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### **“It’s not a waste of time!” Academics’ views on the role and function of academic reading: A thematic analysis**

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## **“It’s not a waste of time!” Academics’ views on the role and function of academic reading: A thematic analysis**

### **Abstract**

The role of academic writing in the development of academic literacy in university students has been considered in some depth in the literature. However, the view of lecturers as to the role and value of academic reading is notably less explored and warrants further exploration. Academic staff from a broad range of subject areas were invited to participate in a survey on the role and function of academic reading. Using an explorative approach, the study investigated academics’ views about reading behaviour with regards to the students’ academic journey, their own academic development, and its incorporation into their teaching. All comments were thematically analysed, resulting in a number of elicited themes and subthemes. The paper highlighted the key role of academics in the modelling, rewarding, and teaching of academic reading and discusses practical implications for Higher Education, particularly with regards to academic teaching and students’ skills development.

### **Keywords**

Higher education, academic reading, reading assessment, reading engagement

## Introduction

### ***Definition and Purpose of Academic Reading***

Academic Reading (AR) is an integral part of Higher Education for both students and academics (Cox, Freisner & Khayum 2003), and AR is typically defined as reading as part of academic study, for the purpose of the acquisition and construction of subject knowledge (Allen 2012; Manarin 2012). AR is fundamentally different than other kinds of reading, in that it is complex, purposeful, and critical (Sengupta 2002). AR is seen as key for greater Higher Education success (Wyatt, Kobrin, Wiley, Camara & Prostler 2011), with links proposed between AR and engagement with the subject (Hermida 2009), composition skills (Lockhart & Soliday 2016), critical understanding (Paul & Elder 2008), and assessment success (Wyatt et al 2011).

AR requires multiple skills including critical questioning, reflection, synthesis, and interpretation (Sengupta 2002). This deeper level of processing necessitates the ability to understand the meaning of the information, make critical consideration of the arguments, and link the information to prior knowledge (Bowden & Morton 2000). Synthesising material from a number of sources (Carrell & Carson 1997) and consciously considering the authors' motivations (Huckin & Flower 1990) are aspects of AR that require the combination of these skills. Expert readers further show deeper processing, with greater proficiency evident on tasks involving higher cognitive functioning (Baer, Cook & Baldi 2006; Hermida 2015). Thus, where AR is taught, supported, and assessed explicitly within a programme of study, students should be able to advance along the continuum towards these outcomes (Condon & Kelly-Riley 2004).

### ***Student Practice of AR***

Howard, Gorzycki, Desa, and Allen (2018) reported that students within a four year US college, appear to value aspects of AR, with 83% asserting that undergraduate education should increase reading proficiency and 73% seeing a strong relationship between AR and critical thinking. However, over 21% of student participants included in their survey agreed that students can learn sufficient material without AR. Specifically, the perceived value of AR appears to be modulated by programme and institutional level drivers, such as the grading system, assessment criteria, and lecturer expectations; portraying the given value of AR as externally driven (Fox & Alexander 2011).

Where positive value is placed on AR, it is not necessarily reflected in behavioural practices. Merely thinking that reading is good for you does not provide sufficient motivation to read (Yamashita 2004). Studies have found that students' individual reading goals are aligned with grade attainment, rather than immersion in the subject of study (Vafeas 2013), and that students read less than they believe they should (Howard et al. 2018). Indeed, when given assigned reading tasks, only 25 to 28% of students have been shown to complete the task on schedule (Burchfield & Sappington 2002; Clump, Bauer & Bradley 2004; Connor-Greene 2000). Where students have self-reported higher compliance with a reading task (at 46%), a basic comprehension test revealed only 55% of these were able to demonstrate a very basic level of comprehension (Hoefl 2012), suggesting a lack of AR. When Hoefl questioned the reasoning for non-compliance in their study, students reported having "no time", and "a lack of interest" or "dislike" of reading.

In addition, while students have reported that they would like AR training to be integrated within the undergraduate experience (Baier et al. 2011), module evaluations have been affected negatively when lecturers integrate AR as an explicit part of a module (so-called *disengagement compact*, Kuh

1999; Sappington et al. 2002). Lecturers have previously expressed anxiety over this reaction to the setting of substantial reading expectations (Burchfield & Sappington 2000).

