ABSTRACT

This case study explores the challenges that Master’s students encounter when learning to write in academic English as part of a UK postgraduate course, after having achieved the required IELTS entry score. Interviews with six Chinese and Japanese learners at different stages of the Master’s study revealed more sophisticated writing difficulties than they had previously experienced. Although students were largely managing their written work overall, there were recurring challenges with critical thinking, the transition to full academic compositions, using reading to inform academic writing, presenting evidence and conveying a clear written message over demonstrating lexical or grammatical range as required in IELTS writing. Furthermore, candidates on non-standard courses (e.g. film or finance) found their assignments to be quite unfamiliar; the use of one academic test for all disciplines may be disadvantageous to some. In summary, although IELTS had provided an important first step to help students develop basic writing skills, meeting university assessment expectations necessitated considerable further progress. The required support to achieve this may be somewhat underdeveloped in the existing model of international postgraduate study, for the participants in this paper. This research follows as part of a larger project, which focussed on IELTS test preparation in China and Japan (Clark 2018).

KEYWORDS

IELTS; postgraduate study; masters; academic writing; Chinese students; Japanese students

1. Introduction

Access to UK postgraduate study requires international applicants to achieve a stipulated score on the IELTS Academic English language proficiency test, depending on both the institution and the specifications of a particular course. After achieving the required IELTS score and being admitted to a UK course of study, learners are expected to reach the necessary standards in a sufficient number of assessed tasks to pass their degree (Haidar 2017). These naturally vary between disciplines and subjects but almost always include some form of writing, including individual assignments corresponding to modules and a dissertation. The difficulty of understanding unfamiliar conventions of format, referencing, style and academic lexis are particularly apparent for many, in addition to forming illogical or ‘off-topic’ constructions (Bailey 2015). Furthermore, the question surrounding international postgraduates can no longer be reduced to whether they will pass a course of study or not; challenges for both the receiving institutions and the students themselves abound (Meza and
Gazzoli 2011). It is considerably more relevant to determine how their experience unfolds, which is an often underrepresented and more complex struggle than a successful degree award reveals (Banerjee 2003).

If their study experience is to be successful, international postgraduates in the UK must learn to write in academic English, which necessitates adjustments on how to produce a composition that conforms to a British standard model of presentation, content and structure. The learning to write process is highly relevant to the subsequent higher study candidates undertake, as ‘writing is at the very heart of academic life’ (Surono 2015). In a large number of cases it appears this can be successfully managed, and a new set of writing skills developed (Vynke 2012). Work documenting the specific challenges of adjustment to a new academic context has outlined several key areas of difficulty (Igbo et al. 2016; Mudhovozi 2012). Of particular interest, the use of essays as an assessment tool was found to be especially problematic for overseas learners, perceived as negatively influential and a hindrance to their study experience. One reason for this is that the assessment format is unfamiliar. Coping strategies such as trying to imitate model answers are common, particularly in response to difficulties of expression (Shroeder 2016). Although UK education includes written assignments from an early stage, exam-based assessment methods are used in many overseas students’ country of origin (Ellis 2013). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that writing graded essays was identified by international students as one of the most challenging aspects of using academic language – partly attributable to lack of experience. The extensive struggle is highlighted through means used by international students attempting to meet expected standards.

2. Literature review: establishing the relationship between IELTS writing and subsequent study

2.1. IELTS as a gatekeeping test
The role and purpose of the IELTS test in helping students transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar is central to their English language acquisition; it assesses candidates’ ability to communicate in order to study in an English language-speaking environment. In addition to language, the educational culture gap presents learners with a collection of serious challenges that must be addressed. It may be an assumption that gatekeeping language proficiency entrance tests necessarily determine a candidate’s suitability for subsequent study (Deygers, Van den branden, and Van gorp 2017).

As outlined on the IELTS Website;

The IELTS Academic test is suitable for entry to study at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, and also for professional registration purposes. It assesses whether you are ready to begin studying or training in an environment where English language is used, and reflects some of the features of language used in academic study.

(IELTS: https://www.ielts.org/what-is-ielts/ielts-for-study)

There are two points of particular interest to the current paper in the above text. The phrase ‘ready to begin studying’ should be read carefully; it does not entail that a successful test-taker is actually at the required stage yet, but that further efforts in English language development will be required as part of the degree process. Secondly, ‘some of the features used in academic study’ does not make any concrete or explicit claims about what candidates can be expected to do based on their IELTS performance alone.
2.2. Balancing authenticity with other key assessment factors
To clarify test content in order to understand this relationship, the IELTS test contains two writing tasks, which can be challenging for students. IELTS Task 1 involves describing information, normally data in the form of a graph or chart (20 min suggested, 150 words minimum). In Task 2 (40 min, 250 words), learners are expected to write a longer essay in response to a prompt. Both tasks are marked using band score criteria, and the candidate is awarded a score for writing in addition to an overall score. How this score is to be interpreted should not be misunderstood by admissions staff; as stated above, the score only indicates that a candidate is suitable to begin a course of academic learning. Consequently, it may be that IELTS written discourse is not actually academic per se, and that the inclusion of fully authentic task types is not the principal focus of the test (Bruce 2008; Moore and Morton 2005; Hyatt 2013). In a high-stakes testing environment such as this, the need for authenticity must be balanced with other factors, including validity, reliability, and practical considerations such as time constraints and issues of test administration. Apart from the authenticity question, further confusion can later be caused by a lack of clarity of expectations, as students struggle to comprehend the differences between their own essays and scholarly work, for example (Gardner and Nesi 2013). Although it is indeed the case that ‘some features’ of IELTS are relevant to writing university assignments, the specific characteristics of these are not detailed in the above citation, taken from the IELTS site. IELTS, for example through test preparation, may be useful to introduce students to a new educational culture. However, students who experience this in their home country with a local instructor may still find the unfamiliar pedagogical practices of British teachers difficult to adjust to (Crose 2011). Achieving an IELTS score alone is not the only predictor of whether or not their language will be sufficiently developed to study in English (Daller and Phelan 2013). Even ‘successful’ candidates admitted to a university face considerable challenges (Rea-Dickins, Kiely, and Yu 2007) and it is not necessarily the case that they will improve as they study (Deygers 2018). Research into university written work has revealed that there are some expected differences between the nature of IELTS writing tasks and academic activities in essay writing for university degree courses (Wingate 2017; Jenkins 2013). For example, differences may include argumentative or persuasive approaches required for essays, or the use of non-academic genres.

