

## **Making the transition to master's dissertation writing: evaluating the impact of a dissertation writing course on PGT students' confidence**

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### ***Abstract***

The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate taught (PGT) studies has received increasing focus over the past decade as universities and educators have recognised that master's students do not necessarily begin their studies equipped with the academic skills necessary to succeed (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Bunney, 2017; McPherson et al., 2017). Research on postgraduate research (PGR) students demonstrates that thesis writing courses improve students' confidence in their abilities (Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011), but to date, the transition from writing for module assessments to master's dissertation writing remains largely unstudied. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of a short master's dissertation writing course – delivered at a British university in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 academic years – on improving students' confidence in their writing abilities, as reported in pre-course and post-course writing self-evaluations. In both years that the course was offered, there was a significant increase in reported confidence between the first session and the final session, and thematic analysis of open-ended questions demonstrated that students enrolled on the course to improve their knowledge of and confidence in academic writing and left the course having met these goals. This paper confirms that dissertation writing support designed for PGT students can have a positive impact on students' confidence in their writing abilities, and thus help support them in making the transition to dissertation writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing; dissertation writing; master's students; PGT students; writing in transition; academic skills support; writing and confidence.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that PGT students have specific transition needs and that they are not necessarily equipped with the academic skills they need for a master's programme (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013b; Bunney, 2017; McPherson et al., 2017; Coneyworth et al., 2019). For many postgraduate students, there may be a disconnect between *what* they are expected to achieve and knowing *how* to achieve it (Fergie et al., 2011). This disconnect may, in part, be a result of differences in the information educators think students need and the information the students themselves think they need (Symons, 2001). The assumption that PGT students are prepared for a new level of study may lead educators to overlook opportunities to develop and implement specific support systems for PGT students (O'Donnell et al., 2009).

The increased interest in PGT transition has focused primarily on the initial transition into postgraduate study, but there is a lack of research to date on the transition from module assessment to the master's dissertation. The master's dissertation is the most autonomous piece of work a PGT student will undertake (Bamber et al., 2019), but many students are not fully aware of the stages of research and writing for a dissertation (Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1986), which may have an impact on both the final submission and on students' confidence in their ability to undertake and complete the dissertation process. Writing courses concerned with writing skills such as criticality, structure and argument, as opposed to subject knowledge, have been useful in developing the abilities and confidence of PGR students (Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011). This type of course can be situated within both self-efficacy theory and communities of practice theory because these courses provide the opportunity for students to develop their skills and their self-belief in those skills (Bandura, 1997) through the practice of dissertation writing techniques with a group of peers who are all going through the same process (Wenger, 1998). Given that the master's dissertation is not simply an extension of the undergraduate dissertation (O'Donnell et al., 2009), targeted dissertation writing courses may also be useful for PGT students. The purpose of this research is therefore to examine the usefulness of a dissertation writing course for PGT students by:

- Evaluating self-reported confidence levels in academic writing pre- and post-course.
- Discussing the students' self-reported motivations for joining the course and the value they felt the course had for them.

## ***Literature review***

In the past decade, there has been an increasing focus on the specific transition needs of PGT students in UK universities. Recent studies have challenged the assumption that postgraduate students have mastered the academic skills necessary to successfully complete their degrees (Alsford and Smith, 2013; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a, 2013b; Bunney, 2017). This assumption may arise from the notion that PGT studies are simply 'more of the same' following the completion of an undergraduate degree, or that it is a straightforward step to the next level (O'Donnell et al., 2009, p.27); however, a student's academic skills may not transfer as smoothly as anticipated if the student has a gap between their undergraduate and postgraduate studies, if they are moving into a new discipline (O'Donnell et al., 2009), if they are international students coming from a different higher educational culture (Alsford and Smith, 2013), or if they have specific learning difficulties, all of which may create challenges and stress when students are not supported adequately.

