



TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING



In their own words

Analysing students' comments from the
Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey

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In partnership with: Liverpool John Moores University

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Background

Postgraduate (PG) education in general, and postgraduate taught (PGT) education in particular, have become increasingly prominent in higher education (HE) policy discussions. The recent decline in PG admission numbers has prompted the Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to refocus their attention onto PG education that “has been neglected in terms of policy debate and strategic thinking” (Higher Education Commission 2012) and to develop strategies to ensure the continued success of higher degree programmes (HEFCE 2013).

Student feedback is crucial to understanding the learner experience (QAA 2013). The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), facilitated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), provides sector-benchmarked results to enable institutions to evaluate and inform improvements to the PGT student experience. In addition to ‘scoring’ their experience, students are now offered the opportunity to leave free text comments at the end of each section of the survey, and also to state the most enjoyable or interesting element of their course and one thing that could be improved. At the national level, these comments represent the collective voice of PGT students and reveal the experiences of postgraduate taught provision in the UK in their own words.

This report presents findings from an analysis of free text comments left by students in the PTES 2014. It is the first attempt to look closely at the feedback of PGT students at the sector level to identify the dominant themes within taught postgraduate education. The report focuses on four areas of the survey: student expectations and perceptions of quality of teaching and learning; engagement with their study; the most enjoyable element of their experience; and what needs to be improved. These sections were selected because of a strong association between teaching and learning and engagement scales was identified by Soilemetzidis *et al.* (2014), with ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘engagement’ scales having the biggest contribution to overall satisfaction.

The PTES 2014 data set included responses of 67,580 students from 100 higher education institutions (HEIs), representing 28% of all students invited to take part in the survey. The overall data set analysed comprised around 2,670,000 words. Due to the large size of the data set, the text-mining software Leximancer was utilised in this study to improve the efficiency of the analysis. The software identifies concepts (most frequently mentioned and highly connected words in the text) and represents them as a map, allowing the researcher to explore key themes and connections between them within the data.

This report includes a description of the main themes generated by the automated analysis of comments in each of the four areas, and the key messages within each theme identified by researchers via manual thematic analysis of student quotes. Although findings comprise a broad range of topics articulated in the student feedback, discussion is focused on the most prominent themes and their implications for the PGT student experience in the UK. The report also makes recommendations on how the findings might be used to inform further developments of the PTES.

1.2 Key findings in brief

Analysis of PTES free text comments showed that PGT students are a very diverse cohort, and that multiple variables impact on their learning experience. However, there were some strong and consistent messages across many demographic groups that merit the attention of HEIs and the wider sector. This research identified the following critical factors for the successful participation and achievement in postgraduate taught education.

1) **The importance of scheduled, formalised contact time with both academics and peers**

The availability of the lecturer is a key quality measure for postgraduates. In particular, individual student tuition is highly valued, especially for part-time students and students enrolled on programmes where independent learning is the dominant mode of study, for example, online/distance learners. This was a strong message that emerged across all demographic and institutional mission groups. Although students appreciated that postgraduate study required independent work and self-regulated learning, when contact time was perceived as insufficient or where staff were difficult to contact or reluctant to provide individual support, students were critical of the teaching and learning experience. For many respondents the major factor in course selection was the academic or industry profiles of the teaching staff. However, many students commented that the workload of high profile staff impacted on contact time they had with students and this had a detrimental effect on their learning experience.

PGT students valued the opportunity to meet, interact and learn with and from their peers who, while having varied disciplinary backgrounds and life experiences, shared the same interests, values and passion for the subject. Some students acknowledged that regular interaction with peers was not only beneficial for their studies but also was an important factor contributing to persisting with their course. Many embarked on PG study hoping to build a professional network to enhance their employment prospects, and course peers (especially among mature students) were seen as part of this process. There were clear expectations that these networking and collaborative opportunities should be integrated into the curriculum. Student feedback indicated that interaction with other students helped to encourage deeper learning through engagement with the subject and capitalising on multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary perspectives. But it was also evident that in many cases learning was hindered by the language ability of non-native English speakers as some non-native speakers struggled to engage in academic discussion, which impacted on the learning experience of all the students in the cohort.

Recommendations

- > Institutions should provide clear expectations regarding the formal, structured contact time with academic staff within course documentation, including how academics will respond to requests from students for additional contact time;
- > Programme teams need to recognise the importance of peer learning and ensure that opportunities are embedded in the curriculum and managed across the programme, and where possible, cognate subject disciplines;
- > Institutions should provide additional support with language needs for non-native English speakers as early as possible in their course of study in order to ensure effective engagement in peer-learning activity.

2) **The requirement for a consistent experience in relation to teaching, learning and assessment**

Consistency was crucial to a high quality teaching and learning experience. This included course delivery, assessment and feedback, and course communication. Postgraduate students often commented favourably on aspects of the programme delivery, for example, excellent modules or particularly effective lecturers/professors, but stated that the overall quality of the teaching and learning experience was reduced where there were inconsistencies in approaches and practices. This was seen as a particular challenge for postgraduate programmes as many courses surveyed required contributions from a range of expert staff, including research and/or practice specialists. Furthermore, comments suggested that the overall quality of the teaching and learning is often determined by the poorest experience and that management of the entire programme is crucial to a positive course experience.

Recommendations

- When evaluating a postgraduate programme, leaders should pay close attention to the consistency of the student experience and the effectiveness of modules in meeting learning outcomes;
- Course leaders should develop consistent cross-module programme approaches to the delivery, assessment and feedback. These could include a programme-level curriculum map, a programme assessment and feedback strategy and a transparent communication approach, for example, via the virtual learning environment (VLE).

3) **The role that workload plays in the overall experience and quality of student outcomes**

One of the most significant findings of the research was that workload could be a significant barrier to a successful course experience. A heavy, unmanageable workload, requiring many more hours than had been advertised in the course documentation, was a critical issue raised in the PGT student feedback, and very noticeable in the comments of part-time students in paid employment in particular. A number of factors contributed to intense workload periods including uneven distribution of work across the academic year and multiple coincident assignment deadlines. International students, working in their second language, found it very challenging to meet high workload demands.

A difficult-to-manage workload had a direct impact on the quality of the student outcomes, as many admitted they were unable to produce assignments to the best of their ability. It also resulted in an inability to assimilate the material properly and to reflect on the new knowledge. Consequently, many respondents adopted 'surface' or 'strategic' approaches to their learning. Finally, students commented on the high workloads impacting on their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- Programme teams should consider the total workload on postgraduate programmes and to make it more manageable, for part-time and mature students in particular. This requires a more co-ordinated approach to submission deadlines with better sequencing and structure;
- Institutions should develop policies to provide opportunities for a more flexible workload through formalised study breaks and increased flexibility for part-time learners. HEIs need to

take account of the work/life commitments of many postgraduate students and develop more accommodating study patterns;

- Programme teams should re-visit their PGT courses' workload guidelines to ensure that they accurately reflect the course requirements;
- Higher Education Academy, through the PTES, should consider providing programme teams with more meaningful information on student workload by including a direct question on perceived workload on the course that can be quantified (and if it was more or less than expected, or matched their expectations). This is established practice on both undergraduate and postgraduate level course experience surveys in the US where information on the actual workload is available to students, allowing them to make informed decisions when selecting optional modules or making other programme choices.

4) **The necessity for the curriculum to be challenging and appropriate to a higher degree**

The academic content of the course was often referred to in the context of previous undergraduate or professional experience. Furthermore, respondents described particular expectations of a higher degree. Given the diversity of the UK postgraduate student cohort, respondents questioned the 'level' of the programme. This resulted in many students perceiving the course content as being too challenging or not challenging enough. PGT student comments suggested that academic staff delivering the programmes also struggled with the 'level' of a Masters programme with delivery sometimes aimed at the level of doctoral degree and, at other times, at final year undergraduate.

Recommendations

- Programme teams should manage the expectations of students in respect of the level of a higher degree programme. This could be through more explicit information in module/programme guides and by providing opportunities to discuss issues around level and challenge during induction;
- Institutions should ensure that academic staff are aware of the level requirements of a Masters programme (QAA 2015).

5) **The availability of structured and timely opportunities for providing module and course level feedback**

PGT students felt that they had limited opportunities to provide meaningful course feedback, particularly at the module-level. Many students stated that they were asked to provide feedback too early in the year or too late to benefit from improvements. Where opportunities to give course feedback were available, students were often not aware how their feedback was used. 'Closing the feedback loop' was not present in numerous PGT courses across the country: many students believed they were not informed about how feedback of the previous cohort helped to enhance teaching and learning provision. This was particularly evident in the comments from full-time students on one-year Masters programmes, where the short, intense delivery periods meant that improvements were not often implemented during their study time. Consequently students felt that there was no personal benefit for them in providing course-level and module-level feedback.

Recommendations

- > Quality services/learning development teams need to improve module-level evaluation on postgraduate programmes including formative as well as summative opportunities to feedback. Programme teams should also ensure that PGT students are informed of survey outcomes and actions taken to enhance the programme.
- > HEIs might want to explore collective feedback of their PGT students in light of the national findings presented in this research and use PTES results as a catalyst for follow-up interviews, and to provide a more in-depth institutional perspective.

1.4 Acknowledgements

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2. Introduction

2.1 Research context

Postgraduate (PG) education has become more prominent in higher education (HE) policy discussions in recent years. Postgraduate enrolments, particularly part-time, have been declining across the UK since 2011 in all domiciled groups (Morgan 2015). An independent inquiry by the Higher Education Commission, undertaken in 2012, noted that one of the possible reasons for this is that this area of education has been largely neglected in terms of policy debate and strategic thinking (Higher Education Commission 2012). A number of factors have contributed to the decline in student numbers, both home and international such as: unregulated and constantly increasing fees for postgraduate courses, limited financial support available for postgraduate students compared to undergraduate students, and changes in the immigration system. Demand for postgraduate study may also have been affected by the higher fees now being charged to undergraduates (Times Higher 2015). Various measures and initiatives are being put in place to improve the postgraduate uptake, for example. the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) Postgraduate Support Scheme (HEFCE 2013).

A recent HEFCE report demonstrated that the number of UK and other EU students starting full-time postgraduate taught courses slightly increased in 2014-15, but at a lower rate compared with previous years (HEFCE 2015). Part-time postgraduate taught entry continues to decline, although at a lower rate than in previous years. This report recommended institutions to regularly review how well their postgraduate provision (especially flexible and part-time) is meeting the demands of students (HEFCE 2015).

Student feedback is paramount to an understanding of how the taught postgraduate offer meets cohort needs. Course and module experience questionnaires are the most widely used tools for collecting student opinions. The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), offered annually by the HEA, enables higher education institutions (HEIs) to collect and benchmark feedback on significant aspects of student experience using a validated instrument. In addition to scores, students are offered the opportunity to leave free text comments in each section of the survey and state the most enjoyable or interesting element of their course and one thing that could be improved. The extensive qualitative comments gathered by PTES represent a sector-wide postgraduate taught (PGT) collective student voice not easily obtained by other research methods. It provides a representative sample to identify perspectives of PGT students who wanted to not only quantify their level of satisfaction with their course but to also provide written feedback on their experience.

2.2 PTES 2014 sample

This research project explored the feedback of postgraduate students using free text comments submitted in the PTES 2014. For the quantitative results of the PTES 2014 (scores) please see I. Soilemetzidis, P. Bennett and J. Leman (2014) *The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2014*

One hundred HEIs, covering a range of university mission groups, took part in the survey. The national data set comprised 67,580 responses. The overall response rate was 28%, capturing a broadly representative group of students by subject, domicile, and mode of study. The demographic profile of the survey respondents was very close to that of the Higher Education

Statistics Agency (HESA) population (Soilemetzidis *et al.* 2014). More female students took part in the survey than males (57% and 43% respectively). The majority of those who responded were full-time students (67%) and primarily face-to-face learners (78%). Nearly half (47%) of respondents were in paid employment. Fifty-three per cent of students were from the UK, 34% from outside of the EU, and 13% from other EU countries. Six per cent of students declared a known disability and 13% believed that they were not fluent in English when they started their course. The largest group of students were age 25 or younger (43%), followed by 26-30 years old (21%) and 31-35 years old group (12%). Importantly, 57% of respondents left comments for at least one of the free text questions – this constitutes a highly representative written source of PGT student feedback.

