



**Contradictory perspectives on academic support: the lecturers' tale**

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## Contradictory perspectives on academic development: the lecturers' tale

### Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse lecturers' views on how they understand academic development in order to elucidate current arguments around how knowledge is codified in higher education, and to what end. Whilst work of this nature has been carried out in a number of national and institutional contexts, much attention has been given to research embedded in particular subject areas or within academic development departments. By utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a series of super- and sub-ordinate themes that represent the ways in which each lecturer describes academic development have been mapped across the existing literature in a form that has not been done to date. The results of this analysis highlight the need to think beyond the binaries subsumed within learner-/discipline-focussed or institutionally-/epistemologically- constrained barriers to academic development.

Key words: academic development; higher education; learner identity; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

### Introduction

Whilst the structure and purpose of academic development in higher education has been examined over a considerable period of time and across a broad range of social and cultural contexts, the 'highly fragmented nature of academic development' (Buyl 2017, 78) continues to challenge the Academy; features of this challenge include the political problematisation of student failure (Percy 2014) and the complexity of pedagogic priorities (Hathaway 2015). For example, the ways in which we codify knowledge in order to decide whether a student has demonstrated a set of agreed academic standards raises questions about the relationship between teaching and learning and the difference between attainment and achievement.

Therefore, and perhaps as a result of such codification, activities that take

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3 place under the guise of 'academic development' deserve the same level of critique  
4 and analysis as those that take place under the guise of 'teaching and learning'.  
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7 More specifically, the plethora of research around the ways in which assumptions  
8 about academic development position students, lecturers and support staff (for  
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10 example that published by Fox and O'Maley 2018; Lillis, Harrington, Lea and  
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12 Mitchell 2015; Murray and Nallaya 2016; Paxton and Frith 2014) points to the need  
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15 for new ways of analysing how the term 'academic development' is understood.  
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19 In response, the primary aim of this article is to present an Interpretative  
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21 Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of a series of interviews conducted with lecturers  
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23 in order to understand how they conceive academic development and what they  
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25 perceive their role to be within this conceptualisation. As a distinctive feature of IPA  
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27 is 'its commitment to an idiographic perspective, to the in-depth analysis of individual  
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29 cases' (Smith, 2011, p. 6), the use of this methodological approach enables a multi-  
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31 layered mapping of discrete experiences against pre-existing literature.  
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35 The next section of this article outlines current thinking around academic  
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37 development practices, focussing on the consequences of how such practices  
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39 impact upon learner identity and enable - or silence - learner voice. From this, an IPA  
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41 analysis of interviews conducted with lecturers is presented and the resulting super-  
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43 and sub- ordinate themes critiqued in order to unravel institutional, subject-level and  
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45 individual understanding of 'becoming' a learner in higher education.  
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### 54 **Making sense of academic development.**

