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Feedback cultures, histories, and literacies: international postgraduate students' experiences

Veronica Rovagnati^{a*}, Edd Pitt^a, and Naomi E. Winstone^b

^aCentre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; ^bSurrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

*Corresponding author's email: v.rovagnati@kent.ac.uk

Feedback cultures, histories, and literacies: narratives of international postgraduate students

Emerging research and examples from practice support the idea of feedback literacies as sociomaterial competencies. Such a conception highlights the contextual and social aspect of literacies but neglects their cultural aspect. Reality in higher education sees an increasingly international student body, particularly at postgraduate levels. International postgraduate students transitioning to new systems are likely to have developed diverse ‘literacies’ within their previous institutional cultures. Using narrative inquiry, this study collected in-depth stories of the assessment and feedback experiences of 10 international postgraduate taught students before and after transitioning to postgraduate education at a UK institution. The study gives accounts of the ways in which the students recognised, processed, and utilised feedback. A combination of narrative and thematic analysis indicated a clear influence of culture- and context-shaped histories upon students’ feedback literacies. Such diverse literacies do not mirror the UK ‘norm’ for feedback literacy and do not initially support students in making effective use of feedback in the new environment. These findings highlight that shifting our conceptualisation of feedback literacies from universal to context- and culture-specific is necessary, as is embedding diversity and intercultural interactions within the development of intercultural feedback literacies.

Keywords: Feedback Literacies, Cultures, Postgraduate Taught Students, Interculturality

Introduction

The concept of feedback literacy has grown in prominence in the recent research literature. Students benefit from the ability to read, interpret, understand, and act on the feedback, defined in the literature as ‘feedback literacy’ (Sutton 2012; Sutton and Gill 2010). Scholars have proposed models and are beginning to investigate ways through which feedback literacy can be enhanced (Carless and Boud 2018; Molloy, Boud and Henderson 2020); however, feedback literacy remains widely depicted from a mono-cultural (prevalently Anglophone) perspective

that accounts for one literacy rather than multiple literacies. In highly internationalised and intercultural higher education systems, students are likely to carry culturally diverse experiences of feedback (Tian and Lowe 2013), particularly when they enter unfamiliar higher education systems at postgraduate levels (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013). Postgraduate taught students, however, are rarely the focus of feedback literacy research; there seems instead to be a tacit assumption that they would have developed the same ‘form’ of feedback literacy in their undergraduate studies.

The aim of this paper is to explore the diverse ‘literacies’ of international postgraduate taught students, with a view to inform a more culturally aware approach to feedback literacy research and development. Our position within this paper argues that if we fail to consider interculturality as a characteristic of feedback processes, there is a risk of involuntarily transforming feedback literacy development programmes into assimilationist practices. It is crucial that we question and re-evaluate the universality of what we do and believe; considering and valuing that the cultural element of feedback literacy can inform genuinely intercultural approaches to feedback literacy development. In a context of internationalised higher education this is a necessity as well as an ethical responsibility (Lomer and Anthony-Okeke 2019).

The role of feedback histories and literacies

Contemporary conceptualisations of feedback have shifted from one-way teacher transmission of information towards student-centred, two-way processes of meaning co-negotiation (Carless 2015). Students are considered as proactive agents who ‘make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies’ (Carless and Boud 2018, 1315) and self-generate internal feedback by making comparisons with other pieces of work (Nicol 2020). For this to be productive, student capacity and willingness to proactively engage

with feedback is paramount (Carless 2020; Boud and Molloy 2013; Winstone et al. 2017; Winstone, Mathlin, and Nash 2019), as is their development of feedback literacy. The role of feedback literacy within the curriculum (Malecka, Boud, and Carless 2020) and different disciplinary contexts have been highlighted (Winstone, Balloo, and Carless 2020). However, feedback literacy has been critiqued to be painted as developed equally by all students (Pitt, Bearman, and Esterhazy 2019) rather than as built differently across contexts and cultures. Contextual, social, and individual factors are influential in this field (Ajjawi and Boud 2017; Chong 2020; Gravett 2020); however, feedback literacy development has not been specifically contextualised to increasingly internationalised and intercultural higher education systems. To address this, the current study aligns with recent conceptualisations of feedback literacy that consider not only internal ‘determinants’ of feedback literacy (cognition, skills) but focuses on all that is external to the individual (Gravett 2020). Social, material, and cultural factors in context are crucial as they shape interactions, experiences, and processes; we argue that feedback literacy as a construct should not be under conceptualised to overlook their role.