2.3. Allowing for the role of educational culture and assessing different course formats
Such differences between IELTS and English language for study become more complicated still when we further consider how potential cultural issues affect the process of adjusting to academic writing, post-IELTS. It is ok and in fact helpful to identify certain recurring cultural traits in groups such as Chinese and Japanese students, which make it hard for them to adjust to the Western way of writing and learning – if these are accurate and based on evidence. Certain aspects of educational culture do form patterns in students from the same country, and identification of these similarities can be used to improve aspects of their learning experience. For example, critical thinking skills often require extensive development to allow candidates to reach their potential in essay writing (McKinley 2013). Although critical thinking is an aspect of struggle for many international learners, those from non-western backgrounds who have not experienced education systems derived from Greek or Socratic argumentation may encounter more problems than European counterparts (Patton 2011). Furthermore, both critical thinking and developing a written argument have been classed as complex learning and necessitate more than merely acquiring generic writing skills in order to meet assessment criteria (Dunn 2015). As critical thinking skills are not addressed at the IELTS preparation stage, successful students will be required to learn them elsewhere.
Another issue sometimes raised is that the type of task required on a course of study depends largely on the subject chosen, and the wide range of potential task formats and skills required (Haidar 2017) make it difficult to define what it is that students in general need for writing. For example, examinations, essays, reports, group work or presentations may be possible. Despite the consequent challenges, there is a sufficient degree of overlap in general university coursework for different subjects to justify using IELTS as a gatekeeping tool to an extent (Moore and Morton 2005). However, for students who enrol on degree courses that are further removed from IELTS writing requirements (i.e. non-standard courses) a potentially unfair extra challenge appears. The suitability of IELTS for this purpose is an important point to establish, therefore, but academic investigation into this is not particularly advanced at the current juncture. It has been noted that using a modular approach involving categories of subject such as Business Studies and the Social Sciences (as used in the ELTS test, prior to IELTS) attempted to address this issue, but the complexity of doing so was not to be underestimated (Alderson, Clapham, and Wall 1995). It is a sizeable task, which necessitates extensive consultation of a variety of key stakeholder perspectives (including test users, existing literature, applied linguists, item writers, teachers and lecturers). Furthermore, although students were found to perform better in their own subject modules (e.g. Business Studies) overall, they did not necessarily do so on the subcomponents of each branch of the module within that overarching category, which is an evident limitation of the semi-subject specific approach.

The potential validity issues arising from attempting to assess discipline-specific language required careful consideration at the design stage of ELTS (Davies 1995). The contemporary approach has moved away from this specificity, and although the current version of IELTS can provide a general ‘ball park indicator’ (Hyatt 2013) of candidates’ English ability; a precise and specific appraisal of required skills is not offered. The remit of the current test is therefore to provide evidence that students will have sufficient language to be able to manage in the study environment (McNamara and Ryan 2011) rather than direct preparation for a particular subject.

Additionally, pedagogical approaches to assessed writing are also evolving in the current UK university context. Peer or group tasks are growing in importance, for example (Dobao 2012). An instructor may ask students to brainstorm ideas together before writing, peer edit one another’s work to identify errors, actively write a piece together, or use some combination of each (Vega 2016). One study revealed that learners (N=18) preferred to work in pairs rather than individually when attempting a writing task (Lou and Lee 2013). Idea generation was perceived as the most useful part of the pair writing process by participants, as it allowed them to both brainstorm collectively and to hear the different contributions of others. Group work may be useful for classroom activities, but if designed to help students write formal course essays which are individual in nature, there is a discrepancy.

However, it could be argued that group tasks help develop writing habits which can later be used as part of individual work (Storch 2005) and the largely positive response towards them is supported by later findings (Dobao and Blum 2013). Nonetheless, international students may not respond in the same way to group tasks as their peers – learning style and experience must also be taken into account (Wiley 2007). If these are not considered, the adjustment required, particularly at the start of their course, may add a significant extra challenge to the study process. To overcome this challenge, it is clear that there are additional ‘costs’ to international learners over and above monetary terms; ‘cost’ defined as the extra time and
work for candidates to compensate for language and skills deficiencies or cultural differences after starting a course of study (Banerjee 2003).

Related to this, research into the implications of higher or lower language proficiency at the start of a course and assignment grades is not conclusive. The relationship between IELTS band score and later academic performance has not been satisfactorily established, and a convincing account has proved difficult to develop beyond slight or moderate correlations (Oliver, Vanderford, and Grote 2016). This is partly attributable to the high number of confounding factors, e.g. non-linguistic variables such as cultural and educational background, attitude, motivation or attendance. These aspects underline the complex challenges of assessing students’ readiness for overseas education more generally, which can mean that students who meet English language requirements still struggle to perform in certain areas to the necessary level (Yen and Kuzma 2009). The consequent purpose of this research is not to establish the relationship between a specific IELTS score and subsequent performance. It is to investigate post-IELTS challenges of acquiring the further necessary academic writing skills, and whether achieving a required IELTS entry score (as stipulated by universities) appears sufficient to facilitate the acquisition of such academic writing skills. There are expected to be similarities and differences between the skills assessed by IELTS and those required to write essays for a postgraduate course, but it is important to examine the Master’s degree course stage to explore the ways in which students may have to continue to develop their writing after the test.

2.4. The inclusion of Chinese and Japanese students
Documenting the experiences of post-IELTS candidates will probe to what extent their writing at the point of entry resembles UK study proper, building on earlier work, which explored Chinese and Japanese candidate writing at the IELTS test preparation stage (Clark 2018). It should be clarified that the inclusion of Japanese students in this project arose through in-depth knowledge of the Japanese pedagogical context, observing first-hand the challenges learners faced as they attempted to make these adjustments, and an emerging interest in how they would later manage after they started writing essays on their Master’s courses. Research evidence is now emerging on the experiences of Japanese learners in the UK, particularly as their arrival in considerable numbers has been happening for some time. Although this work is still at a fledgling stage, it is apparent that Japanese nationals on UK courses of study also have significant challenges acclimatising to the new learning environment (Sato and Hodge 2013). China was added to the project due to the sheer numbers of postgraduate students attending UK universities (95,000 in 2017: UKCISA). Most UK lecturers have still not received specific training for dealing with such large numbers of Chinese students, who have usually never needed to adapt to a new culture of learning and may struggle to see the purpose of communicative tasks, for example (Hu 2014). Furthermore, the extent to which exam preparation in their home country prepares students for UK study proper is debatable. Preparing for a test in a familiar local environment, and writing lengthy assessed essays or having to speak up in group tasks (on an actual postgraduate course for example) are potentially quite different experiences – even if the test in question is designed with a degree of authenticity in mind. Beyond developing skills there appears to be little evidence of work that directly relates to the student learning experience (Yang and Badger 2014). Finally, in documenting these experiences it should be noted for the current study that learners from China and Japan were not expected to have comparable traits, and they were not to be treated as one group, but as two separate sets of participants in one study.
3. Research design and data analysis

This study aims to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ: To what extent does achieving the required writing score allow previous IELTS candidates to manage academic writing on a British course of postgraduate study?
RQ.1a What are test takers’ perceptions of the authenticity of the IELTS writing tasks with reference to academic writing tasks in their degree study?
RQ.1b What struggles did candidates encounter after having met entry-level IELTS language requirements, how sufficient was their proficiency?