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56 For the purpose of this paper, academic development is defined as those  
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58 activities that improve educational outcomes, enhance the student experience and  
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3 enable educational equality. Distinctions between academic literacy, academic  
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5 socialisation and knowledge creation have led to calls for 'epistemological  
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7 adaptation' (Hathaway 2015, 509) in that skills-based forms of academic  
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9 development, when centrally located, can position the lecturer as subject expert, the  
10  
11 member of staff based in an academic development department (termed academic  
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13 support service in some institutions) as literacy expert and the student as either  
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15 skilled or skill-deficient. Unsurprisingly, it has been noted that whilst structures of this  
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17 nature may improve some forms of educational outcome, they can also position  
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19 students who access such services as disempowered beneficiaries of learning  
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21 experiences rather than as independent learners or as partners in their own learning  
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23 (Fox and O'Maley 2018; Tapp 2015). This is not to argue that academic  
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25 development activities always reflect deficit perspectives or that the architects of  
26  
27 such activities do so from a pejorative mind-set. The point, here, is that deeper  
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29 consideration of approaches such as reading resilience (Douglas, Barnett, Poletti,  
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31 Seaboyer and Kennedy 2015) or writing practices as a means of developing  
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33 discourse competency within a field of study (Harper and Vered 2017) might  
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35 encourage broader thinking around educational equality and the importance of  
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37 learner identity.  
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44 To elaborate an example, close reading - the nuanced and thorough analysis of  
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46 a reading text (Douglas et. al. 2015) - seeks to develop empowered and sustainable  
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48 cultures around reading. If we were to extend this argument to incorporate all forms  
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50 of academic discourse, we could reconfigure staff and student relationships as more  
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52 evenly balanced wherein meaning-making could be contested by any member of an  
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54 academic community, despite the fact that staff *may* have a greater knowledge of  
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56 what it is to be academically literate. The consequence of such an approach gives  
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3 scope for the development of arenas that encourage debate around the fact that the  
4 ability to contest meaning may be of greater value than the possession of certain  
5 forms of knowledge (Hathaway 2015; Knudsen 2014).  
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9  
10 By seeking to embed academic development practices that place learner  
11 identity and learner voice at the centre of the process (Murray and Nallaya 2016), it  
12 has been argued that learning to write in academia is a form of 'becoming', in that we  
13 write to express our unique selves and, in doing so, we give voice to both our ideas  
14 and ourselves (Hutchings, 2014). In this regard, Harper and Vered (2017, 697) warn  
15 that:  
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24 'A focus on product can lead to writing that is voiceless, a collage of references  
25 to others in the required format and structure, but without any sense of what the  
26 student thinks about the topic or the citations referenced. Communication  
27 therefore needs to be conceptualised as both product and process: a  
28 purposeful (expressive) transaction'.  
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32 This argument invites deliberation about: what and how we assess learning, and for  
33 what end purpose; how we create (or destabilise) educational equality; and whether  
34 we conceive of academic development as a noun (thing), a verb (something that we  
35 do), or an ethic (moral precept).  
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41 In all, whilst many scholars advocate a more equal negotiation of academic  
42 development practices, there remains a lack of clarity and detail about the roles of  
43 lecturers and students in a number of these models, and often little  
44 acknowledgement of the role of academic support staff when considering the need  
45 for epistemological adaptation. A cynical reading of this might lead to the conclusion  
46 that the sort of 'fiefdoms' referred to later in this article are likely to prevail, despite  
47 evidence that might suggest the need to think otherwise.  
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### 56 57 **The empirical study** 58 59 60

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3 In contrast to other empirical investigations (such as that conducted by Murray and  
4 Nallaya in an Australian university (2016) and McGrath and Kaufhold's Swedish  
5 study, 2016), the empirical data gathered for the purpose of this article does not  
6 relate to a specific initiative or programme. Rather, the purpose was to gather data  
7 from lecturers across a broad range of academic disciplines and programmes, in one  
8 university in the UK, in order to capture the everyday experiences of lecturers  
9 working in different disciplinary cultures within a single setting. That is, to understand  
10 what lecturers do on a day-to-day basis rather than leading them, via structured  
11 interview questions, toward responses that may represent an 'ideal' rather than the  
12 'real-world'. This distinction is crucial in performative cultures. The university from  
13 which the empirical data was collected caters for approximately 12,000  
14 undergraduate and 4,000 postgraduate students, and offers a wide range of face-to-  
15 face, workshop-based and online academic support services facilitated by a  
16 centralised learning services department.

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19 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodological  
20 framework used to explore participant experience in a way that disavows the  
21 presumption of an emergent reality. The data were gathered via individual  
22 interviews, based on the lived realities of each participant, with the intention being to  
23 understand perceptions of academic development within a specific context  
24 (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014; Smith and Osborn 2007) in order to examine what  
25 lecturers do that they believe constitutes academic development.

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28 Disciplines for interviews were identified using Biglan's (1973) pure/applied  
29 hard/soft categorisations; from this, the following subject areas were selected:

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32 Pure Soft: Psychology, History.

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3 Applied Soft: Education, Nursing  
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5 Pure Hard: Mathematics  
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7  
8 Applied Hard: Business Studies (the subject closest to Biglan's Applied hard  
9 category (i.e. Mechanical, Engineering, Civil Engineering and Economics).  
10

11  
12 These disciplines were selected in order to represent pure and applied subjects  
13 common to many higher education institutions.  
14

### 15 16 17 **Sample**

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19 A sample of 16 academic staff was selected to mirror the range of disciplines  
20 represented by Biglan's categories, alongside variation in age and length of service.  
21

22  
23 This sample comprised eight male lecturers and eight female lecturers.  
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### 25 26 27 **The interviews**

