

Independent Studies in Higher Education: Great Expectations or Hard Times?

Introduction: Quality Enhancement and independent study

This chapter presents a case of quality enhancement (QE) focusing on the issue of the independent work students are expected to undertake during their studies in Higher Education. It draws on quantitative and qualitative data gathered as part of a large-scale research exercise involving 113 undergraduate and 128 sixth form students of English. It goes on to explore the changing nature and role of students' subjective expectations by presenting data gathered through individual student interviews in which students reflect upon the factors shaping their independent learning experiences. Following the trajectory of expectations illustrated in Figure 1, it sets out a range of pedagogic interventions in this process, assessing outcomes via individual student interviews.

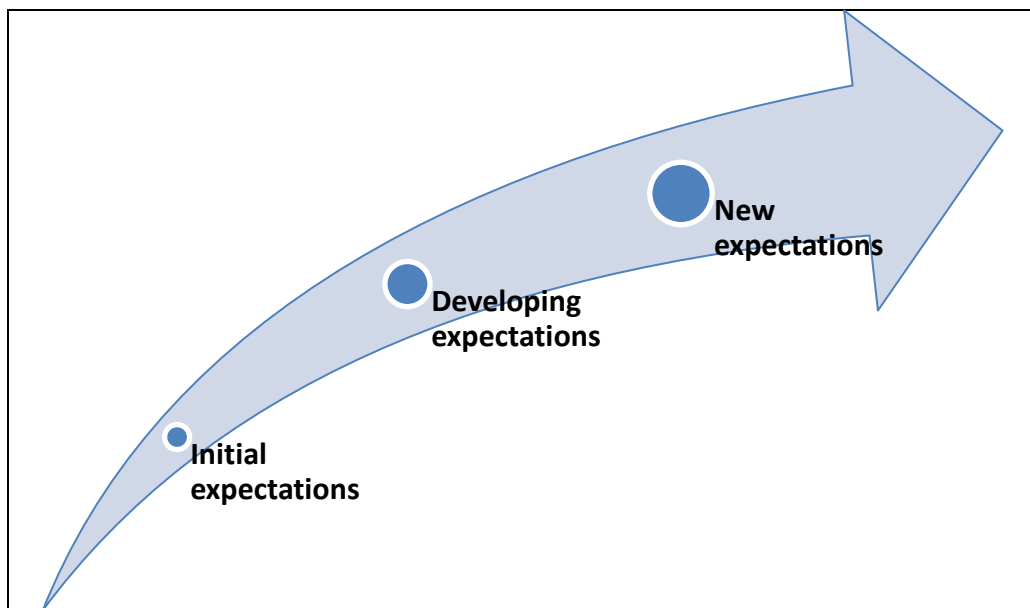


Figure 1: Trajectory of expectations

Learning to manage independent studies effectively has a significant impact upon the quality of students' learning experiences (Snapper, 2009; Green, 2010). This to a large extent depends upon understanding and managing expectations. For Booth (1997) academic expectations

represent a crystallisation of students' experiences of study to date and function as a powerful internalised force as they approach HE. The Higher Education Academy in the UK (HEA, 2008) identifies engaging with student expectations and using them as a means of developing appropriate and effective practices as a key factor in promoting QE.

The question of how QE relates to teaching and learning is not straight forward. In its most general sense, QE may be seen as "*deliberate steps*" (HEA, 2008:33) to improve students' learning opportunities. Gvaramadze (2008:450) takes this further, seeing QE as "*a constant effort to improve the quality of programme design, implementation and delivery*". However, the notion of QE is in itself a contested concept because, as Middleton observes (1995:244), "*it is almost invariably linked to different sets of values and interests [and] it is interpreted differently in different contexts.*"

If we are to measure effectively the extent to which the quality of students' independent learning can be enhanced we need to look to process- rather than content-based mechanisms which will help students develop strong transferrable processes as independent learners as they (re)define themselves in relation to knowledge and knowledge acquisition.

As the range and diversity of students proliferates, so HE needs to develop responsive practices to handle a widening corpus of needs. In the field of independent studies, this means enabling students to accept and cope with the significant challenges of managing academic uncertainty and risk in an autonomous environment. QE relating to independent studies moves away from the traditional focus of QE initiatives on developing contiguous (face-to-face) learning environments.