2.3. Areas of research and research questions

PTES covers a number of PGT students' areas of experience including: quality of teaching and learning, engagement, assessment and feedback, dissertation/major project, and skills development (full version of the survey is available in Soilemetzidis *et al.* 2014). Students are invited to leave any further comments after each section and advised to be as specific as possible. Two final, summarising questions ask students to comment on one thing that has been most enjoyable or interesting on their course and on one thing that would most improve their course experience.

This research analysed comments left in scales relating to the quality of teaching and learning experience and students' engagement with course. These were selected as strong associations between these scales was identified by Soilemetzidis *et al.* (2014) and they were determined to have the biggest influence on overall satisfaction. Comments relating to the most successful aspect of the course experience and areas to improve were also included in the analysis.

The 'quality of teaching and learning' section of the survey covered questions on teaching delivery, staff enthusiasm, intellectual challenge of the course, course potential to enhance academic ability, usefulness of learning materials, contact time and learner support. The 'engagement' scale asked students to reflect on their participation in class, peer-learning, to what extent their course challenged them to produce their best work, the manageability of workload, and opportunities for students to give feedback on their experience.

The key questions that informed this research were the following:

- > What practices do PGT students associate with the quality of their teaching and learning experience?
- > What factors promote students' engagement with their learning and what are hindering their engagement?
- > How perceptions and priorities vary across different demographic groups, if at all?
- > What do students value most in their courses and what, they believe, needs improvement?
- > Are there any topics/issues that stand out in the national student feedback outside of the 'pre-defined' survey sections/questions?

2.4 Data set

Free text comments left in the PTES 2014 generated the following data sets for analysis (Table 1):

Table 1: Size of the data set and areas of analysis		
PTES section	Size of the data set	Analysed
Quality of teaching and learning	1,102 pages* 617,981 words	Full data set; break down by age; disability; place of residence; full-time/part-time; face-to-face/distance
Engagement	717 pages 406,733 words	Full data set; break down by age; disability; language fluency; place of residence; full-time/part-time; face-to-face/distance
Most enjoyable thing	1,242 pages 672,218 words	Full data set
Thing to improve	1,552 pages 972,094 words	Full data set

* A4 MS Word document, font Times, size 12, single-spaced.

The overall data set analysed comprised around 2,670,000 words.

3. Methodology

3.1 Automated semantic analysis

The level of detail in individual feedback varied from a short phrase or sentence to lengthy reflective accounts or mini-narratives. Given the large amount of textual data generated by the survey respondents, an automated semantic analysis/concept-mapping tool Leximancer was utilised for the analysis. Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) has an extensive expertise in analysing large institutional and national survey data sets using Leximancer and outcomes of the research have been widely published (Zaitseva *et al.* 2013; Thompson and Zaitseva 2014; info.leximancer.com).

The Leximancer software permits instant interaction with large volumes of data to reveal semantic characteristics of the text and patterns in the data. It automatically identifies concepts (most frequently mentioned and recurrently connected words), themes (groups of concepts), and connections between them by data mining the text. Findings are visually represented as a concept map (Smith and Humphreys 2006). Based on the assumption that a concept is characterised by the words that tend to appear in conjunction with it, the software measures how relevant one word is to a set of other words (relevance is based on frequency of co-occurrence of words in the text). A numerical indication of relevance is presented by the software in a separate table. The strongest relevance-based connections are represented by direct links between the concepts. An attractive feature for researchers is that the tool not only determines the major concepts and themes but also provides critical information about the proximity of concepts and their location. Themes that are 'densely populated' (containing a relatively high number of connected concepts) are those that require particular attention of researchers.

One of the advantages of this form of analysis is that it is highly inclusive and objective, with every sentence contributing to overall understanding. The concept map that emerges from this analysis captures "the wisdom of crowds" and is in essence a text-driven, not a researcher-driven representation (Dodgson *et al.* 2008). The researcher is able to interrogate the concept map and perform a more focused, or tailored analysis if needed. The researcher can add less common concepts from the thesaurus, a process is called 'seeding', or merge or remove non-relevant concepts.

Leximancer uses a clustering algorithm to allow easy visualisation of the emergent themes (clusters of connected concepts) among the conceptual relationships. This is done automatically by the software via a dynamic interface, allowing the researcher to see the themes with the highest level of connectivity or to explore smaller concept clusters.

The software also has the potential to identify sentiments associated with a concept. The sentiments are identified automatically by linking sentiment orientation, if available (e.g. certain adjectives, nouns or verbs indicative of positive or negative sentiment), to the concepts in the process of analysis and calculating the statistical probability of the concept being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context. Analysis of a large textual data set where both positive and negative attitudes to the same phenomenon are expressed, as in the PTES survey, benefits from an indication of sentiment direction.

Research demonstrates that Leximancer provides an unbiased and reliable method of reviewing complex textual data sets and a clear process of justifying decisions about text selection, thereby increasing reliability and facilitating reproducibility of the findings (e.g. Penn-Edwards

2010). More details about how to interpret a concept map can be found in Appendix 1 ('Interpreting concept maps').

3.2 Manual thematic analysis (researcher's interpretation)

Although the 'mapping' process is completed automatically, making sense of the map and establishing meaning behind each concept or theme is the researcher's role. In order to construe a concept (e.g. identifying all meanings that this concept encompasses), a manual exploration of all pre-selected quotes is required. The concept map and relevance tables are interactive: by clicking on a single concept or two connected concepts the researcher gets access to all instances (quotes from the comments) that contributed to creation of the concepts. It is also possible to explore relationships between concepts that are not directly connected, but may be of interest to the researcher. For example, by running a relationship query for the concepts 'online' and 'tutorial' the researcher is given access to all quotes where these two words were mentioned together.

Exploration of comments that contributed to creation of a concept takes place via conventional thematic analysis. In majority of cases there is no need to read all instances (in the case of this research some concepts were illustrated by more than 4000 comments) – the exploration ends when saturation is reached and new themes are not being generated anymore. Although this research generated a high number of themes and sub-themes, only the most prominent ones, that attracted hundreds of comments across numerous institutions, are presented in this report.

The combination of automated and manual analysis has a major advantage over either fully automated or entirely manual approach. As Jackson and Trochim (2002) noticed, concept mapping "helps to ease the tension somewhat by combining statistical analysis and human judgment" (Jackson and Trochim 2002, p. 329).

3.3 Limitations of the software

There are limitations to this type of analysis. Some concepts emerge strongly where they are represented by a narrow student vocabulary. Concepts such as **lecture**, **library**, **feedback** or **exams** favour a strong presence on the concept maps. In contrast, other elements of student experience such as **personal development** or **extracurricular activities** will be identified from a broader pool of terms and has a greater likelihood of being diluted as a concept in the map. This can be mitigated by undertaking a tailored analysis, for example, through concept seeding, adding concepts that have not passed publication threshold, but are of interest to researcher. All changes made to the thesaurus, such as elimination of certain concepts that are not adding value to the analysis, or creation of compound concepts (e.g. by combining singular and plural form of the same word) must be systematically documented as this would impact on the structure of the concept map.

Some concepts could be relatively fixed in their meaning, while others are very broad. For instance, the concept **tutorial** is most likely to represent a single meaning in student feedback. At the same time, the concept **experience** might have multiple meanings, such as experience of learning a particular subject, overall university experience, or experience of a particular lecturer/tutor. To fine-tune the analysis, more specific queries should be run to better understand all connotations related to the concept (e.g. **academic + experience**, **university + experience**).

In order to interrogate Leximancer as a research tool, in an earlier piece of research (Zaitseva *et al.* 2013) we empirically compared themes generated by automated analysis with those generated by traditional (fully manual) thematic analysis. It was found that the majority of the institutional-level themes identified manually were present in the Leximancer analysis. Topics that were not picked up by Leximancer were generated through the next level of researchers' inductive reasoning and generalisation, or via detecting patterns and regularities across the number of themes. Leximancer findings might benefit from being combined with outcomes from other type of analysis such as traditional thematic analysis or content analysis.

3.4 Ethical procedures

All findings published are at a level of anonymisation and aggregation which ensure no personal data (including sensitive personal data) is published to safeguard the confidentiality of individuals and HE institutions.

In doing this research, LJMU complied with the Data Protection Act 1998, including 'Processing of Personal Data' and 'Sensitive Personal Data regulations'.

3.5 Preparation of the data set for analysis and Leximancer settings

The 'name of institution' field was removed from the original data file and all comments were combined in a full national data set. In order to be able to identify differences in responses of various demographic groups, cross tabulation was performed for the 'quality of teaching and learning' and the 'engagement' comments and these data sub-sets were analysed separately. Where noticeable differences were observed, they were included in the findings and illustrated by concept maps, relevance tables, or sentiment analysis.

To ensure reproducibility and consistency of the analysis, no interventions into the primary thesaurus (list of concepts generated) took place. No concept merging or seeding were undertaken. Sentiment analysis was conducted for 'quality of teaching and learning' and 'engagement' to identify the likelihood of the key concepts being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context.

3.6 How the findings are presented

While the influence of the research instrument on the narrative presented in this report was minimised, it was difficult to eliminate Leximancer terminology completely in the presentation of the findings. Findings are presented in this report in the format listed below:

- > exploration of the most relevant concepts and themes generated by the data set at 50% resolution (from our experience this resolution gives the most insightful perspective into the main topics generated by a textual data set), illustrated by thematic map;
- > presentation of sentiment analysis of the key concepts within the theme, where applicable;
- > examination of and summarising main messages within the main themes, as identified by manual thematic analysis. These are illustrated by a selection of typical quotes from students' comments.

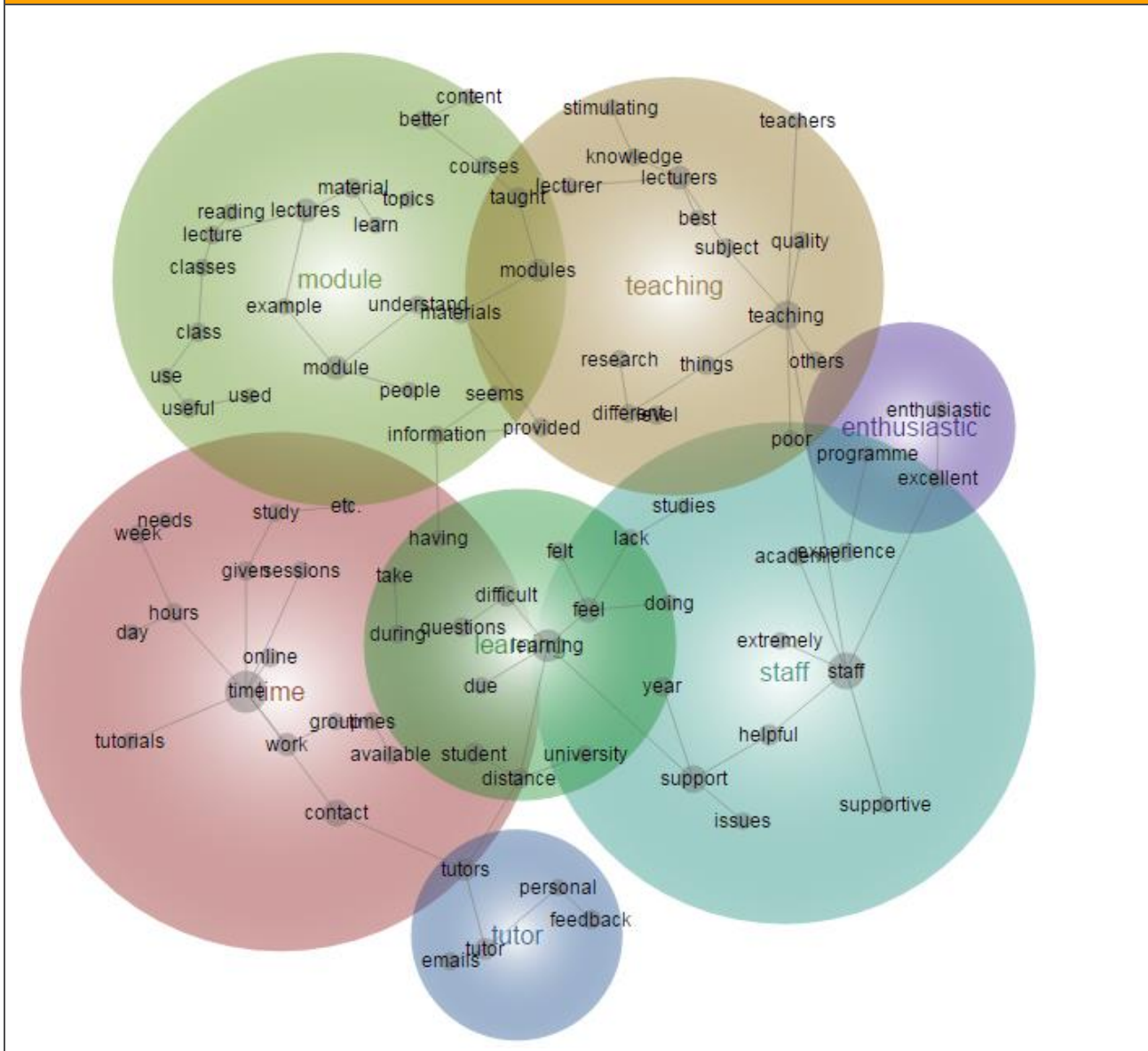
For emphasis, concepts are highlighted in bold in the text. In the findings, direct quotes have only been used where comments were generic enough not to be able to identify institution, department or individual. Discussion focuses on issues within postgraduate taught provision that requires attention across the sector and includes suggestions of how findings may be used to inform further development of the PTES.