3.1. Participants and settings

Further exploration of the longer term challenges of post-test writing required investigation of candidate experiences. In the current study, three Chinese and three Japanese students were interviewed about their experiences. Regarding the selection criteria for these participants, it was firstly important to include students who were at a different stage of Master’s courses, ranging from several months into a programme to recently finished, in order to get some idea of how they may perceive their development as the year unfolded. Postgraduates were identified by intermediary contacts, and it was possible to get six participants, three of each nationality. Where practically possible, these students were also contacted after their completion date and asked for further comments on their experiences after finishing. Secondly, there was little variation in candidates’ IELTS writing scores awarded. Participants were within a small range, with all but one of them receiving 6.5 or 7. As most international master’s students are around that level, it made the data gathered particularly relevant to those key bands. Five of six participants were in their twenties, with one older learner, and all were female. This again was fairly representative of wider master’s cohorts in general, although ideally some male participants would have been included also. Getting a range of subjects was the final criterion of importance, in order to understand how varied course formats and assessment practices affected post-IELTS students (see Appendix A for a breakdown of each of these criteria). It should be noted that although obtaining a truly representative sample of candidates would have been a difficult undertaking due to their busy schedules, the selection criteria above aimed to collate a series of insightful variations within those parameters for interview. It is possible that those students who were struggling the most on their courses did not volunteer to be interviewed for the study, attributable to being overwhelmed with extra work attempting to keep up with their peers. This is a recognised limitation of the sample, but one which could not be easily overcome when interviewing current students in particular, without the risk of disrupting their progress further.

For those who did take part, rather than using a rigid series of questions about their study experiences, a semi-structured approach allowed notes to be made on aspects most relevant to the RQ above. Conducting interviews revealed some practical challenges. Many of the candidates had extremely busy schedules, and as each exchange was limited to one chance, an element of direction and structure helped maximise the time allocated and reduce the risk of wasting the opportunity (Qu and Dumay 2011). Certain questions were included as ‘grand tour’ questions, designed to encourage participants to speak at some length about a topic that is familiar to them (Spradley 1979). Asking interviewees to speak about English learning history, for example, was an effective means of simultaneously obtaining contextual information and encouraging them to feel at ease with the process. Sample guiding interview questions are included in Appendix B (Table 2). Each interview lasted approximately 45 min,
and pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ anonymity as part of the consent to participate which was provided in written form.

As transcribed data was thematically analysed and participant accounts emerged, it was essential to consider which key factors contributed to these post-IELTS writing experiences. When considering the cases, the diversity of individual experience had to be accounted for, and the common emerging factors shaping this experience were collated. For example, these included IELTS score, prior English study, time abroad, subject chosen and any other aspects that may have had an impact on their writing abilities, an adaptation of the earlier ‘Degree Scheme’ framework used by Banerjee (2003). In addition to these similarities and differences, the degree programmes which the cases belonged to were considered. The faculty, course structures and assessment formats are each summarised in Table 1 (Appendix A). As can be seen, the candidates’ degree subjects included were part of either the Social Sciences (& Law) or Arts and Humanities faculties. These were selected as each had a regularly assessed written component used to determine students’ overall grade, helping to ascertain the longer-term relationship between IELTS and academic writing. Four different institutions were included to document the accounts of postgraduates around the UK, instead of using one location only. These were all highly ranked British universities, which account for a large portion of the international student body, with overseas students making up 34% of Russell Group attendees overall (Russell Group 2017). Apart from the subject participants were studying, the stage of the course they were at when the interview was conducted was noted. Four students were mid-course, one student had recently finished and another was on a pre-sessional programme.

One of the relevant individual characteristics that post-IELTS candidates had acquired at the exam stage was their overall band and writing scores. Interestingly, Table 1 (Appendix A) illustrates that writing scores were lower than overall bands for all but one of the six students in this study. All of the postgraduates interviewed scored 6 or 6.5 on the writing section, although there were two cases that require further explanation. One of the Chinese learners, Tracy, had scored 6.5 on the writing section, which was 0.5 lower than the requested minimum level for her course. As a result, she attended a compulsory pre-sessional course and received extra writing guidance. Also of note was that Hiroko, a Japanese participant, revealed in the interview that she took five attempts to manage IELTS with a sufficiently high score on writing to be accepted. The implications of this for her later writing should be considered.

3.2. Data analysis
From an early stage, becoming familiar with the data involved sifting to separate aspects less germane to the research objectives. Thematic analysis was used, allowing sorting, coding and organisation of findings into a coherent report (Thomas and Harden 2015), employing the Braun and Clarke (2006) coding method. The first of the six stages of the analysis model involved becoming familiar with the data presented, before separating it into various strands for further investigation (conception of early codes and identifying themes). The next stages centred on establishing and naming themes, before the findings were documented. NVivo software was used to organise the data, organising it into nodes (or categories). Table 3 (Appendix C) demonstrates how the nodes were organised as part of the analysis process, providing support and further explanation to the categories immediately above, and indicates which key areas students commented on in their interviews.
As shown, these were divided into Nodes 1, 2 and 3, such as critical thinking or pre-sessional attendance. Node 1 included the highest level of (six) coded categories, the most important overarching themes which emerged. Nodes 2 and 3, on the same level as each other but below Node 1, supported this principal set of six categories. As can be seen, not every Node 1 category was expanded by data from Nodes 2 and 3 (for example reading and self-study). However in some cases – such as the group writing tasks category – Nodes 2 and 3 contained branches of further explanation, which related to the themes in the Node 1 category and overlapped, but were not the same. For example, the subdivision 1 node about group writing tasks is developed in more detail by the data in the node below in which participants felt that they had no alternative but to do group work together, when in fact it made them feel somewhat uncomfortable as a result of cultural unfamiliarity. Similarly, the data in Node 3 helped explain that the underlying reason for this was confidence problems, and the overall picture of that aspect of UK study began to emerge.