The situatedness of literacies is not a new concept. It originates from the so-called Academic Literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998) that conceptualises literacies as a complex set of social practices entangled in relational structures and shaped by social and cultural elements (Street 2003, 2004; Sutton 2012). Lillis and Tuck (2016) describe them as ‘ideologically shaped, reflecting institutional structures and relations of power’ (p. 30), an idea that is reflected in Gravett’s recent work (2019, 2020). Learning environments in which feedback engagement occurs have been given greater importance in recent work (Chong 2020) as well as in seminal work on feedback literacy (Sutton 2012). Despite the interest in contextual and social factors, less attention has been paid to cultural aspects. However, contexts and cultures are intertwined; in particular, contemporary higher education contexts are characterised by interculturality. This is important, as cultural diversity of feedback codes and

conventions can result in diverse literacies in intercultural higher education environments. Literacy diversity can originate from students' previous experiences or 'histories'; these are the experiences they gathered with a range of assessment and feedback practices at previous education and higher education institutions (Barton et al. 2007; Barton and Hamilton 2000). Because of the length of their previous experiences within different higher education systems and institutions (likely to be as long as a 3-year undergraduate degree or more), international postgraduate taught students have broader and longer experiences with diverse feedback cultures and traditions (Ramani et al. 2017). Their 'literacy histories' assume a crucial role when they transition to postgraduate higher education elsewhere; they are likely to determine the ways in which they appreciate, process, and act on feedback. Further, for them, assessment and feedback processes happen at the intercultural level: meaning is co-constructed and negotiated in interactions framed by diverse cultural lenses (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2008). Sociocultural theories of feedback conceptualise it as meaning making processes supported by tools and capacities that are available to the students (Esterhazy and Damşa 2017; Säljö 2004). These come from their previous higher education experience and are shaped by their pre-existing knowledge or understanding (Damşa and Ludvigsen 2016). It is therefore likely they guide international postgraduate students when making internal judgements and generating internal feedback on their work and progression (Nicol 2020).

Beyond the 'east vs west' dichotomy

We have thus far highlighted the need to consider cultural aspects when researching feedback literacies in context. We now clarify our conceptual position related to the role of cultures within education and feedback literacy development. The risk when considering academic cultures is to 'slip' into reductive theorisations that classify cultures into 'boxes', dangerously

overlooking their complexities. In particular, much research into higher education has precipitously looked at diversity within the dichotomy of ‘eastern vs western’ systems and cultures of education. Such research is underpinned by two prevalent models: Hofstede’s model of cultural differences (1986; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005) and Biggs’ (1996) ‘deep vs surface’ learning model that identify the different learning cultures of Confucian-heritage (east) and Socratic (west) cultures. Embracing such cultural theorisations without caution has had some detrimental consequences. Firstly, research and institutions have attributed importance to cultural diversity only on the basis of macro-regional cultural distance; secondly, a ‘deficit’ approach towards international students (particularly Asian) has been often adopted (Ploner 2018). This overlooks the diversity and validity of all cultures, values, philosophies, and traditions that shape academic practices and literacies.

Research on diversity across assessment cultures is similarly underpinned by macro-regional cultural diversity; it portrays international students’ ‘difficulties’ with coursework, critical thinking, and academic writing, often suggesting a cognitive or skill deficit of students coming from ‘eastern’ backgrounds. Diversity of feedback cultures is largely ignored (Tian and Lowe 2013); research on international students’ experiences with feedback has largely focused on issues of understanding the language of feedback, often ‘blaming’ student language proficiency levels. Such lack of interest in diverse feedback cultures seems to be the consequence of another assumption: as feedback is an established practice in some leading higher education contexts (e.g. ‘receiving’ countries such as the UK and Australia), it is often taken for granted that this would be the norm in other contexts. In particular, the possibility that this might not be the case within the ‘western’ block is not considered. The current inquiry aims to gather insights into international postgraduate taught students’ histories of assessment and feedback and the role they might have in shaping diverse literacies across eastern and western higher education institutions. We sought to address the following research questions:

- (1) Do international postgraduate taught students' assessment and feedback histories shape their feedback literacies?
- (2) How does this impact on the way in which they recognise, understand, and utilise feedback when they arrive at the UK institution?

