The activity of student research: using Activity Theory to conceptualise student research for Master's programmes

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Abstract

Student research is an important pedagogical feature across the higher education lifecycle. Postgraduate taught (PGT) student research has received limited attention in the context of the diverse nature of the PGT cohort. **Using Activity Theory, PGT student research is explored** from the perspectives of differently motivated Master's students: students studying to progress to doctoral study and students studying a professional Master's to progress in their current career path. **Similarities, differences, tensions and contradictions are analysed, revealing new conceptualisations of Master's research. The outcome of student research, the Dissertation, emerges as a recurring tension within the analysis. A call for a new dialogue on the applicability of the Dissertation for a diverse PGT cohort is made, as the traditional Dissertation may not best meet the needs of professional Master's students. The need to find better ways to disseminate PGT research is identified, given the potential for contribution to knowledge and practice.**

Key words: Postgraduate, student research, learning, dissertation, thesis

Introduction

Research is the cornerstone of the business of higher education institutions internationally, through both the generation and contribution of knowledge to society through funded

research activity, and through the transmission of knowledge and skills development within student education. In the academic context therefore, research has myriad definitions and purposes, as highlighted by Brew (2001, 21): ‘But for the moment let us be clear. There is no one thing, nor a set of things which research is … It cannot be reduced to any kind of essential quality.’

Globally, there is differing emphasis of research within the curriculum from country to country, but in the United Kingdom Higher Education system, research features at every level of study in the higher education life cycle, from undergraduate level through to postgraduate taught programmes (PGT), through to postgraduate research (PGR), primarily comprising Doctoral level research. This structure, and the student research contained within, holds and is the case regardless of whether a university is considered to be research intensive or teaching focussed, with educational features such as a dissertation or major project being a capstone experience for students across disciplines and levels.

In the UK, universities are measured on their research output and impact through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a periodic exercise which influences distribution of funding. This activity does not principally derive from student research (although may be contributed to by doctoral level publications). The REF defines research as follows:

> 'For the purposes of the REF, research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared.' (REF, 2011, 48)

Further expounding the definition provided in the REF documentation highlights a number of features of research including: its direct relevance to the needs of various sectors, scholarship and the generation of ideas where these lead to new or substantially improved insights. It is also clear that it excludes routine testing and routine analysis, and the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research (REF, 2011).

In this paper, I will argue that research within the taught Master's programme has received limited attention in the context of the diverse nature of the PGT cohort, and that there is potential for this group to make meaningful contributions to knowledge and practice. Activity Theory will be used as a lens to analyse student research and to make new conceptualisations and to initiate a new dialogue around the written dissertation.

Student research within higher education – an overview

In order to understand the position of taught Master's student research within the landscape across the higher education life cycle, it is first necessary to recognise the wider context of student research occurring above and below, that is at doctoral and undergraduate level.

Doctoral study

Traditionally, the focus of scholarly discussion about student research has been in the domain of PGR. PGR, comprising principally doctoral study but also the Master's by research degree, encompasses research-based degrees with limited taught or training elements to support researcher development. The principal source of teaching and learning in this mode of study is via a team of supervisors, and the degree culminates in the examination of a written thesis, and in many cases, also includes a viva (*viva voce*, from the Latin by live voice, an oral defence of the thesis conducted by the thesis examiners). The published literature focusses extensively towards the importance of the student-supervisor relationship, considering approaches to supervision and offering critiques of practice and approaches to ensuring student success (for examples, see McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Lee, 2008). Features of doctoral level study include 'the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication' (QAA, 2014a, 30). Thus, there is a clearly defined purpose of research at this stage of study: it forms the main vehicle for the process of

learning, requires an output (or outputs) that extends the limits of current knowledge, and develops the candidate towards being able to be an independent researcher.

Undergraduate study

More recently, there has been an increased focus on the value of student research as an undergraduate learning activity and a body of literature has emerged that focusses on research at the undergraduate stage. Most UK higher education institutions require undergraduate students to complete an undergraduate dissertation, a more substantial project or capstone experience, in which students pursue inquiry in an area of their interest. The level descriptors for a Bachelor's degree with Honours are, unsurprisingly, significantly less explicit on the involvement or requirements for research in comparison to doctoral level study, but include aspects such as: 'an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline' (QAA, 2014a, 26), and point towards the use of research techniques and literature in developing student knowledge.

