data led to a number of key findings, which are discussed in depth in this section. Tasks which students were carrying out for the first time, such as topic selection, finding data and selection of research methods emerged as key areas of concern which at times appeared to impact on progress with the dissertation proposal. Barriers to communication with staff emerged, despite the desire of many in the cohort for further support. However, these support requirements were complex and emphasised the heterogeneity of students' support requirements within the cohort.

While students' perspectives on formulating the proposal are inevitably varied, two distinct types of experience can be identified. These are considered as distinct 'experiences' rather than as categories of participants, in recognition that students may move between the two experiences at different points during the dissertation process. The first 'experience' sees students contending and even struggling with new challenges around topic selection, finding data and research methods, but also demonstrating effective independent learning strategies. This reflects the dialectical relationship between chaos and cosmos (Silén and Uhlin 2008), in which challenges lead to effective use and construction of knowledge. The second experience, however, sees a less productive 'chaos', in which difficulties in 'getting started' on independent tasks lead to 'bafflement and isolation' (Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012, 618) and may prevent learning from occurring. Key findings of the study and the distinct 'experiences' that they represent are now discussed.

Topic Selection

More than half (55.6%) of respondents indicated that topic selection was the most challenging aspect of formulating the proposal (Table 1). [Table 1 near here] Only 11.5%

agreed and 2.2% agreed strongly that they found topic selection easy, compared to 44.0% who disagreed and 10.2% who disagreed strongly. Fewer than one in five (19.2%) had decided on their dissertation topic, less than three weeks from the deadline for submitting the proposal.

However, that students found topic selection challenging does not in itself indicate that they were overwhelmed by the independent study required. Analysis of qualitative data demonstrated that students who had not yet decided on their topic may nonetheless be actively engaged in the independent learning required. As one participant commented:

> still thinking of two diff. dissertation topics. I'm trying to collect as much data and info. about the two to see which is the best one in terms of time availability of data and how can I improve on what has been done before (Q)

Although this participant disagreed that topic selection was easy, and stated 'finding the topic' (Q) was the most challenging part of writing the proposal, this comment demonstrates an approach consistent with Moore's (1973) independent learning, as the learner determines the tasks involved and carries them out. For students, the 'chaos' created by the new and challenging independent learning tasks involved in the proposal worked productively alongside a 'cosmos' wherein they can construct knowledge in the form of dissertation topics.

A second type of experience, however, found students unable to take the initial step of identifying potential topics, and thus 'start' the process of topic selection:

> I have no idea about how to choose the dissertation topic (Q)

> I just confused about my choice. I do not know how to start. (Q)

> I don't know what is my topic. Where to find my topic? (Q)

> it's really hard for us to start. (FG)

These students appeared uncertain about which tasks they should be undertaking and were consequently unable to 'get started' on the independent learning involved. Students in this situation felt uneasy about their roles as constructors of knowledge, able to formulate their own proposals. Some stated a preference for a 'topic pool': a list of possible topics circulated by staff from which students could choose, and which would circumvent this difficulty in getting started. A desire for 'direction' or 'suggestions' from lecturers was a common theme in qualitative data from both the questionnaire and the focus groups.

Finding data

Conducting and planning research in the proposal was another area which saw two types of experience emerge: one in which independent learning was occurring through a productive relationship of chaos and cosmos, while the other risked bafflement and isolation. Students were required to establish the suitability and availability of secondary data, a process involving a number of searches, and perhaps a need to reformulate topics of study in situations where the desired data was unavailable. This process of identifying and accessing secondary data was the second most commonly cited challenge after topic selection, mentioned by 17.8% of respondents (Table 1). Despite the challenges, some respondents described using resources in a manner consistent with independent learning, referring to library resources and the research literature as positive and helpful aspects of preparing the proposal (Table 1). However, some students were again unable to 'get started' on these activities:

> I don't know what kind of data could be reliable for me and how could I get them (FG)

> don't know if it's easy to find the data about the topic (Q)

> Database. I'm not familiar with the database, use sources here. It will help me a lot
> if you can tell us some basic links, website. (FG)

These respondents appeared to be unable to begin the process of independently identifying whether suitable data was available as they were unsure of where to look or what to look for. Other students found that without generating initial ideas for a dissertation topic, they were unable to proceed with the next task of identifying data; as one focus group participant noted:

> I don't show any interest in a specific area. So I don't have a direction […] because
> before starting the proposal, I should check the data. But it will be a huge mission
> for me to check the data for each area. So I think it's a big problem. (FG)

These results suggest that some students lacked experience in finding and assessing secondary data, or found the alignment of dissertation topic and data particularly challenging, and were at this point unable to progress.