### **Teaching and Assessing AR**

There is a growing recognition within higher education that students do not enter their university degrees with the level of AR skills needed for effective study, and that skill development needs to become an essential element of the (undergraduate) curriculum. Student mastery of AR can be achieved through instruction, exposure, and practice / experience (Lee & Spratley 2010). The university lecturer therefore has a critical role (Holschuh & Paulson 2013) in the encouragement and development of AR for students, through explicit instruction or effective assessment design.

The teaching of AR skills in Higher Education appears inconsistent (Bean 1996). AR skills are frequently presumed to have been taught within previous education (Erickson, Peters & Strommer 2006). Despite academics' beliefs that reading compliance is integral to learning, the responsibility for this is frequently placed on the students themselves (Wambach 1999). Many academics consider themselves as transmitters of information as opposed to carrying responsibility for guiding the cognitive development of their students (Barr & Tagg 1995).

There appears to be a goal conflict, with the academic assessment of AR often directly or indirectly working against deeper processing of content. Paulson (2006) suggested that developmental AR courses and a focus on study assistance within textbooks results in a 'get students through' approach, which implicitly signals that reading has no intrinsic value of its own. Whilst this is based on a specific US education model, other studies have found students 'read to the test', merely obtaining the information needed rather than exploring and expanding their knowledge base (Fox & Alexander 2011; Linderholm 2006; Manarin 2012). In-class quizzes have been shown to increase reading compliance (Burchfield & Sappington 2002; Clump, Bauer & Bradley, 2004; Connor-Greene 2000; Hoeft 2012) but, dependent on the question type, may not encourage deeper processing. Assessment strategies involving multiple choice tests incite memorisation of facts and are encouraging of a surface level approach to reading (Wendling, 2008). This tacit acceptance of the processed information portrays reading solely as a vehicle for stand-alone facts, to be regurgitated with a lack of integration or critical evaluation (Hermida 2009). Consequently, if the required information can be found elsewhere (e.g., in lecture notes), additional reading will be low priority (Del Principe & Ihara 2016).

In addition, reading tasks are often presented as global and unstructured, such as 'read chapter 10', resulting in students with poor reading comprehension reporting feeling lost and overwhelmed (Ryan 2006). When students do attempt deeper processing strategies while reading, but lack the skills (or teaching thereof), their comprehension levels do not increase (Linderholm & Wilde 2010), thus not rewarding any increased reading effort. AR is therefore not always linked to an improved performance or good grades (Hoeft 2012), and motivation and a clear rationale are needed for increasing reading compliance (Jang 2008).

### **Academics' Engagement in AR**

With the increasing pressures on academic staff to provide high quality teaching, research publications, external income, impact and academic leadership, it is worth considering how academics engage in and model AR. The Scholarly Reading and Value of Library Resources Project (Tenopir, Volentine & Wing 2011) examined the impact of access to scholarly publications on academics from six UK universities. Over 2000 respondents reported an average of 39 readings a month. Academics estimated they spent an average of 37 hours a month in scholarly reading, for the principle purpose of 'research and writing', followed by 'teaching'. The most frequent outcome of scholarly reading was 'the inspiration of new thinking'. The work of Tenopir and colleagues (2011),

however, represents the UK Higher Education prior to the increased fees. Indeed, the tripling of fees in England in 2012 has driven the 'students as consumers' rhetoric, and this combined with an increased focus on student satisfaction may undermine the rigour and integrity of Higher Education (Bennett & Kane 2014; Callender, Ramsden & Griggs 2014). Wong and Chiu (2017) even suggested lecturers in the UK now identify as 'service providers', feeling the need to provide increased support for students, both regarding teaching and preparing them for assessment. The role of academics within the development of student AR must be considered within this wider context of HE. Paying fees for Higher Education may result in a changed relationship between students and their education; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) suggested students have moved from 'intrinsically driven aspiring scholars' to 'extrinsically driven degree hunters'.

In summary, it is apparent from the literature that whilst students see the potential benefits of AR, their engagement in this may be driven by both their training in AR skills, and expectations and assessment within their programmes. The current research augments the AR literature by addressing how lecturers' understanding of the definition and purpose of AR aligns to their approaches to teaching and assessment. Additionally, we explore the lecturers' own practice with regard to AR, exploring the explicit and implicit messages they may be giving to their students.