Students as researchers pedagogy, a term first coined by Dotterer (2002), has emerged and which has brought a holistic view of the value and opportunities for research both within and beyond the undergraduate curriculum. Concepts of research may differ in the context of undergraduate research, compared to doctoral research, for example considering research as generating new knowledge to the student, rather than new knowledge to the discipline or to society (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). A Higher Education Academy report by Walkington (2015) provides a detailed exploration a range of social or physical contexts in which student research can take place, including early research exposure within undergraduate programmes and paid or unpaid research opportunities outside of formal curriculum, and summarises a breadth of practical examples of approaches towards engaging this pedagogy. Concurrently, there has been increasing traction for providing opportunities for undergraduate student

research dissemination, where generally the level or contribution to knowledge does not meet the required standards to be acceptable for peer-review publication or acceptance to major conferences. For example, the International Conference of Undergraduate Research (ICUR), established by Universities of Warwick (UK) and Monash (Australia) in 2013, provides an annual academic conference for undergraduate students to disseminate their work via high-definition videoconferencing across the world (ICUR, 2018).

Taught Master's study

Sitting between these two levels is student research sited within PGT programmes: the Master's degree. Structurally and conceptually, PGT is more akin to undergraduate than doctoral study as the delivery mode is through structured learning opportunities, but it is particularly distinguished from its undergraduate counterpart by 'enabling students to focus on a particular aspect of a broader subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience through previous study or employment… enabling students to focus on a particular subject area or field of study in greater depth than they encountered during the course of previous study or experience' (QAA, 2015, 2). Nevertheless, its similarities to doctoral study can be seen in the expectations of demonstrating dimensions of originality. In the UK, frequently at least a third of Master's programmes comprise a student research project, which leads to the production of a dissertation or other output. Indeed, some subject benchmark statements for Master's degrees contain explicit reference to such activities, for example, the holders of a Master's degree in Criminology should be able to demonstrate: 'an ability successfully to complete a substantial empirical research project, systematic review or systematic case study, informed by wide current understandings in the subject.' (QAA, 2014b, 19). Thus, student research in the form of a piece of enquiry leading to a final product, namely the dissertation or thesis, is clearly identified at Master's level, and much

less so as a pedagogy for learning like students as researchers pedagogy at undergraduate level.

In exploring student research in PGT programmes, it is important to understand something of the motivations of postgraduate students to engage in postgraduate level study. Data from the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), a national survey of postgraduate students in the UK (see AdvanceHE, 2018), provides the most fulsome national picture of UK postgraduate students and their motivations. In 2018, 85,880 students from 106 institutions completed PTES, yielding an overall response rate of 29%. Of these, 71% of respondents were full time and 29% part time students. The data show the PGT cohort to be highly diverse[1], however the survey demonstrated that student motivations for postgraduate study tend to centre on career and employment prospects. Postgraduate students registered for taught Master's want to progress in their current career path (57%) or improve their current employment prospects (56%) and some wish to progress to a higher-level qualification (34%) (Leman, 2018). Both motivators are strongly oriented towards personal and professional development, but differ in the context for which the student is being developed and prepared: an employment setting, or further study in higher education. Traditional PGT students might be considered to be studying full time, having just completed an undergraduate programme, and may be considered 'extension' (undertaking further in-depth study to their degree subject) or 'conversion' (offering an entry route into a new discipline) Master's programmes in the UK postgraduate market (Macfadyen et al. 2019). However, many PGT's may be returners to higher education, having spent time in the workplace. These students tend to be

[1] Diversity of the cohort is indicated through the demographic data: female: 63%, male 37%; aged 30 years or younger 68%, aged over 32 years 31%; disabled 10%, no known disability 90%; black and minority ethnicity 44%, white 56%; nationality UK 56%, other EU 9%, non-EU 35%; fluent in English 88%, not fluent 12%; parents or guardians studied at a higher level 54%, parents or guardians did not study at a higher level 46%; face to face study mode 84%, distance learner 16%; not in paid work 57%, in paid work 43%, of which 62% work more than 30 hours per week)

already qualified and practicing in their vocation, completing further study with the intention of improving their career prospects or opportunities; notable examples of this might include corporate employees studying towards a Master's in Business Administration, or nurses or other health care professionals studying specialist postgraduate courses (Murphy, Cross and Maguire, 2006). There appears to be growing acknowledgement in the literature of non-traditional PGT students, indeed, to cater for part time Master's in Management students in full time employment in a South African university, Shaw & le Roux (2017) designed a learning system for practice-oriented projects where students show evidence of having used a systematic approach to identify a research problem in their workplace, to locate this problem and the associated concepts in a relevant scholarly research community, and to use relevant sources to answer the question. In this way there are parallels with a larger body of evidence around 'types' of PhD student in North America, the UK and Australia (traditional and non-traditional students, i.e. full time / part time enrolments, PhD / Professional Doctorates) (Evans, 2002; Barnacle & Usher, 2003).