The number of times a comment was made about each of the topics is indicated in the righthand column. For example, reading and self-study was mentioned seven times. Number of comments and relevance to the topic dictated the categories or nodes included. Each of these nodes (e.g. tutor support / feedback, editing written work, group writing tasks) informs the RQ, and is directly related to post-IELTS academic writing acquisition. To clarify, the number of comments alone highlighted in the transcripts was not sufficient reason to include a given topic, the RQ provided an important point of reference. Essentially, themes, which explored how well IELTS prepared students for later writing, were most insightful. It is clear from Table 3 that some of the most pertinent observations – such as confusion about proofreader remit – actually only arose several times. As seen below, the topics of critical thinking, beyond IELTS (i.e. skills required for the IELTS test that would require adjustment or further development) group writing and confidence issues were mentioned most often. Although proofreader remit was only mentioned on three occasions, it was judged to be highly important as it revealed another means of bridging the gaps in L2 academic writing – and therefore included. Before looking at the results in detail, it should be noted that due to practical limitations there was no second rater involved in this coding process, which would potentially have bolstered the reliability of the analysis further than one researcher’s expert judgement alone.

4. Results
RQ: To what extent does achieving the required writing score allow previous IELTS candidates to manage academic writing on a British course of postgraduate study?

4.1. Key findings
Below, we will present the key findings in relation to (a) course formats and critical thinking (b) tutor support, feedback and proofreading and (c) IELTS vs academic writing (wider and more general, but nonetheless related issues).

RQ.1a What are test takers’ perceptions of the authenticity of the IELTS writing tasks with reference to academic writing tasks in their degree study?

4.1.1. Course formats
The first key finding was that the particular subject candidates were studying affected their post-IELTS experience. Course assessment varied, and some written assignments more closely resembled the traditional essay format than others. The experience of two participants (Tracy, Finance and Karin, Film) was notably different from the other more standard courses.
Although Tracy’s Finance degree was categorised as part of the Arts, Humanities and Social sciences, as the other subjects had been, it did not consist of (approximately) 10 written assignments and a dissertation, as they had. Instead, students were required to write a 15–20-page report for each of the three modules per semester. According to Tracy, the workload involved:

Three courses per semester, and each course will ask us to write at least one coursework, or report…. For this quantitative report it will be like 15–20 pages. But more or less not like academic writing we just analyse all the data. Kind of like IELTS. But for monetary theory we have to justify the point. Tracy (Chinese student, CS)

She draws an interesting comparison here between academic writing and her quantitative report requirements, which she separates from more evidence-based work in monetary theory. More conventional academic essays formed the other part of the assessment for the course, and a dissertation was also included, which was slightly longer than for the other participants’ subjects at up to 17,000 words. Interestingly, Tracy explained that IELTS was actually quite useful in terms of learning how to write these reports as they were not greatly dissimilar to Task 1 of IELTS Academic (describing a graph). Despite some differences that existed between traditional essay formats and her assessed writing, Tracy also seemed to be coping well, and continued to improve.

Additionally, Karin also appeared to be managing her Film and Television course well, even though the written assignments did not directly resemble IELTS per se. She felt confident about her writing, having scored 6 for that part of IELTS and 7 overall. Several months into her studies at the time of interview, she had successfully completed three written assignments, having received a distinction mark for each one. The course consisted of lectures and technical input sessions such as ‘Writing and Directing’. For these, completing a report (2,500 words) on a mini-project was required, graded only as pass or fail. These practical elements were separate from the assignments, which more closely resembled the essays written for other master’s programmes.

Karin explained that these were also about 4,000 words long, however they were not required to include a large number of references. According to her, it was the students’ own ideas and how they analysed the film that were of more importance than academic writing as such. For this reason, Karin believed that more standard essay writing had little in common with the type of work she was expected to produce. The dissertation was also quite different to other courses. There were three options: an industrial placement, making a short film, or analysing a film. It appeared that neither IELTS Task 1 nor 2 directly reflected these, but that certain tasks in IELTS might help prepare such candidates (report writing for example) or even provide the general English skills required to compose an essay to the sufficient standard for course access. According to this participant, the relevance of previously encountered writing formats was relatively minimal, but she did appear able to develop her existing skills and learn to adapt to new essay formats ‘on course’.

4.1.2. IELTS vs academic writing (Olivia and Sally’s challenges – wider and more general issues)

It is already evident that the differences highlighted in candidate experiences of writing were considerable. However, only Olivia reported having a negative time, despite passing her Master’s course. Apart from the reasons already mentioned, previous assessment experience was also a factor. One of the difficulties Olivia faced on starting UK study was that her
bachelor’s degree had no assignments; it was exclusively exam-based. Furthermore, when some of her classmates voiced their concerns about certain areas of the instruction they were receiving, she felt even more excluded:

My culture did not allow me to join the movement...If you are not happy you just try to suffer, try to accept it. But students here they just speak up. I don’t know, I didn’t write anything in my Bachelor degree, just exams. Olivia (CS)

The above quote indicates the nature of the struggles faced by such students as multifaceted and simultaneous. In addition to the strains of working in her foreign language, Olivia’s lack of English essay writing experience meant that she was even further behind her peers. Interestingly, she felt that previous writing had been both a help and a hindrance to her UK-based English writing requirements.

Olivia explained that she considered her experience of this previous writing to be quite different to writing actual postgraduate assignments. This is perhaps unsurprising. IELTS, for example, is merely an entrance test after all, and makes no claim to directly resemble specific characteristics of the subsequent written work expected. However, the IELTS test also has other functions, effectively acting as an introduction to British written norms and requirements. It was therefore interesting to note that Olivia perceived IELTS as indeed serving this introductory purpose. She described IELTS as ‘helpful’ but ‘basic’:

But this is a real battle here, it’s a bit different...It was more like a test of if you are suitable for the living conditions here. It is helpful but it is really basic. Olivia (CS)

The use of ‘basic’ above was attributable to the IELTS exam’s somewhat less sophisticated or developed writing in comparison to what would be expected of students beyond the test, after they have demonstrated that they are in fact ready to begin study. Although – in her somewhat unusual case – the ‘basic’ tasks in IELTS did not particularly resemble postgraduate writing, she conceded that it would be impractical to design them to be truly reflective of this. Olivia did not mention which IELTS aspects were similar to UK university writing or useful about IELTS in that sense.