4. Findings

4.1 Quality of teaching and learning

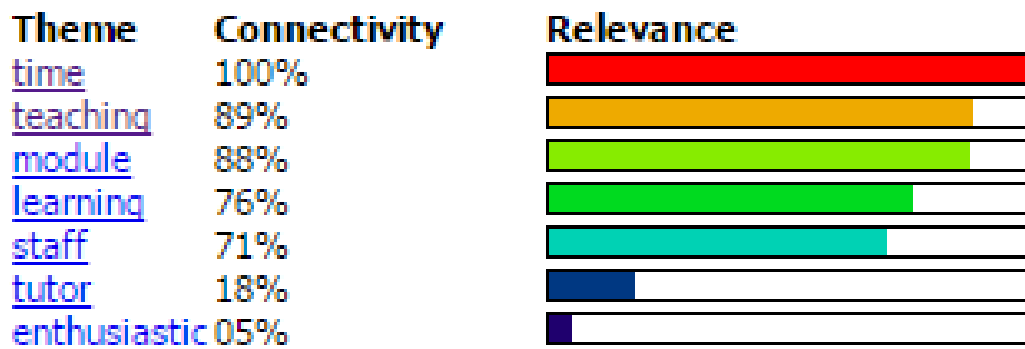
The concept map generated and the associated relevance table (see full relevance table in the Appendix 2) indicated that the strong themes within 'quality of teaching and learning' comments were **time**, **teaching**, **module**, **learning** and **staff** (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Thematic map of the 'quality of teaching and learning' comments



Sentiment analysis demonstrated that majority of key concepts had a relatively balanced sentiment background, with equal or marginally different probability of being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context (Table 3, 4 and 5). **Staff** elicited fairly strong emotions in both directions with favourability being 6% higher. The next strong positive concept was **teaching** (4% difference between primary and secondary sentiment), following by **learning** and **support** (1% and 3% accordingly).

Figure 2: Relevance* of the 'quality of teaching and learning' themes



* Relevance is a combined indicator of frequency of a word being mentioned in the text and how often it was used in combination with other words that passed the relevance threshold (connectivity).

Time was leading the list of likely unfavourable concepts (16% probability of being mentioned in unfavourable context), but secondary sentiment's strength was also relatively high with only 1% difference between them. This is an indication that narratives surrounding **time** were multifaceted and loaded with both positive and negative emotional indicators. The same applies to the concepts in Table 4.

Table 2: Likely favourable concepts

Concept	Primary sentiment	Secondary sentiment
Staff	Fav 23	Unfav 17
Teaching	Fav 15	Unfav 11
Learning	Fav 12	Unfav 11
Support	Fav 12	Unfav 09
Tutor	Fav 08	Unfav 06
Materials	Fav 05	Unfav 04

Table 3: Likely unfavourable concepts

Concept	Primary sentiment	Secondary sentiment
Time	Unfav 16	Fav 15
Contact	Unfav 07	Fav 06
Feedback	Unfav 05	Fav 04
Email	Unfav 03	Fav 02
Work	Unfav 06	Fav 05
Questions	Unfav 04	Fav 03
Class	Unfav 04	Fav 03

Table 4: Concepts with equal probability of being mentioned in both contexts

Concept	Primary sentiment	Secondary sentiment
Module	Fav 07	Unfav 07
Lectures	Unfav 06	Fav 06
Experience	Fav 05	Unfav 05
Information	Fav 03	Unfav 03
Distance	Unfav 03	Fav 03
Online	Unfav 03	Fav 03
Group	Unfav 02	Fav 02

4.1.1 Time

Time was a complex theme connecting concepts relating to the course delivery (including online, tutorials, and sessions) and contact time.

Time was closely linked with the concept **work**. Within this concept, postgraduates described the pressure of their own workload, which is discussed in detail in the following section on student engagement, but also the workload of the staff teaching them. Many indicated that being taught by busy, time-pressured academic staff impacted negatively on the quality of their learning experiences. Respondents felt that staff did not have the capacity to support them, and that this was compounded by the heavy assessment load on Masters programmes:

Staff have too heavy workload to give time needed, especially coming close to deadlines.

Staff are very good, but they are under too much pressure. They seem to be expected to work 24/7, 365 days/year, which they would need to do to provide full support to the students.

I feel that the lecturer are very good at what they do and provide us an insight to their field in a very comprehensive manner. However, as they are busy with academic research work, there seems to be a general lack in support in terms of learning materials and structured introductions (to lab work especially) to specific courses.

The workload of teaching seemed to fall disproportionately on junior staff members. I had expected more teaching from course leaders so that was a little disappointing.

Whilst my personal academic tutor was amazing, she was completely overloaded and simply did not have the time I felt I needed to undertake the varying assignments. This was also true of other teaching staff, who seemed to managing ridiculous workloads.

Interestingly, student own workload was viewed differently by fluent and non-fluent students. Sentiment analysis revealed that non-fluent students were more likely to refer to workload in a favourable context and fluent students in an unfavourable context. This suggests that heavy workload was expected by non-native English speakers.

Table 5: Perception of time and workload between fluent and non-fluent students

Concept	Fluent in English	Non-fluent in English
Time	Fav 23%	Unfav 19%
Workload	Unfav 22%	Fav 12%

A strong concept, directly coupled with work, was **contact**. Contact referred to the availability of face-to-face tuition, with a preference expressed in the comments for more scheduled/structured contact time, especially individual supervisory meeting or tutorials. Within the comments there was a sense that more guidance relating to managing this valuable resource was needed, particularly in programmes with high levels of time allocated to independent learning:

I feel that this is fairly poor considering how much the MA programme costs students, and how little contact time we receive for that fee.

We only met once per week, and I rarely saw my professors outside of that time. While they were available and more than willing to communicate and meet up, it was still difficult to have contact outside of class for that support.

There appears to only be a limited time set aside in the PGT course for meetings with the supervisor.

More structured time with supervisors would really help, especially earlier on in the course.

Scheduled contact time seemed to be a particular issue for part-time students, some of whom were marginalised in a large cohort. Part-time students also felt at a disadvantage if there were late changes to the programme delivery as they were less likely to be able to accommodate unscheduled arrangements.

Where a student is part-time this can mean virtually no contact time at all, and this can affect motivation and confidence.

Online webinars are very good but plenty of notice is needed if people are working full-time/part-time, etc. as they may need time off to be able to participate.

Voices of distance learners, although less prominent than traditional part-time students, were present in the comments:

If I knew that there was a certain time when I was sure to be able to speak to the professor, or when other students were likely to discuss the course, despite the time zone differences I would likely make an effort to participate ...

Because the course is delivered via distance learning, I often felt disconnected from the academic community surrounding the subject, in terms of lack of contact from tutors, which was only available via email or Moodle forums (sometimes had to chase tutors to respond to emails), and also out of touch with current thinking in a particular area because there was not the interaction with staff and students that you would have face to face where you can have progressive conversations.

Distance learning students should have reasonable contact time with academic lecturers during the course. The quality time students have with dissertation supervisors should be the same during the entire course.

Noticeably, there was a tendency for postgraduates to compare their PGT learning experience unfavourably with their undergraduate experience in relation to contact time:

Having been an undergraduate at this university, and having accordingly received hour-long one-to-one supervisions as a major part of my teaching, I was disappointed at the lack of one-on-one contact time at the Masters level, which I had assumed would have intensified.

4.1.2 Module

Module was another strong theme in the postgraduate narrative. Inconsistencies across modules were a particular issue that related to delivery, workload and support. Unsatisfactory communication between modules contributed to the problems, and this was compounded for optional modules. Differences in delivery approaches and workloads across modules were recurrent topics in the student feedback. This impacted on the overall quality of their experience:

It's difficult to make general statements as to the quality of the teaching, materials, etc. as it varies wildly from module to module.

I feel that one issue is the inconsistencies between modules and between members of staff. Some modules provided excellent teaching and support, whereas others have very limited teaching and therefore leave students feeling anxious that they have not been taught anything ...

The course is generally very good however sometimes the workload for the same credits is very different resulting in huge work for one course and moderate amounts for another for the same value.

Too little communication within the lecturers of different [modules], I feel. They are concentrated on their own area which is sometimes hard for us as students to cope with the different schedules and workload since the different lecturers don't know about the workload and schedules of the other areas.

Module is directly and closely connected to **understand**. **Understand** is a broad concept that largely relates to the students' ability to understand the module. Where this had been challenging, respondents cited a range of reasons relating either to the complexity of the topic or the nature of the tutor. In the case of the latter the complexity of the material and staff accents were seen as particular barriers to understanding. The international students' voice was very prominent in comments related to understanding:

Some tutors (not all!) find it difficult to explain their advanced knowledge on a level we can understand.

Sometimes the lecturers can be difficult to understand if they have strong accents.

Most lecturers are hard to understand due to strong foreign accents.

Some staff talk too fast with English accent. International students may ask them to slow down with talking or clarify more their accent. It's a very big challenge for international students. Staff are not aware enough of that.

4.1.3 Learning

The theme **learning** was closely connected to **distance**, representing the voice of distance and online learners. It was also linked with the concepts **feel** and **difficult**, emphasising the challenges of this mode of study. Within **learning** respondents referred to their 'feelings' to explain how the quality of their learning experience could be improved from their individual perspective. They may feel that the course could have been delivered differently or that they could have received more support – **feel** was used, however, to reinforce that this was a personal opinion or preference that may not reflect the collective experience of the cohort. **Difficult**, in relation to learning, often reflected the potential complexity of postgraduate provision, referring to the challenges of delivering a programme to a diverse cohort across a range of time zones, with different modes of study (full-time/part-time), language abilities, and the balance of face-to-face and online delivery.

As it is, as a distance learner, I feel that there is little done to support or encourage my participation in the wider literary and linguistic community or to engage with my course ...

Lectures are very fast paced and cram a lot in. Could be difficult for international students and is tough for those starting at a low base of knowledge.

As an international student, I found it difficult to catch up with the courses in the first a couple of months. The language is the main barrier.

Difficult also related to problems with the PTES survey questions (e.g. 'please rate your overall course experience'). Most postgraduate programmes were delivered by a range of staff across a variety of modules so there was a sense that any measure of quality would be an average rather than a true reflection of the experience.

It is difficult to answer generally as individual staff/courses within the overall course vary significantly – some are brilliant, some actually not so great – so one ends up giving an average score which truly reflects neither.

It is difficult to answer question one satisfactorily. The reason for picking 'neither agree or disagree' is because my answers vary significantly between modules.

