Accessibility and Equity in Proofreading

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Background Concept

This project was conceptualised by Catherine Messinger from Loughborough Students' Union with input from Hannah McManmon (Loughborough Students' Union), Tom Wood (Coventry University Students' Union), Tobi Falana (University of Wolverhampton Students' Union) and Sarah Underhill (De Montfort Students' Union). **The objectives were to explore the accessibility of different higher education proofreading policies in student focus groups and collect innovative ideas to help other students improve and develop their own self-proofreading practices**. Advice, facilitation, and reporting was supported by Sandra Dann, Matthew McCullock, Kurt Lawson and James Reynolds (Loughborough University), Carol Bailey and Mark Groves (University of Wolverhampton), Thomas Lancaster (Imperial College London), Irene Glendinning (Coventry University), Robin Crockett and Kate McIntyre (University of Northampton), Michael Draper (Swansea University) and Nikki Welyczko (De Montfort University).

Project Outline, Deliverables and Changes

This QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project was originally designed to explore the policies and practices around proofreading across the UK higher education sector. While proofreading is an expected part of all research and writing processes, there is considerable disparity between different Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) policies in terms of permissions regarding the process and accessibility of the documentation. The original plan for this project was to survey HEI policies (Appendix 1) relating to proofreading and then explore in student focus groups how any disparities manifest themselves.

The key deliverables of the project centred around four themes:

- **Acceptable use policy advice** - surveying HEI policies to determine commonalities and differences, e.g. whether third-party proofreading was allowed; how proofreading was audited, declared and evidenced; and the accessibility for students of the different policies in terms of how the information was presented.
- **What is/isn't acceptable as part of the proofreading process** - what can be identified for correction, e.g. grammar and typographical errors, and what cannot, e.g. clarifying meanings, adding references or reinterpreting data.
- Training for students to **self-proofread their own work** - see available resource pack and **acceptable/non-acceptable use of technologies** to aid the process of proofreading.
- Clarity over **disability/inclusivity arrangements** where proofreading is provided as an adjustment.

HEIs operate within a formal framework governed by a series of policies, regulations and ordinances, under which their staff and students practice, that give assessors and the general public confidence in their academic standards. This project was conceived by the student unions from a group of HEIs under the premise that, for a variety of reasons which were apparent in their advocacy work supporting students, institutional expectations around proofreading were not always easy for students to navigate. Making mistakes in relation to proofreading can lead to academic misconduct cases which in turn could detrimentally affect student outcomes.

To fully understand these issues, and in order for the student voice to be heard clearly, the final report for this project is the only output which was co-created with academic colleagues. Student focus groups were run with no academic staff present, facilitated by student unions working together. One standout finding from the focus groups was that while proofreading policies should be accessible for all parties, where policies are placed and how they are written is not always helpful for students. Based on lived student experience shared in the focus groups, **the main output objective was to create a 'pick and mix' of hints and tips from focus group participants at different HEIs for students to use when proofreading their own work**. The expectation being that this will help to develop student independence in reviewing their own work and ameliorate the opacity in formal proofreading policies regarding self-proofreading practice.

The innovative approach taken by the project team had many positives, essentially removing academics from the data framing and collection stages, but did create some logistical hurdles too, e.g. navigating ethics approval processes for research led outside of academic departments, challenges around contracting and budgets, etc. The starting point of the questions used in the workshops are given in Appendix 2 and the challenges of using this methodology discussed in the reflections section towards the end of this report.

Each of the focus groups came from the undergraduate student body at a single institution and were recruited by their institution, facilitated by the students' union, sometimes in coordination with a member of staff. Each focus group consisted of 3-12 students and was conducted using Microsoft Teams. Notes were taken by Catherine Messinger and Hannah McManmon from Loughborough Students' Union. Ethical approval was secured through Loughborough Ethics Committee with the support of James Reynolds.

We would like to thank students from Bangor University, Coventry University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Imperial College London, University of Manchester, University of Southampton, University of Warwick and University of Wolverhampton who were candid and honest with their comments and generous with their tips to share with others. Without you, these documents would be much less meaningful.