Constructing effective independent learning in non-contiguous space (Moore, 1973) poses particular challenges, as students and lecturers cannot engage in dialogue at the point of learning. In their independent studies, students encounter the provisional nature of knowledge and have to face this insecurity on their own. As Rogers observes (1969:104), "*no knowledge is secure, ... only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.*" In so doing he identifies the epistemological/ontological conflict which lies at the heart of teaching and learning and which is heightened. It is the contention of this chapter, therefore, that in order to enhance the quality of independent learning, it is essential to discuss) the changing cognitive and metacognitive demands of subject (Atherton, 2006; Marland, 2003), teaching practices (Green, 2005a; Hodgson & Spours, 2003;

Ballinger, 2003), and study patterns (Green, 2011; Bluett *et al.*, 2004; Stewart & McCormack, 1997) explicitly. This creates shared understandings rather than allowing incorrect assumptions to breed, and maximises the conditions for effective independent learning. Wingate (2007) explores this specifically in relation to agendas of learning to learn, ways in which students perceive their ‘knowing’ and how knowledge is acquired.

Fallows & Steven (2000) indicate that, despite Rogers’ conceptualisation of learning, academics are often unwilling to engage with pedagogy, preferring to focus on content rather than process. Faced with limited curriculum time, there is a clear QE case for explicitly developing students’ awareness of epistemological dimensions of subject, as these enhance their abilities to understand the processes of their learning in both face-to-face and independent learning environments (Banks *et al.*, 1999; Grossman *et al.*, 1989).

Students’ perceptions of learning in HE are coloured by assumptions based upon prior experience (Green, 2010; Smith, 2003, 2004). Students’ personal responses to the demands of the HE environment need to be understood and addressed if QE is to be effectively managed (Booth, 1997; Clerehan, 2003; Cook & Leckey, 1999). Blackwell & Blackmore (2003) identify that, within the UK context, QE developments surrounding teaching and learning tend to be subject-based, but if interventions are effectively to drive change in students’ understanding of their independent learning, explicit pedagogic focus is necessary (Green, 2010). This will encourage the quality transformation envisaged by Harvey (2002) as students develop an holistic vision of their studies, including critical independent study.

To address QE in independent studies, we must first consider how difficulties in this area can be conceptualised. Bourdieu’s (1990:205) notion of the habitus, “*the site of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality*”, is illuminating here. In this site, he contends, reside personal expectations, dispositions and schemas. The students best fitted to succeed in HE are those who have developed strong transferable processes as learners; those Baird (1988) describes as effective independent learners. Where there is a hiatus between students’ and lecturers’ expectations, however, a potential conflict emerges (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Vygotsky (1978) identifies the importance of socially constructed and culturally transmitted rules, which operate as internalised guiding systems. These individual systems naturally reside on a spectrum. Some will be largely enabling,

whilst others may tend to create expectational barriers and misunderstandings.

Both of these philosophical stances reflect on independent study and provide useful starting points when considering how to enhance its quality. For Vygotsky, experimental play is central in learning. This play is not spontaneous but rigorously defined by internalised rules which provide cognitive and process touchstones against which new experiences can be measured. These “*socially formed and culturally transmitted*” rules (Vygotsky, 1978:126) come close to Bourdieu’s habitus. In independent study, students employ rules internalised from previous learning as a benchmark. By engaging specifically with students’ personal rules lecturers can develop appropriate interventions to enhance the quality of students’ independent learning (Green, 2010). It is, therefore, important to consider how teaching processes can be used explicitly to address independent study practices.

Using the model set out in the introduction, we will explore how lecturers can work with students’ subjective expectations, devising pedagogic interventions to challenge and adapt these to the new contexts of HE (see Figure 2).