4.1.4 Teaching

Teaching is most likely to be mentioned in a positive context by postgraduate students. Characteristics frequently mentioned related to the staff knowledge and expertise. Teaching for postgraduates is often defined by the subject content and the specialist knowledge of the academic staff and industry professionals:

The Professors teaching their subsequent modules, are really "Experts" in their field, the way they [simplify] complex mathematics to a simple sentence is phenomenal, explanation of complex theories is done in a fantastic, simple way

The teaching is good, lots of variation in terms of teaching, have people come from specialist fields

Quality of teaching, when mentioned, was closely associated with consistency of experience. Low quality teaching was emphasised by the concept **poor**:

Teaching skills and support provided varied across units. Standards across the course are not the same with some very poor teaching on one unit.

It must be noted that the quality of teaching and of course content varies wildly across the ... modules. As such there are a few good quality modules and some very poor modules where the tutor is not very effective at explaining topics or giving information.

It's difficult to make general statements as to the quality of the teaching, materials, etc. as it varies wildly from module to module. Some lectures and seminars are a pleasure to attend, and I leave feeling enlightened, and in others, the lecturer seems bored and disengaged, is clearly presenting using someone else's power point, and makes things very difficult to understand by addressing the issue in a very muddled and illogical way.

Quality of teaching and course materials are really dependent on a teacher. Some lecturers provide us very effective and intellectually stimulating handouts, while the other doesn't even upload course materials before lectures and seems not to improve lecture slides from the last year.

Some lecturers are really poor and have provided a poor level of teaching, complaints have been made but have seemed to fall on deaf ears.

There was a significant difference between the enthusiasm levels and quality of teaching provided. Some were fantastic, in spite of having to teach the same thing year in year out, and some were poor teaching the same thing year in year out.

One of the most interesting and pertinent concepts connected to teaching was **level**. This concept encompassed the complexity of the taught postgraduate provision in that the level of study demands an academic capability/security of course participants as well as academic staff. Participants report a broad spectrum of issues within this concept relating to frustrations with the discrepancy between own and/or peers' ability and level of teaching. For some respondents the step up to Masters level is clearly a challenge, while others report disappointment in a programme that lacks the challenge expected of a higher degree.

Professors don't appreciate the discrepancy between our level of understanding and their level. The social environment is very cold and uncaring.

The whole course gave me the impression that it is aimed for undergraduate level students and not for postgraduates.

Staff require us to write to Masters level but they do not know what this looks like. The course does not stretch me academically and provides little in the way of intellectual stimulation.

Some students do not have the required abilities and knowledge for Masters level, which is why the discussion tend to be boring and not challenging.

4.1.5 Staff

Staff was a strongly favourable concept linked directly to **supportive, extremely, helpful, academic** and **excellent** and to **enthusiastic** through **excellent**. As stated earlier, postgraduates valued the academic knowledge of staff and appreciated enthusiastic delivery. However, the comparisons were frequently made in the comments between staff delivering modules, again, highlighting inconsistency.

I take an online course where some professors are more enthusiastic about teaching than others. I can really see how some put in a lot of effort and spend a lot of time preparing the course, incl. discussions, videos, etc. whereas others seem to take it very lightly.

While some of the staff are excellent, enthusiastic and really make a difference, it is clear to see that others are really burnt out and not enjoying their job at all.

Some staff are more helpful than others and some staff clearly want to teach while others merely see it as a stop gap till something better comes along.

Some staff are more helpful than others. Student experience is inconsistent.

4.2 Student engagement

The concept map generated and associated relevance table (see full relevance table in the Appendix 2) indicated that most relevant concepts within engagement related comments were **time, students, workload** and **feedback**. Feedback in this section of the survey is mostly related to student voice, which is the opportunity for students to give feedback on their course experience and how it could be improved.

Sentiment analysis demonstrated that similar to the 'quality of teaching and learning', majority of key concepts in the 'engagement' section also had a relatively balanced sentiment background, with equal or marginally different probability of being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context (Table 6, 7 and 8).

Table 6: Likely favourable concepts

Concept	Primary sentiment	Secondary sentiment
Students	Fav 20%	Unfav 19%
Feedback	Fav 13%	Unfav 11%
Opportunities	Fav 05%	Unfav 03%
Group	Fav 06%	Unfav 04%
Staff	Fav 05	Unfav 04%
Discussion	Fav 05	Unfav 03%
Lecturers	Fav 04%	Unfav 03%

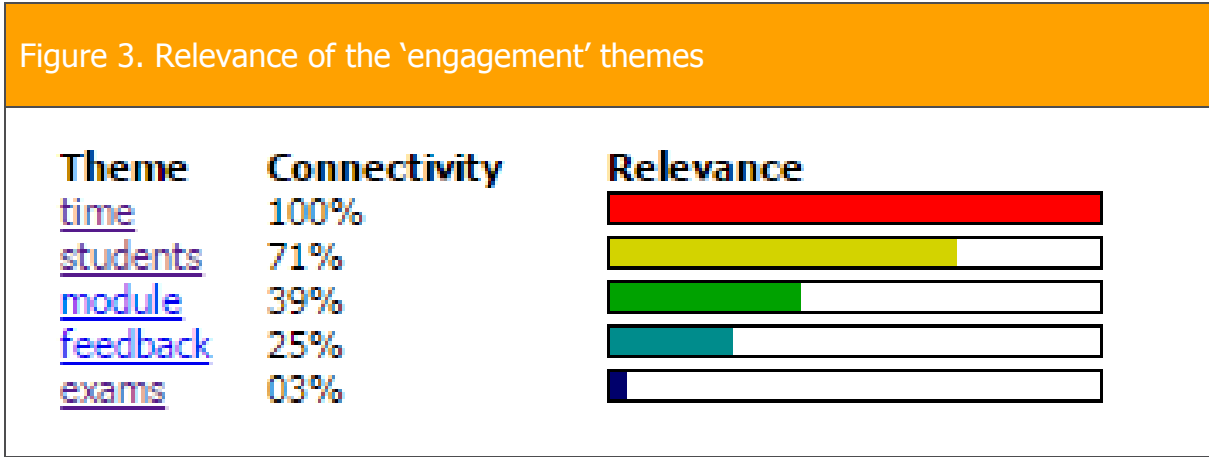
Table 7: Likely unfavourable concepts		
Time	Unfav 28%	Fav 23%
Workload	Unfav 22%	Fav 15%
Assignments	Unfav 09%	Fav 06%
Modules	Unfav 07	Fav 05
Year	Unfav 06	Fav 03
Deadlines	Unfav 06%	Fav 05%

The strongest positive sentiments were attached to the concepts **students** and **feedback**, while **time** and **workload** elicited strongest negative feedback.

The most noticeable difference between primary and secondary sentiment was seen in **workload** ('unfavourability' is 7% higher), and **time** (5% more likely to be unfavourable) concepts (Table 7).

Table 8: Concepts with equal probability of being mentioned in both contexts		
Module	Unfav 06	Fav 06%
Learning	Unfav 06%	Fav 06%
Questions	Unfav 04%	Fav 04%
Experience	Unfav 04%	Fav 04%
Teaching	Fav 04%	Unfav 04%

Automated thematic analysis (50% resolution) demonstrated that **time**, **students** and **feedback** also formed major themes (concept clusters). Two other themes identified by the software were **exams** and **module** (Figs. 3 and 4). **Workload** was subsumed by **time** based on close proximity of the concepts and relevance hierarchy.



4.2.1 Time

Time is a large and well populated theme, which includes a number of highly relevant and connected concepts related to manageability of workload, timetabling, deadlines, balancing work and study, and producing best work. As a concept, **time** is highly likely to be mentioned in an unfavourable context (Table 7). References to **time** were made mostly in relation to the workload and its implications.

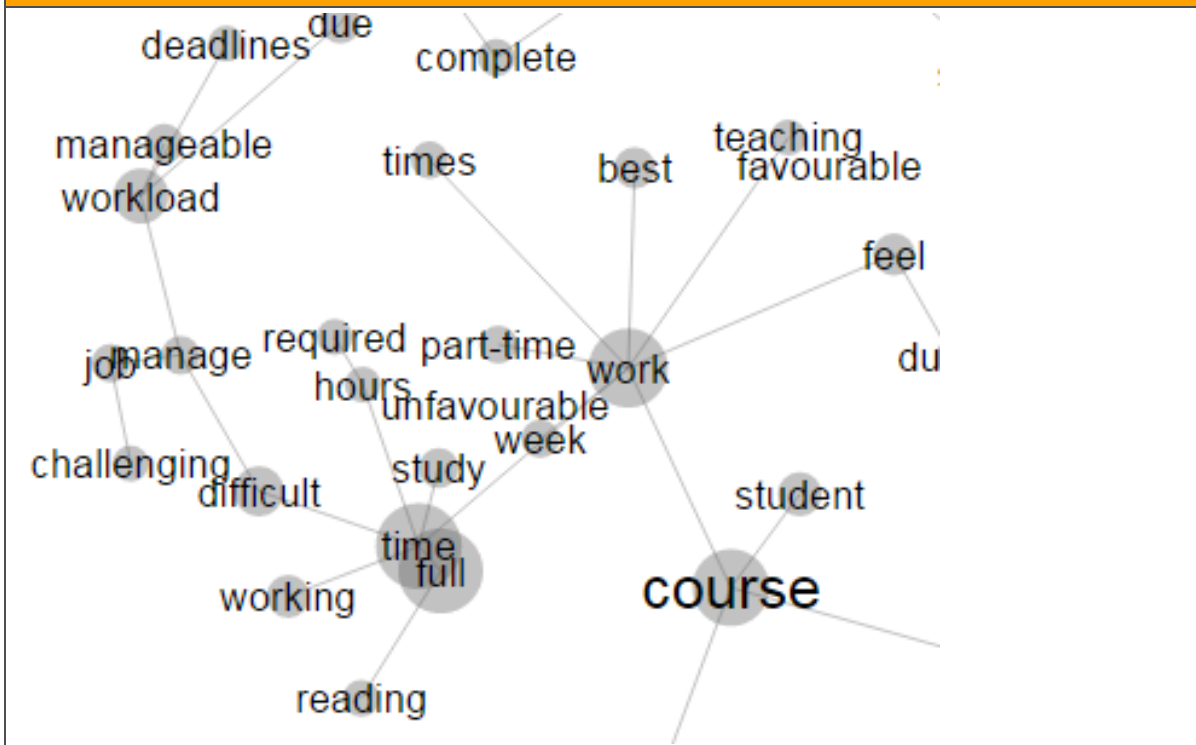
Workload

Nearly half of the students who responded to the questionnaire were engaged in regular employment (47% indicated they were in paid work), and many, as seen from the comments, combined their studies and work with family commitments. This resulted in a very high workload – something that was unexpected/unforeseen by many respondents, as in the following comment:

In order to fund my postgraduate course, I have to work part-time. The course does not take this into account, nor was there any indication that the workload would be as intense as it is. I feel if this information was available, it would have better informed my decision better on whether or not to continue my education into postgraduate level.

The voice of part-time students in particular was strongly presented in these comments. The concept map of Engagement comments left by part-time students demonstrated that many referred to their workload as **challenging** and **difficult** to **manage** (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Fragment of the 'engagement' concept map (part-time students)



High numbers of students commented on their part-time course being very intense and demanding many more hours of independent study than had been initially advertised:

The workload to ensure that assignments are submitted on time and to the best of my ability has been immense. This has been far from a part-time course for me, some weeks I have been working a 60 hour+ week (consisting of Uni, placement and studying) ...

As a part-time student I have often found the workload difficult to manage alongside a part-time job and found myself needing to take two weeks of unpaid leave last term to complete the work ...

I feel that to be able to invest the time needed in the course to develop strong ideas you really need to devote much more than the ten hours a week, outside contact time, that the course suggests, and this should be made clearer at the start when people are considering their external commitments and taking on such a course.

From a part-time perspective ... I feel working 40 hours a week while studying for modules which expect 25 hours a week study (as per the handbook) to be rather unrealistic, stressful and do not grant the student with sufficient time to complete the work to the best of their ability.