Further examination of the literature about student research at PGT level reveals somewhat limited consideration of this area. The language used by authors when investigating this topic is somewhat dependent on geography, with research from UK and South African institutions referring to the Master's Dissertation (e.g. Harrison, Gemmell and Reed 2010; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2008; Shaw and le Roux, 2017) and other European authors (Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian) referring to the Master's Thesis (e.g. de Kleijn et al. 2013; Ylioki, 2001; Dysthe et al., 2006). Whichever term is used, it encompasses both the process of conducting the research (e.g. proposing the study, collecting and analysing data, writing) and the final piece of written work produced. Some authors use more precise language to distinguish these two dimensions, for example, Macfadyen et al. (2019) refer to an 'extended dissertation project' which they distinguish from a 'capstone dissertation of around 15-20,000

words'. However, studies conducted in relation to PGT student research have not tended to consider these dual meanings, but have principally focussed on either the *process* (i.e. supervision) **or** the *product* (i.e. the dissertation). Several authors have explored aspects of Master's dissertation supervision and the supervisory relationship, turning their attentions to uncovering the similarities and differences between UK-based students and supervisors initial expectations (Woolhouse, 2002), exploring the role and purpose of supervision from the perspective of the supervisors in a Scottish university (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin, 2006) and conceptualising the practice of UK Master's dissertation supervision (Macfadyen et al. 2019). Further studies in this areas have considered measuring nursing students' experiences of research and supervision in an Irish university (Drennan and Clarke, 2009), students and their supervisor collaboratively reflecting on the supervision process in a UK university (Ginn, 2014) and proposing innovative approaches to student supervision including group supervision at a Norwegian university (Dysthe, Samara and Westrheim, 2006). Other authors have investigated process from a student's perspective, including Ylijoki (2001) who explored Finnish students processes of writing a thesis, resulting in four core narratives of the thesis-writing process and de Kleijn et al. (2014) who explored students' perceptions of feedback and the student-supervisor relationship in a large Dutch university. Furthermore, the student experience of conducting a fully online UK Master's dissertation has been reviewed (Harrison, Gemmell and Reed, 2014; Ross and Sheail, 2017). Work exploring the *product* of **Master's** student research has involved exploration of the linguistic properties of Master's student dissertations produced at a US public university by comparing these to published research papers, noting differences in the genre of the dissertation compared to published articles and the influence of the discipline within the Introduction section (Samraj, 2008), exploring how New Zealand-based students comment on

the results of their research (Basturkmen, 2009), and devising a framework of moves to guide writing the discussion section of UK **Master's** theses (Hopkins and Dudley-Evans, 1988).

Pilcher's (2011) work encompasses both process and product, and has uncovered the differences in views that supervisors can hold about Master's dissertations in these contexts, concluding that the UK **Master's** dissertation is an 'elusive chameleon'. In describing UK Master's dissertations, Pilcher says:

> … it almost skirts the ground between undergraduate and PhD, being all things to supervisors, and yet because of this, it is elusive to both students and researchers. (Pilcher, 2011, 32).

Similarly, Sinkovics, Richardson and Lew (2015) took a holistic view of the dissertation in their study of International Business dissertations in a UK Business School. They showed that the dissertation is a way of developing competencies and fostered a deep approach to learning, and that performance in the dissertation was significantly associated with their respondents' career paths after graduation, with better performing students more often targeted for graduate schemes and higher-level management positions. In this way, they found the dissertation to be an effective tool to evaluate student's employability potential.

Collectively, this body of work has revealed a number of meanings of the dissertation that emerge from the literature, which are summarised in Table 1. It is perhaps unsurprising that such diverse meanings are held, since students doing PGT student research are diverse themselves.

[Table 1 near here]

In summarising the work that has been conducted in PGT student research, it is evident that process and product are the key dimensions of interest, but there has been limited consideration of the dissertation as a 'whole'. There is an emerging body of evidence

focussing on student research in part-time professional PGT students, and abstract reference to other student types, but limited work has been conducted that compares student groups with differing motivations that are known to exist. Addressing this would provide new perspectives and conceptualisations of taught postgraduate student research **to** inform faculty in supporting different student groups. There is an opportunity for higher education providers in the UK to better understand the nature of research activity taking place among taught postgraduate students. Their potential and actual contribution to knowledge, practice and the disciplines might provide an opportunity for UK higher education providers and also for wider society.

The next section of this paper addresses some of these deficiencies, by exploring PGT student research through the lens of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987). Previous analyses of PGT student research have been conducted through the academic literacies lens (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2019; Stierer, 2000; Shaw and le Roux, 2017). This approach portrays academic writing and reading practices as sites where power is exercised, and focusses towards the written product of the dissertation. Similarly, Dysthe (2002) used academic text cultures in her analysis. By contrast, the Activity Theory framework facilitates consideration of the whole, allowing exploration of both the dissertation or research process *and* the final product, an area which has been shown to be overlooked in the previous literature. It has not been used before to analyse the activity of student research, yet the components of Activity Theory map closely to the literature themes identified, and it provides a practical method to analyse the complexity of PGT student research activity. In using Activity Theory to analyse an activity, the analyst selects a subject, who is a member of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed (Engeström, 1987). Postgraduate taught students are known to be a diverse group, and one aspect of this diversity is their motivation to study. Therefore, the analysis undertaken for this paper adopts perspectives of two of the

student types that have been identified in the earlier analysis: the student studying a Master's to progress to higher level study/qualification and the student studying a professional Master's to progress in their current career path.