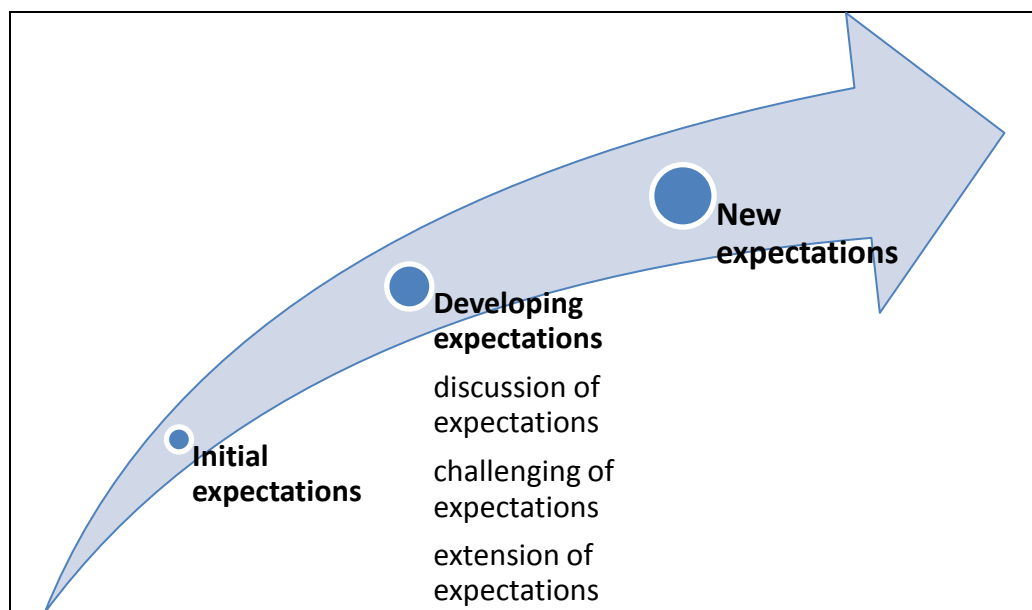


Figure 2: Developing student expectations

Teaching for quality independent learning

The changing nature and amount of contact time at university is a significant factor. Many students anticipate receiving greater input than they in fact do. In a survey of 128 sixth formers, 85% anticipated receiving six or more contact hours per week. Only 13% percent of 113 undergraduates surveyed, however, received more than six hours and none more than ten hours per week. This means that students face considerably more independent study than they typically expect. As Yorke (1994) observes, students increasingly perceive face-to-face teaching as a measure for quality learning. The role and management of independent studies is, therefore, a core issue for QE. It is important to ensure students perceive their independent studies as a necessary and logical 'emergent' from contiguous teaching; as a built-in rather than as a *post hoc* or additional component of learning (Yorke, 1994).

Low & Cook (2003:63) identify that "*about one-third of the cohort appear to expect teaching styles associated with school*". This is only natural. However, in reality the pedagogic range of HE is typically narrower and less supportive than they expect (Green, 2005a). Lectures and seminars are unfamiliar formats to many new students (Snapper, 2009; Rosslyn, 2005), and using these as the basis for extensive independent study is very challenging. Much learning at post-16 level tends to be activity-based, focussing on short extracts of text and working over extended periods of time through set texts (Atherton, 2012; Snapper, 2011). Students are expected to work independently, but this is often highly structured, as is reading of primary and secondary sources (Smith, 2003, 2004; Green, 2005a; Atherton, 2012).

In HE, students concurrently follow multiple modules, each addressing at least one full text each week, each requiring the preparation of primary and secondary materials, often selected from a large reading list. This is clearly very different from their previous experiences, yet students are assumed to be autonomous and capable of handling and evaluating the quality of large quantities materials for themselves (Mishra, 2008). This requires a shift from content- to problem-centred conceptualisations of learning (Knowles, 1984, 1990). The quality of support for independent studies can be enhanced by involving students in developing materials (e.g. VLEs) and study processes. This promotes shared understanding of the function, process and content of independent studies (Adjieva & Wilson, 2002; Srikanathan & Dalrymple, 2002).

Levels of pressure to complete and support for work are very different as students progress from school into HE (Ellis, 2008; Hodgson, 2010). Interviews repeatedly revealed a lack of understanding and organisation in relation to independent studies. Students were often unable to conceive of and shape their response to literary study on a large scale – a legacy of their previous studies (Snapper, 2009; Green, 2010). Using process-based discussions, VLEs and course handbooks to model effective study practices and as platforms for dialogue about independent study is a central QE tool. It helps if students conceptualise their studies not as one large activity, but rather as a two related and iterative stages (see Figure 3). Understanding these interdependent phases of study enhances student engagement and with improved quality of participation come increased levels of student satisfaction. This is, thus, an essential component of QE.