Online learners, many of them working full-time, were also affected by a high workload:

Time wise I am struggling with a full-time job and a young toddler – the estimated ten hours a week for the online course is an underestimation, it is easily twice this much due to the amount of reading that is required.

Academic and **year** were two directly connected concepts on the part-time students' map. Analysis of comments revealed that they were largely related to an uneven distribution of workload across the academic year. In many examples, the first semester was relatively manageable, while second semester created a high pressure on students:

For part-time students ... it would be useful if the workload was spread across the academic year rather than in clusters where everything needs handing in.

Distribution of work across the academic year is incredibly uneven; especially in the winter term.

The course load is weighted heavily towards the second term in my course. The first term is ... manageable but the second term is incredibly demanding.

Many comments referred to unbalanced timetabling and coincident assignment deadlines that contributed to heavy peaks of workload:

As for the workload, it has been abysmally managed creating very slow periods and extremely hard periods with extremely poor time tabling ...

With regards to workload, I felt that the deadlines can be organised in a way that not all course works are due at the same time to make it more manageable for us to produce our best work.

A high number of international students, non-EU students in particular, also commented on a very heavy workload. Achieving the level and quality of learning they desired required very long hours. Numerous respondents confessed that they were not able to read course-related material or go through the lecture notes as all efforts were focused into producing coursework of acceptable level:

The workload for international students is mostly overwhelming specially that there is not enough more specialized workshops to teach UK scholarly system ... (non-EU student)

The workload is manageable if 80-hour workweeks are manageable. (non-EU student)

The course should last three month longer – the workload is extreme ... due to the amount of assessments which include essay writing, native students have a clear advantage ... (non-EU student)

The high workload and students' limited language abilities led to more capable students being overstretched, especially in group assignments. Narratives such as those below regularly appeared in student feedback:

As the only near native English speaker in the groups, I was often forced to do other peoples work if I wanted a good grade on the assignment. Workload for other [international] students is unbearable ... (non-EU student)

The workload would be manageable if the abilities of the students on the course was better understood by the staff. Some students cannot hold a single conversation in English, nor can they write a legible paragraph in English. This drastically increases the workload of other students since they have to compensate for the language barrier in order to produce Masters level reports for the group. Sometimes the contributions of these students who struggle with the language is zero to none, and this really puts other members of the team under a lot of pressure whilst coping with a normal workload of a postgraduate student. (non-EU student)

Quality of learning and work produced

When **work** and **produced** related comments were scrutinised the following messages emerged.

A high number of respondents admitted that heavy workload had a direct impact on the quality of their work as they were unable to produce assignments to the best of their ability. Part-time students in particular commented frequently on the challenge of managing an unexpectedly high workload.

Coursework and projects being rushed and not completed to their full potential ...

As a part-time student, being required to work full-time, I have had to complete assignments in very short deadlines – with no extension, I feel it's impossible to produce my best work ...

The second semester workload gave us no time to actually compete the work, let alone to our best ability. For example, we received an assignment, which was due one week later, during the middle of exam period in which we had multiple other exams on and assignments due ...

Intense workload resulted in the students being unable to assimilate the material they had studied and to reflect on the new knowledge. This often led to a 'surface' or strategic learning approach. Students commented frequently that they were merely "getting by" or "getting the job done by the deadline", rather than being able to engage in depth with complex concepts and theories.

There is too much material to cover, insufficient breaks ... to allow people to recap and consolidate knowledge, which just means that students do what is necessary to pass rather than have opportunity to interrogate and look at topics in depth. By reducing reading and concentrating on a few key issues I feel it would be possible to get a better depth of understanding and critically evaluate material better as there is more time, rather than a mad rush to get through it all or skipping large chunks.

Throughout the course I have completely skipped over the areas I knew were not going to be examined, simply because I had no time to look at them, which means I have missed out on some areas.

Workload in my course is WAY TOO LARGE --- essentially we cover way too many modules with zero depth, there is ... little actual learning. Here's a suggestion --- halve the necessary courses you need to take, double the depth, and make the exams harder.

Please could the structure of the course be looked at to allow a little reflection time.

Impact of heavy workloads on mental and general health

Many students, particularly those in full-time employment or on placement, admitted to be unable to cope with the pressure of working, studying and fulfilling family responsibilities. This led to a heightened sense of anxiety, physical and mental drain and negatively impacted on students' wellbeing:

Working full-time and juggling studying has been much harder than I anticipated – there should be a session on how to maintain ones mental health.

We ... work all night, sometimes not sleeping just to get the work done in time. This results in you starting to burn out but because there is no break in the course there is no time to recover.

The course workload continues to be too intense. Far too many students are suffering with health and emotional issues due to the stress of the amount of work we are expecting to produce, and the lack of sleep involved in producing the work. The course does not allow students to maintain a balanced lifestyle and enjoy other hobbies, activities and sports ...

Course organisation

Many part-timers felt that although personal tutors and lecturers did their best to support students, course organisation and administration, including regulations, should be more flexible and responsive to their needs. This included taking into account mitigating circumstances, allowing a study break or fitting fewer modules per term to allow students to better combine their studies with work and life commitments:

More flexible timetable and more time to prepare coursework for part-time students. I found the whole studying stressful and struggled to deliver coursework on time and up to required standards. If I had more time I would probably do a lot better in terms of my grades. I work full-time 40hrs a week and have a family.

Being able to complete it at a more flexible pace, i.e. do a course in six months if you can, or two years if you need to, as long as it's all finished within the designated five-year span.

Assignment deadlines were challenging and I was forced to drop out of the course until the course organisers became more flexible ...

Students across all demographic groups expressed a wish to extend their study time – the whole course, length of certain modules or revision period for exams. Some understood though that it would have implications:

Maybe the school would like to make it ten-week or even longer, cause ... it is extremely intense.

I would like the programme to be spaced out a bit further, that is because I am doing two jobs whilst studying. The down side of this would be that it would take longer to qualify ...

Modules' length should be longer in my opinion to give student the chance to deepen more some topics.

If classes were longer, or farther apart, to allow time to review and study the material presented. I felt as if the material was rushed through and we moved on to the next topic too quickly for me to fully understand and absorb. Hence, I felt as if I had not learned as much as I should have.

4.2.2 Module

Module, as a theme, overlapped with **time** and **students**, indicating that there were common messages within the themes. Many sub-themes echoed findings presented in the 'quality of teaching and learning' section.

Inconsistency of delivery

A high number of comments were related to inconsistencies in module delivery, workload and module evaluation approaches. Inconsistency impacted on students' engagement with their study and their overall perception of the course. Differences in module workload was a frequently repeated theme across all institutions:

The workload for some modules was harder due to the amount of reading which was expected from us ...

The workload is good for some [modules], but unmanageable for others. Some courses require ~four hours per week out of class during the term to keep pace, while others require >12 hours. If all classes were structured that way, students would need to do 60 hours of work per week outside of class on top of 15 hours per week in class. Though I acknowledge it may be difficult to standardize the work load, it would certainly be beneficial to at least make an attempt at regulating the scope of material covered in any given class. This would result in more balanced, manageable workloads ...

I felt that there was some discrepancy in the time-commitment required to complete the coursework assignments, between the different modules. I didn't feel that I produced my best work in the time that I had ...

Variations in module delivery impacted negatively on overall course experience. Respondents scored their course experience on the poorest module:

Different modules have been different experiences, some have given good space for discussion with other students, others limited...

I have had one module where I would have ticked all 'agrees', with everything being excellent, but one module has not been adequate ...

Module evaluation

Reflecting on student voice opportunities, a relatively high number of comments were made about module evaluation. Many PGT students said that they did not have an opportunity to provide module level feedback or were asked to provide it too early in the year and were therefore unable to evaluate the entire module/course. Students commented that module evaluation was limited to teaching only and did not give them opportunity to comment on other elements of the experience such as summative assessment or feedback on coursework, as in the following comments:

There has only been one questionnaire about a module handed out for a module to date (with eight modules attended). It seems staff do not wish to hear feedback from students.

Feedback should cover a whole module – exam, coursework feedback, length of time to receive marks, etc. – and not just the taught element.

We're asked to give feedback on modules and assessments before we've completed the whole module and assessment. Hence the evaluations are not a true reflection of how we feel about the whole block.

I would have preferred to provide feedback after the exam or coursework submission date (although not after the final mark) because it is not until the very end of the course can one see if the module has been worth undertaking.

Sometimes we do want to have a say on what we think about the assessment of each module, not just the teaching part.

Quite a few students suggested that module feedback should be staged in order to be able to resolve problems before it is too late:

I don't think a questionnaire at the end of a module is sufficient, I would rather have them between weeks three to five, so that problems can be fixed before the end of the module

Only can give feedback at the end of a module so no rectifications can be made.

Feedback should be asked for half way through each module.

The only place to give feedback is the module forms at the end of a semester, this is not enough as when finding problems in the middle of the term it was sometimes not taken on board.

A noticeable number of comments were made about the evaluation methodology and survey instruments. Face-to-face dialogue with somebody external to the module was seen as the optimum way to provide feedback. Interestingly, a few critical commentaries were related to paper-based surveys as students perceived this approach to providing feedback as less confidential and more restrictive:

Evaluation methodology could be looked at. For me, a paper form at the end of a module is not fit for purpose.

It is only possible to give feedback writing on a paper, it would be more useful and more efficient to have a dedicated module [questionnaire] online to fill.

All module feedback should be collected anonymously online.

We get the chance to fill in a feedback form on each module at the end of it. However, this is done in the final lecture [on paper], so if you happen to miss it then you get no chance to provide feedback.

Another frequent module-related theme was the actual or perceived lack of action taken in response to PGT feedback.

Comments are only asked for at the end of a module and then no feedback is provided.

Whilst feedback was sought from the course at the end of each module, it was obvious that no action would be taken, as a result of the views expressed by the students.

Course evaluation forms are available but to date we have had no feedback as to what, if anything, is being considered based on our evaluation of the course.

PGT students made various suggestions in relation to how their module experience could be improved (reflected in two concepts **module** and **better** having a direct link). Most frequently mentioned was a better communication between module leaders in relation to workload and assignments deadlines.

4.2.3 Feedback

As a theme and a concept **feedback** contained primarily messages that related to the student voice, but often on a programme/course level. Similar to module level comments, many students reported that opportunities to give course feedback were available, but students were not aware of how their feedback was being used and if it had made any difference:

The mechanisms for feedback on course experience do exist, but it's not clear if this is being listened to, especially where it's negative.

I have been a student rep and so I have had opportunities to feedback. But overall I am very unclear – even in my role as a student rep – what my department does with student feedback. They seem to go out of their way to avoid communicating with us about students' concerns.

I think nobody cares about what students have to say because I talked to few alumni of my programme and they had exactly same complaints – so clearly nothing happened between when they filled in this survey few years ago and now.

We have opportunities to give feedback about our experience. However, this is met with a great defence and a resistance to accept an element of the course is not working for current students just because they have been doing it for many years.

Many students believed that giving feedback/doing evaluation after assessments or exams are completed (but before marks are announced) would make it more reliable:

We have opportunities to give feedback after the teaching sessions end but not after the assessment has been done. Sometimes we do want to have a say on what we think about the assessment of each module, not just the teaching part ...

However, quality of teaching only becomes clear [later]. Only then am I able to judge if the professor has prepared me well. Having fun in class is no indication about the learning/teaching quality and if I got the tools needed to pass the exam or complete a good coursework. I would have changed about half my evaluations after the exam or coursework – both to increase as well as decrease evaluations.

The questionnaires regarding individual courses were distributed on the last sessions of the course. It included questions concerning exams and feedback – which we did not even receive until that time.

4.2.4 Exams

Exams was a small theme, largely based on the concept itself. Exploration of exam-related quotes revealed three prominent issues: lack or insufficient feedback on examinations (from staff), badly organised exam timetables and, as discussed above, inability to provide feedback on exams' structure and content.

Many PGT students felt that feedback on exams was often missing or lacked details. It appeared that part-time students, whose programmes vary more in their patterns of delivery, commented on that most frequently:

I would prefer feedback regarding exams to be made available as it may be that I am making generic mistakes which would help me for future exams.

It would be nice to have access to detailed feedback about our performance in the written exams.