Methodology

This exploratory study used narrative inquiry to gather insights into the assessment and feedback histories and literacies of a diverse group of international postgraduate taught students. Originating from sociocultural theory, narrative inquiry (Moen 2006) can guide explorations and interpretations of individuals' learning and development as occurring in socially and culturally shaped contexts (McAlpine 2006). The narrative approach valorises the role of histories in shaping individuals and their experiences, allowing for an exploration of the 'social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted' (Clandinin 2007, 42). Narrative inquiry is a particularly appropriate methodology to understand interculturality as it offers an opportunity to 'imagine a world other than the one we know' (Andrews 2007, 489). By employing this methodology, we collected stories that allowed us to explore feedback cultures and literacies that differ from what we traditionally 'knew'.

The participants were ten international students enrolled on a range of 1-year postgraduate taught degrees at a university in the South of England. They were non-UK citizens who had spent most of their lives outside of the UK, did not attend nor complete secondary, undergraduate, or preparatory (foundation or pre-sessional) education in the UK, and were speakers of English as a second or other language. Table 1 below provides an overview of the participants' backgrounds and current UK studies.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

This study was part of a larger, exploratory and longitudinal research project that included multiple data collection methods and events over one academic year. For this study in particular, data were collected from two sets of narrative interviews carried out between September and December 2019, for a total of twenty interviews. The first interviews gathered in-depth and comprehensive narratives of students' histories and literacies on arrival at the new institution; the second set of interviews provided insights into the impact of students' literacies on how they recognised, processed, and utilised feedback. In the narrative interviews, 'research aims and interests [were kept] in mind, while leaving enough space for the conversation to develop into a meaningful narrative' (Josselson and Lieblich 2003, 269-270), leaving pre-existing expectations aside (Kartch 2018).

All references to assessment and feedback within and across narratives were analysed to give 'voice' to the participants through making sense of the content of their stories. Narrative and thematic approaches were integrated. In stage 1, individual narratives were analysed, and stand-alone researcher constructed narratives were developed. These were then interpreted to expose implicit understandings embedded in each story (McAlpine 2016). In stage 2, thematic analysis (TA) was employed to identify similarities and differences across narratives. Through thematic analysis, patterns of shared meaning across narratives were constructed, and the interpretation of the patterns identified are offered in the next section (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun et al. 2018).

Findings

The findings indicate that international postgraduate student-participants had diverse assessment and feedback histories. These shaped the multiple feedback literacies they

developed and brought with them when they entered university in the new environment. We report on student histories, highlighting how they determined the ways in which students recognised, understood, and utilised feedback in the beginning of their postgraduate journeys.

Impact of histories on recognising feedback

Many student-participants revealed they had very little experience of feedback during their undergraduate studies; for them, the concept of feedback as either written ‘information’ or dialogic interactions about their work was new.

We didn’t get any feedback. Never and ever. Do the task, bring it to them, get the mark. (Malak)

We definitely don’t have a feedback mechanism; we just get the mark, we don’t talk to them. (Numi)

This thing with a written assignment with a feedback on it, I have never seen anything like this in Italy. I never had this for a course related exam or assignment. (Ann)

When students encountered assessment feedback for the first time in the new environment, they attempted to make sense of it by drawing on what they knew. For many, grades and ‘corrections’ were what could be more logically associated with the concept of feedback.

Marks show that if you have got the good marks it means you are good. Sometimes the professor highlights the feedback: if there is something wrong or incorrect and he writes with the red. ’ (Jalil)

I think [feedback] it’s the corrections on each paragraph, they tell you what was wrong and what was right, so you know it. (Antonio)

The ways in which students had been assessed in their undergraduate studies was an influential factor that shaped their sense-making of feedback. The prevalence of summative, compartmentalised examinations or tasks in student histories influenced their conceptualisation of feedback as grades and corrections.