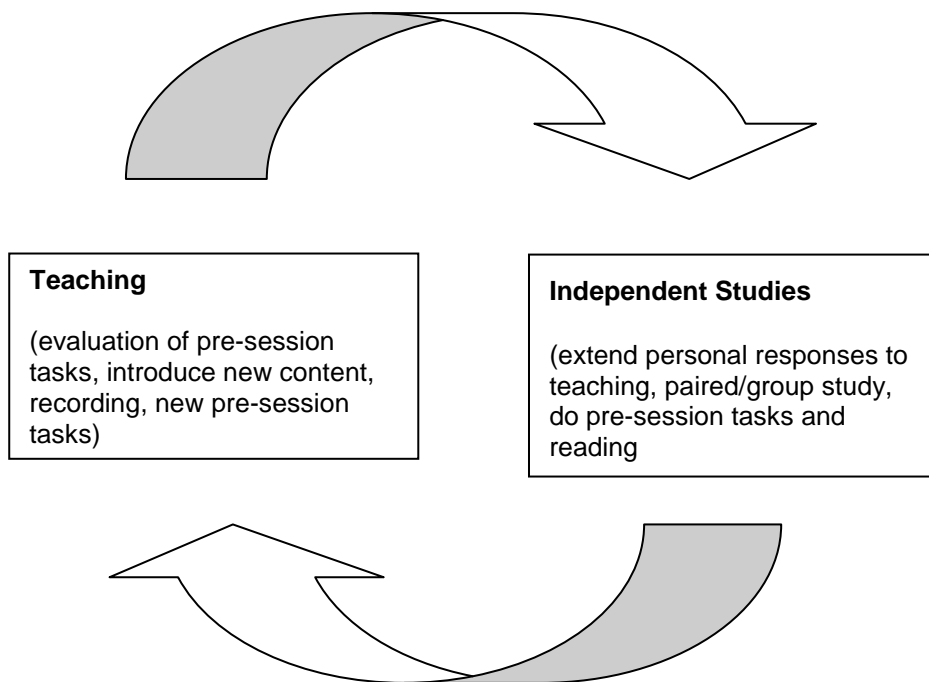


Figure 3: The study cycle (adapted from Green 2009: 46)

By exploring this learning cycle and related processes, students are empowered to deal with the contingent demands of their studies. By looking backwards and forwards through their learning, students establish how previous experiences inform or limit new learning. Figure 4 demonstrates how lectures, seminars and independent study relate to each other. Through discussing such structures, students can revise and challenge previous concepts or opinions; learning becomes

a connected and dynamic process. For lecturers, such structured interventions provide insight into students' developing conceptualisations of subject and related processes, as envisaged by Rogers (1969). This enhances the quality of student experiences, of independent study and its outcomes and also specifically addresses student expectations, internalised rules and habitus. The challenges of overcoming such implicit expectations are also explored by Maensivu *et al.* (this volume).

Understanding independent study

School literature courses tend to focus on a narrow range of content. HE literary studies, by contrast, emphasise breadth of study, and this change in intellectual process poses a major challenge for students. This can be intimidating but also liberating, as students have more time and space to pursue a wider range of materials and ideas. Students need to be actively introduced to these possibilities, not simply left to discover them for themselves.