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29 In an attempt to understand lived experiences, interviewees were given a single  
30 interview question:  
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35 • Can you tell me about an actual, but typical, example of academic  
36 development that you have enabled?  
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39 For each interview, this formed the basis of a discussion around perceptions of what  
40 academic development meant to each lecturer in the real world of academia. The  
41 resulting interviews were scrutinised through a process of identifying, coding and  
42 connecting themes (Savin-Baden and Major 2013; Smith and Osborn 2007), noting  
43 areas that appeared to be of particular interest to the participant or of particular  
44 significance to the study.  
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54 Ethical dilemmas associated with most interview-based research, including  
55 IPA, generally relate to the collection and reporting of verbatim extracts from  
56 interview data, the securing of anonymity, and obtaining participant consent (Smith,  
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3 Flowers and Larkin 2009). A useful starting point when attempting to address such  
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5 concerns is that proposed by Braidotti (2006), who argued for an alternative view on  
6  
7 subjectivity, ethics and emancipation. A recurrent theme throughout her writing  
8  
9 relates to the importance of constructing socially and politically relevant knowledge  
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11 that contributes to making a difference in the world of ethical and political subjectivity  
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13 in contemporary culture. In a study of this nature, where hierarchical structures have  
14  
15 the potential to disenfranchise participants, ethical and political subjectivity are clear  
16  
17 points of reference that emerged from the interviews. Thus, whilst it would be naïve  
18  
19 to assume that interviews with staff could ever be without some form of power  
20  
21 differential, if only in terms of the 'interviewer's monopoly of interpretation'  
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23 (Brinkmann and Kvale 2006, 165), concerns of this nature were borne in mind  
24  
25 throughout the IPA analysis. For example, in line with Smith et al (2009),  
26  
27 considerable emphasis was attached to the writing process undertaken whilst  
28  
29 constructing the resulting framework so that the researcher's role could become both  
30  
31 explanatory and interpretative. Table 1 outlines the super- and sub- ordinate themes  
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33 determined from the IPA analysis and the explanatory aspects of each super- and  
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35 sub- ordinate theme are analysed in what follows.  
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\*Insert Table 1 here\*

On analysis of these super- and sub- ordinate themes, a series of contradictions and tensions emerged which could be seen to illuminate what Roth and Tobin (2002, 116) describe as an 'ethnography of trouble'.



## ***Super-ordinate Theme # 1: Skills-Focussed instruction***

### *Students as skill- deficient*

The general tenor of responses that indicated a view of students as skill-deficient displayed high levels of frustration - and possibly even cynicism - with one lecturer commenting that:

I am not an English teacher, and don't purport to be one, and therefore I am not prepared to sit there and say "that's a full stop" and that's what you do with it...because I can write I just know where it should be...I say to students "you clearly have a problem with grammar and you are going to continue to have a problem with grammar unless you go away and actually learn some basic principles of English grammar. Then you can maybe write your assignments but that's out of my remit" (Lecturer 3, Applied Soft).

In responses of this nature, lecturers appeared to focus upon attainment and spoke little of the links between learning cultures and learner identity. By saying 'I can write', it could be argued that this lecturer framed academic development in technical terms rather than as an aspect of pedagogical practice and, as argued by Harper and Vered (2017,697), focusses on product over the ability to conceptualise the subject matter.

In a similar vein, several lecturers talked about the need to ensure that they are seen to advise students about academic writing support. A typical comment was that made by Lecturer 7 (Applied Hard):

I make sure I say on their feedback "for your next assignment I strongly advise that you access learning services" so that the second marker or external examiner can see that I am attempting to point them in the right direction and point out that they need additional help.

There are (at least) two potential readings of this quotation. Firstly, it could be argued that the very existence of a learning services department invites lecturers to refer students for support even when there is a lack of familiarity with the type of support

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3 on offer, as was evidenced in all but one interview. Alternatively, this remark might  
4  
5 simply reflect a culture of uncertainty around the purpose of second marking or of  
6  
7 having work scrutinised by an academic external to the university, pointing to the  
8  
9 need for the types of epistemic adaptation called for by Hathaway (2015).  
10  
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12 Another example of the problematisation of student failure was offered by a  
13  
14 lecturer who mentioned the range of academic development artefacts created for  
15  
16 students observing that:  
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19 They [handbooks or study guides] exist because you can show them to auditors  
20  
21 and external examiners as examples of support that are available to students  
22  
23 (Lecturer 8, Applied Hard).  
24

25 Notwithstanding these structural references, responses relating to skills-  
26  
27 focussed instruction tended to highlight forms of academic support that focus on the  
28  
29 redemption of individual learners (Percy 2014). An interesting juxtaposition to this  
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31 was offered by Lecturer 2 (Applied Soft) who expressed misgivings that the very  
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33 nature of generic academic support structures was resulting in conditioned  
34  
35 responses from students, saying that:  
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39 They really haven't embedded the necessary skills of reading, even though  
40  
41 they have been given loads of reading, it's actually superficial essay driven key-  
42  
43 word approaches, they are scanning for quotes, they are not reading for depth,  
44  
45 reading for meaning, reading for thinking, they are reading for quotes.  
46