Universities may also assume a degree of homogeneity amongst their PGT students – particularly in terms of level of academic skill or degree of preparedness for a higher level of study – that no longer exists (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Rather, there is increasing diversity among PG cohorts (Coates and Dickinson, 2012; Bunney, 2017), as widening access policies (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005) and international recruitment encourage greater participation in higher education. PGT students want recognition that their level of study is different to that of undergraduates (O'Neill et al., 2007; Alsford and Smith, 2013), and that many of the challenges they face are based on the higher academic expectations of their degrees (Coneyworth et al., 2019).

This is particularly true when it comes to master's level academic writing, which, in comparison with undergraduate writing, requires a more sophisticated demonstration of

criticality, originality, argument and structure. McPherson et al. (2017) found that PGT students experience stress and anxiety in response to not knowing how to approach coursework at a higher level and not understanding precisely what master's level writing entails. Writing skills are a concern for many PGT students (Symons, 2001), and the short duration of their course (typically one year of full-time study) means that the need for specialised support for PGT students is more immediately pressing (Bownes et al., 2017). Formalised and targeted support initiatives for PGT students are therefore needed in order to assist with the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies.

Although the need for specific transition support for PGT students has been recognised in recent literature (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a, 2013b; Bunney, 2017; Coneyworth et al., 2019), this is generally focused on the transition into PGT, and there has been little research to date on the transition from module assessment to writing the master's dissertation, which may be a result of universities' assumptions regarding the academic readiness of master's students (O'Donnell et al., 2009) and the relatively recent expansion of research into this level of study. The master's dissertation is the most substantial piece of autonomous work that PGT students will undertake (Bamber et al., 2019), but this level of autonomy can be challenging. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013b) found that postgraduate students viewed independent learning as 'being left alone to struggle' (p.7) rather than as a space to think and develop critical enquiry. Supervisor time is limited (Larcombe et al., 2007), and the majority of PGT students conduct their research and complete their dissertations over the summer, when they and academic staff are more likely to be off campus, which can make accessing support services more difficult.

This challenging situation is compounded by the fact that, although PGT students often anticipate their need for guidance on writing at master's level (West, 2012), many of them are not aware of the stages of research and writing for their dissertation, and thus focus more on the technicalities of writing rather than on analysis and argument (Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1986). Even if PGT students were successful undergraduates, they may find this transition difficult or challenging (Tobbell et al., 2010; Bownes et al., 2017), which necessitates the development of dissertation writing provision specifically for master's students to help support this transition.

When dissertation writing support focuses on writing skills such as criticality, structure and argument, rather than subject-specific content, it allows students to work in a community of peers who are all undertaking the same process and to evaluate and increase their confidence in their own skills (Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011). Research has found that PGT students consider identity and confidence to be very important (Littleton and Whitelock, 2005), and a lack of confidence in their skills may cause students to question their right to be on their course, which leads to increased anxiety (McPherson et al., 2017). A writing course focused on identifying and developing strategies to overcome the specific challenges of the dissertation may, therefore, have a positive impact on students' overall dissertation writing experience.

This type of writing-specific support combines the development of practical skills within a peer group with the development of confidence in those skills and is thus grounded in both communities of practice theory and self-efficacy theory. Communities of practice theory revolves around social participation, in which members are learning by doing, giving meaning to the techniques and theory they are being taught, becoming more confident, and creating a community of others who are engaging in the same process (Wenger, 1998). Learning is not solely an individual activity, but a larger social one as well (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005). Learning, therefore, involves participating in new practices such as dissertation writing, and this participation can be supported by working within a community (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a). Focusing on PGT students specifically, and creating an environment in which they are practising dissertation writing skills, enables students to become active participants within a community and develop their identities as writers (Wenger, 1998). Self-efficacy theory focuses on developing individuals' belief in their skill sets and their ability to apply their skills in different contexts, thereby making them more resilient when confronted with new challenges (Bandura, 1997). Participation in activities that help students develop their academic writing skills is linked to the increased self-efficacy of those students (Callinan et al., 2018), and experiencing success in academic writing can lead to an increase in self-efficacy (Murray et al., 2008), but that success must be made clear to students to help them evaluate their progress. By asking students to reflect upon their learning experiences (Fergie et al., 2011) and to evaluate their confidence levels before and after a writing course (Larcombe et al., 2007), students are gauging their belief in their ability to complete their dissertation (Bandura, 1997) based on skills they developed during the writing course. This form of reflection is important in

helping students develop the confidence needed to undertake the dissertation because perceived self-efficacy is not about whether an individual has a specific set of skills, but whether they believe they do (Bandura, 1997). Dissertation writing courses therefore allow students to develop the necessary writing skills and to reinforce their ability to implement these skills through active, community-based practice of writing techniques.

