

## A critical discussion of ‘Masterness

**Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Evangelia Fragouli

(Kingston University, UK)

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The present work is a short discussion paper on the concept and content of ‘Masterness’ as this was established by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee which also identified the use of ‘facets’ of Masterness via an effort to reflect upon postgraduate learning and teaching practices and the content of the postgraduate taught courses. The paper, via a critical literature review highlights the importance of the Masterness as a toolkit being used by supervisors of postgraduate students in order to plan and deliver effectively PG supervision, minimise tensions & conflicts, help towards performance improvement.

**Keywords:** *supervision, masterness, facets, postgraduate studies*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

*Master's study, is a journey - and the attributes of masterness are transmitted/acquired during that journey. Overall, the student body is highly diverse (who they are, where they start from, what else they have done or are doing), and this is often reflected in master's student cohorts’* (p.2 SHEEC report) . Students find the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study challenging (Tobbell et al., 2010; West, 2012 as cited in Shanley et.al, (2016). Siddle (2001) supports the view that the education and training of postgraduate students is one of the most important functions of any university. He emphasizes that the main task is to train successive generations of students and researchers capable of recognizing new ideas, adjusting knowledge in new situations, creating new ideas & actions, producing innovative and pragmatic research from fundamental to applied research in a variety of educational, research and development, commercial and industry contexts (Siddle, 2001).

Additionally, Cullen et al (1994) support that there are certain key generic processes in teaching & supervising students effectively indicating that due to disciplinary boundaries, the actual process and therefore the ‘best practices’ exhibited are different between cognate areas of study. The same is also supported by Black, (1994). What though is important is that academics and PG program designers need to define and strive to develop the skills that are required a postgraduate student to have acquired upon the completion of PG studies The Masterness toolkit helps up to understand better how master level students can be supported during the studies to make the transition to a Master level. The facets which are defined here should consist the corner stone of our programs, modules, teaching & any learning activities

we provide to students. It defines the skills and the ways these can be developed with the support of instructors and supervisors. So, it builds the framework which we should consider and plan activities in our programs and modules to ensure its application. *The Masterness toolkit helps to develop conceptually & practically a good understanding of all the presented dimensions.* These facets serve the role of the postgraduate studies that is advanced studies to prepare the future generation of research scholars and scientists considering though that masterness is not just ‘advanced knowledge’.. (Discussion paper, July 2012 p. 3) Also, help students as learners become *conscious...of the limits to their competence - no-one is ever fully competent.* (Discussion paper July 2012 What is masterness).

### **Challenges being cause by the Masterness toolkit:**

The context of the toolkit challenges us : A) to think deeply about the importance of the ‘accountability culture’ academics should share; It is not only to have a list of areas/facets where we should focus on so to support students, and us to build evidence that indeed we consider these in our teaching, supervision etc but to be honest and accountable when we do not do it in the right way, or, to the right extent (e.g teaching an approach once and taking it for granted that this has been understood or will be memorized is not the best practice) in the right time (for example, if a tutorial is organized to teach critical thinking etc. at the very beginning of a program of PG study students and especially international students who have not have been adjusted will not be able to pay the required attention). it is not what we do but ‘how’ effectively we do it as well. We have to ensure that ‘what’ we

do/teach supports the six facets e.g teaching a subject is not just lecturing and theorizing: acting as role model for the students, we express a critical thinking when introducing a topic, we compare & contrast different opinions of authors when we try to define the context of a concept instead of just defining in 2-3 lines a term; or/and, when we provide guidelines for a coursework, the questions of a research assignment should challenge students to exercise skills as are presented here through the six facets. 'How' we do what we do means, tools (using even ourselves as vivid example) and activities we design and use to achieve what is needed to be achieved for the best of our students. Students' failure is our failure; repetition of what we do and teach has added value in students' understanding and especially when we teach international students who most of them lack critical thinking and have a stereotype kind of approach towards learning (do not question issues; do not know how to go in depth learning etc). So, it is of our responsibility to invent ways & activities to support students to develop abstract thinking, deep learning, complexity, autonomy, ability to deal with unpredictable situations, research enquiry and professional skills (and often we need to think of a variety of activities because not all students perform well in x or y activity so the more the opportunities the better), create ways (e.g providing instructions and guidelines orally BUT also in written so students who have language to be able to review them when they are provided in written as well).