Exploring PGT research using Activity Theory

Activity Theory is a cultural-historical conceptual framework based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and considers activity as the prime unit of analysis, which is broken into analytical components of *subject* (the person being studied), *object* (the intended activity), *tool* (the mediating device by which the action is executed), *rules* (conditions which affect how a person will act), *division of labour* (distribution of actions between people) and *community* (the relation between people and their environment). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full description of the theory, a key feature of Activity Theory is the activity system, depicting how human behaviours are situated within a social context, which exerts influence over the actions performed. Key principles include that activity systems are multi-voiced, in that they are a community of multiple points of view, traditions, and interests. Furthermore, they are a product of their own history, and change over time. Contradictions are a central source of change and development in activity systems - when an activity system adopts a new element, contradictions can occur which cause conflict within the system and drive innovation and change (Engeström, 1987). Activity systems can be represented conceptually, as shown in figure 1.

[Figure 1 near here]

Activity Theory has been previously applied in education research. It has been used to reconceptualise experiential learning in management education (Holman, Pavlica and Thorpe 1997), to conceptualise service learning for teachers (Levine, 2010) and to evaluate the interactions between emotion, cognition, and action in the activity of assessing

undergraduates' written work in social sciences (Li, 2016). It has also been used to examine the use of learning technologies in higher education (Scanlon and Issroff, 2005). In that context, the *tool* was the learning technology, applied within the *community* of higher education, and where the desired *outcome* was more learning for the student. Their work explored the potential for Activity Theory to provide a framework and language to uncover issues in evaluating learning technologies, and to uncover problems and contradictions for students and staff based on the rules of practice and how division of labour occurs. Student research is a complex activity which takes place within a social context, and Activity Theory can provide a suitable framework to explore the activity of student research in postgraduate students on taught programmes.

In a general sense, considering the UK Master's student who is undertaking student research, the ability of the student (*subject*) to perform the activity of student research (*object*) is mediated by a number of tools; they access previous literature, use computer databases and software to search and organise their literature, data and analysis, they use language to develop their ideas and to convey their findings and conclusions. Student research is conducted alongside a supervisor within the wider University *community* and so has a clear social dimension; thus it is influenced by *rules* such as the regulations of the University (for example, what the student must produce) and ethical guidelines or governance issues. The work is likely to also be heavily influenced by the epistemic *rules* of the discipline and the methods that are available and appropriate to answer their questions, and might also encompass the students expectations of supervision on the basis of their previous undergraduate experiences. Temporally, student research is the terminal activity that students do on their Master's programme, and the *outcome* of the student research activity, the Dissertation, is usually the final piece of work that they submit for their award. Expectations of the dissertation are generally bound in the historical-cultural university tradition of

producing an extended monograph, following a conventional structure of introduction, literature review, methods and so on.

Turning our attention more specifically towards the student who is undertaking a Master's to progress to higher level study, they are performing student research with a motivation to increase their research skills and knowledge through the inquiry they undertake. This is achieved through working with their supervisor, with students invariably aiming to pursue a topic of particular interest which they may hope to go on to study at the higher level, or at least, or within a cognate field. The *outcome* of their activity, the assessed dissertation, is likely to be very important given that their aspiration for higher level study. It provides a tangible measure of their strengths and weaknesses in research, prepares them for the scholarship of the PhD thesis and may form a basis for their future applications. This is summarised in Figure 2:

[Figure 2 near here]

A great deal of similarities are found in the activity systems of the student wanting to progress to higher education and the student who is undertaking a Master's to progress in their current career. For example, they access the same sorts of *tools*, are part of the same *communities*, and are bound by the same *rules*. However, for students who are in employment and wishing to develop in their profession, not seeking to go on to higher level study, a difference in focus can exist and other mediators come into play (Figure 3). In social terms, their *community* may be much larger and encompass their colleagues, managers and service users. *Division of labour* may be influenced by workplace needs, for example, the student may wish to, or be required to, perform a particular piece of enquiry to suit the needs of the employment organisation, particularly if being funded by their employer to undertake the Master's degree. The motivation (or requirement) of these students in completing their

student research component may be to answer a practice-based question, that is beneficial to both the student (in providing an authentic vehicle to conduct their enquiry) and to the organisation (in developing local systems or practice).