To date, there has been limited research on dissertation writing courses, and published studies examine the effectiveness of these courses for doctoral students (Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011) rather than PGT students. The aim of this study, therefore, is to evaluate the impact of a practical dissertation writing course designed specifically for PGT students by analysing students' motivations for joining the course, the impact of the writing course on students' confidence in their writing abilities, and the value the course had for the students.

## ***Methodology***

### **Course structure**

The writing course was delivered by a central department of a UK university that provides academic skills support to all students at the university, regardless of course, level of study or background. The course was run in the spring term of 2017-18 and 2018-19 and was composed of four two-hour sessions taught over two weeks:

- Session 1: Critical Thinking and Writing. This is a foundational session that covers the fundamentals of academic writing by discussing and practising critical thinking and writing.
- Session 2: Critically Analysing and Evaluating Literature. This session focuses primarily on how to construct a critical and effective literature review by engaging with, critiquing and synthesising literature.
- Session 3: Critical Discussion. This session explores the development of a critical argument using evidence and observations from the students' own research, and how to link these results and observations to published literature.

- **Session 4: Managing Your Dissertation.** This session covers the management of the dissertation process including understanding procrastination, strategies for working with one's supervisor and tools for combatting writer's block.

To be relevant and practical, skills development must integrate learning tasks alongside teaching and must provide the opportunity for feedback (Bunney, 2017). Thus, the writing course sessions were taught as practical workshops, with a high degree of participation that gave the students the opportunity to implement the techniques they had been taught in an environment that allows for questioning, exploration and feedback.

## **Participants**

The writing course was open to all PGT students in one college at the university, and students were invited to register via email. In both years, students from the Business School represented the majority of participants, which was expected given that this department has the highest student numbers in the university. Other departments represented were the Law School, English Literature, Anthropology, Journalism, Politics, and Education.

In both years, there was an expected decline in the number of attendees between the first and the fourth sessions. This is largely an issue of scheduling for those who attended two or more sessions, as some students had conflicts with lectures or seminars, exams, work, or childcare.

In 2017-18, 15 students (13 female and 2 male) attended Session 1, and 8 students (7 female and 1 male) attended Session 4. All of the 2017-18 students who attended the final session attended at least three of the four sessions, and all of them attended Session 1. In 2018-19, 23 students (15 female and 8 male) attended Session 1 and 10 students (8 female and 2 male) attended Session 4. Of those who attended Session 4, two of them had been unable to attend Session 1 and thus were not eligible to participate in this study. The remaining 8 students who attended Session 4 also attended Session 1 and at least three of the four sessions.

## Data collection and analysis

A mixed-methods approach was used in this study, which yielded a range of responses via quantitative questions and detailed qualitative responses to questions surrounding students' motivations for joining the course and the benefits they had gained from the course. This approach provides a more in-depth analysis of the impact of the writing course, which is valuable given the limited research on writing courses for PG students generally and the lack of focus on these courses for PGT students specifically.

### Confidence Measures

In order to assess students' confidence in their writing abilities, students were asked to rate their confidence levels using a 5-point Likert scale in nine areas of academic writing:

1. I can critically evaluate evidence and demonstrate its importance to my reader.
2. I can use a range of sources effectively to support my argument.
3. I can construct and maintain an academic argument.
4. I can consider different points of view or options for exploring a particular problem/question.
5. I can structure my writing to communicate my ideas effectively.
6. I can engage with my sources effectively.
7. I can write critically rather than descriptively.
8. I can write in an academic style appropriate to my discipline.
9. I can reference my work appropriately.