There is absolutely no feedback. It would be helpful to get back our graded exams to see where we could improve.

Perhaps ... too much to ask for but feedback on exams would be also useful. Maybe not a full written feedback just to point out where was I wrong.

Another frequently articulated problem was the timetabling of exams. Timetables were considered to be poorly organised or badly co-ordinated. Respondent felt that this affected the quality of work they produced. Many PGT students commented on deadlines for various assignments being too close to exams, leaving them without any revision time. There were occasions when students had two exams on the same day or five exams during one week. This intensity was felt to have had detrimental effect on quality of their work and retention of knowledge in general:

The workload during the semester is very much manageable, unfortunately I cannot say the same for the exam period. Since I am a Master[s] student I want to perform very well in my exams, which is hardly possible when they are one day after the other ...

It seems that deadlines for coursework and exams all come together at the same time, if the separate course tutors could communicate with each other and spread out deadlines it would be more helpful.

I feel that the three consecutive days of exams in Term two are a bad idea. I felt that my scores on all three exams were negatively impacted by the timing and stress involved with such a swift turnaround.

Although this does make the course challenging, I believe this unsatisfactory scheduling meant I could not produce the highest standard of work possible. I do not see the point in cramming all of the exams in one week as I do not believe you get a true reflection of knowledge ... because you have to quickly move on to the next subject.

As referred to in the 'feedback' section, students commented on the limited opportunity to feedback on exams. Many students wanted to comment on how course prepared them for examination and on alignment of assessment with the module delivery, illustrated in the selection of comments below:

The ability for students to give feedback on exams would be nice. Often students have comments on exams and a modules assessment is as important as its teaching.

Those questionnaires would be far more efficient after the exams.

Similarly I wish to leave feedback on how well the course prepared me for exams as well as how fair I feel the exams where ...

They always ask for feedback before the module has finished – it would be better to ask after the assignments/exams have been completed – before then we simply don't know how useful the teaching was ...

The opportunity to complete feedback forms on individual modules was before we had completed the exams or received feedback on our assignments. This therefore meant that I was not able to provide complete feedback as some of the questions were "not applicable" at that moment in time.

4.2.5 Students

Students was second most highly relevant concept and a well populated theme. Although it attracted a variety of comments, the main topics were related to PGT learning community, peer interaction and group work. Reflecting on their interaction with other students, many acknowledged that it was not only beneficial for their studies but also an important factor in retention:

If not for my fellow students I would have dropped the course ...

The workload was not clear at any time, it was always a guessing time what had to be done and when it had to be handed in. We could only keep track of this by talking to each other rather than because this was made clear.

I have managed myself to find two other students via facebook, one is six months ahead and one is six months behind me, it is very useful having group discussions with them.

Courses where peer interaction was encouraged and supported were praised by PGT students:

The discussions with other students in the taught sessions and online were the most stimulating aspect of the course. This definitely helped to encourage deeper learning

through engagement with the subject and was an incentive to explore different approaches to learning and teaching

The biggest way my work has improved has been through interacting with other students, not with the teachers.

There is a lot of encouragement to work with other students and this has been a real addition to the course.

I have found informal meet-ups with other students to be extremely valuable. For a course of this nature, significant benefit would arise for pro-actively encouraging this type of activity.

At the same time, courses with limited opportunities for communication and interaction, especially for distance learning and part-time students, attracted critical comments:

As a postgrad course consisting of professionals and delivered via block mode I had expected more opportunities for networking. The demographic for our course are professionals in their 30s to 40s. We have come from the ages of free education mostly – therefore (rightly or wrongly) our expectations are higher because we have forked out circa. £10k before expenses and spent time away from our jobs and families to be here. Opportunities to network ... have not been evident on this course.

The programme did not promote contact/communication/shared work between students, as all assignments (apart from one) were individual ...

I don't know how to contact other students. It was never explained how it all works. The distance study packs are vague and do not follow the timetable (if this is given), so as a distance learner, I am never sure if I am on the right topic at the right time. I have to figure out from notes where we are up to.

Part-time students felt that their study mode left them little opportunity to work with other students, while online learners admitted that success of their interaction was often dependent on the willingness of students to take part:

As a part-time student I have found it more difficult to get the opportunities to discuss my work with other students as I am not around as much, or at times when there are fewer people around (such as the evenings), or not being able to attend events held during the day. Some opportunity for gathering together other part-time students so we know who else is in a similar situation would be beneficial ...

Online discussion mainly depends upon other students taking part and it is unfortunate in that not all students participate.

There is good opportunity for liaison with other students via BB discussion forums, but input from students has varied, mostly, I think, as we are all very busy with full-time work and juggling the pressure of looming assignment deadlines. The workload is heavy in that context also, but we knew that when we signed up!

When full-time students' comments on engagement were analysed, the concept map revealed **students** was linked directly to **learning** and **level** (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Fragment of the 'engagement' concept map (full-time students)



Both concepts were frequently mentioned in relation to factors that were limiting the ability of student to learn at Masters level. One of these factors was insufficient level of language skills of some international students and the impact of this on the learning of other students in the group. In some cases more advanced, critical discussions did not take place as students were unable to engage in Masters-level debate. This caused respondents to question the academic rigour of Masters level study:

Quality of interaction ... is hit/miss ... but I didn't get the discursive atmosphere I had hoped for. In one course, well over 50% of students had insufficient language skills to participate fully in seminars. Nice people, but they didn't contribute to the academic experience, and often just played on iPhones. Unacceptable at this level.

The huge quantity of [international] students NOT able to communicate in English makes the discussion and work group in the lectures/tutorials impossible. It is really frustrating at a Master[s] level not being able to discuss opinions with the others. This make the Master[s] experience really decreasing its level, the university should really check in advance the English level of [international] students as it does with European students!

Staff members tried to encourage participation, but often to no avail. I also think much of it is a language barrier. I understand everyone comes from different countries and academic backgrounds, but a certain level of proficiency in English should be required in order to undergo a Masters level course at an English university. When only half the seminar speaks, it hurts everyone as those of us that do speak would like more people to bounce ideas off of.

It concerns the somewhat unpredictable demographic mix of students in a given year on international postgraduate courses. This year's intake comprises of many who possess such limited English language skills that one questions the integrity of the 'tests' or indeed those who have allegedly taken them to be deemed set at a suitable level for PG UK based study as I understand it.

I have also found that the lecturers tend to prefer very simple questions or comments from students who have a limited knowledge rather than discuss more advanced (MA level) discussion. This has been frustrating because my course is mostly full of teachers new into the profession who have limited English language skills (the students are mostly international students).

Some international students also commented on this issue:

Most students on the course are international. I am an international student myself, but sometimes the English level of others renders it daunting for class discussion and so participation is somewhat limited. The course often needs to adapt and be shortened sometimes to accommodate foreign students with a lower level of English speaking skills.

I tried to participate and contribute in class when possible, as I like the exchange learning process, but there was very little participation from the other classmates as most of them were international with a poor level of English. Discussion were cut short and lacked content. Other participants were forced into contributing which created very short conversation. I am a non-native speaker myself and wanted to use this opportunity to learn and perfect my skills.

'Levelness' was also mentioned in relation to what is a Masters level degree and how curriculum should be designed to reflect this. Students most often commented on the level of difficulty.

Some sections of modules are too simplistic and some are horrendously over-complicated and made worse with the apparent inability to specify the level of detail required on each task. Yes, it is a Masters course BUT we have been set things that are frankly useless for our future work and have taken up ...

I feel the Masters programme should be geared towards students with prior working experience so that a higher level of engagement and reflection can occur, rather than following the teaching style of undergraduate courses.

The difficulty of my course is debatable, I would really question if it is a "Masters" level course. Tasks are often time consuming but do not offer any intellectual challenge.

At postgraduate level I expected the course to be less broad, but for lecturers to focus in on certain aspects and expect in depth knowledge of those. This was difficult to do fully for each area.

The course lecturers are mostly really good, however, the material they are supposed to teach is not on a Master[s] level as we discuss way too many basic ideas instead of going more into detail. The small courses of the specialization pathways are really good for discussion.

4.3 Most enjoyable or interesting on the course

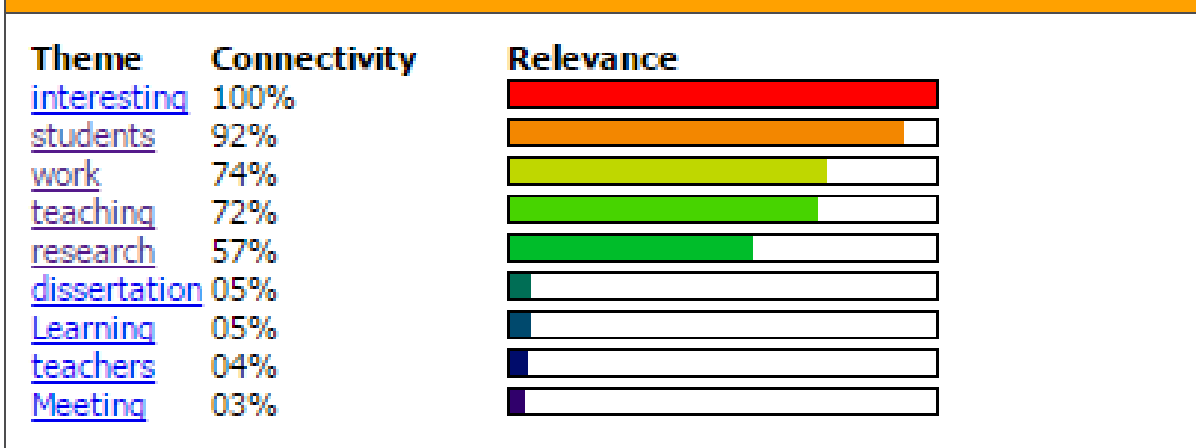
Reflecting on the most enjoyable part of their course experience, students most frequently mentioned their fellow students, interesting and challenging modules, teaching delivered by excellent lecturers, and the overall learning experience (Figs. 7 and 8). Interestingly, **Meeting** and **Learning** (starting with capital) were also identified as 'name-like' concepts. This is an indication that many comments often started with these words and both of them were mentioned in the same comment, as in the following examples:

Meeting other students and talking to them about their experiences. Learning from each other and the discussions that come out of modules and lectures.

*Learning in a different way to what I was previously used to and being on placement.
Meeting new friends.*

Automated thematic analysis demonstrated that **interesting, students, work*, teaching** and **research** also formed highly relevant themes, together with **dissertation, teachers, Learning** and **Meeting** (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Relevance of the 'enjoyable/interesting' themes



***Work** was a complex concept with multiple narratives related to group work, project work, able, opportunity, practical (work and life). We omit this theme due to a high fuzziness of the concept and the related theme.

4.3.1 Interesting

Although the 100% relevance of this theme was 'inflated' in part by the wording of the question, exploring the concept's connections was helpful for identifying linkages and related narratives.

Interesting and **enjoyable** experiences were closely associated with stimulating course content, an interesting subject, engaging lectures and seminars and interesting modules (all these concepts were embraced by the theme). In their comments, students mentioned a broad range of course-related experiences that were perceived as interesting: class discussions, tutorials, field trips, assignments and research project/dissertation were most frequently quoted.

Close proximity of **challenging** to **interesting** and **enjoyable** was an indication that challenge was directly associated with course satisfaction:

I have found myself for the first time challenging my own deeply rooted ideas with extraordinary results: either to shift my paradigms or to reinforce my thoughts. This process is what I have found extremely interesting and satisfying.

The course in itself was enjoyable. It was something quite new and challenging for me thus this made it more interesting.

The direct link between **enjoyable** and **useful** suggests that PGT students valued a learning experience that was applicable and relevant to their needs and to future career in particular:

One optional module is very practical and enjoyable, and I felt that is where I have learnt the most useful things during [my university] study ...

The residential field trip in the first semester was by far the most useful and enjoyable experience of the course. Not only did it deliver invaluable skills and experience for my future career, it also provided apt opportunity to develop relationships with fellow students and academic staff alike.

I enjoyed ... module and found it most enjoyable and interesting. I found the knowledge and skills gained from this module most useful for my future career.