[Figure 3 near here]

Analysis

Analysis of the activity systems shows that PGT student research occupies an interesting position whereby student research is both a method of learning (i.e. learning about research methods, data analysis, critical appraisal), and is a method of assessment (i.e. the production of a dissertation). In this way, student research is both *process* and *outcome*, two literature themes which have already been separately identified earlier in this article. There, published works had largely examined process, through exploring practices in relation to postgraduate supervision and the supervisory relationship, and product, or *outcome*, was explored through research that had considered the linguistic properties of dissertations and writing genres. In the context of student research, conducting an independent research project under supervision enables students to critically engage with the research process from formulating a research question, collecting data to analyse and synthesise (using *tools*). In doing so, students learn disciplinary knowledge, may create new knowledge, and learn about the epistemology of a discipline through their enquiry (via their *community* and mediated by the *rules*). Master's level student research allows students to deepen their skills of critical appraisal, enquiry and synthesis, demands the development of project management skills, and challenges students to higher levels of synthesis. The *outcome* is the production of an artefact that distils the essence of the learning that the student has undertaken into a standardised format e.g the dissertation, which is used to assess how well the student has met a set of learning outcomes. In this way, student research is not a unitary concept, and there is a pluralism in its dual role

for students and faculty. Considering process and outcome together highlights tensions which can exist in the extent to which the *outcome* can capture the extent of the learning that has taken place, particularly when that includes softer skills, such as project or time management, which have been shown to be enhanced through PGT student research activity (Sincovicks et al., 2015).

A further similarity between the two activity systems centres on the relationship between the *motives* for conducting the student research and the *motives* for completing the degree itself. Considering PGT student research through the lens of these motivations for study reveals the potential for a set of parallel motivations for doing the research and for doing the degree; in this way, student research is something of *a microcosm of the Master's degree itself*. In supporting and preparing students for progression to a higher-level qualification (i.e. doctoral level study), the value of research methods training and the completion of a research project is evident. In these cases, PGT research offers a comparatively deeper level of research development, for a more substantial piece of work that is completed more independently, than is found at undergraduate level. The traditional dissertation *outcome* might be viewed as a particularly useful vehicle for such students in preparation for writing a more substantial thesis during doctoral study. By contrast, for those seeking professional development that is employment related, and not with the intention of further academic study, the student research component plays a different role. Here it is more influenced by the employment *community* and *division of labour* in the workplace (i.e. it may be performed *for* the employed role) and therefore is likely to be more practically focussed, applied in nature, or embedded in practice.

A key contradiction identified between the activity systems have also revealed how PGT research can be viewed as *both an end and a beginning*. Student research in most Master's programmes is located at the end of the programme – temporally it marks the end of a level

of study, a major undertaking with the dissertation being the terminal assessment. This is the case regardless of the career motivations of the student. However, it could also be conceptualised as a beginning. Maunder et al. (2012) position **Master's** dissertation psychology students as qualitative apprentices. Their students had received specialist qualitative training, but observe that 'most of the real work of research training is done in the dissertation itself' (31) via student supervision in UK universities. The dissertation, and the supervision of the work, form an apprentice model of learning, where the supervisory context is the place where students develop the skills, and students undergo an epistemic and identity shift as they progress through their apprentice journey (Maunder et al. 2012). They liken this approach to Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice metaphor, with the supervisory relationship providing a *community* of practice – the master (supervisor) teaches the apprentice (the student) (*division of labour*), who, initially as a relative newcomer to the community of qualitative researchers, over time learns the practices and ways of thinking of the community (the *rules*) and in turn, builds their own identity as a researcher. This notion may be particularly pertinent for students who go on to doctoral study, who continue their research journey towards becoming an independent researcher themselves, capable of supervising others.

Applying the activity system model to the activity of student research in two 'types' of PGT students has enabled an analysis of the activity at a more holistic level than has previously been identified within the published literature, which has tended towards the process of supervision or how to perform well in the outcome of the dissertation. Considering different student types has enabled a deeper exploration of the motives and activities of different student groups who make up some of the postgraduate students who complete Master's programmes each year, and has revealed important similarities and differences between groups, which have not received much attention in the literature previously. Exploring

similarities and contradictions within and between activity systems has enabled fresh perspectives on the Master's research, which can be conceptualised as PGT research as a process and an outcome; PGT research as a microcosm of the Master's degree; and PGT research as an end and a beginning. A recurring tension emerging from these conceptions is of the written dissertation as the *outcome* of student research. This unresolved contradiction is discussed in the following section.