Writing confidence measures were drawn from Cottrell (2013) and aligned with the content taught on the writing course. Students completed the pre-course self-evaluation at the beginning of Session 1, and the post-course self-evaluation at the end of Session 4. The same confidence measures were used on the pre-course and post-course self-evaluations.

Responses were anonymous, and pre-course confidence responses were not returned to the students at the end of the course for comparison; however, students were encouraged to take a picture of the pre-course confidence measure responses on their phones if they wanted to compare their progress.



The pre- and post-course confidence measures for each year were compared in SPSS to determine if there was a significant increase in confidence levels between the beginning and the end of the course. All self-evaluations from both years were used in the data analysis. Because of the small sample sizes, the data were not normally distributed and were thus tested with a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, which is appropriate for comparing non-parametric data which are measured on two separate occasions (Pallant, 2010).

### Qualitative Measures

The pre-course self-evaluation included three open-ended questions:

1. What are the key areas of academic writing that you would like to improve on?
2. What prompted you to register for this course?
3. What do you hope to gain from this course?

The post-course self-evaluation included three open-ended questions:

1. What was the most useful part of this course for you?
2. What changes would you suggest we make to this course in the future?
3. Would you recommend this course to other students?

Qualitative questions were analysed using thematic analysis to identify and explore themes and sub-themes in the students' responses, particularly in relation to what they hoped to gain and what they had found most useful. Two overarching themes emerged from the analysis: confidence in and knowledge of academic writing. Within these, there were five major sub-themes that link the two main themes: critical thinking and writing; writing the literature review; structuring the dissertation; creating an argument; and practical group work.

Given the small sample size, the use of qualitative analysis software, such as NVIVO, was not necessary, and the analysis was conducted manually.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee. To ensure anonymity, no identifying information such as name, student ID number, or course was

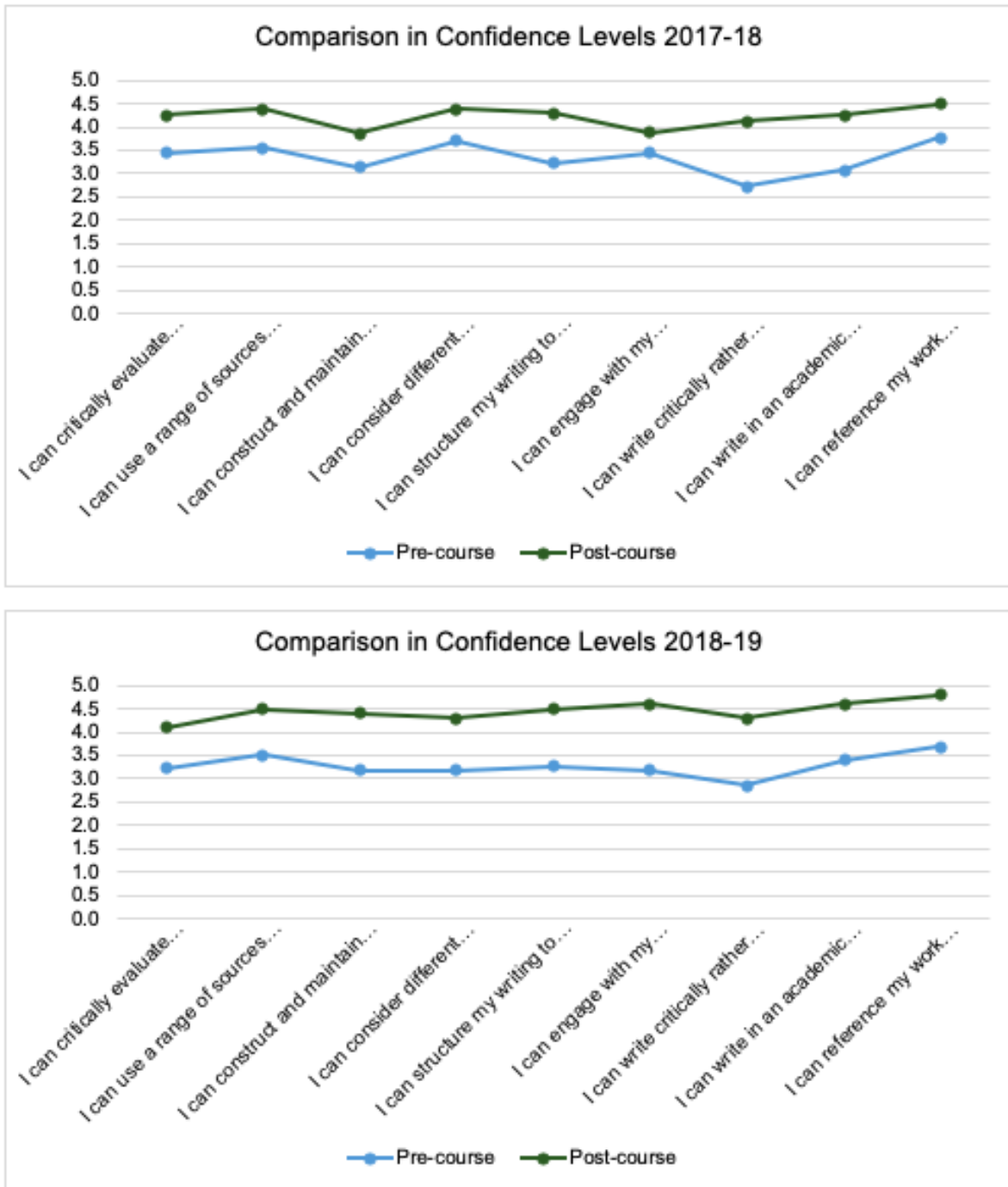
associated with any of the pre-course or post-course self-evaluations. All eligible students agreed to participate in this study. Participants signed an informed consent form and were given hard copies of the participant information sheet. Self-evaluations and responses to open-ended questions were digitised following the completion of the course each year, and the hard copies securely destroyed. Data are stored on a password protected computer accessible only to the researcher. Data will be kept for ten years then securely destroyed. All GDPR regulations for the storage and protection of data have been followed.