However, some of the other participants (Tracy, Hiroko and Karin) did suggest that their acquired ability to use paragraphs, introductions, and conclusions had been helpful. This suggests that the organisational work done as part of test preparation was useful to most candidates at this later stage. Interestingly, she also opined that ‘when it comes to the academic writing, it may be the school’s responsibility to find out’, meaning that the lecturers will be able to ascertain whether or not students can write sufficiently well, after the course has started, rather than at the IELTS stage. The point supports the finding above that students were expected to learn what to do as the degree progressed, not to fully understand what to do and how to do it at the IELTS test juncture. When asked about if she felt her writing had improved as the course progressed or not, Olivia felt that it had not really done so:

I have thought about this. I don’t think there was a really great improvement. I think it was basically already like this before coming here...I don’t know..when it comes to really academic thinking or writing I still have to be careful. Olivia (CS)

This quote referred to language level, however, as she did believe that her critical thinking skills had developed over the year, and that this element of progress was enjoyable for her. Perhaps, Olivia conceded, more hard work on her behalf would have helped her improve her writing. Issues such as this revealed one of the problematic gaps in the overseas to UK study process – if there are aspects of academic work not covered beforehand, it is difficult to
determine how and when candidates are expected to develop them. One factor that made things more complicated for another participant, Sally (Chinese, South-East Asian Studies) was that the writing she was expected to do in the pre-sessional course was somewhat different from IELTS writing. This meant that in her essays, she was already expected to take a more academic approach than before, even though she had not yet begun her studies. Interestingly, this was not necessarily more difficult — in her opinion. She explains that:

I think it’s a little bit different, academic writing. Like when I do my pre-sessional course, you don’t always have to change your structure of sentence…. you don’t always need to change the…like a synonym. Actually, I find the academic writing easier than IELTS test. Sally (CS)

This quote highlights an interesting discrepancy between previous writing experiences and later requirements in the UK. Of more importance for academic writing proper than exhibiting lexical range, her tutor felt, was to ensure that the message she was trying to convey was clear. This also applied to wider lexical and grammatical usage; the objective was no longer to demonstrate her English skills to an examiner, but to convey the messages received from independent, critical thoughts on course reading into written form for a subject lecturer. Nonetheless, despite aspects of struggle for many of the postgraduates, only Olivia had an overwhelmingly poor experience — but even she still passed the course.

RQ.1b What struggles did candidates encounter after having meeting entry-level IELTS language requirements, how sufficient was their proficiency?

4.1.3. Critical thinking & reading issues

Apart from the problems arising from varied course formats, critical thinking emerged as a notable challenge. When asked about what the specific difficulties the lecturer had identified in her early assignments were, Olivia (Chinese, Psychology) explained that they related to both content and language. The most prominent aspect she was told to improve was critical thinking, and she admitted that, at first, she did lack analytical skills. Her explanation for this was that Chinese students were more passive, both in terms of their classroom behaviour and their approach to reading an academic article. She comments that ‘In the class in China we just listen and take notes, but here we are welcome to interrupt, can ask questions at any time during the course. Very different to me.

For this participant, passivity and reluctance to question the teacher or her peers also extended to her reading, which in turn affected her writing performance. Not only did she feel unable to disagree with others in class, she felt unable to engage critically with academic articles set by the teacher as reading tasks. This was supported by the lecturer’s feedback on Olivia’s assignments, who highlighted the necessity of changing the way she read to improve her essays. On this point, it was clear that Olivia felt her previous education in China still had an impact on her studies in the UK, especially towards the start of the degree programme:

On the course we were given some articles by the lecturer, and we were told we need to find a weakness in the article. At first I was thinking….it’s published articles, how come there are weakness? Because, I don’t know how ‘fresh’ students in China are thinking about this, but for me it was like we were mainly taught, but we were not in the position of bringing up many questions or challenges. Olivia (CS)

This indicates that she was not critically analysing the literature, but absorbing it at surface level. The notion that published articles would not be expected to have a ‘weakness’ in them is particularly insightful. Questioning the authority of published work was not something that she had been encouraged or expected to do prior to UK study. It was clear from the data that most of the participants had to learn a new way of approaching reading texts and reflecting this in their assignments. As was the case with Olivia, this was especially noticeable near the
beginning of their studies, and usually improved as the course progressed – in response to the lecturer’s feedback. In Hiroko’s case (Japanese, International Relations) the link between reading and writing was again made. Hiroko was advised by a senior academic to improve her writing in English by attempting to imitate the models provided by scholarly reading texts. This specifically applied to how to connect ideas to examples in academic English. She was also recommended to read casual texts such as magazines by one of her peers, in order to develop a more natural writing style:

My classmate told me that general reading in English can also have a good effect, and make writing sound very natural. Academic journals are better, I think, because they show a more academic way. I have time for this one, but not the newspapers. Hiroko (Japanese student, JS)

In the above quote, it is apparent that Hiroko felt that although both academic and non-academic texts would be useful to improve her writing, she had not had time to read the latter thus far, and would prefer to read scholarly literature. She does not seem to doubt her peer’s advice that reading magazines would also benefit her, but time constraints and workload necessitated careful prioritisation.

The need to read, and read critically, was now required of students post-IELTS. If critical awareness was not evident in students’ assignments, they would often struggle to convince the lecturer that they were capable of writing essays to the required analytical standard. As stated in the IELTS band criteria, certain higher IELTS bands (7 or 8) may require at least some awareness of developed thought, albeit at a relatively unsophisticated and superficial level. A position is expected to be taken by the writer, and properly supported by evidence, although this is not critical per se. However, it did seem, from Olivia’s experience, that IELTS writing (band score 6) did not necessarily require demonstration of critical thinking, or for this to be developed to any substantial degree. Many participants had to learn skills of critical analysis as their course progressed. This increased the difficulty of their already considerable task, perhaps especially for those with writing – or overall – band scores of below 7, as in this case.

Furthermore, the ability to write sufficiently well in English to receive positive feedback on their essays from the lecturers was not always reducible to one factor. In the case of Masako, she had taken a module in critical applied linguistics as part of her undergraduate course, and explained that although difficult at first, she was now comfortable in conducting critical analysis and including this in her writing tasks. Nonetheless, this did not mean that she found the essay writing straightforward.

One of the principal struggles centred on independent study:

Actually doing the research, that’s the one I am struggling with the most. Even though it’s a group work we have to analyse and write independently. I don’t know anything about evaluating and analysing the data that I have, so I have to start reading a book about qualitative research, which makes me question if I really like the Master’s programme sometimes. Masako (JS)

This suggests that demonstrating critical thinking alone is not enough to write to the required standard. It was difficult for her to ‘analyse’ and ‘evaluate’ data or texts, and the notion of reading in depth about qualitative research appeared off-putting. In order to achieve this, some students would have to seek support elsewhere.