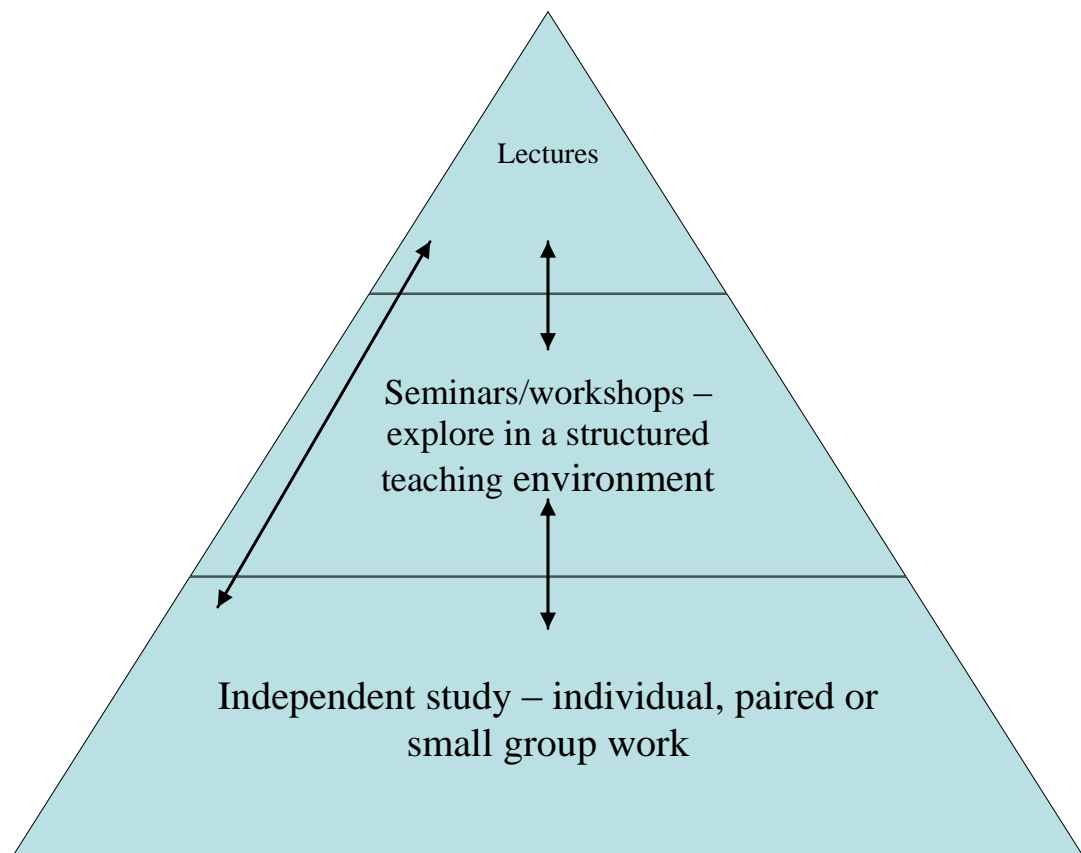


Figure 4: Teaching & learning in HE (Green 2009: 26)

The following case study explores a variety of possible forms for independent study, which need not always be synonymous with individual study, and which can utilise the kinds of social construction and intellectual play Vygotsky (1978) advocates. Working in a variety of organised group contexts, for example, can be fruitful and rewarding and prevents independent study becoming an isolating and unmediated experience.

First it is useful to consider students' perceptions of independent study at school and university. One comments in particular on "*the independence one receives*", identifying the "*contrast to school*" where work is much more closely structured and monitored. Faced with this, undergraduates allocate inadequate time to independent study. Of 113 undergraduates surveyed, 70% spent ten hours or fewer per week on independent study. Only 11% reported spending 21 or more hours per week (Green, 2005b).

Interview data indicate that sometimes the cause is non-academic activities – sports, social engagements, employment, etc. – but often it is lack of understanding of independent study processes (as outlined by Rogers, 1969) or poor organisation and planning. Support and guidance in syntactic dimensions of subject (Grossman *et al.*, 1989) and the modelling of study practices assists students to function more effectively and leads to improved understanding (Green, 2010).

Independence in HE is often viewed in a negative light by incoming students, used to the much greater levels of structured input schools tend to provide. Student 2 observes the pressure she feels "*to take control of my own research and education, which could have a negative effect on my work.*" Student 3 also expresses fear of autonomy, which contrasts with the perceived security of learning in the school environment:

"The idea of independent study at university worr[ies] me, as I like the security of having teachers at hand. I worry that it would be entirely different."

Similar views are expressed by undergraduates, who draw a clear distinction between their experiences at school and at university. Student 4 felt under-prepared for the demands of HE, "*since at university most — nearly all — learning is done on your own. Whereas in college you are almost spoon-fed.*"

Student 5 recognises the differing nature and function of independent studies in school and HE (Durkin & Main, 2002):

“Sixth-form education . . . was very different to the study of English at degree level. Individual thinking was not nearly as encouraged and the emphasis was on teacher-based learning rather than independent study.”

Student 6 reflects: *“University is about working and thinking on your own and for yourself.”* Student 7 simply observes, *“The mode of study is completely different. I had no idea how independent I would have to be in study terms.”*

Implicit in these interview data is a sense that students feel isolated and unsupported in their HE independent studies (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012). This is not to say, however, that they do not perceive and welcome the opportunities for personal development increased independence allows; it is simply that they require support in learning to function more autonomously. This is a significant issue in ensuring effective QE, as lack of appropriate support for independent learning can be a significant contributory factor to attrition rates (Ashby, 2004; Birch & Miller, 2006; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Pace of Study

Pace of study is another important issue. The number of texts covered in HE and the rate at which they are covered comes as a surprise to many students and has a significant impact on their ability to manage their independent studies (see Figure 5).