I did oral exams. I don't know how they exam here, maybe it is different. (Nik)

You study a lot and then you go to the exam. (Diana)

It's mainly exams and then some tests and quizzes. (Eileen)

In their prior experience, feedback (or corrections) only came with grades at the end of modules; in the new environment, feedback also seemed to be recognised as extra information 'provided' alongside grades. This influenced students' conceptualisation of feedback as 'further explanation' of the meanings of the grades.

I received the mark, but I will have to go and collect my feedback later at the office, so I will tell you what the feedback says about the mark. (Eileen)

In the end the feedback comes only after you have done the work and after your work has been evaluated. So, the feedback is there to give you an understanding of the grade. (Antonio)

Feedback as dialogic process was difficult for many participants to envisage. Students' histories uncovered absence of student-educator interactions and relations; their previous higher education contexts were instead characterised by strict hierarchies and great power distance.

They will never give you the chance even to discuss with them anything. I remember the doctor [lecturer] she said: "never and ever think that you can come and ask me for help or ask to clarify things; you need to go and read". (Malak)

It's a feudal system where the professors are the barons of their territory. They are some kind of superstars; they use their power to create a distance. (Ann)

I understand I come from an academic environment where the culture is that you keep your students at a distance and giving feedback is not necessary. They don't understand the value of communication. (Numi)

Interestingly, this was uncovered across educational contexts, revealing cultures of great 'distance' in 'western' institutions as well. Students' histories of hierarchical dynamics prevented them from even 'imagining' feedback as dialogues. Further, previous negative experiences of 'attempting' to initiate interactions with educators strongly impacted on their emotions and behaviours in the new context. Some avoided interacting with educators (despite encouragement) fearing they would relive situations experienced in the past.

You can't express your ideas, they will send you away. I am scared it will happen again in my Master's. (Malak)

In students' undergraduate histories, evaluation was as top-down judgement on their work, where 'judgements' did not account for student future development. Rather, they were final 'sentences' pronounced by more knowledgeable individuals on ones' completed work. Initiating feedback dialogues would be interpreted as 'distrusting' lecturers' evaluations; these were imparted from higher 'power and knowledge' positions and had to be passively accepted.

I went to discuss a paper and I was basically told that two people corrected it and if I still don't trust it, I can put it for re-correction. So, it wasn't about telling me why I got the grade, it was more about defending their judgement. (Eileen)

In Serbia, somebody [a lecturer] says something and that's it. Everyone knows professors teach from their own books so if you oppose them it's not a very good thing! (Nik)

The professor is considered like an ocean of knowledge and this is his perception too,
so what can you say? (Jalil)

Locating and recognising feedback in its forms was also problematic for many. In their undergraduate experience, students were often physically handed grades and ‘corrected’ assignments. In the new environment, they expected to find the same mechanisms. Most students were not aware they needed to locate and read the feedback comments online on virtual learning environments; those who did were unsure where to find them and what they would look like. Because of this, some students retrospectively revealed they ‘missed’ some feedback comments.

They could have explained to us what feedback we should expect so that we would have looked for them. I had to go online and open the link that would take me to my essay with the comments. I never realised there would be more than in-text corrections. I never realised there was this long, developmental comment as well. It was not straight forward. (Ann)

The use of virtual learning environments as feedback platforms seemed to cause further confusion, as students reported using only very little technology within learning and assessment at their undergraduate institutions.

The technology here is all different! We don’t have all these systems in Pakistan.
(Jalil)

Even email communication is difficult, you go and see your grades on the ‘wall’.
(Ann)

We couldn’t see our results online, we had to book appointments to see the lecturer and the work. (Marlene)

If identifying written feedback was challenging because of the diversity of its ‘forms’ at the new institution, recognising verbal feedback was even more uncommon. In the first three months of studies, students mentioned engaging in verbal interactions in the new environment (formal or informal) but did not identify them as feedback.

The findings reported thus far represent students’ similar narratives; however, differences were also found. Two student-participants’ undergraduate histories were partly shaped by individuals or institutions that were influenced by the UK’s assessment and feedback cultures. They were unsure how feedback would be conceptualised and operationalised at the new university but, unlike others, had some experience of feedback information and exchanges and were keen to seek more information.