47 On initial reading, this comment appears to place the problem within the student.  
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49 However, it could also be argued that this lecturer is illuminating a flawed system  
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51 that perpetuates superficial learning that merely demonstrates the attainment of a  
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53 particular set of skills at the expense of intellectual curiosity.  
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56 *Perceptions of ability*  
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3 Terms such as 'strong', 'average' or 'weak' were more closely associated with this  
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5 sub-ordinate theme than any other. In one example, Lecturer 4 (Applied Soft),  
6  
7 expressed concern that:  
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10  
11 You get the ridiculous situation where the weakest students have the most  
12 work, having to complete resubmissions whilst trying to get their heads around  
13 the next assignment and we wonder why they take such a superficial approach.  
14 These students end up having less reading and processing time and thus get  
15 caught in a cycle of failure.  
16  
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18 Although this comment is generally empathetic towards the student who may be  
19 perceived as lacking the required abilities for a given course of study, talking about  
20 students as 'weak' or 'strong' serves to embed a language of deficiency. Whether  
21 such language is a product of the acceptance of performative educational cultures,  
22 or a reflection of societal prejudice more broadly, the need to be aware of the impact  
23 of what we say is (hopefully) evident.  
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32 A further distinguishing feature of some responses related to what were termed  
33 'non-traditional' students, accessing higher education within a Widening Participation  
34 agenda. A typical example of this was given by one lecturer who stated that: 'these  
35 students, the non-traditional ones, might be able to grasp the concepts but then hand  
36 in a waffly and woolly paper that just jars' (Lecturer 5, Applied Hard). Following  
37 Burgess & Ivanič (2010), should attitudes of this type be conveyed, it is inevitable  
38 that a 'sense of inferiority is likely to have a strong influence on the kind of authorial  
39 self she constructs and may lead her to be hesitant about engaging in writing at all,  
40 as writing is by its nature an agentic social act' (p. 246). The very use of the phrase  
41 'these students, the non-traditional ones' demonstrate the - albeit benignly intended  
42 – objectification of learners for which we must hold ourselves accountable. In  
43 addition, the fact that lecturers expressed a range of assumptions about the role of  
44 academic support staff is indicative of a fractured academic development culture,  
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3 potentially 'leading to a lack of enthusiasm combined with a degree of scepticism –  
4 even cynicism' (Murray and Nallaya 2016) around the roles of other members of the  
5 academic community. Similarly concerning comments were made across the piece  
6 with Lecturer 7 (Applied Hard) noting that: 'In terms of parity, I just don't think that we  
7 can meet everyone's needs so we focus on the weakest'.  
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14 Finally, a number of lecturers articulated unease about the perceived stigma of  
15 engaging with academic support services, with one commenting that students might  
16 'feel like the underdog from the outset' (Lecturer 8, Applied Hard) and another that 'I  
17 think, quite understandably, they don't want to be seen as stupid' (Lecturer 14, Pure  
18 Soft). Comments of this nature raise important questions about what forms of  
19 teaching and learning are valued in higher education and, as a result, who is seen to  
20 be of value.  
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### 30 31 *Perception of engagement*

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33 A shift in emphasis was evident when lecturers talked about motivation and  
34 engagement, demonstrated by the absence of the sympathetic, and seemingly well  
35 intentioned, language associated with the previous sub-ordinate theme. A typical  
36 example of this was given by a lecturer who stated that:  
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43 They won't read. They go on the net and look at questionable web pages, but  
44 they won't pick up a book and read a paragraph or a chapter (Lecturer 4,  
45 Applied Soft).  
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48 If, as argued by Fernsten & Reda, it is incumbent upon lecturers to 'take into  
49 account our students' complex histories as writers, their socio-cultural  
50 backgrounds, and the nature of written language' (2011, 181), it could be argued  
51 that the first step to understanding writing practices involves the understanding of  
52 reading practices. Furthermore, given that there are as many questionable books  
53 as there are questionable websites, a preoccupation with the source of the material  
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3 might not form the basis of useful academic guidance. The empirical evidence  
4  
5 presented here suggests that an academic skills approach that runs the risk of  
6  
7 'missing important nuances that impact on how knowledge is created by students,  
8  
9 and how it is taught and assessed by lecturers' (Clarence and McKenna 2017, 39),  
10  
11 does little to take account of the cultural and contextual components of academic  
12  
13 development in higher education.  
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17 An interesting point was made by one lecturer who expressed frustration  
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19 around perceived levels of engagement stating that:  
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22 They turn up [to a tutorial] and want to talk but they never send a draft or plan  
23  
24 beforehand like they are supposed to. It's almost a form of prevarication or  
25  
26 avoidance (Lecturer 7, Applied Hard).