A level

<p><i>The Tempest</i></p> <p>Read Act 1 independently. Close reading: prepare in detail Act 1, Scene 2, ll. 1-180.</p> <p>Read opening section of Act 1, Scene 2 as a class. Read extract from critical introduction.</p>	<p><i>Regeneration</i></p> <p>Read chapters 1 to 4. Prepare in detail chapters 1-2. Read extracts in class as basis for discussion.</p> <p>Read Rivers' paper "The Repression of War Experience".</p>
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<p>University</p>	
<p><i>Poetry</i></p> <p>Read Seamus Heaney's collection <i>North</i> for lecture.</p> <p>Prepare in detail a selection of ten poems for detailed seminar discussion.</p> <p>Read background on The Troubles in Northern Ireland.</p>	<p><i>Middle English</i></p> <p>Read "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" for lecture.</p> <p>Prepare for group presentation on the view of medieval views of women, using historical sources.</p>
<p><i>Shakespeare</i></p> <p>Reread <i>Othello</i> for this week's lecture.</p> <p>Read <i>King Lear</i> for next week's lecture.</p> <p>Read <i>Shame in Shakespeare</i>, Ewan Fernie, to compare presentation of shame in the two plays.</p>	<p><i>The Rise of the Novel</i></p> <p>Refamiliarise <i>The Italian</i>, Ann Radcliffe for lecture and seminar.</p> <p>Read <i>The Monk</i>, Matthew Lewis for next week's lecture.</p> <p>Read Radcliffe's <i>On the Supernatural in Poetry</i> and Burke's <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful</i> as views of Gothic literature.</p>

Figure 5: Weekly reading in school and HE (Green, 2010: 146)

Not surprisingly, such a radical shift in gear causes many new undergraduates problems. Where students are not appropriately prepared, they encounter difficulties:

“I have gone from spending an entire term on Hamlet to four hours, which is understandable given that we cover far more texts here...” (Student 2)

However, it emerges that not all students understand the nature of independent studies in HE. Student 8 observes the pace of coverage and simplistically equates this with lack of depth: *“There isn’t a lot of time spent on in-depth knowledge. It seems to be basic overviews and moving on to the next topic.”* The same is true of Student 9:

“I was expecting to look at literary pieces in more depth, but some of what is done feels quite basic. I hoped to be challenged more. Also we don’t seem to be given the chance ourselves to analyse pieces of literature. More in-depth discussions would make me enjoy the course much more.”

Here again coverage is perceived as lacking in depth, and the role of independent studies in providing the desired ‘in-depth discussion’ and ‘challenge’ is overlooked. There is a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of independent studies, and this has significant QE implications.

Such potential for misunderstanding illustrates that it is not productive to leave students to fend for themselves in the early stages of their HE. Support is needed initially in managing independent preparation for teaching:

“It would give ... more structure, because it would allow the seminar to be more focused as well. If everyone focused on something or like five themes, everyone could go in with all their points and really go for it, because everyone’s done it. I don’t know how many people prepare — it can be really wishy-washy and you just touch one thing then move on to the next topic and it just doesn’t work. It’s really messy.” (Student 10)

Where preparatory tasks are made the subject of metacognitive and process-based discussion, students learn more effectively how to challenge existing learning paradigms (Bourdieu) and to play with

learning (Vygotsky) as they engage in autonomous literary study. These tasks can (and should) steadily be withdrawn as time progresses.

Such practices enhance students' understanding that HE is less about narrow content focus and more about developing generic processes that can be brought to bear on a wide variety of material; that it is about using independent and wide reading to discover connections across their learning. It cannot simply be assumed that students will know how to plan for this kind of work.

Using Module Handbooks and VLEs

Module handbooks and VLEs are powerful vehicles to engage students specifically with processes of independent study, and can therefore be used to secure QE gains. Particular attention was paid through a sequence of structured interventions to:

- reading of primary and secondary texts;
- revisiting and completing notes after teaching;
- discussions with peers;
- preparation for assignments.

These provided a specific focus for quality input into independent studies (Green, 2009). The supporting resources for students to use in an unadministered environment needed to be unambiguous, responsive and anticipatory (Moore, 1973). Handbooks and VLEs were used to establish what would be covered in teaching (contexts, themes, theoretical perspectives, etc.) and to provide stimulating questions or activities. These structured intellectual 'play' with concepts and content both prior to and following teaching, thus tightening the relationship between taught and independent components of study. As Maslow (1968) identifies, the extent to which learners are required to display and/or cede their autonomy is situationally dependent, and the interventions described assist students in locating themselves.