Selecting research methods

Similar issues arose when students were required to identify appropriate research methods, the third most commonly identified challenge (13.5%). Again, despite the difficulties involved in selecting research methods, there were demonstrations of active involvement in independent learning:

> Although I understand the model, but I cannot build a formula, or build a model.
> It's too hard. Once I think a topic, I think it's good. But after that I think I need to
> build a formula, I think the topic is not a good one. (FG)

While this experience is framed as a setback, this comment demonstrates that successful independent learning is occurring: the student assesses the task requirements, reflects on the skills and the timeframe involved, and makes informed decisions about the feasibility

of methodological choices. Some focus group participants, however, felt they were not equipped for this type of reflection:

> we don't familiar with the analysis method […] we don't know, where can we find some method for the good choice. (FG)

> the guideline shows that we can use some method from book. But we don't have some experience, or practical… (FG)

A key issue here is practice, with students finding it difficult to commit to particular research methods without the opportunity to try them, and then assess whether they are suitable for both potential projects and their own skill level. This lack of experience in selecting research methods could leave students attempting to develop independent learning skills in this area without the support they require.

Writing the proposal

Given the challenges presented by independent research and topic selection, it is perhaps not surprising that very few respondents (9.0%) had started writing the proposal close to the deadline. However, despite some concerns over English language and academic writing skills, *writing* the proposal was not raised as the primary challenge by the vast majority of respondents. Any such challenges are likely to have been encountered during earlier assessment tasks and, unlike topic selection or research design, may not see such a shift in terms of independent learning during the preparation of the proposal.

Barriers to communication with lecturers

While students were not allocated a supervisor at this stage, and there were no explicit expectations that students would consult teaching staff regarding their proposal, 9.9% of students reported that they had discussed their dissertation with lecturers. The

vast majority, however, had not had informal communication with teaching staff regarding their dissertations during this pre-supervision stage. Approaching lecturers to discuss 'getting started' on the independent learning required to formulate a proposal was particularly challenging, as students did not have ready-formed ideas on which to request feedback:

> We don't know how to describe our question, or maybe our idea is not very mature yet, so, yeah, it's difficult. (FG)

> we only have to talk with our supervisor after we choose a topic. But before we have already seen it's a difficult time for us to choose. But we didn't get any help from our professor or something, this is quite difficult. (FG)

Uncertainty around how to approach lecturers with difficulties in 'getting started' on topic selection and research methods appeared to create a barrier to accessing support. This experience, therefore, may leave students experiencing the 'bafflement and isolation' identified by Spiro, Henderson and Clifford (2012, 618).

Experiencing Independent Learning

Different experiences also emerged in terms of how enjoyable respondents found working on the proposal. 20.7% of respondents agreed and 3.1% agreed strongly that they were enjoying the proposal. Students appreciated benefits that are consistent with more independent learning, including the planning and focus that the proposal would bring to the later stages of the dissertation and the opportunity to gain knowledge, particularly in an area of personal interest (Table 1). However, 26.3% of participants disagreed and 8.4% disagreed strongly that working on the proposal was an enjoyable experience. Focus group participants alluded to the dissertation becoming more enjoyable once the initial stage was over:

> Before last week I think it's, it's too, it's too painful for me to think about the topic. But in one day I suddenly find I could focus on some, some thing, so I think I am enjoying it. (FG)

> Maybe after writing the completed proposal, maybe we have some good ideas, maybe then we enjoy it. (FG)

These comments suggest that the seemingly overwhelming requirements for independent learning were in fact 'chaos' that would later combine with a more productive 'cosmos', and through which learning could occur. Yet, while there is evidence of students working effectively through the challenges of independent learning, the difficulties students describe with 'getting started' remain.