## **Method**

### ***Study Design and Survey Development***

We employed an anonymous online survey, using the survey software *Qualtrics*. Based on the initial literature review, we identified five core domains of relevance to the research question: (1) Definitions of AR, (2) Purpose of AR, (3) Student Practice of AR, (4) Teaching and Assessing AR, and (5) Academics' Engagement in AR. In a first step, we independently identified specific questions for each domain, which were subsequently compared and merged / altered as appropriate. In addition, we asked about contextual information, including subject area, job role, and years in higher education. The final survey consisted of 26 questions, with a mixture of closed and open-ended question types. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the host university.

### ***Analysis***

Open-ended questions were analysed using Thematic Analysis, employing an inductive approach. Following the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006), all comments were repeatedly read and coded, with additional reflections added. Codes were then compared and summarised into themes and labels, with the labelling of superordinate themes being guided by the identified core domains. Closed questions were presented in a descriptive manner.

### ***Recruitment and Sample***

Academics working in Higher Education were recruited via a snowball sampling, initiated through the authors' professional networks. Fifty-two participants from UK universities responded to the survey. Of those, twenty-four did not complete the survey and / or did not consent for their data being used (47% drop-out rate). The majority (75%) of respondents were from Social Sciences (including Criminology, Health, Psychology, Sociology, Sport Sciences), three respondents were from History, three from Education, and one from Arts. Respondents held a variety of job roles, from Associate Lecturer to Principal Lecturer / Associate Professor level, with an even balance of years of experience.

## **Results**

### **Definitions of AR**

The responses highlighted three key elements of AR, referring to:

1. The type of literature that is being read: Most respondents referred to academic literature (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles, text books, and academic texts), however, some respondents broadened their understanding of the type of literature concerned: “Reading information that usually originates in a higher education setting, that either is or contains peer-reviewed material.”
2. The process of engagement with the literature: In its verb form, AR was defined as, “the ability to read actively and critically, to understand, synthesise and explain what’s been read to others”, while others emphasised to read beyond the subject matter, “often considering the underlying methodology rather than simply the content” and the ability to reflect on the stance of the author, “reading closely and attentively to uncover layers of meaning which are not apparent at first glance”.
3. The desired outcome of the engagement process: AR was considered an “integral part of university study” due to its link to key academic outcomes, including the completion of assessments, to become cultured and knowledgeable in one’s field of study, and to “develop understanding and advancing debate and knowledge”. As one respondent highlighted: AR is: “purposeful reading to support understanding in a key / main subject area / topic to support critical analysis, knowledge formation, skill development, development of professional values, application (to practice) and reflection.”

### **Purpose of AR**

The majority of respondents highlighted the key purpose of AR to “extend knowledge, consolidate learning and gain new understanding of the topic”, to “enable growth and depth of subject knowledge”. Knowledge increase was perceived to be linked to a more skilful knowledge application, in terms of one’s own professional practice or research skills, the ability to balance conflicting evidence, to identify knowledge gaps, and to advance new ideas. Participants further highlighted the secondary purpose of applying and expanding one’s critical thinking skills: “More broadly, there are also conceptual dimensions, for example recognising and understanding different ways of thinking about an issue, and how that affects how it is understood” and to improve one’s own academic writing and argument development.

The majority of participants conveyed that the type and purpose of AR changes over the years of study, from general knowledge to more complex / specialised knowledge, from knowledge transfer to knowledge application, and a more critical and sophisticated appraisal of one’s engagement with the literature. There was also the feeling that in later years, an interest in the subject area is less prescribed: “For postgraduate research students (...) there will probably (I hope) be more reading for interest sake rather than simply for mechanistic reasons relating to fulfilling assessment criteria.” Having said this, participants’ responses seemed to refer more to how their teaching of AR changes for different years of study, rather than the purpose of AR itself. In addition, a minority of respondents did not think that the core purpose changes: “The purpose is always the same. The analytical skills develop but the core objectives remain the same.”