B) this Masterness toolkit challenges us to wonder at an academic and institutional level about 'what' motivates applicants wanting to study at PGT level and which are the barriers they face? 1) are our courses fit for purpose in terms of content, mode of study, timing and type of L&T delivery, skill acquisition and do they serve students' expectations & motivations? Do really all MSc courses being provided to a master level of study include or/and achieve to develop through their activities the facets as being presented in this toolkit? If not, should this be considered for a curriculum review? It is important to On the other hand, while us we consider that higher education should be seen as an environment for research and love of studying, however, is that really the same with how the majority of students see HE today? I think it is not. This is one of the major shifts that have occurred. Applicants and students view HE as a means of getting a higher paid job upon graduation and they expect value for money. If our courses provide either of these, our offering becomes unwanted. Generally, findings show that as a sector, there is not good management of applicants and students expectations regarding what undergraduate and postgraduate study is about. Universities sell their courses to applicants on the basis of employability outcomes and get ahead. Due to this, I believe that it is very important, from the very beginning of postgraduate studies, academics and institutions, with

induction programs but also brief workshops to make clear the nature, expectations and context of the master level of studies. Students do not really know what the difference is between UG & PG studies, do not know the standards, the nature of modules and expectations, the required skills but also those PG studies aim to develop. Students should be prepared about all these.

### **Benefits of the use of the toolkit:**

*The Masterness toolkit aims to facilitate discussion and debate between the all of those involved in the postgraduate student experience about the nature of Master's level study.* This is important because gives us, as supervisors, the chance to explore views of what students believe and experience in a postgraduate level of study. This is a feedback we get from the students which we can consider in the development of the MSc programs, modules, in designing assessment & feedback, creativity and engagement activities (within the curriculum or/and extra-curriculum perhaps activities). Learning from students is a kind of a *didactic approach* 'from' and 'for' the supervisor showing that the needs, thinking and contribution the student can make to the area of study, is not mechanistic, is not ignored but is considered. At the same time challenges also peer-interaction which helps students learn about opinions & experiences other students from different cultures and educational background have. Adding to the above, the context of the Masterness toolkit with its handbook, background paper and case studies providing clear definitions and examples show not only how this toolkit can be used but also has added value of developing, organizing resources & defining concepts when some practices are introduced. The same value of this approach applies for our students.

Besides the above concerns this masterness toolkit, influences directly my practice; first of all, although all the elements being described here (called facets) and fully defined and analyzed in the Discussion paper (July 2012) "*What is Masterness*", is part of the work we do, however, the way they are presented in this toolkit, helps us a lot because it organizes the key elements better but also expands more our thinking. For example, the facet of professionalism is an issue which I did not include to a good extent in my work with students. Although, very often, I raise the importance students to be prepared for the real world and emphasize on skills and capabilities nowadays organizations and companies require from applicants connecting what we do in my module/s with what skills are developed as outcome of these activities, and, to what extent these skills are required from employers, however, I do not do something else so that to prepare even better my students for professional choices and choices for occupations. The fact that this facet is included among other facets challenge me to think deeper and develop activities that will support students for this.

From a general perspective, the mastery toolkit challenges primarily our practice to think to organize one introductory workshop introducing issues about the PG study journey (e.g standards & expectations, acquisition of generic/knowledge versus transferable & research (facets) skills & approaches/practices, challenging also students to work in groups and discuss about how they perceive these skills & expectations, what the differences of what they know and can do with what they are asked to know & do. Then, it helps challenging students' learning & understanding, organizing tutorials & practicing each facet separately developing exercises so that to make sure that students understand each one fully. This would be a starting point (not at the very beginning of their studies) , a kind of training for my students/supervisees so them to understand better what kind of learning & research thinking is expected during their postgraduate studies. Group or/and individual meetings can follow up this training and apply in practice what we share together via tutorials. The plan I have in my mind is the following: In the tutorials & meetings it is important to be prepared a brief handout/guide and slides, using examples of published research work from conferences I attend and top in the field journal articles or/and pieces of students' own work/research, doing exercises and encouraging discussion, interaction & reflection . It is important th supervisor to focus on the six facets: teaching students how to extract knowledge or ideas from sources using them afterwards to construct new knowledge (abstraction), ways to acquire more knowledge and use them differently (depth) (e.g engaging in a narrow topic of their research in depth or engaging in an up-to-date research), developing critical research and enquiry skills (research and enquiry), recognizing and dealing with complexity of knowledge. complexity of learning, knowledge application in practice & integration of skills (complexity), be responsible for own learning , acquisition of knowledge & motivation (autonomy), understanding that problems are complex and using experience & knowledge to be creative solving these problems (unpredictability), showing professional attitudes and values (professionalism). The starting point , while explaining each of the above is to build *an exemplary model* that is to 'build' an example on the blackboard or/and give adequate time space to them to read the relevant page for each step and then to challenge them to think , reflect upon their own experience & research, & produce a similar example and share it in the groups or meetings or/and send it to me via email. In these tutorials t is important to be encouraged peer feedback among students because this provides an additional learning opportunity but also exercise students to think, use their own experience and share experiences. The supervisor has also to challenge them to think about what facets are developed in their PG work and which facets are most or less important for them as well as which facet is