The Changing Proofreading Context

Proofreading is a widely accepted practice designed to improve the presentation of written work that is usually undertaken in the final stages of document preparation. The modern definition of proofreading according to the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP, 2024) is 'a process of identifying typographical, linguistic, coding or positional errors and omissions on a printed or electronic proof and marking corrections'. However, the proofreading terminology itself is much older, and originated from traditional printing practices where publishers would print a copy or 'the proof' of the text after typesetting on a mechanical press, and 'the proofreader' was responsible for correcting grammatical, spelling and formatting errors (Steinberg, 1996; Twyman, 1998). The proofreader's job was to compare the original text with the output from the typeset, mark the errors on the proof and send it back to the typesetter for correction.

Further back in history, the experience of proofreading scribes in ancient civilisations correcting the spoken word as they transcribed it, was very different to the typesetting methods of the Fifteenth to Twentieth Centuries. In a similar way, modern proofreading can be instantaneous. With spell checker and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) platforms

increasingly built into computer packages used for writing, the proofreader no longer has to be a person, arguably making the process easier and quicker. However, the importance of building in the opportunity to review written work and correct any errors is as important today as it ever was. For example, if a covering letter for a job is full of mistakes, it is likely to reflect poorly on the applicant as they fail to show core skills expected by most employers.

In terms of this study, the hints and tips shared by students as part of the focus groups extended beyond the CIEP definition of proofreading and into the realms of how to review and correct your own work successfully. To enable other students and QAA membership to gain the full benefit of this collaborative enhancement project, all ideas brought forward by students relating to reviewing and refining your own work successfully are included in the 20 Self-Proofreading Hints and Tips resources created as outputs. Each one of the 20 hints and tips on the poster links directly to a single PowerPoint slide which elaborates on how the point can work in practice. This is not designed to be a sequential or exhaustive list, more of a “pick and mix” which students can choose from and/or add to their existing practice. In reality, the inter-relationship between many of the points means that a fixed sequence would be impractical, and the strengths and weaknesses of individuals would necessitate different foci anyway.

Proofreading in a Higher Education Context

Training students to write good quality documents, which are error-free and make sense, might be expected to be an important practical skill that should be developed as part of the training packages of all higher education qualifications. However, the regulation of, and training to support, proofreading practices in different Universities are surprisingly diverse, leading to questions about the landscape being equitable. Although many QAA member institutions have proofreading policies to manage expectations between staff and students, they vary substantively in their prescription. For example, in relation to third party professional proofreaders, policies range from banning them entirely (e.g. Swansea 2021), through registered University proofreaders operating within the framework of the HEI (e.g. Edinburgh 2024; Oxford 2024) to partnering with commercial outfits who provide proofreading as part of a broader package of support, such as Studiosity (Lincoln, n.d). Companies such as Proofed (www.proofed.co.uk) also have website pages solely dedicated to the service they provide to researchers or college and university students, highlighting the demand for such provision.

Through focus groups, it also became apparent that in some institutions, university staff also provide proofreading support for their students. This happened both formally, through dedicated staff in libraries or academic English language units, and informally through relationships students had with research staff such as postdoctoral fellows, research assistants and postgraduate research students.

> *‘Postgraduate students sat with us, questioned us and gave us feedback – that was really helpful.’*
>
> Loughborough Focus Group

'He offers tips, tricks, advice, you can give him something to read and come back with feedback – content, structure' in reference to Ask an expert (The University of Manchester Library)'

Manchester Focus Group

It has been previously noted that interventions may vary, not only due to the competence of the proofreaders (Lines, 2016), but also their ethics and how they perceive their role in relation to the student (Harwood, 2018). In the Harwood study of 14 proofreaders reviewing the same text, these differences in beliefs and practice led to more than 4 times the number of interventions for some proofreaders compared to others.