We further asked participants about the perceived advantages of AR. Many responses reflected the purposes already identified, such as the enhancement of knowledge, gaining a broader perspective on an issue, understanding the use of evidence in supporting one's argument, getting enculturated into one's subject area and use of terminology, improving one's writing skills, and expanding one's critical thinking skills: "Particularly in today's 'fake news' society, beyond their studies and skill development, it is important that the University produces students able to query material and decide on its accuracy or relevance." One participant highlighted that the engagement with academic sources is key to independent thought forming. The responses also communicated implicitly, and in one case explicitly, that the development of AR and its related skills requires time:

*Reading around a subject is not some 'out-dated' and regressive activity that can be replaced by a smart device or screen in the ever-changing, and quite possibly misguided 'in terms of education' attempts by universities to insist upon 'quick knowledge' and two-year degrees with minimal bother posed by complex reading.*

Interestingly, some participants expressed a certain circularity in their argument: "We do use the phrase 'you are reading for a degree' with our students which I feel is fairly old fashioned now but is still a powerful message." Asked about the advantages of AR, one participant stated: "Is this a serious question or a joke? If they don't read they don't think and learn."

### **Student Practice of AR**

With the exception of three participants who felt their students read "just enough", all participants indicated that their students read "too little". A number of respondents stated that their students do not (independently) engage in AR: "They don't, is the short answer. Most students do not read, and often don't even like it."; "Much of the academic literature can be dry and is sometimes poorly written, using big words that exclude people. Students don't want to spend the time reading complex arguments, and learning complex concepts when they can just ask google for an easy answer."; "Many of our students report that they do not like reading and it can be a challenge to engage them." Many participants highlighted a functional approach to AR on behalf of the students: "The vast majority of my students engage with reading 'strategically' to complete assignments.", referring to a lack of enthusiasm and interest linked to AR: "I don't think they read with the aim of learning for its own sake."; "They tend not to read for fun and to approach reading as something of a chore."; "They don't seem to like the idea of reading beyond what is covered in class. Students seem to underestimate significantly the amount of reading required, and the amount of time that should be devoted to reading."

While participants highlighted how they (aim to) engage the students in AR through their teaching, many responses communicated a lack of understanding or underlying skills deficit on behalf of the students: "I find students lack confidence in the ability to independently identify relevant material or to expand beyond professional discipline. Reading is not always valued as a skill to acquire / develop."; "Despite students being advised to use the library systems, students seem to automatically go to 'google' when sourcing their own reading and therefore often engage with articles such as the BBC and the Guardian which we would not consider to be academic."; or "I try to run extracurricular sessions on scientific communication but it's too little, too late. I have students who've entered university utterly unaware that they ought to be taking notes whilst reading."

Finally, we asked participants to rate their students' AR skills, on a scale from 'not well at all' to 'extremely well' (Table 1). The responses pointed to some variety, with most respondents describing

students' AR skills as 'moderately well'. It was noteworthy that 'taking notes', arguably a more basic skill than 'critical reflection', was rated the lowest of all AR skills. Overall, the low-moderate rankings raise some concern given the importance placed on AR in academic settings in general, and assessments in particular, and reflects that students appear not to be equipped with the basic skills to engage in AR.

*Table 1: Academics' perceptions of students' academic reading skills*

<b>In their academic reading, how well do you think your students are able to:</b>	<b>Mdn</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Comprehend what they are reading	3	1	5
Extract relevant information from the text	3	1	4
Think critically about the content	3	1	4
Take notes	2	1	5
Think critically about the stance of the author	1	0	5

*Note.* Questions were rated on a scale from 0 ("not well at all") to 6 ("extremely well").

### **Teaching and Assessing AR**

All participants reported that AR was a core component of their teaching. AR is integrated into the teaching (e.g., through reading lists, guided reading and class discussions, reading homework) and assessed in relevant assignments (e.g., reading journal, literature reviews, setting expectations for citations):

*"Currently, some of my students are using Talis Elevate, a software that is designed to assist in reading activities and students can post comments or questions to me as they read or discuss in class and can also make their own study notes on the reading to access later for written tasks."*

There was some diffusion concerning the responsibility or placement of AR skills teaching into the curriculum: "Academic reading skills seem to be handed off from teaching teams to the library rather than being seen as part of the core teaching role."; "Academic reading in relation to assessments tends to be concentrated on bibliography, and I tend to refer them to the style guide, assuming that academic reading skills are discussed as part of personal tutoring." In that respect, only a few participants highlighted teaching sessions specifically dedicated to AR skills development: "We have just started to teach an academic skills module in year 1 and deliver a session on academic reading which is supported by the library teaching team."; "A library Treasure Hunt is a task that activates students as young researchers and asks them to search out specific materials and bring them back to the group."; or:

*Giving reading time in seminars and workshops of specific articles, and by providing approaches to academic reading, and how to skim read, understand the basics of an article and by undertaking teaching activities to aid reading an article; for example breaking an article up and then asking students to piece the article together from the pieces provided.*

In fact, it was only in response to our survey, that one participant stated:



*I had not considered pointing out academic reading skills to my students as something they should pay attention to- I assumed this came up during personal tutoring. I will ensure I signpost to library support or similar in future, particularly when I know they will begin to prepare for assessments.*

However, only two participants highlighted the need to instil enthusiasm for reading: "The papers I have chosen are both relevant to their assessment and are fun / interesting / weird, and initially are quite short. The students enjoy the seminar format."; and to lead by example:

*I praise and commend articles. I give examples of authors' incisive and critical insights. I say how insightful and useful specific academic sources are. I often actually email them articles to help their research. I promote that reading is ultimately everything in their short academic careers.*

In that respect, one respondent observed that students usually engage in AR for their third-year projects: "It's only at that point that some of them get scared that they won't understand enough!". Thus, it may be that the third year dissertation is the first time during the degree where the students feel a clear application of AR (and potentially an increased interest and enthusiasm for their topic area).

In terms of the assessment of AR, it was evident that AR is considered a component of an assessment rather than an assessment topic in itself. Participants consistently highlighted that "well researched, well referenced work with a good supporting bibliography relates unambiguously to the best analysis and therefore the best marks"; participants comment in their grading on the quality of sources used and on the level of engagement the student displayed. One participant pointed again to the communication of an enthusiasm for AR:

*I always comment on the breadth and depth of sources listed in the reference list when marking student work. I try to highlight and praise where they have gone beyond what is recommended and always pull out things I have not seen before. (...) It helps them to realise that learning is a partnership and I am learning from them, too.*

However, participants highlighted some difficulties with grading (and teaching) AR in itself: "In modules I have taught for, a participation mark reflects students levels of preparation and engagement with reading for seminars." but: "Unfortunately, the course assessment structure overall is not particularly well suited for assessing academic reading, and we do not have the flexibility to change this (for external reasons). This makes it difficult, as inevitably students seek to 'study to the test'." One participant concluded: "Higher marks are awarded to students who engage more widely with reading outside of the reading list but I think we could do more than just marks however, this is an area we are struggling to develop."

Asked what could be improved in their subject area to enhance the value of AR, academics highlighted the need to assess students in ways that values AR (instead of, for example, multiple

choice questions) and to explicitly teach students AR skills: “Reading could be seen as a core skill in the same way that communication skills and professional values are seen as essential to the role.” or “Regular refresher / upskilling surgeries could be embedded within module delivery to spiral skills development across the periods of study.” This was especially relevant in subjects that were linked to practical professions, such as nursing or medicine: “Many of the students are very focused on the development of practical and clinical skills and perhaps see some of the academic work as an ‘add on.’” Academics discussed the introduction of reading weeks (“A recognition that time spent just reading is not wasted time.”) and “opportunities for students and staff to engage in reading activities together”. However, it appears that in some disciplines, the writing itself needed to be more accessible: “Sociological writing tends to be very dense and has its own conventions that can make it less accessible occasionally. More accessible writing would help with this.” and “The contrast between the fluid writing style of work written decades ago and the clunkiness of a lot of academic writing nowadays can be really startling. Academic culture needs to value quality over quantity-the way the REF is set up now is a disservice in this regard.” Again, participants highlighted the need to instil AR skills before they join a degree: “The emphasis on reading at a school level. It is not unusual for us to have students who have never read a book in its entirety before coming to university.”; “I think that students find it difficult to persist with difficult reading - they are used to getting everything immediately, so when they are faced with a text that is difficult to read, they tend to just give up rather than keep trying.”