My supervisor she did her PhD in Cambridge and she’s been through this culture [...] she’s very big on feedback, but in general here I think it’s different. (Numi)

I had some British and American professors who gave us some feedback to progress through the essays. But I’m still very interested to hear now what kind of university style it is here. (Marlene)

Impact of histories on understanding feedback

Feedback information seemed to be used by students to ‘compare’ their grades to standards of work quality. Such standards had been for them defined over several years of undergraduate education in different contexts. The quality standards known to the students were different from the UK ‘norms’; thus, such comparisons were often not useful. Students struggled to make sense and agree with what the feedback suggested about the quality of their work.

I can’t follow the feedback because [...] I know how to do my writing and I just do it like that. (Marlene)

I agree with my lecturer in Florence and not with my lecturer here. And this makes me think that I shouldn't even continue this course. I completely disagree. I also want to talk to an Italian lecturer here and discuss this with her. (Diana)

Here they really care about respecting the topic and for them I did go a bit off topic. Mainly because of how it works in Italy – in Italy if you discuss a topic you need to explain what it is in detail, all the background [...] I still want to do as I think would be good. (Antonio)

Students' consolidated undergraduate experiences with assessment determined what they considered important in their work. Quality, quantity, and detail of information memorised and repeated used to be the main criteria for a good performance; such criteria tended to guide student work and to frame their understanding of feedback in the new context.

You have to demonstrate that you remember what all the books are about. This is what they say to you. (Ann)

We memorise things. For the sake of passing the exam. (Mahmoud)

He can ask you whatever, you need to memorise it all. Whatever mood he is in, because what he wants, I don't know. (Nik)

Few students were aware of this and recognised the need to inquire into what standards might look like in the new context.

I need to get all the knowledge, especially to get all the baseline knowledge in line with the others to know if I am really doing good. (Mahmoud)

For many, on the other hand, standard misalignment caused emotional distress. In particular, diversity of expectations caused confusion and stress, whilst uncertainty of what to expect often caused 'paralysing' emotional states that culminated in disengagement and alienation.

This thing with a written assignment with a feedback on it, I have never seen anything like this in Italy [...] I am not sure how to approach it, it makes me nervous, so I am just waiting. (Ann)

It's very different here. So, I am not sure what they want here, I don't know. I am not going to learn from this [feedback]. (Diana)

Furthermore, as previously high-achievers, many student-participants were expecting to be as successful as they were at their previous institutions. However, diversity of criteria, values, and of the practices themselves led to expectations initially not being met, causing strong emotional reactions.

I am very disappointed, and I feel I don't know [...] it's not what I expected! Oh my God! I lost so many marks because of misunderstanding! I feel like, I don't know, I can't even think about this in my mind! (Malak)

Diversity of previous histories created ambiguity and, when not addressed, emotions were difficult to manage.

It is difficult and stressing especially for those outside of UK coming to the UK and needing to know what the differences are. (Marlene)

I mean, okay, Master's is a heavy degree and it's more about self-study, but for international students we have different backgrounds and different ways of doing assessment [...] we need to see what is expected from us and what is not. I am really shocked and disappointed and I don't know what to do. (Malak)

Impact of histories on feedback uptake

Taking action on the feedback to improve future work or learning strategies was not part of students' feedback literacy on arrival at the new institution. This was partly linked to how

students' undergraduate histories shaped their ideas of responsibility within assessment and feedback processes. Put simply, students perceived that assessment responsibilities only lie with the student (study, memorise, repeat knowledge acquired) whilst feedback/grading responsibilities lie with educators.

You are not expected to produce anything on your own. To do anything on your own.

You study everything and repeat. (Ann)

Student histories clearly revealed past or present orientation towards assessment. Further, they show assessment tasks were very often unrelated to each other. Influenced by their prior experience, feedback remained for them a tool to evaluate 'separate' past performances.

Good feedback targets the problem, like what is wrong in any assessment which you did. It's like, how did a student do that one. (Eileen)

Because of such orientation, feedback was initially deemed of little use by some student-participants, especially when the performance on which feedback was offered was completed and had already been evaluated.

I think they [feedback] can be useful but this is not going to change anything because it's already done. (Antonio)

He doesn't have [need] to give you feedback [...] you can't change it anymore when you say or not say your answer. (Nik)

They often say 'you could have said more about certain aspects', but in the end your comment is pointless because I can't change it now. (Diana)

Strictly linked to past- and present-orientation in their history was also the absence of feedback seeking behaviours in the new environment. Students did not show interest in seeking feedback after a task because the judgements on it had already been 'issued'. Further, they did not seek

feedback whilst working on a task as they either were unsure whether that was appropriate or considered any 'pre-submission' feedback an 'unfair' advantage.