A common theme in the focus groups was that a single review of a project draft prescribed in the module descriptor might turn into several staff reviews, with not only different staff doing different things, but also different numbers of iterations of the review as well. What staff would be doing as part of this review process was also not clear. As one student noted:

'My supervisor is allowed to proofread 3 pages. If I show her a paragraph in person that is ok – if I send it to her in email, it counts towards the 3 pages. Although they are willing to turn a blind eye sometimes.'

Southampton Focus Group

This comment demonstrates that students might be expecting staff to be proofreading the work, rather than undertaking an academic review and providing feedback on whether the work meets the assessment brief. Many students in the focus groups conflated proofreading with academic review. For example:

'Many module leaders will proofread one paragraph before submission.'

Coventry Focus Group

Managing expectations of students as to what academic staff will do in a "review" then needs to be clear in order for the students to glean most benefit from it. For example, if students are expecting staff to highlight grammatical and punctuation errors and they do not do so, they may incorrectly believe that these points do not contribute to the assessment. Previously, Errey (2000), had noted that penalties for proofreading errors varied between subjects where law students were penalised for language errors, but not business students. Inequity then exists within institutions, not just between them, highlighting that training/guidance is perhaps incomplete for staff and research personnel as well as for students.

'I want to submit something that is relevant – I want the info so I can do it on my own. I would be less likely to ask others if I know what to do confidently.'

Leicester Focus Group

The outcomes of the focus groups in this study suggest that whilst all parties could benefit from additional guidance regarding the content of any departmental or organisational proofreading policy, the training of students and staff may benefit from a more practical approach.

‘We had a draft submission – where we could see what Turnitin was and how it worked which was really useful. I felt more confident… the practical nature helped.’

Loughborough Focus Group

Exploration of how to implement any approved proofreading support in a way that both remains within the accepted boundaries, and contributes to developing learner autonomy, may support staff and students who don't know how to adhere to the policy. In addition, discussion regarding inequities in relation to proofreading may support participants in their understanding in why commitment to adhering to the policy is required. An example of this joint active engagement for staff and students (Grayson et al, 2018; Blake et al, 2020) is highlighted in Case Study 1.

It is worth noting at this point that proofreading services are usually not considered illegal under the criminal offences of sections 26-30 of the Skills and Post 16 Education Act 2022. Section 26(2) of the Act defines a “relevant service”. For an individual or body to be commit an offence, they must complete all or some of the student’s work such that the work would not be considered the work of the student. This excludes generally accepted study support such as tutors, proofreading and ordinary teaching practices from being covered by the offence, as even with the provision of such services the work would generally still be considered to have been completed by the student personally. However, commercial proofreading services (whether they are masquerading as an essay mill or not) may make substantive changes so that the work in whole or in part can no longer be considered that of the student.

Unfortunately, generally essay mills continue to use the term “proofreading” deceptively to disguise their business and mislead unwary learners into unregulated and exploitative contracts (Woolcock 2019; QAA 2022). However, in practice there is an uncomfortable continuum between what might be termed “contract cheating” (Lancaster and Clarke, 2006) where a student submits work entirely written by a third party, and work that is enthusiastically over-corrected by a well-meaning, but misguided, proofreader (Draper and Newton, 2017). Glossy mainstream grammar checkers such as Grammarly (O’Neill and Russell 2019), essaybots (Frye 2021), translation software (Jones and Sheridan 2015) and paraphrasing programmes (Prentice and Kinden 2018; Roe and Perkins 2022), only compound students’ confusion over academic expectations.