more or less difficult for the, to be reached. This will help me to explore students' preferences, but also students' strengths & weaknesses which to some extent for me mean that these may relate to cultural differences or/and educational background & experience differences; This will have added value in designing activities for developing better each facet so the process and context of the activities to respond better to students' needs & interest (Warring, 2011) . Interaction with students and the supervisor can be encouraged during these activities via face to face interaction, but also via email so that all possible questions per student to be answered ontime All students will have the same time to answer all will get equal feedback. Special arrangements will be made for students with problems and disabilities (e.g additional personal meetings, preparation of review points being discussed etc via emails or Turnitin [when the research outline is upload for MScs] . It is very important to plan (e.g via regular announcements) the above concepts and areas to be repeated continuously via different planned or unplanned activities so that to keep concepts and practices to be internalized by the students; *repetition is the mother of learning.*

Studies on postgraduate students' perspectives on the most effective strategies for supporting their transition showed that during induction of a postgraduate programme, students are supported in developing 'master's level' skills through various formal and informal sessions (e.g in Coventry University etc). However, it is not fully evidenced which methods are most effective in supporting this transition . For example, Prof. David Nico (as mentioned in the Mastery Toolkit) seems to reach the conclusion that workshops succeed in creating change locally and in seeing change beyond the immediate participation experience , but Spearing (2014) as cited in Shanley et.al, (2016) put an effort to address this by searching the effect of specific teaching sessions targeting to enhance student understanding of the master's level expectations . The findings showed that for most students this strategy proved helpful but for the weaker students it was not effective proposing that formal teaching sessions are not the full answer to supporting student transition. This, in relation to Mastery toolkit and my suggestion organizing tutorials, result in agreeing that indeed well structured and targeted workshops can add value change in learning, knowledge and skills development to take place but, I believe that for postgraduate students tutorials can serve the same target achieving to have small than big class size helping interaction. Also, to propose as part of consideration the need to arrange individual meetings exploring specifically with each supervisee deep understanding and ability to apply each facet in his/her work so to ensure understanding & development of such skills. Constructive and continuous feedback by the instructor/supervisor is of critical importance encouraging and supporting

academically but also emotionally the student so to feel confidence, trust and support by his/her supervisor. At this point, is critical to raise that assessment criteria for the progress of the students' work have also to reflect the understanding & application of these facets in practice. For example, producing a literature review chapter, the student should understand that good quality of literature means not descriptive and generalized theoretical statements but critical literature review, comparing & contrasting different authors' opinions, reaching conclusions which show critical thinking.

Research (Stanley et.al, 2016) indicates that three key themes emerged from her research, relating to the timing of the support strategies: 1. The value of pre-course support, including reading material and contact with peers. 2. The value of early support, including pastoral support from staff, peer support and facilitation of time management skills. 3. The value of ongoing support, including academic writing, support with assessment and feedback on coursework. Students seem to place great value on peer support and flexible support from instructors during their module/ programme. Students value support with academic writing and assessment but emphasise also that feedback from assessment is crucial in developing their master's level writing skills. An interesting finding is that students propose that information about assessment and critical thinking should be introduced slowly, as they feel that for them is rather overwhelming to take place early on in their studies. It is important to consider that postgraduate students need support throughout a programme of study to enhance the overall positive experience.

### **CONCLUSION:**

It was reviewed the Masterness Toolkit and reflection upon practice took place. The specific tool is helpful and make supervisors to review their practice not only arranging tutorials and meetings but generally, through any activity aiming to develop the required skills that is abstraction, depth of learning, research and enquiry, complexity and professionalism.

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