I haven't talked to him [lecturer]. Maybe I can talk to him but [...] I don't know what the system is here, but I don't think it is like that. (Antonio)

If professors give the feedback before, he tells me what to do! What is the point of me writing an essay? Maybe the professor should write all essays, and everybody will be happy! That's the fault of education in the UK.' (Nik)

Undergraduate histories of past and present orientation, absence of feedback seeking encouragement and diverse conceptions of responsibility in feedback processes also determined students' initial unfamiliarity with active agency in assessment and feedback contexts. Students did not recognise the reason for actively taking action on the feedback for future work; all that mattered to them happened in the past.

Most students were able to recognise that their previous academic cultures of assessment and feedback did not reflect that of the new environment. Despite such awareness, they reported needing guidance to pinpoint where the diversity lay. Further, they revealed that such awareness was not shared by educators and the new institution: as postgraduate students, they felt they were expected to have already developed a certain level of understanding of the practices.

I would think if we had more knowledge how to do the assignments, how to use the feedback...because what we are doing is trial and error. Master's students are expected to already have an undergraduate experience with a lot of academic assignments and feedback. So maybe they have more of an idea, but for me, this is kind of new to me. (Mahmoud)

To be honest, if it's a Master they all expect people to know what they are going into and to have their mechanisms and strategies. (Numi)

Honestly, I am new to the system and usually the university is not aware of everything that we might need or struggle with. (Eileen)

Discussion

Different cultures of assessment and feedback shaped the way(s) in which the students recognised, processed, and utilised the feedback when they arrived in the UK. The international postgraduate taught students in this study had diverse undergraduate histories of assessment and feedback, and previously developed different feedback literacies. These did not equip them to immediately recognise and utilise feedback as a tool for ongoing learning and development in the new environment. To be able to make effective use of the feedback, students would need the ability to locate, recognise, and understand the feedback information in all its forms (written, verbal etc.) whilst showing proactive recipience, active agency, and feedback seeking (Boud and Molloy 2013; Carless and Boud 2018; Carless and Winstone 2020; Winstone et al. 2017). In other words, they would need some level of feedback literacy to support them to effectively utilise the feedback as conceptualised and operationalised in the new environment. In their prior experience in higher education, however, the students did build some forms of assessment and feedback literacies; these were simply not underpinned by conceptualisations and operationalisations of feedback that reflected those of the UK higher education. In Carless and Boud's (2018) model of feedback literacy, appreciating feedback as processes in which students are actively involved is a fundamental aspect of feedback literacy. According to them, students' conceptions of feedback are often not sophisticated enough to recognise this; for international postgraduate taught students, appreciation of what feedback might be and of its functions was simply different, as shaped by different experiences and conceptions of feedback. Making judgements on one's work is also crucial (Carless and Boud 2018); for international postgraduate taught students, the decisions made on quality of work was once

again different as determined by different criteria that were valued previous institutions. In a context where assessment and feedback practices were different, students tended to make sense of them through the lenses of what they knew. Consciously or unconsciously, they were comparing their work, results, and feedback to what they had experienced in undergraduate education. In line with Nicol (2020), such comparisons generated inner feedback; however, the prior knowledge that shaped the comparisons was different, as it was developed within diverse cultures of assessment and feedback. This generated tension between the internally generated feedback and the external feedback information received. Conflict often emerges in intercultural contexts (Deardorff 2008); it needs to be made explicit and mediated if it is to be resolved.

Not only did histories generate culture and context specific knowledges and literacies; they also generated expectations that, when not met, triggered negative emotional responses (Pitt 2017). Emotions were also triggered by previous experiences of interactions within assessment contexts; the ability to manage emotions and attitudes (Carless and Boud 2018) was not determined by how ‘capable’ a student was but by emotional and relational histories. The role of the affective and interpersonal dimensions of feedback is recognised in the literature (Ajjawi and Boud 2017); the findings suggest that their role is vital in intercultural contexts, where learning to ‘tolerate’ uncertainty is paramount (Deardorff 2008). All this, alongside feedback not being a ‘place’ for active agency in previous environments, impacted on students’ decisions to take action on the feedback they recognised as such.