During this project, concerns regarding rapidly advancing technologies were epitomised through the sudden explosion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) such as ChatGPT (Open-AI), Bard (Google) and ERNIE (Baidu). A review of 20 HEI assessment policies (Luo, 2024) noted the need for institutions to be more agile in their responses to new technologies, highlighting the challenges of references to submission of “original work” in their grading criteria. As what is produced by a human or AI generated becomes less clear cut in this context, it has also been argued that it is both futile and irresponsible for universities to ban its use (Eaton, 2023), and assessment needs to be rethought to embrace its existence (Lodge et al, 2023). Training for staff to produce GenAI appropriate assessments or use GenAI to save time in producing feedback is one part of this story. At the same time, students need to be prepared for a world where they can understand the strengths and weaknesses of GenAI e.g. for summarising and proofreading, and use it ethically (Lodge,

Thompson and Corrin, 2023; Russell Group 2023; Schwartz et al, 2022). It was noted by students in the focus groups that training in ethical use of GenAI and demonstrating strengths and weaknesses would be helpful to them. For example, one student stated:

> *'The uni told us they will offer an AI workshop called "How to use AI for your degree". This would be good. It will safeguard us, so we are clear.'*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

Even talking about it would be a start in some subjects in some institutions, as the student experience indicates that there had often been a reaction of uncertainty and concern. For example, when one student asked about a specific AI tool, instead of being given a definitive answer, they were told:

> *'It is better to be safe than sorry.'*
>
> Warwick Focus Group

Another example involved a student enquiring what tools were allowed, and the response was:

> *'Some tools are allowed, but there is no specific description of the software not to use.'*
>
> Wolverhampton Focus Group

Perhaps most telling was that in four separate groups, students gave scenarios where lecturers would only speak to them about GenAI usage face-to-face but were not willing to commit that same advice in writing. The students assumed meaning of this was that the staff did not want to make any comment formally which could be evidenced or attributed to them. Turnitin was shown to be used diagnostically in 95% of 62 Universities in a recent study for at least preliminary analysis of text matching (Harrad, Keasley and Jeffries, 2024). Forty-five (74%) of those institutions using Turnitin, also gave access to their students to allow them to identify text-matching issues themselves as part of their proofreading process before submission. Unfortunately, a few students in our focus groups noted that some staff described this as "plagiarism checking" and showed a lack of understanding in what a similarity index means despite literature arguing the weakness of "plagiarism detection" as a concept (e.g. Bretag and Mahmud, 2009; Foltynek et al, 2020). Essentially, encouraging students to craft their text-matching score down may result in poor decisions to change text which should stay the same e.g. technical terminology, or be included for credibility, such as quotations giving provenance.

Currently, there is no equivalent detection tool for GenAI (Crockett, 2024; Yu, 2024) that is as reliable as Turnitin is for text-matching. Particular concerns over algorithms used in the tools for detecting GenAI have also been expressed in relation to unfair bias (Sullivan, Kelly and McLaughlan, 2023; Yan et al, 2023) where simplistic language and too many short sentences are often flagged as "machine-like" in character. Unfortunately, that type of presentation with limited syntactic complexity and limited lexical diversity is characteristic of non-native speakers (McNamara, Crossley and McCarthy, 2010) who are less familiar with the rules of language and disabled students who find argumentative academic writing more difficult (Ferreti et al, 2007).

It is noteworthy that some self-proofreading recommendations referred to later in this report, such as knowing your weaknesses by analysing your feedback, may require different interventions to enable all groups of learners to improve, since you need to understand your feedback to feed those points forward. Noted many times by students in our focus groups, was that the act of analysing your own feedback for common mistakes to make your own checklist was a key part of enabling successful self-proofreading. What was less clear was how this was best done, since some students reflected that they needed time to engage with it properly, since making errors repeatedly was often frustrating. Putting time aside to formally discuss their feedback with tutors was identified as a good mechanism to help engage with feedback. “Facilitating the checklist process” could be built into processes formally as part of the circle of review of student performance.

What is well documented is that inconsistency of messaging around legitimate use of technology and support leads to poor scholarship issues and academic integrity breaches, ultimately detrimental to student outcomes, wellbeing and experience (Davis 2022; QAA 2021; Eaton, 2024). Arguably this also leads to wasted staff time as they scramble to make sense of what is and is not allowed and whether there is an academic misconduct case to answer or not. When policies and processes are less clear, those who have the fewest people to ask for help are the most vulnerable. It is well known that first-generation HE, disabled, international and Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) groups are often overrepresented in academic misconduct cases connected to proofing (Eaton 2020; Beasley 2016), further emphasising the need to establish greater clarity to address these inequities.