Further support

In response to an open question on further support which participants would find useful, 25.9% expressed a desire for more support from lecturers, and 9.9% for more support from others, such as PhD students or former Masters' students (Table 1). More support with research, such as with finding secondary data or other source materials, was prioritised by 14.6% of respondents. Some tension here emerges between the independent tasks that students have been set and the expectations of students, as this comment demonstrates.

> I hope that a professor can recommended some reference for my topic to me. […] I think professor has more experience and the professor reads more and can give me some instruction to show me which should I read and which should I skip (FG)

Finding literature and making decisions on which papers are most relevant are examples of the kinds of independent learning activity that lecturers expect students to demonstrate on the Masters' dissertation proposal. Nonetheless, while lecturers may feel that telling

students what to read works against the aim of encouraging independent learning, more guidance on the process of completing these tasks would clearly be welcome.

A similar situation emerges regarding sample dissertation proposals, which were cited by 11.3% of participants as examples of further support which would be helpful. These were also discussed by focus group participants, one of whom describes how more samples could be used:

> I read them and I find what topics they focus about. Maybe there is a good direction for me. (FG)

This student appears to see sample proposals as a way of 'getting started' on the dissertation proposal, and as a means of finding research topics. Samples are best viewed with a critical eye, with their strengths and weaknesses evaluated, and as a means of helping students to form their own views regarding the scope and communication techniques of effective proposals. Using samples as training materials in the development of independent learning, therefore, rather than simply as sources of topic ideas, would be helpful.

There was no evidence of a desire for more independence: students showed no indication that they were being prevented from choosing topics that they wished to study, and were keen to follow advice from lecturers on 'appropriate' topic selection. However, it is important to note that not all respondents wished for further guidance: 14.6% of respondents stated explicitly that they had no further support needs (Table 1). When asked whether additional support would be helpful, responses included:

> No, I'll figure it by myself. (Q)

> Everything I need is provided. (Q)

These responses act as a reminder that students' readiness to embark on independent learning tasks is likely to be variable (Boud 1988; Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012) and that a 'one size fits all' approach to supporting students is unlikely to be effective.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings suggest that experiences of writing the dissertation proposal among this cohort are highly diverse. Despite working in the same discipline, under the same requirements for independent learning and similar support opportunities, individuals report very different experiences. There does appear to be a broad consensus that identifying appropriate topics, data and research methods is challenging. However, respondents experienced these challenges in different ways, with some describing reflecting on these challenges and working to address them. These processes are consistent with independent learning, suggesting a productive experience of 'cosmos' alongside the 'chaos' of uncertainty around the dissertation proposal (Silén and Uhlin 2008). Nonetheless, a new theme that emerges strongly from the findings is that difficulties in 'getting started' could create barriers to progress. This was particularly apparent when students reported that they did not have an initial topic idea to explore further, as without this starting point they could not begin searching for data, relevant literature or appropriate research methods. This contrasts with prior studies into the early stages of the dissertation which found students readily able to identify dissertation topic ideas, despite experiencing challenges in formulating appropriately academic research questions (Cooper 2011; Franken 2012). This acts as a reminder that students embarking on the dissertation may not only have different levels of confidence relating to independent study but may experience different tasks as challenging. Difficulties in 'getting started' also affected respondents who reported that they did not know where to

begin searching for data or how to evaluate research methods, and created barriers to communication with teaching staff, as students were unsure how to initiate conversations without a clear topic idea on which they could request feedback. Barriers to independent learning thus emerged, as some of the cohort felt unable to determine the steps they should take to overcome the challenges they were experiencing.