Here is an example drawn from the handbook for a first-year Shakespeare course. The primary fields for inquiry are clearly stated at the beginning of the handbook:

- the plays as theatre and as text;
- the genres Shakespeare employs;
- use of language;
- historical-cultural context both at the time of the plays' composition and today.

This introduction provides significant insight into the approaches the course adopts. It is to introduce ‘the close study of a wide range of Shakespeare’s plays’ and is not to be the full extent of students’ engagement. Lectures and seminars modelled the kind of close readings (or textual ‘play’) that students are expected to develop through independent studies, and these relate specifically to interim peer-assessments and lecturer-moderated chat-room seminars. Lectures are thus the first, not the last word on Shakespeare and students are guided through session notes to forge independent and creative responses to the plays. Chat-rooms and other on-line materials are used post-teaching to stimulate further thought and development through subsequent studies. Teaching and learning is thus not an end-stopped activity, but becomes an iterative process.

The module handbook also provides teaching and learning outlines on a week-by-week basis. Broad aims and objectives presented in the introduction are used to provide more detailed guidance for study. Here are the outlines for two related teaching sessions on *The Merchant of Venice*.

<i>Week One: Introduction: The Merchant of Venice 1</i>
Why does Shakespeare matter? <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> . Is the play a comedy? How important are the issues of trade and finance to the play? What does the play value? What is its view of “aliens” and “outsiders”? What is its view of love or of revenge?

The provision of open questions to promote critical thinking prior to teaching, develops high quality problem-centred learning, as advocated by Knowles (1984). Some questions are broad in nature. They are intended to encourage reflection on personal, cultural, and literary values: for example, ‘Why does Shakespeare matter?’ Others lend themselves to exploratory reading. ‘Is the play a comedy?’, for example, prompts reading on genre and Shakespearean comedy in particular. The final four questions guide students’ developing responses to certain issues in the play.

<i>Week Two: The Merchant of Venice 2</i>
This special lecture will introduce performance

approaches to Shakespeare, focussing on post-Holocaust interpretations of *The Merchant*.

Here the guidance is very different. There are no detailed questions. Instead 'performance approaches' and 'post-Holocaust interpretations' are highlighted as two ways of reading the play. The emphasis upon the play as theatre and as cultural-historical phenomenon focuses students on theoretical issues of textual production and reception.

When students revisited and developed materials gathered during teaching, they were guided via questions and tasks in the VLE to reflect in more refined ways upon teaching (e.g. through developing personal critical responses to particular productions of the play, and considering how these reveal developing perceptions of anti-semitism). Suggestions were also provided about how to follow up learning through additional library work, discussions with peers, contact with lecturers, and how to generate further cycles of study within and across modules.

While much independent study inevitably takes place alone, studying in pairs and groups has great QE and learning benefits (Vygotsky, 1978). The opportunity to discuss learning with peers is very important for a number of reasons. Detailed suggestions about how to work in pairs and groups were discussed:

- sharing and evaluating opinions;
- working through personal difficulties;
- clarifying complex ideas and theoretical issues;
- developing confidence in discussing primary and secondary texts;
- discussing teaching.

Before paired study, students were encouraged to spend time preparing in order to maximise focus and direction. Issues for discussion were agreed in advance with input from lecturers. The conditions for independent learning were thus situationally mediated (Maslow, 1968) to reflect developing levels of student autonomy and encouraging new understandings of process (Rogers, 1969; Huet *et al.*, this volume). Primary and secondary reading was also established. These tasks could, of course, be undertaken individually, but are more dynamic and useful if undertaken in pairs.

Encouraging students to think clearly about the desired outcomes and processes of the shared study session also proved useful. Before

teaching, students developed introductory notes and questions and frameworks for taking notes during seminars and lectures. In the early stages of preparation for an assignment, such sessions were directed towards establishing important areas for coverage.

Group study was also facilitated. The larger group format, however, brought certain difficulties:

- the logistics of finding a time mutually convenient for all group members;
- finding a space that is suitable for meeting (though virtual learning environments can help overcome this);
- agreeing on a shared focus for the group;
- agreeing the outcomes for sessions.