Student participants within the focus groups frequently reflected on how policies open to interpretation exacerbated systemic inequities. This ranged from estranged, international or 1st generation HE students not having the social capital to source a free proofreader (four different universities), students of a lower socio-economic background not being able to afford the more extensive tools available to others paying for a premium AI tool (two universities) or students with caring responsibilities not having the capacity to travel to receive the “informal” proofreading advice from a tutor in their office hour.

> *‘I can only afford the three free tries of Grammarly, not a proper proofreader.’*
>
> Manchester Focus Group
>
> *‘I know some students, especially from the access programme, don't have people they can send work to for proofreading like family members. Some of them are the first in their families to go university.’*
>
> Manchester Focus Group

The lack of written acknowledgement of these widely accepted institutional practices for supporting proofreading created barriers to learning of acceptable and unacceptable adjustments or alternative practices, which, the focus groups would suggest, is further compounded by feelings of stereotype threat. As one student shared:

> *‘I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking if a particular type of AI is permitted. Different cultural backgrounds don’t want to go and ask the lecturer. They feel foolish to go and ask a lecturer where their cultural background might be seen*

as having a lower literacy level. They do not want to be seen as unintelligent or ineloquent.'

Wolverhampton Focus Group

Some of the students who took part in the focus groups for this project remarked that they asked family members who were academics to do their proofreading, simultaneously showing the advantage some students have over their peers, how academics operate outside their own employing institutions rules on proofreading and/or do not respect the expectations of other HEI. As part of the factfinding stage in applying for this project, it was also identified that institutional policies are not always clearly articulated in accessible language, due to the necessity to fit within university policy frameworks. Being embedded in other documents often makes the information more difficult to find as well and it is questionable whether it is necessary to hide them behind a login at all (5% of the 100 Universities surveyed, list in Appendix 2).

The Office for Students (OfS) suggested that to maintain standards, students should be marked on their spelling, punctuation and grammar. Furthermore, and despite the sector-wide variation in third-party use, the OfS stated in that document that the "responsibility for proofreading written work rests with the student" (OfS, 2021). Students' union advisors who support the student body prior to (via proactive campaigns) and during academic misconduct cases repeatedly reported mixed messaging deviating between encouraging students to keep their work secure yet simultaneously encouraging them to share their work to be proofread (and consequently relinquishing control over it). This is not at all surprising, since most guides on proofreading acknowledge the difficulties in self-proofreading when the writer's brain has, through hours of work, painted a firm image of what they wish to convey resulting in difficulties spotting any written errors. Broadly, the literature suggests (Levy, 1986; Buboyne et al, 2023) that the brain corrects errors on the page in a special version of word blindness, that grows worse with familiarity and deadline proximity. The benefits of finding another person, without those preconceptions, to read the work instead and conversely draw a picture from the writing are commonly hailed as a solution to this issue. Our focus groups highlighted some innovations around the "proofreading buddy" idea which are discussed later in the section relating to training. This information is not included in the self-proofreading resources since some institutions expressly forbid third party involvement and we wanted the study to be helpful to everyone. Some additional innovations are also discussed in Case Study that demonstrate the benefits of peer-assisted learning in relation to study skills support.

Acceptable Use Policy

The first part of this study involved identifying, reading and collating information from as many HEI proofreading policies as possible. These policies were collected in several ways including general searching of university websites and requesting policies through the JISC plagiarism lists and regional Academic Integrity Networks. It is noted that recently, a proofreading policy content analysis of 15 Universities has been carried out by Davis (2024), who sampled institutions across the UK based on recurring criteria with the sample of universities chosen based on date of establishment, Times Higher Education ranking 2022 and location. Our QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, along with its methodology and sampling criteria, were contracted before this publication. Part of the Davis study involves quantitatively classifying policies according to recurring elements within both the policies and

the study skills advice arising from them. A more qualitative analysis of this larger sample is presented below simply as a prelude to providing prompts and thoughts for the focus groups only.