27  
28 When prompted to explain what was meant by this, the lecturer demonstrated little  
29  
30 desire to explore why the students in question found it difficult to send written work  
31  
32 before a tutorial, citing workload demands as the reason for this.

33  
34 More pointed remarks were made by one lecturer who argued that:

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36 By the time they come to university, students should really be taking more  
37  
38 responsibility for their own learning (Lecturer 10, Pure Hard).

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40 A thought-provoking comment, relating to perceptions of engagement, was  
41  
42 made by a lecturer who stated that:  
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45  
46 It's hard to get it through to them that doing very little all term and then working  
47  
48 flat out for three days is not working hard, it's working badly (Lecturer 12, Pure  
49  
50 Hard).

51  
52 It could be argued that this is sound, and very helpful, advice for any student.

53  
54 However, presumptions behind why students may be described as 'doing very little  
55  
56 all term' can become unhelpful habits of mind that serve to marginalise those that  
57  
58 might, for example, have families or other caring responsibilities. In effect,  
59  
60 conceptualisations of academic development that located the 'difficulty' within the

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3 student appeared to result in the marginalisation of learners and the production of  
4 forms of pedagogic communication that could be described as undemocratic and  
5  
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7  
8 unjust.

### 10 ***Super-ordinate Theme # 2: Knowledge dissemination***

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13 When lecturers talked about knowledge dissemination, they predominantly focussed  
14  
15 on attainment and the ability to access discipline-specific discourses.

#### 17 *Attainment*

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20 When discussing attainment, lecturers often acknowledged the fact that students  
21  
22 may not be accustomed to certain ways of thinking, reading and writing but did not  
23  
24 frame this as a student deficit; rather, they appeared to focus on the unfamiliarity of  
25  
26 the task and the vague nature of assessment criteria. Indeed, responses that aligned  
27  
28 with this category tended towards descriptions of students as yet to achieve their  
29  
30 potential. Lecturer 5 (Applied Hard) described a typical example of this as:

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34 The thing I am trying to get across is that there are lots of ways of achieving a  
35  
36 distinction, some great pieces of work use two or three references to brilliant  
37  
38 effect and go into them in great depth. Others show a real grasp of the field.  
39  
40 This is what the students can't seem to grasp, that good writing takes different  
41  
42 forms but has the same basic qualities, thoughtful, well written, well informed  
43  
44 and, if you're lucky, showing a glimmer of originality.

45  
46 This quotation typified responses that acknowledged the perceived centrality of  
47  
48 subject specific knowledge to academic attainment. In an arena where 'students are  
49  
50 often penalised in assessment for an inability to express their knowledge and  
51  
52 understanding in discipline-specific ways' (Ryan 2011, 109), it might be unsurprising  
53  
54 that lecturers focus on product over process. However, it is all too easy to blame the  
55  
56 system for pedagogical practices that produce certain forms of knowledge that are  
57  
58 easily assessable within a definitive set of distinctions about valuable ways of  
59  
60 knowing.

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3 An arguably more sophisticated response was evinced by Lecturer 3 (Applied  
4 Soft), who said: 'I tend to ask my students "what do you understand by that concept"  
5 and then say right, now look at it in relation to what the text book or article says  
6 and then say right, now look at it in relation to what the text book or article says  
7 about it, how near is that to what you are saying'. This lecturer was clearly aware of  
8 the need to engage with a body of literature for a range of reasons, including  
9 formative assessment. However, this description went beyond knowledge  
10 dissemination, per se, to include thoughtful engagement with the field. This position  
11 does not disavow the need for the 'knowledgeable' in the teaching/learning  
12 relationship and, indeed, it is not the intention of this paper to reject knowledge  
13 dissemination; rather, the point is to question the degree to which teaching  
14 experiences enable practical reasoning and reflexivity.  
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### 29 *Discipline-specific discourses*