### **Academics’ Engagement in AR**

All respondents indicated that they engage in AR, with the aim to stay-up-to-date in their field (for their own development or teaching), to develop new ideas, develop new skills, and enhance their writing. About a third described AR as a “standing item” in their weekly schedule, often with a definite time commitment: “Every day. Depending on the day maybe an hour or two on average.” Or “Continually – it’s an essential part of the job!”. However, the majority of academics communicated a desire to read more, with responses such as “Not enough, due to time pressures.” Or “Not as much as I’d like with the increasing pressures of administration on academics now. I read for a purpose usually in order to develop publications, outputs and teaching resources.” Indeed, similar to the perception of students’ engagement, the majority of AR appears to be linked to the production of an outcome, such as a lecture or academic paper, “often I find this slips from my to-do list unless it is in relation to a task, e.g., publication or module planning.” Notably absent from all responses was an ability and / or enthusiasm to read solely for scholarly practice. Only one participant reported to be “a member of a reading group as I find this helps me to stay on track when I am busy.” Many respondents referred to systemic changes in universities that do not prioritise time and space for AR:

*It goes without saying that in academia these days, researchers and scholars read in their out-of-work hours and weekends as working days are overloaded with admin tasks, meetings and committees, which indicates that reading does not appear to be ‘valued’ as a work related task by the university. I have had to adjust to the fact that I do most of my research in the summer as semesters are too busy.*

Or, “I would like to be able to read a paper daily but sadly all I seem to read is email.”. There was further a sense that AR is not a ‘productive’ use of one’s time: “It usually feels less productive than writing but without it would not be possible to publish or develop an authority of my subject.”

## Discussion

The current research was aimed to increase the understanding of how AR is integrated into Higher Education teaching, assessment, and professional development, from the perspectives of academic lecturers. The survey pointed to key issues regarding academics' definitions of AR, its perceived purpose, teaching, and assessment, and students' and academics' own engagement in AR. The thematic analysis particularly highlighted three key findings, regarding how AR is taught, rewarded and modelled.

### **Teaching AR**

"Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students are trying to catch marlin with the tools of a worm fisherman" (Bean 1996. p.133). In support of the wider literature, our participants reflected this view that many students are entering university without basic AR skills. Whilst AR was reported as a core component of their teaching, responses also reflected the majority message that the provision and support of AR development is not the responsibility of university lecturers, but of a tutorial programme or the library. One suggestion for increasing AR through module teaching was giving time within seminars to read and breakdown papers. However, Bean (1996) referred to this approach as a 'vicious circle' wherein lecturers, concerned about their students' engagement with the text, summarise and review the reading in class. This in turn leads to students not reading the paper as they are waiting for the lecturer to summarise.

Two participants implicitly referred to the building of confidence through gradual exposure to more complex texts and AR tasks. This is an approach that is commonly used within primary, secondary and further education but does not appear to be widely evident within Higher Education. To be effective this will need planning at the programme level, to ensure consistency and staged development across modules.

### **Rewarding AR**

Our findings show a general presumption amongst participants that AR is rewarded based on marking criteria, with a wider range of references gaining higher marks. One participant mentioned praising students for going beyond set reading, but otherwise there was general recognition of the challenge of assessing and rewarding engagement with AR. Current assessment structures can allow students to experience success with assignments such as essay writing, despite non-compliance with most reading set. Students instead may use the 'find what other people said and use it', tacit acceptance, approach to reading (Hermida 2009). Academics highlighted the need to change this, and to assess students in ways that value AR, and to additionally reward AR with more than just marks.

The findings further highlighted an issue with students' reading choices. Participants' responses denigrated non-academic sources of information, such as online sources accessed through Google. Engaging students with multiple sources of information has however been shown to increase motivation to read (Rycik & Irvin 2001). A more simply written, accessible source may provide the situational interest to drive students to the sometimes "dry" and "poorly written" peer reviewed, academic material considered suitable. Participants further reflected on ways to engage students in AR. For example, one participant suggested joint reading tasks. While this concept brings together value and skill development, class size may be important here. Hoeft (2012) showed differential engagement with AR in a small class ( $n = 24$ ) than a large class ( $n = 100$ ). Self-reported factors that mattered 'a lot' for AR in the small class were 'interest in the course', 'respect for the professor'

and ‘concern over what the professor thinks of you’, this is contrasted with ‘concern over grades’ given as the only factor that mattered ‘a lot’ in the large class. Thus, it is crucial for academic curriculum development to consider the extraneous factors that may affect engagement with AR: smaller classes may reduce apathy and increase student accountability (Hassel & Lourey 2005).