These difficulties in 'getting started' suggest a need to explore further ways of enhancing students' experiences of independent study, yet the diversity of student experiences is a reminder of the need to achieve an appropriate balance of guidance and autonomy in independent learning in the pre-supervision stage. More explicit discussions around the nature of guidance provided in the early stages of the dissertation could help to achieve this balance, as students and lecturers negotiate and construct understandings of the independent learning required. It is unlikely that all students and lecturers will automatically conceptualise appropriate levels of guidance in the same way. This is demonstrated as measures considered desirable by some students, such as the provision of a topic pool, or clear direction from lecturers on which aspects of the literature to read, are likely to be considered unsuitable by lecturers and some other students, who instead see the dissertation as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their own abilities to select topics and relevant readings. Discussion around these issues, in which both lecturers and students negotiate the guidance required, could help to address difficulties with 'getting started' by emphasising and exploring the underlying independent learning involved.

Ongoing discussions around the balance of guidance and autonomy could also help to ensure that students were able to access the guidance that would be most beneficial. Students value opportunities to discuss and gain feedback on their ideas from lecturers, but uncertainty among many respondents on how to initiate conversations on

emerging ideas which were perceived as 'not mature' suggests that more guidance on the nature of these discussions and clearer channels through which to arrange discussions would be helpful. Students reported experiencing challenges in areas where they typically had little prior experience or opportunity for practice: topic selection, research methods and data collection. A more holistic approach in which assessments in students' taught courses are adapted to include more of the tasks required in the proposal, could stagger the leap into independent research more incrementally across earlier stages of the Masters' course.

These findings suggest that the earlier deployment of smaller, formative, 'scaffolding' tasks (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976, 90) would be beneficial, allowing students to receive feedback before progressing to make independent decisions regarding their dissertations. Scaffolding has been associated with effective approaches to independent learning, by offering explicit guidance (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan and Chinn 2007), opportunities for students to check that they are progressing and 'a safe space for learning to learn' (Thomas, Jones and Ottaway 2015, 38).

Scaffolding would be particularly helpful in addressing the challenge of 'getting started' on the dissertation proposal. Further activities could be built in throughout taught courses which encourage more opportunities to identify where gaps in the literature offer the potential for future research. This would address the key challenge of 'getting started' on the project, and identifying a topic, particularly for students who have previously been given a 'topic pool' of suggested dissertation topics. Other areas in which more practice activities could be developed include additional opportunities to identify and access data suitable for a given project, to match suitable research methods to research questions, and carry out small-scale research activities in order to gain familiarity with those methods. Providing greater opportunities for practice would also offer the chance for all students

to receive feedback, and could therefore be beneficial to students who already have confidence in their work, as well as those who do not. This feedback would also give students opportunities for more informal contact with lecturers.

This project has offered new perspectives on the experiences of a large cohort of students preparing dissertation proposals independently. It points to the proposal as a site of considerable transition to independent learning. Challenges can be resolved through positive independent learning practices, but can also act as barriers to independent learning due to difficulties 'getting started'. A limitation of the study is that it focuses on the experiences of students at a particular point in the dissertation process; a potentially productive avenue for future research would be in exploring how students overcame these barriers as they progressed further through the dissertation. However, the key findings of the study have allowed the development of tentative suggestions for greater opportunities for discussion around guidance provided on independent learning practices and for scaffolding activities which could better facilitate the transition to more independent learning. Further research is required to evaluate how these or other activities could work in practice to support independent learning in the dissertation proposal.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Ai, Bin. 2017. "The communication patterns of Chinese students with their lecturers in an Australian university." *Educational Studies* 43 (4): 484-496. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1293507.

Anderson, Charles, Kate Day, and Pat McLaughlin. 2006. "Mastering the dissertation: Lecturers' representations of the purposes and processes of Master's level dissertation supervision." *Studies in Higher Education* 31 (2): 149-168. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572017.

Anderson, Charles, Kate Day, and Pat McLaughlin. 2008. "Student Perspectives on the Dissertation Process in a Masters Degree Concerned with Professional Practice." *Studies in Continuing Education* 30 (1): 33-49. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01580370701841531

Augustsson, Gunnar and Jimmy Jaldemark. 2014. "Online supervision: a theory of supervisors' strategic communicative influence on student dissertations." *Higher Education* 67: 19-33. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9638-4.

Bache, Ian and Richard Hayton. 2012. "Inquiry-based learning and the international student." *Teaching in Higher Education* 17 (4): 411-423. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.640998.