A summary of the numbers of policies accessed through searching the internet and their availability is given in Table 1. Comments from focus group members on their awareness of their institution's proofreading policy varied significantly. Some indicated that they had never looked for their institutional proofreading policy before, while others noted that there was sometimes more detailed guidance at subject and programme level. Several noted that information from different areas could be conflicting. In two cases, signing up for their focus group had prompted them to look up their policy for the first time. One student noted:

> *'I typed out the words "proofreading" and "Southampton" in Google and there were lots of links and lots of multiple dates, so I remember going through the Sharepoint to see what seemed the most sensible one.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

Table 1: Summary of the 100 University Policies Investigated

Universities with a Dedicated Proofreading Policy	32
Universities with Proofreading in Other Policies	22
Universities with Proofreading Policies Behind a Login	5
Universities with No Proofreading/No Policy Identifiable	41
Total of Number of Universities Reviewed	100

There are several weaknesses to this general searching approach in that how search engines work for internal and external people may be different, but the varying placement practices are nonetheless notable. For 46% of our sample, it was not possible to find a proofreading policy to view, in good agreement with the in-depth study of the group of fifteen institutions (Davis, 2024). It's not entirely clear why policies of this type might be behind a login or difficult to find if they are designed to inform students. This was a point raised consistently in all focus groups – why are they so difficult to find? It should not be a secret what you are allowed to do!

One student in the focus group described their university policy as:

> '*Hidden on the website and like a maze.*'
>
> Coventry Focus Group

Another noted that they could find the policy easily when they searched for it online but:

> *'I keep getting a server error whenever I try to open the webpage link.'*
>
> Wolverhampton Focus Group

For a third, they only found a policy by searching through other information:

> *'I found it on academic integrity link as a PDF – It really wasn't easy to find.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

A fourth noted that they had not been directed to the policy by staff, but had found it because:

> *'I stumbled upon it by accident when I was using SharePoint.'*
>
> Leicester Focus Group

This also indicates another challenge for students that if you cannot find what you are allowed to do or do not understand the information, it is hard to know what is expected of you (Carduner, 2007). The focus groups also noted that academic staff need to be trained about what is expected, since different staff gave mixed messages leading to confusion for students.

> *'Students need to know. Staff also need to be inducted so they know.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

This also then leads to difficulties for anyone trying to decide whether or not a student has a case to answer when it comes to gaining unfair advantage in an assessment. Appeals and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) cases tend to focus on whether the institution has followed its rules to decide if an institutional decision should be upheld. If the rules are ambiguous or difficult to find, or varying guidance is given by different staff, then there is immediately an issue for everyone. This seems particularly critical where third party proofreading is permitted, as it would be advantageous to make the information publicly available so a contractor can follow the required practice, and students can easily access what is expected to trace their document authenticity. Conversely, having a proofreading policy available was noted to be useful by one student.

> *'I send the rules to my family so they don't go over the rules.'*
>
> Warwick Focus Group

Additionally, it is important to ensure students are advised to keep drafts before and after any third-party involvement as this forms the evidentiary basis to refute metadata evidence when authorship is questioned in an academic misconduct case (QAA, 2021).

Focussing on the 54 available policies, various themes were identified as recurring in many proofreading policies. As noted by Davis (2024), where policies could be located and read, it was common to find lists of what was and was not permitted in relation to third party reviewing. Generally, where third party proofreading was permitted the following were consistently deemed as acceptable for proofreaders to highlight:

- Typographical, vocabulary, spelling and grammar errors
- Inconsistencies in style and/or formatting and non-adherence to the assessment brief
- Indication of areas that would benefit from minor changes in wording to improve clarity of the writing
- Inappropriate terms for formal writing e.g. contractions, slang and first-person usage (particularly in scientific texts)
- Duplicate words or phrases
- Inconsistencies in the labelling of diagrams, tables and figures.