## ***Discussion***

Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ) between the pre-course (median 3.00 for both 2017/18 and 2018/19) and post-course (median 4.00 for 2017/18 and 4.50 for 2018/19) self-evaluation scores for both years, indicating that participants found the course useful in increasing their confidence in their writing abilities (Figure 1).

The anonymous nature of the self-evaluations and the open-ended questions means that individual student responses cannot be traced from pre-course to post-course. Therefore, when student responses are included in the discussion, no participant number will be assigned, but the academic year the response comes from will be given.

Figure 1: Comparison in average (mean) confidence levels for each measure between the pre-course and post-course self-evaluation for both years.



Two themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data: writing knowledge and confidence in writing skills. These themes are, for many of the students, interdependent, and thus cannot be separated for the purposes of this discussion. For this discussion, confidence in writing is defined as a student's belief in their ability to follow conventions of academic writing such as critical evaluation, the development and support of an argument,

and logical structure. Knowledge of academic writing is defined as understanding the way in which these conventions work and how they are applied. An actual or perceived lack of knowledge can have a strong impact on an individual's ability to apply that knowledge (Bandura, 1997), and if students believe themselves to be ineffective academic writers, this may have a negative impact on their performance (West, 2012). Self-efficacy theory thus informs the underlying, and often explicitly referenced, motivations that students had for joining the writing course – the knowledge they had or believed they had, and their confidence in their abilities based on that knowledge – and the basis for the writing course itself. The aim of the course was to equip students with effective writing skills *and* the confidence to apply those skills during the dissertation process (Bandura, 1997).

Within both themes, four major sub-themes were identified from both the pre-course and post-course self-evaluations: critical thinking and writing, writing the literature review, structuring the dissertation, and creating an argument. A fifth sub-theme, practical group work, emerged from the responses in the post-course self-evaluation.