Belghitar, Yacine and Giovanna Scataglini Belghitar. 2010. "The Role of Critical Evaluation in Finance Education: Insights from an MSc Programme." *Accounting Education* 19 (6): 569-586. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2010.511705.

Boud, David. 1988. "Moving Towards Autonomy." In *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*, 2nd edn., edited by D. Boud, 17-39. Abingdon: Taylor Francis.

Brown, Lorraine. 2007. "A Consideration of the Challenges Involved in Supervising International Masters Students." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 31 (3): 239-248. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098770701424967.

Burnapp, Dave. 2006. "Trajectories of adjustment of international students: U-curve, learning curve, or third space." *Intercultural Education* 17 (1): 81-93. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980500502412.

Chang, Chiungying Evelyn and Pat Strauss. 2010. "'Active Agents of Change?' Mandarin-speaking Students in New Zealand and the Thesis Writing Process." *Language and Education* 24 (5): 415-429. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09500781003789873.

Christie, Hazel, Paul Barron and Norma D'Annunzio-Green. 2013. "Direct Entrants in Transition: Becoming Independent Learners." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (4): 623-637. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.588326.

Coates, Nigel & John Dickinson. 2012. "Meeting international postgraduate student needs: A programme-based model for learning and teaching support." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 49 (3): 295-308. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.703018.

Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison. 2011. *Research methods in education*. 7th edn. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Cooper, Linda. 2011. "Activists within the Academy: The Role of Prior Experience in Adult Learners' Acquisition of Postgraduate Literacies in a Postapartheid South African University." *Adult Education Quarterly* 61 (1): 40-56. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0741713610380441.

de Kleijn, Renske. A. M., M. Tim Mainhard, Paulien. C. Meijer, Albert. Pilot, and Mieke Brekelmans. 2012. "Master's Thesis Supervision: Relations Between Perceptions of the Supervisor–Student Relationship, Final Grade, Perceived Supervisor Contribution to Learning and Student Satisfaction." *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (8): 925-939. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.556717.

de Kleijn, Renske A. M., Paulien C. Meijer, Albert Pilot, and Mieke Brekelmans, 2014. "The relation between feedback perceptions and the supervisor–student

relationship in master's thesis projects." *Teaching in Higher Education* 19(4): 336-349. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2013.860109.

de Kleijn, Renske. A. M., Larike H. Bronkhorst, Paulien C. Meijer, Albert Pilot, and Mieke Brekelmans. 2016. "Understanding the up, back, and forward-component in master's thesis supervision with adaptivity." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (8): 1463-1479. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.980399.

Denscombe, Martyn. 2010. *The Good Research Guide: For Small-scale Research Projects*. 4th ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Drennan, Jonathan and Marie Clarke. 2009. "Coursework Master's Programmes: The Student's Experience of Research and Research Supervision." *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (5): 483-500. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070802597150.

Durkin, Kathy. 2008. "The adaptation of East Asian Masters students to Western norms of critical thinking and argumentation in the UK." *Intercultural Education* 19 (1): 15-27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980701852228.

Dysthe, Olga. 2002. "Professors as Mediators of Academic Text Cultures: An Interview Study with Advisors and Master's Degree Students in Three Disciplines in a Norwegian University." *Written Communication* 19 (4): 493-544. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/074108802238010.

Dysthe, Olga, Akylina Samara, and Kariane Westrheim. 2006. "Multivoiced supervision of Master's students: a case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* 31 (3): 299-318. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070600680562.

Franken, Margaret. 2012. "Re-situation Challenges for International Students 'Becoming' Researchers." *Higher Education* 64: 845–859. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9532-5.

Gieve, Simon and Rose Clark. 2005. "'The Chinese approach to learning': Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme." *System* 33: 261–276. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.09.015.

Grant, Barbara. 2003. "Mapping the Pleasures and Risks of Supervision." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 24 (2): 175-190. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596300303042.

Greenbank, Paul and Claire Penketh. 2009. "Student Autonomy and Reflections on Researching and Writing the Undergraduate Dissertation." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 33 (4): 463-472. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098770903272537.