4.1.4. Tutor support and lecturer feedback
Other forms of support (such as from tutors, lecturer feedback, proofreading or peers) were important to help candidates during the transition and wider writing development process,
although not all of these were straightforward to manage. Olivia experienced a number of problems with her assignments, particularly in the first several months of the course. She explained that ‘for the first few assignments my feedbacks were available, and I was reading that. It seemed no matter how hard I tried I cannot meet the expectations or requirements of the reviewers. But then I got some shine points later.’ This experience was fairly common throughout interviewees’ responses, initially they struggled considerably and received poor feedback from their lecturers. Some students were able to improve as the course progressed, as was the case with Olivia and the ‘shine points’ she later received. Not all learners (N = 2) seemed to be able to read and respond to feedback successfully, and this had an impact on writing performance. Interestingly, not all participants (N = 4) were given feedback on their writing, and some lecturers chose to focus only on content, depending on the preferences of individual staff members. It is conceivable that some students had such strong writing that corrections or feedback on language were minimal, but most learners would not be expected to be in this high proficiency range. Masako, a Japanese student, had quite a different experience regarding feedback. Like Olivia, Masako also got an IELTS score of 6 for the writing section, which she said was more difficult than the other parts (overall 7). However, she felt that the lecturers had been satisfied with her written work up to that point. Interestingly, Masako suggested that perhaps ‘the professor had not intended to correct her English as she was an international student’. This is possible, and would also reflect a personal approach to marking. Whatever the reason, the comments she had been receiving on the content of her work had been very encouraging, and she felt that she was improving with each assignment she wrote. Using a proofreader was one possible option for those were finding their essays were not meeting lecturer expectations.

4.1.5. Using a proofreader and peer support
Different attitudes to proofreading emerged, however. The markers told Olivia to have her work proofread, but she felt that this was frustrating, as her English had always been ‘above the level of her peers’ and she did not want a proofreader. Olivia also admitted that she was somewhat lazy at the beginning of the course in particular, and that she could have made more effort to check her own work carefully.

Masako’s peer group used what they referred to as a ‘trade circle’. This involved exchanging essays for proofreading, which she said was beneficial in that it reduced mistakes and allowed them to share different perspectives on the topics at hand. This approach appeared to be working for Masako thus far. When asked if IELTS writing had played a part in this she explained that it may have provided a starting point from which to develop. In particular, she felt that ‘IELTS has more opportunity (to) write whatever I’m thinking, but Master’s assignment I need more evidence about why I think that, which I kind of understand, that’s the whole point of academic writing, I feel that’s a lot more pressure’. This suggests that she believes that previous experience of writing was somewhat less academic in comparison to the essays written for her Master’s course. The valuable writing experience acquired as part of her Japanese undergraduate studies, for example, appeared to have strengthened her skills and confidence to write in academic English, probably combined with her IELTS experience to provide this starting block. Fairly untypically, students on her undergraduate course were required to submit ‘U.S.-style’ essays (as part of general study) which she felt was useful practice indeed for later UK writing. However, she felt that between previous learning and UK-based academic writing there remained a considerable disparity.
The notion of progress was evident in her case, and she commented on various points of development in her writing ability. In another part of the interview, she used the word ‘sophisticated’ to describe her latest essay attempt in comparison to the two earlier efforts:

The first one was the one I didn’t get much feedback on, so I asked my peers and that’s where I got the information. For the second one, it’s a lot different so not good. For the last one I did a lot more reading and I am a lot more used to using conjunctions and I feel I have become more sophisticated (with my writing). Masako (JS)

Masako clearly recognises that learning to write academically is an iterative process, and that each assignment is an opportunity to improve the previous effort. This positive and responsible approach to the assessed tasks was already helping her development, and indicated an optimistic future for the remaining coursework.

5. Discussion – support required beyond the IELTS test

5.1. Overview of findings

There were several main themes that emerged from the interviews, which will now be described. Table 4 (Appendix D) shows the UK study issues reported by the six participants. It should be noted that this differs from the previous Table (3, Appendix C), which focused on an earlier stage of the analysis, specifically looking at a wider range of comments made. In Table 4, certain nodes have been clustered (e.g. tutor support & feedback). The reason for this is that the participant views themselves often overlapped between the two, in those cases. There was also some overlap in the comments compiled for Table 3 for the same reason. In some cases, the overlaps were not the same as in Table 4 (e.g. Critical thinking, which is associated with pre-sessional courses in Table 3 and with proofreaders in Table 4). This is not to be interpreted as a contradiction, but rather illustrates that some of these issues cannot be discussed in isolation, and quite naturally overlap.

As can be seen from Table 4, all six participants identified critical analysis as a particularly challenging aspect of their writing. The role of proofreaders and pre-sessional courses was explored, which had notable implications for essay writing, as did extra self-study and reading, for those candidates who undertook the extra work. The apparent effect of attending an English university overseas campus in students’ home countries before attending a master’s course needs also to be taken into account. Lecturer feedback on submitted assignments varied considerably. The organisational work at the IELTS test preparation stage – such as paragraphing – appears to have helped candidates in their subsequent academic writing; reported problems centred on more sophisticated elements of essay production. Although predictive validity studies are now regarded as somewhat unrefined at dealing with the complexities of contemporary UK higher education (Banerjee 2003; Rea-Dickins, Kiely, and Yu 2007), the aforementioned notion of non-monetary ‘cost’ to the learner is to be considered. The findings of the current study largely support this assertion, and the cost to the interviewees appeared to be more pertinent than whether or not a final degree would be awarded. Each of these will now be examined in more detail.

5.2. Interpreting these results; IELTS beyond the test

The results outlined reveal the complexities of documenting student experiences, and challenges of accounting for the varying characteristics of individual cases. There was a large amount of post-IELTS learning required, as was to be expected. Successfully overcoming IELTS is only the first step in learning to write to the expected academic standard. Although IELTS does appear to help with certain aspects of academic writing, and most learners in the study were managing their courses (albeit with some difficulties), the subsequent required step forward is to acquire a series of skills that equip them for the challenges that lie ahead.
It is now evident that writing development is divisible into three key stages: (1) prior language education; (2) IELTS test preparation; (3) academic study. Most participants did appear to be managing to write on their courses thus far, supporting earlier claims (Vynke 2012) that although students would find the courses challenging, they would often succeed in passing (Gu and Maley 2008).

However, previous assertions that academic culture shock is common for international learners (Spitzman 2016; Brown and Aktas 2011; Rienties, Johan, and Jindal-Snape 2014) proved accurate, and that coping strategies were therefore required (Shroeder 2016). This was clearly problematic for both the postgraduate and the receiving institution, as expected (Meza and Gazzoli 2011).