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31 Three features of discipline-specific discourse were evidenced in the interviews.  
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33 Firstly, the need to deal with subject-specific content when engaging in thinking,  
34 reading and writing within a discipline was mentioned by lecturers across all of the  
35 subject categories represented. In some interviews, particular attention was given to  
36 the disjuncture between non-specialist academic support and the assessment  
37 requirements of a given subject. However, there was also a sense that students may  
38 be 'dismissed as deficient through not exhibiting the range of practices valorised by  
39 those discourses of observable participation – despite being central to study  
40 practices and academic work' (Gourley 2015). There are levels of injustice  
41 embedded here, not least of which is that articulated by one lecturer who reflected  
42 that:  
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57 I guess what we are seeing is an entirely understandable conditioned response  
58 to a schooling system that seems to involve very little creativity and a university  
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3 system that cannot demand creative thinking as a result (Lecturer 5, Applied  
4 Hard).  
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8 Another example of this was given by Lecturer 7 (Applied Hard) when describing an  
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10 interaction between a student and a member of academic support staff:  
11

12 One of them got out an article and showed it to her and she admitted that she  
13 wouldn't know where to start with it and that as she wasn't a subject specialist,  
14 her help and advice would have to be general.  
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16  
17 So, although a number of lecturers stated that they specifically advised  
18  
19 students to attend learning support services when they had failed an assessment,  
20  
21 recognition of the gap between generic support and discipline specific support was  
22  
23 recognised. In this sense, lecturer 9 (Pure Hard) pointed out that:  
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25  
26 For some subjects, separate study support, provided by non-specialists, might  
27 not be the way forward. In fact, I don't know what it could achieve as any  
28 advice, no matter how useful in principle, will be so dislocated from the subject  
29 as to be worse than useless.  
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33 It could be argued that both of these comments reflect Harper and Vered's call  
34  
35 for 'communication to be conceptualised as a purposeful (expressive) transaction'  
36  
37 (2017, 697) in several domains. Firstly, communication between academic staff and  
38  
39 students could be interpreted as contradictory if a student is advised to access a  
40  
41 service somewhat undervalued by lecturers. Secondly, communication between  
42  
43 lecturers and academic support staff (in both directions) appeared to be less than  
44  
45 purposeful in these interviews. If we were to speculate on the reasons behind such  
46  
47 disconnects, the lecturers' tale speaks to subject-specific scholarship or  
48  
49 professionally bound ways of being. One lecturer commented on both aspects when  
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51 remarking that.  
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56 I guess my point would be that writing, and even reading, is dependent upon  
57 the way that we think and conceive knowledge.  
58

59 And:  
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3 Faculties like Education and Health see themselves as professional rather than  
4 academic faculties and the culture is that of professional rather than academic  
5 development (Lecturer 4, Applied Soft).  
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9 When exploring how they enable the development of discipline specific discourses,  
10 lecturers focussed on pedagogic priorities by talking about academic development  
11 practices as:  
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16 I get to hear how individual students are rationalising problems. By actually  
17 working on them in class, I can see their thought processes and can help them  
18 to develop more productive processes. For me, that counts as study support, at  
19 least as much as the traditional notions of supporting someone with their written  
20 English (Lecturer 9, Pure Hard).  
21  
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23  
24 Alongside such comments, lecturers tended to talk about the need for students to  
25 immerse themselves in a discipline as part of the academic experience and drew  
26 clear distinctions between this and the completion of, albeit discipline specific,  
27 assignments. In the words of one lecturer:  
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32  
33 If a student shows you a draft or if you pick up that they are struggling with  
34 writing, I would refer them to Study Support. I obviously wouldn't do this if they  
35 were struggling with the content (Lecturer 12, Pure Hard).  
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37

38 As mentioned earlier in this paper, it might be argued that this is a perfectly  
39 reasonable point of view. However, any acknowledgement that 'writing demands are  
40 also identity demands' (Burgess & Ivanič 2010) requires lecturer engagement with  
41 the development of *all* forms of academic discourse.  
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### 49 ***Super-ordinate Theme # 3: Contested meaning making***

#### 50 *Student voice*

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52 For this sub-ordinate theme, contested meaning making refers specifically to  
53 pedagogic spaces that are designed to level the intellectual 'playing field' in order to  
54 privilege student voice when discussing meaning- or knowledge- making (Lillis and  
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3 Tuck 2016; Murray and Nallaya 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, but of interest here,  
4  
5 is the fact that the distinction between contested meaning making and knowledge  
6  
7 dissemination (whilst equally linked to the student-lecturer relationship) was  
8  
9 articulated differently across disciplines. In some cases, it was described in terms of  
10  
11 subject specific academic reading, thinking and in the ability to develop and sustain  
12  
13 an argument. One lecturer explored this in terms of developing academic  
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15 confidence:  
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18  
19 It is usually a revelation [to students] that articles can be, and usually are,  
20  
21 partial. This is the first step to them realising that they, as students, have a  
22  
23 basis to critique them (Lecturer 13, Pure Soft).