Although an interest in working within a community of peers was not explicitly or implicitly identified by students in the pre-course self-evaluation, communities of practice theory (Wenger, 1998) was purposefully built into the course through the use of practical group activities focusing on dissertation writing skills. This final sub-theme is thus a reflection of the students' enactment of this theory, and a recognition that the practice of this theory had a positive impact on their experience.

Because dissertation writing is a process rather than a series of discrete tasks, the qualitative sub-themes and the quantitative results cannot be discussed individually. Skills needed for critical writing, for example, contribute to an effective literature review, which contributes to the structure and the overall argument of a dissertation. Likewise, students' perception of their ability to implement these skills can have an effect on their writing process. Thus, the discussion of the quantitative results and the qualitative sub-themes will be conducted as a whole to demonstrate the impact of the course.

For both years, the primary motivation for joining the writing course was concern about academic writing, particularly critical thinking and writing skills. The concerns the students expressed regarding their ability to think and write critically reflect the issues raised in the

literature regarding the assumption that PGT students will enter their course equipped with the academic skills necessary for master's level study (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013b; Bunney, 2017). The expected depth of knowledge is greater at PGT level (Bamber et al., 2019) and master's students are aware that their level of study is different (Alsford and Smith, 2013). This awareness was articulated by two students from the 2018-19 course, who were hoping to improve their skills in 'writing critically at the masters level' and to gain a 'better understanding of writing at a higher academic level'.

Critical thinking, and thus critical writing, needs to be 'explicitly and consciously taught' (Halpern, 1998, p.454), but if PGT study is assumed to be an extension of undergraduate study (O'Donnell et al., 2009), then master's students may not be receiving the critical thinking and writing instruction they require to complete their dissertation. The impact of this explicit instruction is demonstrated by the increase in students' confidence in their ability to write critically rather than descriptively (measure 7), which was, for both years, the largest increase between the pre-course and post-course self-evaluations (Figure 1). A 2018-19 student indicated that the most useful part of the course for them was that 'it gave a lot of practical tips to address challenges I have with academic writing (eg. critical writing)'. These results suggest that PGT students do require instruction in these fundamental aspects of academic writing, which will help equip them with the skills necessary to complete their dissertations.

For many students, the first direct application of critical writing to the dissertation is the literature review, which requires clear, logical critical analysis of existing research to justify their own research problem. The literature review was identified as motivation for joining the course by several students across both years, which was not unexpected given the uncertainties graduate students often have in understanding the concept (Bruce, 1994), scope (Bruce, 2001), and focus (Kwan, 2008) of a literature review. All of the confidence measures can be applied to skills required for writing a literature review (Figure 1), and both years showed a significant increase pre-course and post-course, which indicates that students perceived a positive impact on their ability to complete this chapter.

Following the course, students from both years identified the literature review session (Session 2) specifically as being the most helpful part of the course. The timing of this session is especially relevant because many of the students were in the process of

researching for or writing the review and were thus able to immediately apply the skills developed during the course to their writing.

Student concern about the literature review is also linked to uncertainty about how to structure the dissertation, both at the chapter level and as a whole, as well as identifying and sustaining an argument. Structure and argument were often, but not always, identified together as reasons for enrolling on the writing course, which was best expressed by a 2017-18 student who sought 'clear guidance on how to structure and lay out my arguments in my dissertation'. The frequency with which one or both of these sub-themes were identified in the pre-course self-evaluations suggests that PGT students need explicit communication regarding what is expected of their work (Heussi, 2012), and supports the need for universities not to assume that PGT students arrive fully prepared for this higher level of study (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Both of these sub-themes were incorporated throughout Sessions 1 to 3 and following the course, students reported an increase in confidence for measure 3 ('I can construct and maintain an academic argument') and measure 5 ('I can structure my writing to communicate my ideas effectively') (Figure 1). Although many of the students on the course were writing a 'typical' five-chapter dissertation, and most of them had completed undergraduate dissertations, their concerns about structure and argument before the course and the increased confidence in their abilities regarding these measures indicates that PGT students need specific support in developing these skills.