Prior work indicating that boosting IELTS scores may cause learners problems with later study as they struggle to compensate for their lack of actual language acquisition was recalled (Smirnova 2017). Each learner was working hard to overcome several difficulties repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews, including critical thinking, using reading to inform essay content and writing more academically than in previous writing experience. Such issues with critical thinking have been attributed to earlier education (Patton 2011) and noted before (Mckinley 2013). These findings also relate to the concept of cost above, which denoted the sustained struggles experienced by postgraduates in previous work (Banerjee 2003). Essentially, significant challenges remain for some students post-IELTS (Rea-Dickins, Kiely, and Yu 2007). The results of the current study suggest that although these were indeed elements of cost there were in fact others. For example, in the case of Olivia who passed her degree after a year of relative suffering, ‘cost’ also included feelings of insecurity, lack of confidence and isolation. Other participants also experienced cost to varying degrees. The experiences of each of the students documented in this paper add to this notion, highlighting that feedback, reading and self-study also play a role in writing development in attempting to reduce this cost, the need for autonomous development to meet the necessary conditions, and ultimately engaging effectively with the postgraduate study process.

Additionally, it was found that pre-sessional courses appeared advantageous to those who attended. It has been observed that pre-sessional courses benefit student writing (see Clark 2018) by addressing a number of required skills that are often underdeveloped, such as producing an extended composition (Knapp and Seidlhofer 2009). This was supported by participant experiences in the current study. Sally, who had taken part in a pre-sessional course, felt that she was in a stronger position than those who had not. She was doing the pre-sessional course because it was, for her, compulsory. The university Sally had planned to attend required a 6.5 score in IELTS writing. As she had received an insufficient score of 6.0, Sally would not begin before completing a ten-week pre-sessional programme. This was an unexpected shift in the trajectory of her UK study experience, but she was eager to express the advantages of attending the extra course. Sally felt that she had benefitted from the time to practice the required skills before the actual Master’s started, and that she additionally believed this to be the case for her classmates, who were largely of Asian origin. Although this was useful, it involved a large amount of extra work, before the proper course of study had begun. She explained that ‘my tutor is good, she will give me some feedback. Help me like, fix it. I am tiring though, two essays per week, I will finish (in) six weeks left, half way’. It was clear that Sally felt she was improving however, despite the heavy workload expected of them.
One final point emerging from the results was that learning to write for non-standard postgraduate degree programmes did not appear to be particularly well accommodated by the overall UK study process. The evolving nature of university courses and the development of non-standard assessment practices (Banerjee 2003; Yang and Badger 2014) may mean that international students attending such courses may require additional support, as their prior experiences of English writing may be quite different to what is expected of them in the UK.

It is now clear that certain aspects of IELTS writing are particularly useful beyond the test, and the gap between preparation and later study is partially bridged in most cases. Work on organisation and structure for IELTS essays – for example – does appear to help candidates in the longer term. Perhaps as it would be difficult to achieve the required band score without using paragraphs, successful IELTS candidates appear to have few problems in that respect when they engage in postgraduate study. Nonetheless, adaptations to existing test practices may help further improve the link between test preparation and later study. For example, previous suggestions to reintroduce an integrated reading and writing component in testing have been based on the potential advantages of linking reading to writing by theme (Moore and Morton 2005). Doing so would provide the test-taker with a relevant context from which to write, which would more accurately reflect academic writing in addition to developing key skills such as referencing, according to Moore and Morton. This assertion is supported by the evidence in the current study, albeit one with limited sample size.

However, the implementation of integrated writing examinations has been found to be complex, and the difficulty of establishing what is being tested often becomes apparent. It has been suggested that markers of such texts should expect to decide – for example – how much of a reading text it is acceptable to ‘lift’ directly into a written composition (Weir, Vidakovic, and Galaczi 2013). Despite these legitimate challenges, the notion of integrated testing should be considered in the future.

In addition to this, it may also be possible to include a more diverse range of subjects. Two branch categories of subjects (standard and non-writing based) would allow a greater degree of flexibility for assessment implemented, while maintaining the economic and practical requirement to avoid using specifically tailored examinations. For example, a non-standard assignment category for subjects such as Film and Finance (in this study) could be designed to better reflect course content (Yang and Badger 2014) without being too specific in nature. Notably, this would not entail a return to a previous format of IELTS per se, but rather it would reflect the recent realisation that reducing three categories – which were designed to reflect different disciplines – to only one (as was done in 1995) is perhaps somewhat limiting. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to suggest that the responsibility for improving the overall process of test preparation to subsequent UK study rests entirely with test developers. There are a series of potential adjustments that could be made by UK universities in order to better accommodate Chinese and Japanese postgraduates, as identified in this project.

These recalled earlier findings that essays were often seen by international students as negative aspects of UK study (Igbo et al. 2016) as they are accustomed to different assessment forms (Ellis 2013). One issue was marking consistency, as feedback varied according to individual expectations of the lecturer. In-sessional support and pre-sessional courses for all students regardless of IELTS score would offer the level of assistance actually required. Finally, although all UK postgraduates interviewed had received an IELTS 6.5 or above, those with higher writing scores were managing better. This provides further evidence
that higher entrance scores may improve the student experience (Hyatt 2013). It should be recalled, however, that this is does not necessarily entail increased academic performance. Again, it should be remembered that the current study was only conducted with a limited sample. This means that the results may be interpreted as helpful and insightful, rather than conclusive.

6. Conclusion
In conclusion, it is now timely to revisit the research questions outlined earlier and summarise what has been found in relation to these six participants. RQ: To what extent does achieving the required writing score allow previous IELTS candidates to manage academic writing on a British course of postgraduate study? The answer to this overarching RQ is that – for the candidates in this study at least – achieving the required IELTS score appears to serve as a useful starting point for postgraduates to begin their studies, as stated on the IELTS website. However, participants then developed the necessary skills to write their essays and overcome the emerging challenges they faced in different ways. In all but one case (Olivia) this transition, although undoubtedly involving considerable work, did appear possible. Even in Olivia’s case, the final degree was obtained.

RQ.1a What are test takers’ perceptions of the authenticity of the IELTS writing tasks with reference to academic writing tasks in their degree study?

Candidates had mixed views about the authenticity of the IELTS writing tasks. Overall, they appeared to be largely positive about the introduction to English essay writing they provided, and felt they were a good start from which to develop. However, there was clearly a considerable amount to learn as they wrote assignments on an academic course. Assessed tasks for some subjects bore more resemblance to IELTS writing than others acquired during the postgraduate year.

RQ.1b What struggles did candidates encounter after having meeting entry-level IELTS language requirements, how sufficient was their proficiency?

All six candidates appeared to have sufficient English proficiency to manage on their courses; to that extent, IELTS had fulfilled its principal function. However, there remained some key skills that were more academic in nature to be acquired. Skills such as critical analysis of texts or using reading to inform writing had to be developed, for example. Forms of support varied between cases, indicating that a more standardised approach to lecturer, peer and in some cases proofreader input would perhaps be desirable to provide a fairer postgraduate study model. Students who took responsibility for seeking and using some or all of these various forms of support appeared to manage their coursework particularly well.