Overall, these finding reiterate that the non-homogeneity of students and feedback cultures needs to be considered within research on feedback (Pitt et al. 2019; Tien and Lowe 2013) and understanding(s) of feedback literacy, Further, they highlight the importance of accounting for heterogeneity at postgraduate levels as well, offering new empirically-based suggestions on where the diversity might lie: contextual as much as cultural factors are shown

to be fundamental. The diversity of students' undergraduate experiences across different institutional cultures plays a crucial role in their initial stages of approaching assessment and feedback practices at the UK institution. Such diversity was observed beyond 'eastern and western' systems of educations and assessment 'orientations' demystifying theorisations of macro-regional cultural diversity. In fact, students depicted the diversity of their assessment and feedback experiences across institutions in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Memorisation of knowledge and information, exam-based and summative practices, orientation towards grade achievement and past and present performances, little exchange or dialogue encouragement characterise the majority of the participants' histories regardless of 'regional' cultures. Regional cultures are not what is most impactful; rather, histories and literacies developed within academic and institutional cultures (Ramani et al. 2017) of assessment and feedback were what greatly influenced students' feedback literacies. Diversity exists and is worth investigating across different institutional contexts and cultures of assessment and feedback.

Limitations

This paper is exploratory and does not advance generalisations on international postgraduate students' histories and literacies; it does not 'categorise' diverse feedback literacies on the basis of nationalities, regionalities, nor any other factors or criteria. We reported on student histories and their influences on literacies with a focus on the initial stage of their transitions to postgraduate education in the UK; changes and developments at later stages were not included. Further inputs from students with different histories would have enriched the collective narrative. In particular, future research involving students with a wider range of backgrounds is needed; students' countries of undergraduate higher education also need to cover a wider geographical area.

Implications

We argue for the need to shift our conceptualisation of feedback literacy from universal to culture and context specific. We stress that context and culture are intertwined, and both need to be considered. Merely acknowledging diversity of contexts and cultures in which international students built their feedback literacies might not be sufficient. In fact, if we encourage our students to develop an ‘appropriate’ feedback literacy, we still run the risk of proposing feedback literacy development practices that are assimilationist. What is ‘appropriate’ is determined by the receiving institution that defines what practices are the ‘norm’ and what is consequently valued and expected. These are not universal concepts and beliefs; thus, we need to encourage intercultural dialogues about assessment and feedback that might uncover diversity and its nature. We encourage educators to dedicate some classroom time to openly communicate with their students about their previous experiences, the new assessment and feedback practices, and about their characteristics and purposes. Sharing and valuing everyone’s’ experiences and perspectives within assessment and feedback conversations is fundamental to shift from assimilation to interculturality. We argue for the need to embed such diversity and intercultural interactions within feedback literacy development initiatives. These need to be aimed at reaching effective and purposeful communication between cultures and literacies; the necessary shift needs to happen from ‘multiple’ feedback literacies that become assimilated in one towards ‘intercultural’ feedback literacies that are effective and appropriate for all. Encouraging intercultural educators-students partnership when designing assessment and feedback processes within the curriculum could be a valuable step towards developing feedback literacies at the intercultural level. Engaging international students in the development of shared principles underpinning assessment and feedback design can also be a useful way forward.

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Table 1. Participant overview

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Country of UG education</i>	<i>Language of UG tuition</i>	<i>Length of UG education</i>	<i>Postgraduate course in UK</i>
Anna	Italy	Italian	5 years ('full cycle' degree)	Curating History of Art
Antonio	Italy	Italian	3 years	Biosciences and Biotechnologies
Diana	Italy	Italian	5 years ('full cycle' degree) with Erasmus (France)	Curating History of Art
Eileen	Pakistan	English	3 years	Biosciences and Biotechnologies
Jalil	Pakistan	English	3 years	Conservation
Mahmoud	Iraq	English/Arabic	4 years	Clinical Psychology
Malak	Bahrain	Arabic	3 years	Linguistics
Marlene	Germany	English	3 years with work experience abroad	Peace and Conflict Studies

Nik	Serbia	Serbian	3 years	Finance and Management
Numi	Sri Lanka	English	3 years	Conservation