The practical nature of the course had the benefit of allowing the students to work within a community of their peers (Wenger, 1998), which may also help reduce the stress and anxiety PGT students feel about their work (McPherson et al., 2017) by highlighting the fact that they are not alone in the questions or concerns that they have. Completion of academic assignments is often impacted by fear (West, 2012), but by participating in group exercises, students were learning by doing and giving meaning to the techniques they were being taught, which can help students develop confidence in their abilities (Bandura, 1997; Wenger, 1998). A 2018-19 student emphasised the importance of this group work by identifying that the most useful part of the course was the 'exercises exemplifying the actual practical situations/certain things that can happen throughout the process of the dissertation'. The group activities help participants shape each other's experiences of meaning (Wenger, 1998) by allowing them to discuss ideas and solutions,

and to 'apply what we were being shown, and also remember the important information/tips better' (2018-19 student). Even a short-lived community of practice may decrease the sense of isolation PGT students may feel (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a) by allowing them to develop their writing skills and increase their confidence in their ability to complete their dissertations.

The higher expectation for academic work at the master's level (Coneyworth et al., 2019) and the independent nature of the master's can be challenging (Bamber et al., 2019). This may be particularly true of the dissertation, which is largely conducted during the summer months when modules are not running, and academics and other students are often away. Writing courses have been shown to help improve student confidence in their writing (Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1986; Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011), and a number of students who registered for this writing course were hoping to gain 'confidence to finish [the] dissertation' (2018-19 student) because they were uncertain of their 'abilities to write effectively and academically' (2018-19 student). The writing course was designed around the practice of writing the dissertation, which gives the students 'authentic mastery experiences' (Bandura, 1986, p.239) in an environment in which they could receive feedback and guidance. The goal of this practical writing course was to build the students' self-efficacy beliefs, and although the sample size was small, the significant increase in all confidence measures between the pre-course and post-course self-evaluations, and the qualitative feedback on the course, indicate that this goal was met. A 2018-19 student left the course 'feeling more confident and clear about what I need to do and how I need to do it'. This increase in confidence may help build resilience when faced with challenges (Bandura, 1997), which may be beneficial in helping students complete a large and independent research project.

## **Conclusion**

The master's dissertation represents a substantial piece of independent work, but there is little research regarding dissertation writing support for PGT students. Previous studies (Larcombe et al., 2007; Fergie et al., 2011) demonstrate that specific thesis writing instruction for PGR students is effective in improving writing skills and increasing confidence. With the growing understanding that master's study is not simply an extension of undergraduate study (O'Donnell et al., 2009), it is important to understand how PGT

students can be supported in the transition to writing a dissertation. This study evaluated the results of a four-session master's dissertation writing course run in 2017-18 and in 2018-19. The goal of the course was to improve the students' writing skills and increase their confidence in their ability to complete their dissertations. In both years, there was a significant increase in the students' self-reported confidence in their writing skills. Despite the small sample size, the results suggest that the writing course achieved its aims by helping students develop their master's level writing skills and increase their confidence in those skills.

This study measured increases in confidence from the beginning to the end of the writing course, but not across the whole dissertation process. The longer-term impact of the course for the students is therefore not known, and future research investigating how this confidence helps sustain students throughout the process would be beneficial so as to develop more extensive dissertation support structures.

This study has a small sample size and participants were recruited from only one college in the university, so the results may not be generalisable across different disciplines or institutions. Furthermore, the content of the writing course itself may not be applicable to other fields in which the dissertation is structured differently; however, the outcomes indicate that transition pedagogies designed for PGT students (Bunney, 2017) are effective in supporting their specific academic writing needs. Future work on dissertation writing courses for PGT students would benefit from larger sample sizes, and from both including students from a broader range of disciplines and developing courses that are specific to particular disciplines. This would allow for a comparison between generic writing skills instruction and discipline-specific writing skills instruction, which in turn may help identify where there are common areas of concern for students, and where those areas of concern are related to particular fields. More work is needed in developing and evaluating dissertation writing transition support for master's students in order to better understand the writing needs of this particular level and to best support them in successfully completing their dissertations

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