### **Modelling the Value of AR**

The definitions of AR given by participants are generally consistent with the wider literature (Allen 2012; Manarin 2012). Participants referred to the concept of AR for the purpose of expansion of a subject knowledge base and development of critical thinking. Within the given explanations of AR, there was no reference to AR for the purpose of finding specific facts and answers for assessment success.

Despite this, where AR was embedded within teaching practice, this was achieved through reading lists or set seminar reading. The focus for most participants therefore appeared to be on providing AR for external goal-directed activity. Little reference was given to instructing students to read widely on topics they find interesting, and are not directly related to assessment. Only one participant did refer to ‘reading being everything’. It is worth considering what message students are receiving about AR – explicitly and implicitly; perhaps that it is important, but mostly in relation to extrinsic motivations, specifically assessment success. There was no reference to the *disengagement compact*, with no participants referring to concerns around negative module evaluation responses affecting their choices around recommended reading.

With the exception of three participants, academics reported that their students read “too little”, and, in agreement with the literature, that reading tends to be assessment-driven, with little evidence of wider reading for learning’s sake. Paradoxically, the majority of the participants reported that when they read themselves, it also tends to be goal directed, for example, reading to refresh lecture materials, or to write a paper. Participants reported that their own AR was constrained by other, higher priority demands on their time, with reading felt to be ‘less productive’. Self-Selected Reading for Enjoyment (SSRE), an ability or enthusiasm to read for the sake of reading (Paulson 2006), was notably absent from our survey findings. Lecturers in Higher Education are asking students to value AR, without dedicating time to it themselves and / or without being allocated the time and space to model this behaviour. This may contribute to the implicit message that AR has little intrinsic value of its own.

Intrinsic motivation for reading is a key focus at primary and secondary education, where self-selected reading for enjoyment has been suggested to have a greater influence than socio-economic background on a child’s academic achievement (OECD 2002). Readers engaged in SSRE aged 15 to 17 years have been found to perform better in English, mathematics, science and history (Whitten, Labby & Sullivan 2016). To date, there is little empirical evidence of the effectiveness of SSRE at the Higher Education level. The concept of SSRE was only hinted at by two of the participants in response to engaging students in AR. The suggestion of use of papers relevant to assessment that are, “fun / interesting / weird, and initially are quite short” can create text based interest, a form of situational interest, that can lead to long lasting personal interest and personal interest, like intrinsic motivation is internal, providing an attraction to a topic (Hidi & Anderson 1992). One participant commented that it is only at third year that students increase their reading: “It’s only at that point that some of them get scared that they won’t understand enough!”. Third year is, however, also the time when on many programmes students are able to align their curriculum more closely with personal interests, particularly with reference to their dissertations. Perhaps it is this opportunity to follow one’s personal interests that provides the motivation to read widely. This change in approach is captured by the participant who described reading at PGR level: “For postgraduate research

students (...) there will probably (I hope) be more reading for interest sake rather than simply for mechanistic reasons relating to fulfilling assessment criteria."

### **Limitations**

A low take up and completion rate was apparent here; there was specifically a lack of respondents from STEM subjects. Despite this, the qualitative data here provide an insight into the views and beliefs of academics, with consistent themes emerging. The medium of the survey however means contextual information is missing. Future work should employ a more in-depth agenda to explore if there are subject-specific issues.

### **Conclusion**

Our results suggest that whilst AR is highly valued by academics for intrinsic developments, the information regarding why and how it is valued, is not clearly communicated to students. There is an expectation that students know that Higher Education differs from Further Education, and that their AR should be developed, but responsibility for this is placed with the student, with schools, Further Education colleges, or with the wider university systems. The integration of AR within the curriculum and within assessments focuses on AR for extrinsic goals and yet it is considered as negative that students are generally seen to engage only in sufficient reading to respond to these external targets. Paradoxically, academics' own practice of AR is also not prioritised outside of external goals, due to a lack of perceived value at the level of university and one's own time management, and this implicit message may be passed on to the students.

There is a clear mismatch between the explicit and implicit messages that students receive around the value of AR. To engage students with AR to integrate knowledge and concepts, challenge patterns of thought and ultimately create new knowledge, we need to consider our own practices, and how we develop and reward student reading.

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