6.1. Relatively minimal alterations with a potential impact
As has been outlined, a series of possible modifications at various stages of the learning to write process would be expected to improve the overall student experience. Altering several parts of the test would necessitate a change in test preparation strategies, meaning that ‘successful’ candidates would have to demonstrate certain essential academic writing skills in order to gain access to a postgraduate course. This might include reintroducing an integrated reading and writing component to better reflect the academic requirements to follow, supporting earlier calls to do so (Moore and Morton 2005). Critical thinking skills may consequently be further developed at an earlier stage, and learners would be expected to use skills they had already encountered rather than acquiring them as an already challenging
A postgraduate course unfolds. Additionally, a series of small changes to UK institutions’ management of writing issues is a possible option. Notably, the lack of standardisation of university procedures for marking writing assignments leads to confusion for candidates and a more uniform approach is recommended.

6.2. Recommendations for further research
There are several areas which merit further investigation. Exploring the experiences of learners from other linguistic backgrounds would provide a valuable comparison to those documented here. A detailed look at students’ written assignments, interviews with other stakeholders (lecturers and admissions tutors), or observation of group planning sessions would be useful additions that this study was not able to practically include. Looking at a different entrance exam (TOEFL for example) or a different receiving country in ‘the West’ or as part of the emerging ‘East’ now accepting large numbers of overseas students, may be advisable. It should also be noted that even in a small-scale study such as this the possible diversity between the participants is considerable (two nationalities, different course types, specific written assignment requirements and different forms of academic writing for each such as literature reviews and research proposals). Ideally, these variables would be accounted for in more depth, if practical. Finally, investigating native English speakers’ experiences of academic writing, and to do so across a broader range of institutions ranked both highly and less so, would be insightful. It should not be assumed that native English speaking students would avoid the challenges that are described in this article. Although some of these struggles may be attributable to differences in educational culture, a larger-scale and comprehensive account of academic writing experiences would also include L1 English speakers.

References


Oliver, R., S. Vanderford, and E. Grote. 2016. Evidence of English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement of Non-English-speaking Background.


Vynke, M. 2012. The Concept and Practice of Critical Thinking in Academic Writing: an investigation of international students’ perceptions and writing experiences. MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, Kings College.


## Appendices

### Appendix A

**Table 1. Participants and Courses (Adapted from ‘Degree Scheme’, Banerjee 2003).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Msc Psychology</th>
<th>International Relations</th>
<th>MSc South East Asian Studies</th>
<th>MA Sociology</th>
<th>MSc Television</th>
<th>MA Film and Television</th>
<th>MSc Finance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student, age, gender</td>
<td>Olivia, 38, f</td>
<td>7 overall</td>
<td>Masako, 24, f</td>
<td>6 overall</td>
<td>Hiroko, 27, f</td>
<td>6.5 overall</td>
<td>Tracy, f, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IELTS score</td>
<td>7 overall</td>
<td>6 overall</td>
<td>6.5 overall</td>
<td>7 overall</td>
<td>6.5 writing</td>
<td>7 overall</td>
<td>6.5 writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Structure</td>
<td>7 mandatory units &amp; 7 optional</td>
<td>3 core units, 23 optional</td>
<td>1 minor</td>
<td>3 core, 16 optional</td>
<td>1/2 core units &amp; 5 optional</td>
<td>3 per semester (&gt;4)</td>
<td>Quantitative report for each course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>1 per unit (10 approximately)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Exams, essays &amp; presentations – 75% of mark</td>
<td>10 essays minimum</td>
<td>Different written work for each unit</td>
<td>Non-standard</td>
<td>15–20 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other written assessment</td>
<td>dissertation required (15,000)</td>
<td>dissertation required (15,000)</td>
<td>dissertation required (10,000)</td>
<td>dissertation required (10,000)</td>
<td>Non-standard</td>
<td>15–20 pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer writing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes mixed, significant number of Malaysians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class makeup</td>
<td>50% Chinese</td>
<td>unspecified</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>90% Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix B

**Academic writing in the UK**

**Table 2. Sample interview questions for Chinese and Japanese Postgraduates.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Prompt (if necessary)</th>
<th>Relation to Research Question and General Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is similar or different to IELTS writing?</td>
<td>In what way?</td>
<td>-to establish participants’ experience of writing in the UK thus far</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lecturer feedback on assignments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is your English writing part of the grade?</th>
<th>What did the lecturer write / say about your English writing?</th>
<th>-to explore what kind of feedback has been received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have these comments been the same since or began study or are they different?</td>
<td>Why do you think that is?</td>
<td>-to explore what kind of feedback has been received</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Table 3. Subdivisions of NVivo Nodes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Critical thinking (12 comments)</th>
<th>Tutor support / feedback (7 comments)</th>
<th>Beyond IELTS* (8 comments)</th>
<th>Editing written work (5 comments)</th>
<th>Reading / self-study (7 comments)</th>
<th>Group writing tasks (10 comments)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Node 2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>No way to opt out of group work (4 comments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node 3</td>
<td>Pre-sessional attendance (5 comments)</td>
<td>Non-standardised feedback (8 comments)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Using a proofreader or not (7 comments)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Confidence issues in groups (5 comments)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Node 1 = High level recurring themes
Nodes 2 and 3 = further explanation of particular aspects of Node 1 themes
*This category refers to extra skills (not covered in the other categories) or learning habits that acquired as part of IELTS study, which appeared useful for subsequent postgraduate writing.

Appendix D

Table 4. UK Study Issues (N=6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recurring themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking issues</td>
<td>All participants (N=6) reported struggling with critical analysis, leading to problems in writing. Learned after starting study in most cases, some took longer than others. Study background a contributing factor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and self-study</td>
<td>Three candidates (N=6) read academic texts to critically inform their written work, others felt unable to do so which had a ‘knock on’ effect on essays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-sessional courses &amp; proofreaders</td>
<td>Two participants (N=6) took part in pre-sessional courses, and reported learning how to think critically and write appropriately. Peer and professional proofreading were used by some participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor support &amp; feedback</td>
<td>Mixed responses from lecturer to academic writing issues across all subjects – personal preference was a factor in lecturers’ choice of whether to ‘correct’ English errors or not. Some were stringent, others less so, according to interviewees (3, N=6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with group planning</td>
<td>Four participants (N=6) described problems with group writing tasks, mainly confidence issues. One case of extreme discord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IELTS vs academic writing*</td>
<td>Most students (4, N=6) highlighted the distinction in some form. Some mentioned the skills that were required beyond IELTS. Paragraphing and structural work seemed to help candidates post – IELTS.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N.B. this is number of participants, not the number of comments as Table 3 showed).
*This category refers to any perceived similarities or differences between IELTS and academic writing on a postgraduate course.)