24 In this interview, the lecturer talked about students in terms of their potential and the  
25  
26 need to create spaces for individuals to express their unique selves. Another lecturer  
27  
28 described the practices of a team of lecturers who had adopted an enquiry-based  
29  
30 approach:  
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34 We just question what they are saying. We might say “is there another  
35  
36 explanation for this” or “that’s one way of looking at it, how else might you  
37  
38 explain it”? Some of the students love this, and others get nervous, but you  
39  
40 often find that it’s the quiet ones who come up with a gem or who are more  
41  
42 provisional and thoughtful (Lecturer 11, Pure Hard).

43 An interesting point, perhaps illustrating an education system increasingly built upon  
44  
45 contested terrains, was made by a lecturer who reflected that:  
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48  
49 If we present ‘fact’ and ‘truths’ we can’t really complain when the students do  
50  
51 this in their assignments but if we present possibilities this can unsettle some  
52  
53 students, they have never had to do this before (Lecturer 16, Pure Soft).

54  
55 This comment highlights potential barriers to the development of spaces that  
56  
57 encourage students to contest meaning; whilst it is encouraging to see a lecturer  
58  
59 tussle with the demands of education prior to university, and that expected within  
60  
61 higher education, it is easy to see who some academics might chose to walk the  
62  
63 path of least resistance.

### *Belonging to an academic community*

The qualitative difference between this sub-ordinate category and the last is that there was a shift from *enabling* student voice to an expectation that students are legitimate, if not equal, participants in the academic endeavour. In some cases, this led to lecturers questioning the degree to which separate academic development systems encouraged the development of an academic community. In the words of one lecturer:

I think it is possible we are doing the wrong thing here. I think we see study support as remediation, it is seen as something that is there for people who need it, whereas I think that study skills – the thinking about thinking – should be something that perhaps should be in every subject (Lecturer 1, Applied Soft).

Further, one lecturer in particular talked about communal struggle as an aspect of community building, noting that ‘fewer students struggle overall because they are all encouraged to struggle in the beginning’ (Lecturer 9, Pure Hard).

When asked to explore this in more detail, the lecturer commented that:

The students just seem more confident when they realise that this stuff is hard but by working things out, usually with others, they can get to the bottom of it.

This is an interesting conception of academic development, articulated by a member of staff working in the same institution as those quoted earlier. It is also of note that this member of staff talked about the way that the academic team worked:

We would describe study support as the things that we do and the cultures we create to enable students to study in the way that is required at a university....if we create an exploratory culture, where we are presenting concepts, and even problems, to our students, we develop a culture of discovery, not one of delivery (Lecturer 9, Pure Hard).

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3           Whilst we would expect individual lecturers to express their own pedagogic  
4 vision and priorities, this lecturer talked with confidence about a way of being  
5 adopted by a group of colleagues that created spaces within which all members of  
6 the academic community were able to make knowledge claims and, in effect,  
7 challenge aspects of prevailing staff and student hierarchies, similar to that  
8 described by Murray and Nalaya (2016).  
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## 16 17 18 **Conclusion**

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20           The super- and sub-ordinate themes discussed here enable some tentative  
21 suggestions regarding the ways in which socio-cultural influences impact upon the  
22 experiences and expectations of staff, and students, in higher education. Where a  
23 student accesses and experiences technical support for academic writing it could be  
24 argued that rather than seeking technical support, which is available through  
25 manuals, they are seeking access to the institutional academic rubric; that is, the  
26 academic culture as espoused and expressed by lecturers.  
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36           Moreover, the interviews demonstrated little evidence of overlap between  
37 academic staff communities in one faculty or subject area, and those from another.  
38 This was acknowledged by some lecturers who defended this pedagogical division  
39 by describing their subject as 'different' (Lecturer 11, Pure Hard). Whilst this is  
40 clearly true, it is difficult to argue that one discipline cannot learn from the  
41 pedagogical choices made by another. As argued by Tapp (2015, 719) 'Pedagogic  
42 arrangements also need to frame a curriculum for participation, yet often this is  
43 overlooked in the assumption that students will be able to act on explicit guidance'. If  
44 this is the case, it is worth considering the degree to which this *has* to be subject-  
45 specific.  
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3 This brings us back to the question of the purpose of the Academy and what is  
4 understood by the term 'academic development'; a question which must be seen in  
5 the wider market context of higher education. As one lecturer argued:  
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10 I would say that the structure of the degree is being driven by market forces.  
11 So, for example, there is an increasing trend towards cutting down the contact  
12 hours to be attractive in terms of marketing, particularly in relation to the part  
13 time courses (Lecturer 2, Applied Soft).  
14