4.3.2 Students

The second most relevant theme was **students**. This covered a number of topics related to the academic experience with peer interaction, class discussions and group learning being most prominent. PGT students valued opportunity to network, interact and learn with and from fellow students who, while having varied disciplinary backgrounds, shared the same interests, values and passion for the subject.

Meeting other students from diverse backgrounds and feeling that you were embarking on something with others was great.

Learning with students with the same goals and attitudes as me. A pleasure to attend Uni each week.

Meeting a range of both lecturers and students with a broad level of understanding in topics. This variety has lead me to learn new things not only in the field of modules but also how to tackle assignments ...

I love the other students in the course. Although we are all medievalists, we all come from such diverse background and have such diverse interests.

A reciprocal relationship with other students was very prominent in many comments. Being able to communicate with international students, to learn and benefit from exposure to various cultures and backgrounds was valued by many respondents:

Getting to know fellow students and supporting and be supported by them.

The best thing in my course so far is the interaction with the peer group, who have immense experience and knowledge from around the world and multiple industries.

I think the most enjoyable experience of studying at the university must be the ability to meet students from all over the world. Students who come from different work backgrounds and who bring their own experiences that add value in group work.

The diversity of students allows me to broaden my view of the world which enhanced my confidence and understanding in dealing with studies, work, and life as a whole.

4.3.3 Teaching

Teaching as a theme covered a number of topics, with excellent quality of teaching and student support being the most prominent ones. PGT students valued an exceptionally high standard of teaching and the knowledge and teaching ability of the staff that made learning relevant and enjoyable:

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the course has been the enthusiasm and high regard for the subject that the lecturers show, which naturally transfers itself to the students. Being taught by people who are genuinely interested and passionate about what they are teaching is a joy ...

The interaction with the various teaching staff is very stimulating. It has been a pleasure to learn from such amazing members of staff, who not only have the experience in their field but also possess the skill to keep the class interested and interactive.

I enjoyed the fact that the tutors were not biased in their teaching. Subjects are taught from all perspectives which assists learning for individuals from different backgrounds and gives a graduate student the opportunity to form their own informed opinion on global issues.

I really enjoyed my tutors enthusiasm and motivation while teaching and sharing experiences. I always had the feeling they really love what they're doing, they showed their engagement and gave appropriate support during the course.

Support-related concepts were closely positioned to **teaching**. Support from personal and/or subject tutor, and one to one individual sessions were highly valued.

The most enjoyable aspect has been the support from my subject tutor and my peers in the tutor group – this course is challenging but sharing the experience and being given the opportunity to discuss those shared experiences has been enjoyable and useful.

The staff especially personal tutors really been a pillar of support, being an international student I was really helped as it was difficult for me to work and make assignments in a

different format as what I was used to back home. But with the teachers help and support and also a lot of guidance from my classmates I reached from barely passing in my assignments to getting one of the best grades in the class.

I really enjoyed my tutors enthusiasm and motivation while teaching and sharing experiences. I always had the feeling they really love what they're doing, they showed their engagement and gave appropriate support during the course.

4.3.4 Research

Relevance of research as a concept was close to 50% indicating that this was a prominent theme in student comments. Being able to do independent research and the exposure to current research was extremely important to students:

I learned how to research! That is really good. And, I want to stay in research ... and make a contribution in those topics ...

Many PGT students who had a positive dissertation or placement experience were then motivated to continue a career in research. Students commented on the enjoyment of being part of research community of 'like-minded people', who have similar career aspirations and are available to discuss research ideas. Attending conferences and symposia gave a much clearer picture of academic life than they had as an undergraduate.

I really enjoy being able to talk to the lecturers and learn about their experience and research. They are all open to conversation, and considering that they are some of the biggest names in this field, they are very interesting to talk to!

The course material was extremely novel, interesting and exciting, with a number of academics giving lectures on research which is currently under review for publication or was published just this year. This has made me very excited about being an academic scientist, and was largely due to the choice of lecturers, who were leaders in their field and from all university departments ...

I feel that my course has given me quite an insight into what doing a PhD will be like, as well as a greater understanding of what life as part of an academic department would be like. Also (sorry, I know the question said one thing), the research seminars the department run every Wednesday have been brilliant, diversifying the topics and presentation styles I have been exposed to and opening conversations with members of the department in a way which has been very valuable.

Interestingly, there was a difference between young and mature demographic groups. While young PGT students were more appreciative of a wide range of research opportunities and freedom of picking up research topic, mature students were more complimentary about being able to do research in their professional areas and make an impact:

I really enjoy undertaking research, especially in an area that is closely related to my job.

I believe my dissertation will be the most enjoyable and interesting thing due to the fact that I'll be focusing in one subject and have the time to do the required research for it.

The increased freedom in designing research projects and contributing to class has been a pleasure that really separated the experience from undergraduate study. The incredible support and inspiration of supervisors and staff is unparalleled at other universities.

I am very grateful for the opportunities I have had to be involved in research in some of UK's most academically prestigious labs.

4.4 One thing that should be improved

The concept map generated and associated relevance table (Fig. 9) indicated that most relevant concepts within 'one thing to improve' comments were **time, work, module, learning** and **feedback**.

4.4.1 Time

Time is a complex theme that encompassed the concepts **work, assignments, study, group, people, year** and was connected directly to **year, people, study** and **work/working**. In terms of one thing to improve in relation to time it was "more time" – particularly for programmes delivered across one year.

More time, wish the course would span more than a year. There's so much to know

Extra time, one year is too short to reach my aims and objectives on the course.

More time, I don't know if the course should be offered as one year. Very intense

However, in relation to **study** and **work**, comments related to more structure in regard to the scheduling of deadlines and assignments that was often perceived as uneven or end-loaded.

... more evenly spread workload, varying intensities throughout the year meant an awful lot of work on at one time, and others no work at all.

More time for personal study, spreading out of deadlines

In respect to improvement, **group** was a very interesting concept that related to learning from peers. In terms of what to improve, comments were split between more group work and less group work, depending on the experience. The quality of the group learning experience was directly related to language fluency, the group size, and how the group activity was assessed.

Not enough English speakers. Group members tended to speak in Chinese in pretty much every group I was in, leaving me unable to offer my opinions or be involved in discussion.

I think more small group tutorials to enhance academic fluency would be most beneficial.

Not being required to work in a group based assignment, with students that could not speak/write in English.

The language barrier amongst students is really astounding since the grasp of the English language between two international students are so drastically varying. This is why I think all group work that carry a significant portion of the marks should allow teams to be selected by the students themselves.

4.4.2 Work

Work was also a highly relevant concept, ranked second, and connected to **time** and **group**. As an independent concept, **work** relates to all aspects of engagement with a postgraduate course. However, suggested improvements related to time and group which are discussed earlier in this section.

4.4.3 Module

Module was a complex theme constructed from concepts that related primarily to delivery, teaching, lectures, lecturer, materials, and online learning mode. The concept **module** also had direct close connections to the concepts **sessions** and **taught**. The theme **module** is positioned in close proximity to the theme **time** and connected through the concepts **class**, **hours** and **study**. With regard to improvements, comments focused on better structure/organisation; higher quality and more consistent teaching; more interaction with other students; communication between teaching staff, particularly in modules that are taught in teams; more specialist teaching; greater enthusiasm of teaching staff and a better quality of teaching. Where respondents made comparisons with their undergraduate experience it was usually negative with the postgraduate experience being poorer quality.

Organisation of course could distract from the teaching: the general organisation of the course is poor which is a shame as the overall teaching is good. There is too much team/co-teaching and not enough responsibility taken by a single module leader for each individual module so for example reading for each module is posted on a piece meal basis rather than as a whole at the beginning of the module.

Everything is ruined because of the poor organization of the course: too many topics are repeated throughout the different modules, the workload is unbalanced, professors cannot involve the students, the teaching assistant[s] don't care about what they're saying and sometimes it's hard to understand their English. Very few networking moments available during the year, I also noticed considerable differences from some courses to others.

Overall the quality of teaching is much poorer than I would expect for a postgraduate degree, and certainly poorer than the teaching I received as an undergraduate. Please bring on more lecturers who are there to teach, not because they are forced to by the department.

Consistency with the teaching in university sessions so that all sessions are engaging and relevant.

4.4.5 Feedback

Feedback was a simple theme formed from two directly linked concepts: **tutors** and **assignments**. Assignment bridges the two themes; **feedback** and **time**, and **feedback** is linked to **time** through **assignments** and **work**. This forms a simple 'axis' in the concept map. In terms of how feedback should be improved respondents wanted more, quicker feedback. Within the narrative there was also a call for more fair, consistent and transparent marking practices. Improvements to the timing of feedback were also requested particularly in relation to having an early feedback opportunity schedules in the programme. As seen in the theme

module where respondents compared their postgraduate experience of feedback with their first-degree experience it was in a negative context.

More feedback, especially at the beginning of the course.

Fair and timely assessment and comprehensive feedback on all pieces of coursework. The standard of assessment was too variable among instructors, specific criteria.

Return of essays should be much prompter with more feedback, I have never waited so long for an essay to be returned before, we were told on several occasions that essays would be returned on a certain date just for that date to be moved back.

Better and more consistent feedback and consistency amongst classwork.

More personalised feedback, and more human, real-time interaction.

Better feedback and quicker marking. Better marking criteria, feedback and transparency.

4.4.6 Learning

As with other themes, **learning** related primarily to delivery. Within the theme the concepts **online, teaching, academic** and **management** were present. The challenges of online/distance learning were highlighted in this theme and suggested improvements relate to increased ease in contacting staff and strategies to limit the feeling of isolation. Opportunities to work with other students was considered to be an improvement both within the programme and with students on other programmes. Improvements to the structure and approach of the distance delivery were also requested. Respondents on class-based programmes wanted improvements to the delivery, in particular, more opportunity for individual contact with the professor and more active learning/in class participation. Respondents also wanted more preparation for being an independent learner with some students stating that they felt unsupported.

A course that had taken into account distance learners and made at least some attempt to include them in the seminars and not just send out PowerPoint presentations.

Less PowerPoint presentations and more interactive learning.

Improved presentation and ease of accessibility to the online learning environment.

Developing the course materials for distance learning students to create opportunities that will compel students to interact together, i.e. working as teams on projects.

Stressing on collective learning through workshops and groups.

More interaction with fellow students on course to share learning experiences.

I would like it if there was more discussion and an active involvement in our learning.

More support in the virtual learning environment and more pastoral support. I don't think anybody on the course knows anything about me, or cares, and that is very demotivating.

The distance learning aspect may be improved perhaps by a video conference session in-between workshops?

Definitely more interaction. Students should be made aware of how to reach out to other students on the same course, who their lecturer is, and I think that lecturers should post regularly to discussions, and engage distance learners.

Better structured peer-to-peer learning, making sure that there is sufficient exposure to other students and their work. We tend to huddle down around our own area, and don't share sufficiently.

The course takes independent learning to the extremes, I feel fully unsupported in this process. It is possible that I lacked the background for the course, having not previously worked in the industry, I feel this puts me at a severe disadvantage.

5. Discussion

The Higher Education Commission Report emphasised the need for the sector to dramatically improve its understanding of postgraduate provision before starting to formulate strategies and action plans (HEFCE 2012, p. 10). The aim of this research was to use existing data to understand the postgraduate experience from the student perspective and to analyse the collective voice of PGT students across the UK.

While the overall satisfaction of PGT students is relatively high (83% in PTES 2014 and 82% in PTES 2015), there is clearly a certain amount of disquiet beneath this apparent content. As Morgan (2015) rightly noted, the undergraduate and postgraduate landscapes have changed rapidly in the past three years. Increased fees have resulted in a greater student emphasis on course value for money and return, in the context of more employment opportunities with increased earning potential (Kandiko and Mawer 2013; Morgan 2015). Three key quality measures articulated in PGT student comments and linked to 'value for money' were: contact time with academic staff, meaningful interaction with peers, and course consistency. The availability of the lecturer/professor is a critical course metric for postgraduates. Not only do they want to be taught by highly regarded academics and professionals, they want 'out of class' support and to be guided through their learning through tutorials and/or online sessions. They also require individual time with staff and expect prompt, helpful responses to email queries. Email support is considered an important means of student support – when email queries are not being answered, this can have impact on student confidence and ability to perform/achieve.