Practical application: the problem of the dissertation

As identified, the dissertation is a common outcome of the Master's student research process, regardless of the 'type' of student completing the programme. It is a traditional document that has been in use in higher education systems since the mid-18th Century (McClelland, 1980). Thus, it is part of the history and culture of the Activity System, and has remained largely unchanged over centuries of use. Nevertheless, student demographics have changed over the years, and as has been shown, PGT students are a diverse group, with an aspect of this diversity centring on the motivation for study. These differences have been typified by the two students examined in this paper, for whom the process of completing PGT student research is largely similar, although their *community* and *rules* may differ somewhat. The dissertation is the traditional model, but it does not necessarily follow that the dissertation is the best product or *outcome* to use for assessing student research in all PGT students, given their differing needs and *motives*. In his theory, Engeström (1987) described how the internal tensions and contradictions in activity systems generate disturbances and conflicts, which in turn leads to innovative attempts to change the activity. This analysis has highlighted a need to consider the blanket use of the dissertation for PGT student research and to propose calls to open a dialogue on the appropriateness of the one-size-fits-all PGT dissertation. A parallel debate is already active in the PGR space, where the emergence of professional doctorates has supported the development of 'researching professionals' rather than 'professional

researchers' via the traditional PhD (Evans, 2002; Barnacle & Usher, 2003). There is associated discussion of innovative and adapted thesis types for different doctoral programmes and student needs (Archbald, 2010; Thomas, West and Rich 2016). A similar discussion is yet to permeate the PGT space.

A further important consideration of the value of the PGT dissertation is revealed when considering the original definition of research posed for this paper: 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared'. Through the activity systems of different students and the conceptualisations of PGT student research, the first half of this definition can be seen; whether the student research is highly theoretical or highly applied, a process of investigation has been conducted. To be worthy of a Master's level award, some new insights will have been uncovered, be that new knowledge that is generalisable, or applies only to a specific practical context, or that provides a new interpretation or implementation of policy, for example. The second part, '…*that it is effectively shared*', is more problematic in the PGT student research context. The main readers of a student dissertation are the supervisors and the markers, and these documents are simply not designed with dissemination in mind. It may be that other forms or formats of assessment that facilitate dissemination are more appropriate, and further thinking about this in the Master's context would be welcomed. Finding better ways to disseminate PGT research, particularly that created for the applied rather than the theoretical setting would be a worthwhile exercise, not least given the potential for contribution to knowledge and disciplinary understanding from PGT research. This was demonstrated by Landor (2011) who found the potential for some UK educational psychology student dissertation work to have wider impact through informing practice and the knowledge base. This raises the question of whether current assessment practice might become a barrier to a student becoming a part of a disciplinary *community* of practice through limiting, or making more difficult, their opportunity to disseminate their work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student research within postgraduate taught programmes has received limited attention in the context of the diversity of the PGT cohort, which is important to address given the size of the postgraduate market and the opportunity that this group has to contribute to knowledge or practice through their student research activity. This paper presents a novel analysis of the activity of student research from the perspective of two different types of postgraduate students using Activity Theory, and further work could be conducted using the Activity Theory lens to explore other aspects of diversity beyond student motivations. This analysis has revealed new conceptualisations of PGT student research and has raised important questions as to the traditional 'one size fits all' approach often taken within institutions to assess PGT student research. **The Master's dissertation is known to develop competencies and deep learning, and higher business dissertation performance is significantly associated with higher-level management positions (Sinkovics, Richardson and Lew 2015). Therefore**, the tailoring of PGT research opportunities to the needs of different types of PGT student is an opportunity to **enhance these benefits further and** make improvements towards two key drivers in current higher education policy: student experience and student employability. **To address this,** attention should be paid to developing more authentic assessment vehicles to encourage or enable better dissemination of work and that consider the breadth of needs and motivations of different types of postgraduate taught student.

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Table 1 Emergent literature themes relating to 'The PGT Dissertation'

Themes/explanation
A way to acquire a degree (de Kleijn et al. 2013; Landor 2011)
A piece of writing to demonstrate mastery of a topic and to measure educational performance (Hasrati and Tavakoli 2019; Hamilton, Johnson and Poudrier 2010)
A method to learn disciplinary world views and writing conventions (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2019)
A preparatory exercise for a PhD thesis and/or a research career, a stage in a student's academic socialization (Hasrati and Tavakoli 2019; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2008).
A vehicle to develop skills and competencies that are valued by employers, which are important for career development; an effective tool for evaluating students' employability potential (Landor 2011; Sinkovics, Richardson and Lew 2015).
An opportunity to experience "Being like a researcher" (Ginn 2014)
A transformative stage of students' studies where they transition from student to professional (Ginn 2014; de Kleijn et al. 2013)
An individual or group research project (Ginn 2014; MacFadyen et al. 2019)