15  
16 If this comment is taken within the context of broader concerns about the time spent  
17 on subject-specific knowledge (Fox and O'Maley 2018, 2), tensions around  
18 instrumental forms of support that seek to meet perceived student need will continue.  
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23 Yet without adaptive leadership that seeks to embed new ways of support  
24 (Benzie, Pryce and Smith 2017; Goldingay, Hitch, Carrington, Nipperess and  
25 Rosario 2016), the dominance of outmoded and hierarchical structures is unlikely to  
26 disappear. The reality of this was captured by one lecturer who commented that:  
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33 To my knowledge, everyone sticks to their own little fiefdom. It's as though  
34 everyone is protecting their own role...I have never known a dialogue between  
35 study support and academic staff about how we can work together to meet the  
36 changing needs of our students. Instead, we continue to build our own little  
37 empires not knowing what the other is doing or, in fact, whether this is actually  
38 what the students want or need (Lecturer 10, Pure Hard).  
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42 In sum, it is difficult to address a problem without seeing the shadow that is cast  
43 by the structures that create the problem in the first place. The purpose of this paper,  
44 as stated at the outset, is to view a recognised aspect of higher education through a  
45 different lens; that this lens will challenge some members of the Academy is without  
46 doubt. However, the craft of scholarship should be no less challenging than the craft  
47 of teaching and learning and it is incumbent upon those representing the Academy to  
48 think, and reflect, beyond their own professional boundaries. As argued by Solbrekke  
49 and Helstad (2016) 'as teaching in higher education is a moral endeavour with  
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3 profound implications for students, it is crucial to encourage greater awareness  
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5 about whether teachers in higher education contribute to the holistic formation of  
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7 students’.

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10 In this sense, it could be argued that the fragmentation of academic  
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12 development as a field of practice is, to a large extent, mirrored by a sense of  
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14 epistemological fragmentation (Buyl 2017, 79). However, if responsibility for the  
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16 construction of meaning lies not only with the individual student and the lecturer but  
17  
18 is also located at institutional and social levels (Hathaway 2015; Lillis and Tuck  
19  
20 2016), it is of some concern that the historical, intellectual and symbolic positioning  
21  
22 of academic support practitioners in the Academy often retains a focus on the  
23  
24 redemption of individual learners (Percy 2014). The evidence presented in this paper  
25  
26 might be seen to demonstrate that some lecturers believe that individual learners do  
27  
28 need redemption and that this is not the role of an academic.  
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33 In conclusion, it could be argued that we need to think beyond the binaries of  
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35 leaner-focussed/discipline-focussed modes of academic development or  
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37 institutionally-constrained/epistemologically-constrained barriers to academic  
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39 development. Rather, the hope is that pedagogic complexity, in all shades and  
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41 contexts, can serve as a starting point for the analysis of teaching and learning in  
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43 higher education.  
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Table 1: Super-ordinate and Sub-ordinate Themes

<b><i>Super-ordinate Theme</i></b>	<b><i>Sub-ordinate themes</i></b>	<b><i>Description of sub-ordinate theme parameters</i></b>
<b>Skills-focussed instruction</b>	Student as skill-deficient	The role of Academic Support staff; modes of contact, frequency of contact and content of contact.
	Perception of ability	Lecturers' beliefs with regard to student skill-sets and abilities to complete the course or module.
	Perception of engagement	Lecturers' beliefs with regard to student motivation and levels of engagement.
<b>Knowledge dissemination</b>	Attainment	Consequences of actions undertaken by the lecturer and how they impacted on the student.
	Understanding discipline-specific discourses	Subject-specific academic reading, thinking and writing.
<b>Contested meaning making</b>	Student voice	Enculturation within, and access to, a discipline.
	Belonging to an academic community	Confident subject specific engagement and the ability to develop and sustain an argument.