Being part of a learning community was very important to PGT students. Students valued the opportunity to actively participate in the academic and professional discourse, to learn from peers and take part in a higher 'postgraduate' level discussions and collaborative activities that they feel is commensurate with undertaking a higher degree. Peer networking and learning emerged as strong concepts in the analysis of the "best thing about course". Mature and part-time students placed particular emphasis on these opportunities and struggled to interact with their peers without scheduled, structured peer-learning integrated into the curriculum.

The requirement for a consistent learning experience was strongly articulated in all the survey sections analysed. Consistency (or inconsistency) was applied to staff teaching approaches, assessment workload, availability of tutors and course challenge. This revealed the challenge of a one-year programme to deliver an effective specialist programme taught by a range of experts in a coherent manner. Respondents valued both staff expertise and high quality consistent teaching, requiring a difficult balance to be struck between subject specificity and course coherence.

PGT students are a highly diverse cohort, and the free text comments showed a wide variety of individual circumstances and motivational backgrounds influencing student success and satisfaction with their learning experience. Respondents commented that requirement for course efficiency and course cost effectiveness placed many part-time students under additional pressure as simply there was no the human resources to support them at the time they most needed it, while working on assessment and not in class. Part-time mature students in particular were affected, feeling isolated and having a limited support from peers or academics. The similar findings were presented at the report of Butcher (2015) in relation to experience of undergraduate part-time students. The voice of part-timers was loud and clear in the free text data, specifically in relation to academic workload. For mature students work and family responsibilities generated an overload that may impact on their overall achievement. Many students acknowledged that high workload challenged their time management and organisational skills, although some believed it was something expected from a postgraduate study while others felt that the expectations of the workload should have been more clearly stated at the outset.

This research has highlighted the extent to which students' workload may have an effect on their engagement, educational performance and their feeling of well-being. It appeared that for many students there was a sense that their level of achievement was suppressed as a consequence of an almost overwhelming academic workload. Strategic or surface approaches were taken by students as a result, which limited their outputs and left many with a feeling that they were not able to get maximum out of their degree. Suggestions to extend PGT courses by several weeks and even months were noticeable, if not frequent.

A critical issue within the comments that is not related directly to the questions scales, is the challenges of learning within a diverse learning community. Although UK students recognised the benefits of studying alongside international students, it seems that in some cases the quality of academic discussion and peer learning in general has been affected by the languages skills of international students. Classroom discussions that were supposed to be critical and multi-cultural, were apparently often undermined by the limited language abilities and cultural learning preferences of some students. A recent article in the *Guardian* on international student learning approaches acknowledged that the strategy of encouraging intercultural academic dialogue in class has not succeeded. Lack of a language proficiency and knowledge of the UK context is still a barrier to international students' participation resulting in "mutual misunderstandings rather than intercultural dialogue, with international students believing that home students waste their time by dominating the discussions and home students assuming that international students hinder their learning by keeping silent" (Welikala 2015). Increasing "intercultural capability" is crucial for meaningful critical discussion. Findings from a recent HEPI survey showed that the majority of students (54%) think international students work "much harder" or "a little harder" than home students (HEPI 2015). The survey also showed that only 35% of students either agree or are neutral on the proposition that the presence of international students reduces the quality of the academic discussions. However, the survey related to undergraduate students. At the postgraduate level this figure may be much higher as quality of academic discussion becomes an important factor of student experience and satisfaction. As there is a continued sector reliance on international student entrants at postgraduate level, particularly in taught Masters courses (HEFCE 2015), this needs to be taken into consideration.

Opportunities to provide feedback on their course experience were perceived as limited for many respondents. Students reported inconsistent approaches to module feedback. Surveys were often administered too early in the course to allow for comment on assessment or too late with no opportunity for in-year change. Furthermore, programmes were often taught by large teams of experts, which meant it was difficult to comment on the learning experience at a module or programme level as feedback was closely linked to the individual lecturer.

With postgraduate fees increasing by 4.2% from 2014-15, compared with a 1.2% increase in the preceding year (THE 2015), the emphasis on a high quality student learning experience will also increase. Taught postgraduate provision is complex. Cohort diversity is high with students valuing contributions from a range of academic specialists and professional experts but also demanding a consistent coherent experience. The challenges of postgraduate delivery are specific to programmes' level and intake, therefore in designing an effective programme these issues need to be taken into account. This research provides an overview of the postgraduate landscape but more detailed institutional work needs to be done to fully understand the topography.

6. Recommendations

- Institutions should provide clear expectations regarding the formal, structured contact time with academic staff within course documentation including how academics will respond to requests from students for additional contact time.;
- Programme teams need to recognise the importance of peer learning and ensure that opportunities are embedded in the curriculum and managed across the programme, and where possible, cognate subject disciplines;
- Institutions should provide additional support with language needs for non-native English speakers as early as possible in their course of study in order to ensure effective engagement in peer-learning activity;
- When evaluating a postgraduate programme course leaders should pay close attention to the consistency of the student experience, and the effectiveness of modules in meeting learning outcomes;
- Course leaders should develop consistent cross-module programme approaches to the delivery, assessment and feedback. This could include a programme-level curriculum map, a programme assessment and feedback strategy, and a transparent communication approach, for example via the VLE;
- Line managers should identify issues with quality of the learning experience and provide training for staff, as appropriate;
- Programme teams should consider the total workload on postgraduate programmes and to make it more manageable, in particular, for part-time and mature students. This requires a more co-ordinated approach to submission deadlines with better sequencing and structure;

- Institutions to develop policies to provide opportunities for a reduced academic workload through formalised study breaks and increased flexibility for part-time learners. HEIs need to take account of the work/life commitments of many postgraduate students and develop more accommodating study patterns;
- Programme teams should re-visit their PGT courses' workload guidelines to ensure that they accurately reflect the course requirements;
- The Higher Education Academy, through the PTES, should consider providing programme teams with more meaningful information on student workload by including a direct question on perceived workload on the course that can be quantified (and if it was more or less than expected, or matched their expectations). This is established practice on both undergraduate and postgraduate level course experience surveys in the US. Information on the actual workload is available to students, allowing them to make informed decision when selecting optional modules or making other programme choices;
- Programme teams should manage the expectations of students in respect of the level of a higher degree programme. This could be through more explicit information in module/programme guides, providing opportunities to discuss issues around challenge and level during induction;
- Institutions should ensure that academic staff are aware of the level requirements of a Masters programme (QAA 2015);
- Quality services/learning development teams need to improve module-level evaluation on programme including formative as well as summative opportunities to feedback. Programme teams should also ensure that PGT students are informed of survey outcomes and actions taken to enhance the programme.

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Appendix 1: Interpreting concept maps

Concepts in Leximancer are collections of words that generally travel together throughout the text. They are weighted (not a simple frequency count) so the presence of each word in a sentence provides an appropriate contribution to the accumulated evidence. A sentence (or group of sentences) is only tagged as containing a concept if the accumulated evidence (the sum of the weights of the keywords found) is above a set threshold (Leximancer White Paper 2011). The software automatically sets the threshold. The researcher can control the generality of the concept via software settings. Raising this value will increase the fuzziness and generality of each concept (Leximancer Manual 2001):

- Frequency of co-occurrence between concepts is used to generate the concept map;
- The size of the concept denotes its strength (relevance based on frequency of co-occurrence) – the largest concepts are most relevant, the smallest least relevant. The relevance is also presented in a separate table to allow easier comparison;
- Concepts that appear together frequently in the text will settle close together on the map. Those with a direct link are most likely to be mentioned together as a set phrase/expression, those without a direct link but situated in close proximity are likely to be mentioned together in a given text block (e.g. individual nomination);
- The coloured circles on the map are themes. They aid interpretation by grouping the clusters of concepts. The themes can be explored using the different level of thematic connectivity. One hundred per cent view indicates the most connected theme(s), lower levels show smaller concept clusters;
- Words in bold font are indicative of a concept in this report;
- Since Leximancer is dealing with a statistical probability, in the description of the findings we might use phrases like 'more/less likely';
- When a thematic analysis of quotes that formed a concept was undertaken, only the strongest/dominant themes, present in a high number of student responses, were reported. In some cases, absence of themes was also highlighted.

Appendix 2: Concept relevance tables

Table1: Relevance of the 'quality of teaching and learning' concepts

































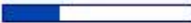






























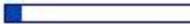

























Word-Like	Count	Relevance					
time	3825	100%		study	577	15%	
favourable	3773	99%		understand	571	15%	
staff	3410	89%		subject	556	15%	
unfavourable	2508	66%		issues	542	14%	
learning	2327	61%		knowledge	532	14%	
teaching	2073	54%		sessions	528	14%	
support	1907	50%		research	509	13%	
contact	1618	42%		poor	504	13%	
module	1451	38%		tutorials	492	13%	
lecturers	1433	37%		reading	487	13%	
feel	1431	37%		teachers	484	13%	
lectures	1355	35%		classes	478	12%	
work	1258	33%		enthusiastic	476	12%	
tutors	1258	33%		content	475	12%	
modules	1255	33%		lack	465	12%	
tutor	1150	30%		doing	429	11%	
helpful	1081	28%		due	427	11%	
student	1072	28%		group	427	11%	
difficult	1003	26%		extremely	419	11%	
feedback	916	24%		use	411	11%	
materials	868	23%		supportive	404	11%	
better	849	22%		having	391	10%	
taught	843	22%		stimulating	387	10%	
experience	837	22%		learn	373	10%	
year	786	21%		programme	370	10%	
courses	785	21%		needs	359	09%	
given	781	20%		people	356	09%	
useful	779	20%		personal	355	09%	
questions	764	20%		take	354	09%	
material	756	20%		example	350	09%	
class	753	20%		seems	348	09%	
things	752	20%		day	347	09%	
academic	745	19%		topics	316	08%	
hours	702	18%		best	304	08%	
distance	700	18%		used	267	07%	
level	697	18%		studied	257	07%	
others	695	18%		etc.	237	06%	
online	672	18%					
provided	662	17%					
information	652	17%					
different	641	17%					
excellent	635	17%					
emails	634	17%					
available	629	16%					
felt	627	16%					
lecture	623	16%					
week	614	16%					
university	601	16%					
quality	596	16%					
times	591	15%					
lecturer	587	15%					
during	580	15%					

Table 2: Relevance of the 'engagement' concepts

Ranked Concepts			Exp				
				working	462	15%	
				term	457	14%	
				lectures	451	14%	
				study	443	14%	
Word-Like	Count	Relevance		courses	419	13%	
time	3174	100%		felt	418	13%	
students	2609	82%		assignment	416	13%	
workload	2297	72%		reading	409	13%	
feedback	1868	59%		online	409	13%	
unfavourable	1506	47%		manage	400	13%	
favourable	1487	47%		complete	394	12%	
best	1040	33%		challenging	385	12%	
feel	1010	32%		sessions	369	12%	
produce	992	31%		taught	366	12%	
difficult	948	30%		tutors	366	12%	
module	931	29%		weeks	358	11%	
assignments	913	29%		people	357	11%	
modules	861	27%		exams	329	10%	
student	780	25%		others	324	10%	
given	778	25%		useful	324	10%	
manageable	772	24%		required	320	10%	
due	704	22%		encouraged	317	10%	
year	681	21%		different	309	10%	
learning	678	21%		expected	300	09%	
deadlines	676	21%		academic	297	09%	
opportunities	605	19%		tutor	294	09%	
group	601	19%		university	289	09%	
week	591	19%		level	283	09%	
questions	586	18%		hours	280	09%	
discuss	576	18%		take	275	09%	
class	572	18%		asked	273	09%	
better	562	18%		discussions	271	09%	
opportunity	551	17%		exam	267	08%	
times	537	17%		support	258	08%	
staff	525	17%		research	253	08%	
during	509	16%		provide	252	08%	
discussion	506	16%		issues	244	08%	
semester	481	15%		material	234	07%	
experience	472	15%		school	224	07%	
teaching	468	15%		lack	209	07%	
lecturers	465	15%					

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