Gu, Qing, Michele Schweisfurth, and Christopher Day. 2010. "Learning and growing in a 'foreign' context: Intercultural experiences of international students." Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education 40 (1): 7-23. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057920903115983.

Harland, Janice, Sarah Pitt and Venetia Saunders. 2005. "Factors Affecting Student Choice of the Undergraduate Research Project: Staff and Student Perceptions." *Bioscience Education* 5 (1): 1-19. http://dx.doi.org/10.3108/beej.2005.05000004.

HEA (Higher Education Academy). 2014. "Independent Learning." York: HEA. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/independent_learning.pdf.

Heinze, Aleksej and Beverley Heinze. 2009. "Blended e-learning skeleton of conversation: Improving formative assessment in undergraduate dissertation supervision." *British Journal of Education Technology* 40 (2): 294-305. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2008.00923.x.

HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency). 2016. "Students in Higher Education 2014-15." https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/students-2014-15.

Hills, Steve and Viv Thom. 2005. "Crossing a multicultural divide: Teaching business strategy to students from culturally mixed backgrounds." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 9 (4): 316-336. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1028315305281263.

Hmelo-Silver, Cindy E., Ravit Golan Duncan and Clark A. Chinn. 2007. "Scaffolding and Achievement in Problem-Based and Inquiry Learning: A Response to Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006)." *Educational Psychologist* 42 (2): 99-107. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00461520701263368.

Hughes, Hilary. 2013. "International students using online information resources to learn: complex experience and learning needs." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 37 (1): 126-146. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.644778.

Kelley, Kate, Belinda Clark, Vivienne Brown, and John Sitzia. 2003. "Good practice in the conduct and reporting of survey research." *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 15 (3) 261-266. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12803354.

Kember, David. 2000. "Misconceptions about the learning approaches, motivations and study practices of Asian students." *Higher Education* 40 (1): 99-121. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1004036826490.

Kiley, Margaret. 2003. "Conserver, Strategist or Transformer: the experiences of postgraduate student sojourners." *Teaching in Higher Education* 8 (3): 345–356. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1356251032000088565.

Koehne, Norma. 2006. "(Be)Coming, (Be)Longing: Ways in which international students talk about themselves." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 27 (2): 241 – 257. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596300600676219.

Knudsen, Sanne. 2014. "Students are Doing It for Themselves – 'the Problem-Oriented Problem' in Academic Writing for the Humanities." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (10): 1838-1859. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.806455.

Malcolm, Mary. 2012. "Examining the implications of learner and supervisor perceptions of undergraduate dissertation research in Business and Management." *Teaching in Higher Education* 17 (5): 565-576. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.641005.

McGinty, Suzanne Claire, Yew Lie Koo, and Mahnaz Saeidi. 2010. "A cross-country study on research students' perceptions of the role of supervision and cultural knowledge in thesis development." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14 (5): 517-531. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603110802668682.

Moore, Michael Grahame. 1973. "Toward a Theory of Independent Learning and Teaching." *Journal of Higher Education* 44 (9), 661-680. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1980599.

Nulty, Duncan D. 2008. "The Adequacy of Response Rates to Online and Paper Surveys: What Can Be Done?" *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (3): 301-314. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930701293231.

O'Donnell, Victoria, Jane Tobbell, Rebecca Lawthom and Maria Zammit. 2009. "Transition to Postgraduate Study: Practice, Participation and the Widening Participation Agenda." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 10 (1): 26-40.

Overall, Nickola. C., Kelsey L. Deane, and Elizabeth. R. Peterson. 2011. "Promoting Doctoral Students' Research Self-efficacy: Combing Academic Guidance with Autonomy Support." *Higher Education Research and Development* 30 (6): 791-805. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.535508.

Pilcher, Nick. 2011. "The UK postgraduate Masters dissertation: an 'elusive chameleon'?" *Teaching in Higher Education* 16 (1): 29-40. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.530752.