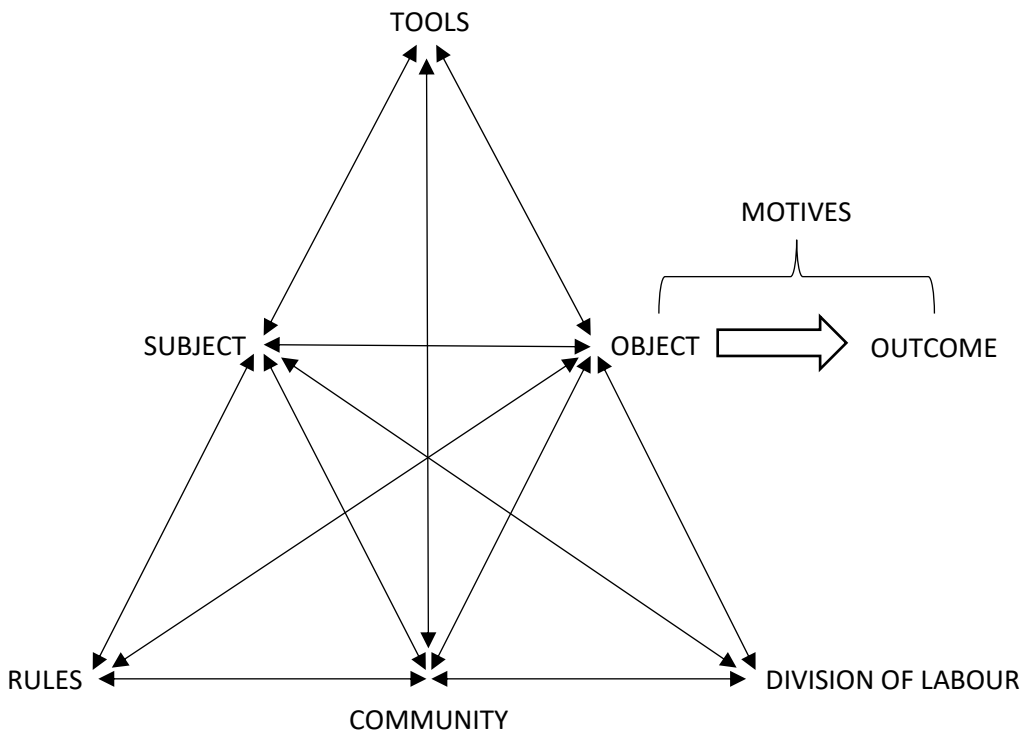

Figure 1 An activity system, adapted from Engeström (1987)