Meetings of the group may be formal or informal. Sometimes students met informally to chat about reading — related or unrelated to their modules. Where there were more formal agendas, students agreed upon a weekly schedule for contribution. Some groups met via the VLE, and lecturers suggested the means by which formal extended contributions could be made (e.g. pre-circulated individual papers, podcasts, visual stimulus, audio files, etc.). On a weekly basis, individuals or small groups took responsibility for organising session content and outcomes were monitored by lecturers. This ensured that responsibility for these sessions did not fall too heavily upon any one person and that all students benefited from their participation.

Students following this module were asked to reflect upon their experiences and to consider how it had enhanced their learning experience. The impact of the interventions described is effectively captured in some of their responses. It is clear that students appreciated the specific input into their studies, feeling that it had increased their confidence in lectures and seminars. Student 4 observes:

“it has given me more confidence to sort of question what’s being said and I feel more engaged with what’s happening whereas the times that I haven’t done it it’s felt like I’m just sitting here taking notes and the thing gets passive rather than active.”

Student 10 comments specifically on the value of directed preparation:

“we were given a worksheet ... with a list of bullet points saying while reading this text look for this, that or the other and just

make brief notes and then maybe go into the lecture and they develop on them, so then you're not going into the lecture with nothing on your mind. You know what to expect."

The benefits of structured preparatory reading are the focus of Student 5's attention:

"it's not just reading the primary text, it's reading all the other things that are around it. You know, the critics to see what they say, and the different perspectives on it. And it really does widen your knowledge of that book by getting lots of other views as well."

All of these benefits can be summed up in the succinct response of Student 3, who observes that as a result of the structured interventions, *"you do not feel like you're reacting."*

Conclusion

Independent studies, like any other area of teaching and learning, is an important focus for QE. The structured interventions to guide independent studies explored in this chapter served an important purpose in developing the quality of undergraduate students' understanding of the processes of literary study. By assisting students to engage with some ways they could play with learning (Vygotsky) and challenge their pre-established expectations, students developed in autonomy and confidence. The interventions described enabled them to find new ways to (de)construct their own learning and (re)define themselves as learners in HE. As a direct result of this the quality of their learning and their transferable abilities as students of literature were enhanced. Figure 6 illustrates the final outcomes of this dynamic process of pedagogic development, during which students were empowered to reshape their perceptions of subject and their

expectations of themselves as independent learners.

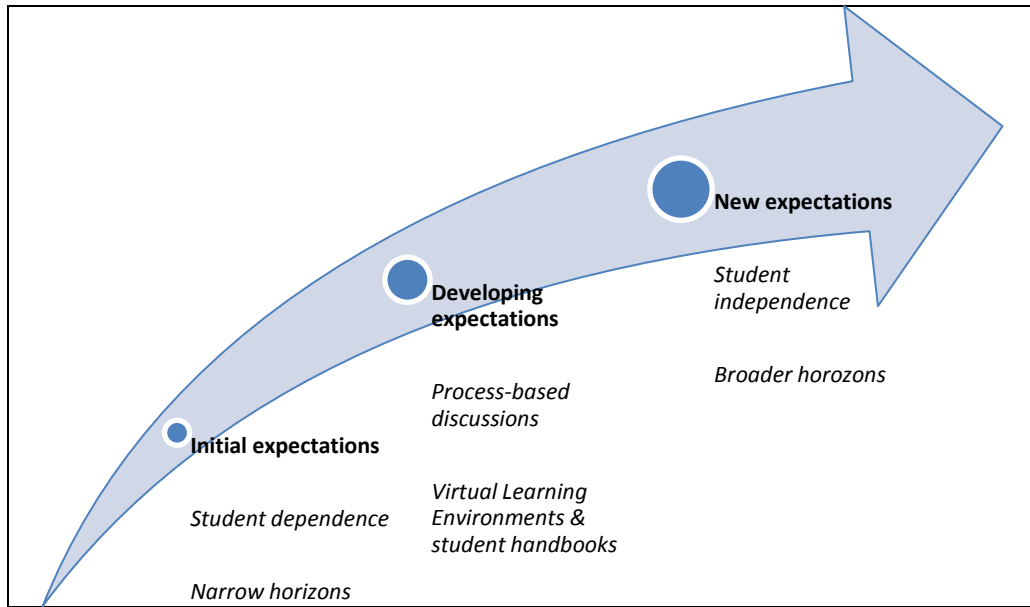


Figure 6: New expectations

Whilst placing additional demands upon staff, whose input is essential to the development of the QE mechanisms outlined, the on-going student autonomy fostered by these mechanisms should amply repay the effort in terms both of student engagement and student satisfaction.

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