Richards, Lyn. 2009. *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Salter-Dvorak, Hania. 2014. "'I've Never Done a Dissertation Before Please Help Me': Accommodating L2 Students Through Course Design." *Teaching in Higher Education* 19 (8): 847-859. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2014.934344.

SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework). 2012. *SCQF Level Descriptors*. Glasgow: SCQF. http://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SCQF-Revised-Level-Descriptors-Aug-2012-FINAL-web-version1.pdf.

Silén, Charlotte. and Lars Uhlin. 2008. "Self-directed Learning – A Learning Issue for Students and Faculty!" *Teaching in Higher Education* 13 (4): 461-475. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510802169756.

Spiro, Jane, Juliet Henderson, and Valerie Clifford. 2012. "Independent Learning Crossing Cultures: Learning Cultures and Shifting Meanings." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 42 (4): 607-619. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.663607.

Strauss, Pat. 2012. "'The English is Not the Same': Challenges in Thesis Writing for Second Language Speakers of English' *Teaching in Higher Education* 17 (3): 283-293. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611871.

Thomas, Liz, Robert Jones, and James Ottaway. 2015. "Effective Practice in the Design of Directed Independent Learning Opportunities." York: HEA. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/effective-practice-design-directed-independent-learning-opportunities.

Tian, Mei and Lowe, John. 2013. "The role of feedback in cross-cultural learning: a case study of Chinese taught postgraduate students in a UK university." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (5): 580-598. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.670196.

Timmerman, Briana Crotwell, David. Feldon, Michelle Maher, Denise Strickland, and Joanna Gilmore. 2013. "Performance-based Assessment of Graduate Student Research Skills: Timing, Trajectory, and Potential Thresholds." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (5): 693-710. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.590971.

Tobbell, Jane, Victoria O'Donnell, and Maria Zammit. 2010. "Exploring Transition to Postgraduate Study: Shifting Identities in Interaction with Communities, Practice and Participation." *British Educational Research Journal* 36 (2): 261-178. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920902836360.

Todd, Malcolm, Phil Bannister, and Sue Clegg. 2004. "Independent Inquiry and the Undergraduate Dissertation: Perceptions and Experiences of Final-year Social Science Students." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 29 (3): 335-355. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0260293042000188285.

Todd, Malcolm J., Karen Smith, and Phil Bannister. 2006. "Supervising a Social Science undergraduate dissertation: Staff experiences and perceptions." *Teaching in Higher Education* 11 (2): 161-173. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510500527693.

Tran, Ly Thi. 2011. "Committed, face-value, hybrid or mutual adaptation? The experiences of international students in Australian higher education." *Educational Review* 63 (1): 79–94. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.510905.

Turner, Yvonne. 2006. "Chinese students in a UK Business School: Hearing the student voice in reflective teaching and learning practice." *Higher Education Quarterly* 60 (1): 27-51. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2006.00306.x.

Universities UK. 2015. "Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education." London: Universities UK. http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/patterns-and-trends-2015.pdf.

Vehviläinen, Sanna and Erika Löfström. 2016. "'I wish I had a crystal ball': discourses and potentials for developing academic supervising." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (3): 508-524. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.942272.

Verenikina, Irina. 2008. "Scaffolding and Learning: Its Role in Nurturing New Learners." In *Learning and the learner: exploring learning for new times,* edited by Peter Kell, Wilma Vialle, Deslea Konza, and Gillian Vogl, 161-180. University of Wollongong.

http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=edupapers.

Wang, Yina. 2012. "Transformations of Chinese international students understood through a sense of wholeness." *Teaching in Higher Education* 17 (4): 359-370. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.641004.

Wendt, Maria and Cecilia Åse. 2015. "Learning Dilemmas in Undergraduate Student Independent Essays." *Studies in Higher Education* 40 (5): 838-851. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842967.

Wood, David, Jerome. S. Bruner, and Gail Ross. 1976. "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17: 89-100. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1976.tb00381.x.

Wu, Wenli and Michael Hammond. 2011. "Challenges of university adjustment in the UK: A study of East Asian Master's degree students." *Journal of Further and*

Higher Education 35 (3): 423-438. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.569016.

Yin, Robert. K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks: Sage.