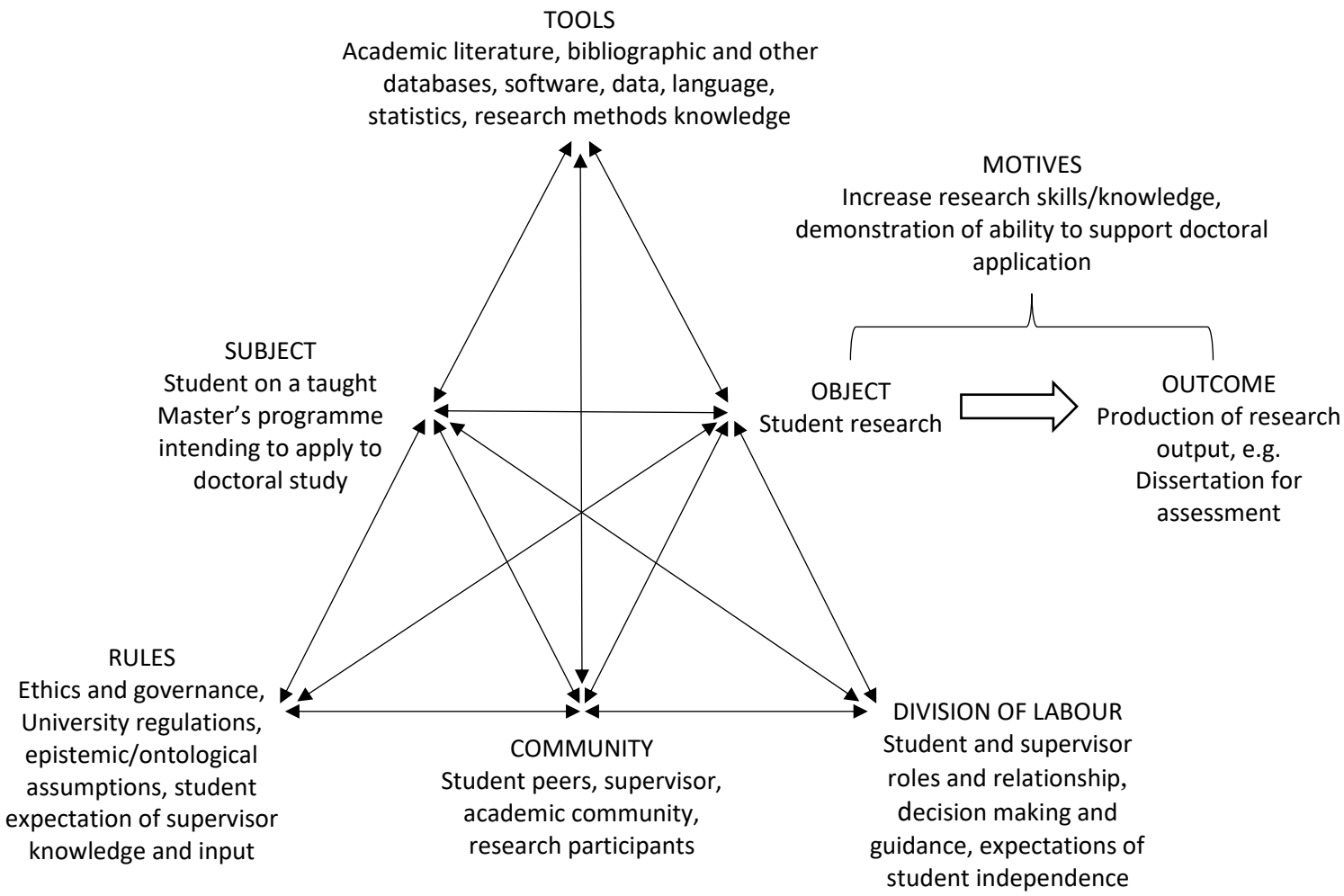

Figure 2 Activity system for PGT student research in a student intending to progress to doctoral level study

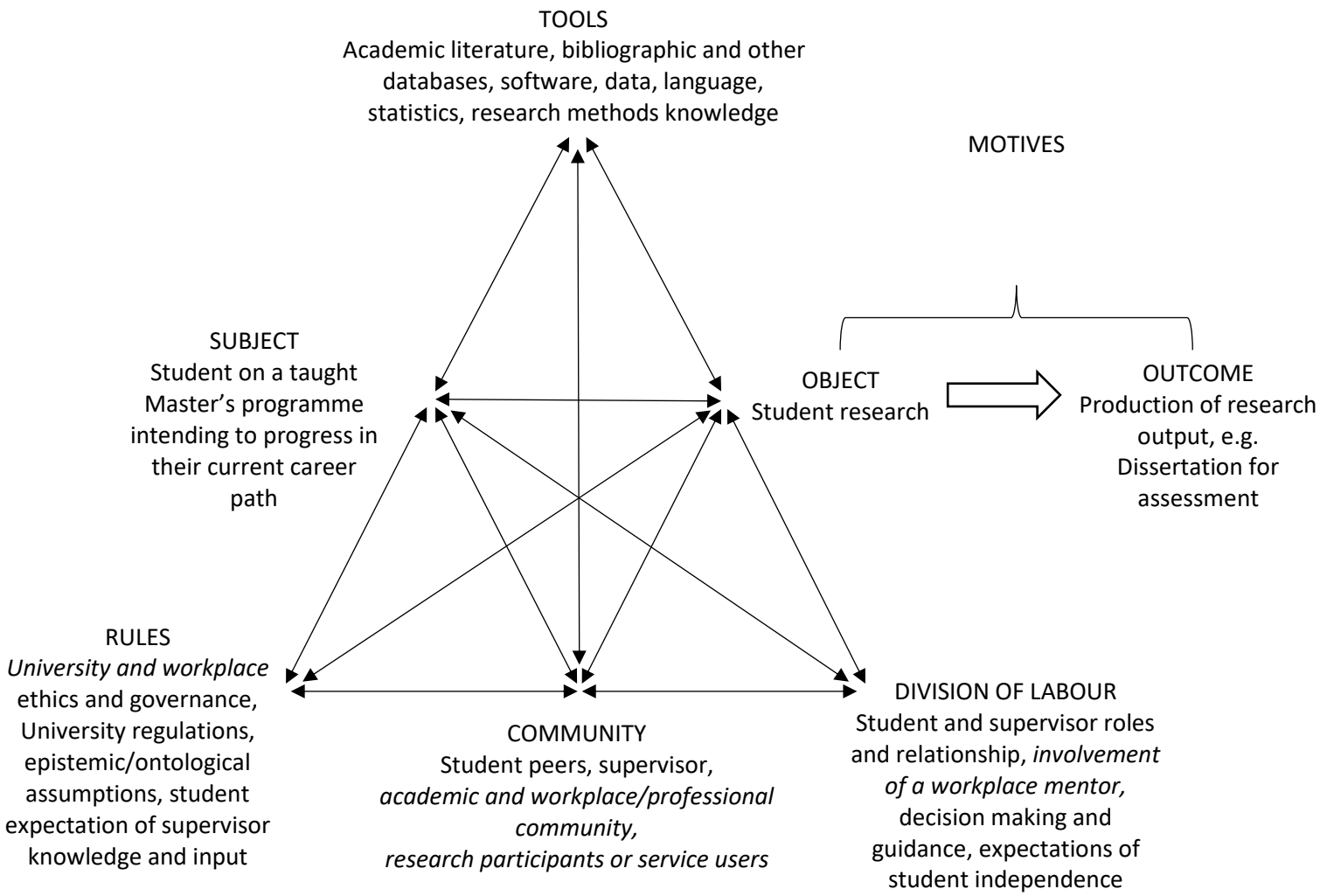

Figure 3 Activity system for PGT student research in a student intending to develop in their career