Acceptable marking up practice normally used comments boxes, "sticky notes" or "fill and sign" in pdf format for online editors or handwritten comments in coloured ink for those reviewing hardcopies. Generally proofreading of work in editable formats such as word was consistently not permitted. In a small number of institutions, markers and proofreaders

formally or informally used the proofreading marks convention (BSI ISO 5776, 2022) for marking up different types of error such as “sp” for spelling etc. This was identified by students as useful for spotting recurring errors of the same sort which allows them to feed forward in their work easily and make their own checklists for self-proofreading. This point is returned to in a later section on training students to self-proofread. One novel innovation from Manchester University, trained staff in proofreading processes at the same time as students in a programme devised by students employed through the University of Manchester Library’s Student Team (University of Manchester, 2023). One focus group participant noted that:

> *‘Students are seen as equal partners with other members of the Library’s Teaching, Learning and student team and are represented at all stages throughout projects to create and refresh workshop plans and online resources.’*
>
> Manchester Focus Group

Detail of how this works in practice is given in Case Study 1.

In general, third-party proof-readers were not allowed to:

- Copy-edit (make changes) to the text directly
- Rewrite sections to improve arguments/clarify meanings
- Make changes to how figures are presented
- Rearrange paragraphs to improve the structure and/or the arguments
- Correct calculations, code, data, or facts
- Contribute additional material to the original work
- Make significant changes to the references or the styling of them
- Offer translation services.

Even where formal proofreading of single owner assessments was effectively banned, peer-assisted proofreading was permitted in some types of assignment where students were reviewing other students’ work that was integral to the assignment in some way. For example, students reviewing each other’s input in collaborative group work to ensure all components fitted together coherently. Examples of this might be doing a joint literature review and avoiding repeating points, doing a group presentation using the same slide formatting, or a collective poster where the data were formatted consistently with the same font in the same size. Cooperative groupwork assignments, where students share information to create larger datasets for fieldwork or laboratory analysis of similar samples to learn about systematic and random errors, usefully demonstrate the strength of repeating experimental work and the importance of reproducibility in validating results. This sort of proofreading in context of other data needs careful instruction regarding potential collusion in terms of analysis as well as the principles of outliers in the grading criteria. For example, results outside the expected mean could encourage students to alter their results (fabricate data) if it is not understood that outliers, and knowing what to do with them, is an important part of the assessment criteria.

In terms of training students to proofread each other’s work, Case Study 2 highlights a programme originally designed to be delivered in peer-assisted learning sessions as an example to be considered for adoption. Students in four focus groups highlighted examples of how they had initiated a similar system to support one another with proofreading through peer-led study groups.

As noted earlier in this report, what project/dissertation supervisors do to review students' work is perhaps one of the more complex areas. Many focus group participants reported that this was one of the most variable experiences for students, almost irrespective of what was written down in the module descriptor. As one student noted in relation to project drafts:

> *'Different lecturers are saying different things – but I'm unsure if that reflects their personal preference, or they don't know themselves.'*
>
> Loughborough Focus Group

It was commonplace that supervisors would review and provide feedback on a single draft of a dissertation or final project report provided it was submitted according to a mutually agreeable timescale. In practice the usefulness of the feedback provided depended on the efficacy of the supervisor/student relationship and their expectations of their roles in it. For example, while proofreading might be part of that process, it was unlikely to be systematic, since the supervisor generally would be primarily focusing on the academic content. This is troubling because both literature reviews and project reports are typically very heavily credit weighted in degree programmes and differences in treatment, perceived or real, make significant discontent. Projects are often deeply seated in a supervisor's research programme and some of the concerns regarding over-zealous supervisor input to student PhD theses overlaps strongly with this area (Krauth, 2009; Corcoran, Gagne and McIntosh, 2018). Students in focus groups noted varying experiences of their interactions with both supervisors and research staff with some noting that input on their written work came from multiple areas in extensive research groups. However, larger research groups were not always good, since in some cases students didn't receive any comments on the draft from the academic member of staff, the responsibility being passed on to someone else who didn't necessarily know much about assessment processes or the assessment brief at all. One student noted:

> *'My personal tutor is amazing, however he says my area of study is not his area, so the framework isn't clear [to him] and he can't proofread.'*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

Clearly, there is work to be done here for institutions in managing expectations for everyone involved, since the lines between feedback on content and proofreading do not seem to be clear. For example, by the time students reach the project stage, it is likely that academic staff will be uncomfortable providing academic feedback outside their specific area of research expertise. Ideally for students to maximise their benefit from a single review by a supervisor, the project report should be as close to finished from the student perspective as possible when passed to the supervisor for review. Students then should be completing their own reviews of documents first before submitting the report to their supervisor according to the flow diagram shown in Appendix 3.

Students in different focus groups noted that some of their institutions had campaigns about what is and isn't allowed where proofreading was mentioned as key deadlines, such as the end of semester, approached which was described as useful. What was a disappointing story in most of the student experiences was that these tended to be framed entirely on the negative. Four examples from four different universities of the many received are given below:

‘Campaigns seemed to be framed entirely in the negative: “do not use paid third parties”, “Do not use GenAI”. I want positive rules – not what you can’t do.’

Loughborough Focus Group

‘Why is there only a don’t list?’

Leicester Focus Group

‘There should be guidelines how to use it, rather than not using it.’

Bangor Focus Group

‘There is only information “on what not to do, rather than what to do” for proofreading’.

Warwick Focus Group

Going forward it is therefore recommended that it would be helpful for information campaigns to focus on what students can and should do, rather than only what they cannot do. The general concerns from the students’ union staff and students about this aforementioned negative messaging is that there is essentially no safety net for worried students. Any campaign that refers to what not to do should always be signposting both to academic help and welfare support. Many student advocates noted that students often come to them for support having broken the rules in desperation. However serious the rule breaking, institutions are still duty bound to ensure vulnerable students are supported (Lancaster et al, 2022).

Our focus groups noted, students would like to see information placed in areas which they access often such as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and module or programme handbooks. Specific issues existed around the technical subjects in relation to coding and design works that were often not included in the broad university proofreading guidance, even when third-party proofreading was described for text-based subjects. Proofreading text might be considered different to proofreading code since a typo may stop a code from working which materially benefits a student in a way that a text typo would not. For example, a student noted:

‘You are actively encouraged to copy code and learn in that way – I think that policy would need differentiating.’

Southampton Focus Group

Draft keeping when third party proofreaders were allowed was also noted as variable and in need of more guidance. Finally, what electronic tools they could use needed better framing, particularly since some felt they were at a disadvantage over peers where accessibility was an issue e.g. premium Grammarly versus the standard version. It was also apparent from comments that while students might be required to declare use of GenAI, it was not always clear (to them) how to do that. It was noted that better equity in relation to technologies might be achieved if universities provided tools as noted by Warwick students:

'It would be helpful to have a standardised University tool available for everyone.'

Warwick Focus Group

Non-native speakers

Non-native speakers can push the limits of what is acceptable from a proofreading perspective as they are often less confident and practised in their academic writing. The informal process of asking a family member to help mentioned previously is also not open to them. As one student remarked;

'*I am an international student and my family don't speak English, so I can't ask them.'*

Warwick Focus Group

This means non-native speakers are more likely to want to access third-party support and more vulnerable to what those third parties may or may not do in response.

'It is often students that can't speak English well who hire third party proofreaders. My friend uses someone on Fivver, but I think they are an idiot.'

Manchester Focus Group

Making it clear from the outset what can and cannot be done in terms of asking others for help proofreading their work, including using technology such as translation software, is then important in terms of supporting students to reach their potential and successfully navigate the HE system. It was noted that some institutions included contracts for third-party proofreaders as annexes to their proofreading policies to help students manage expectations on both sides. Furthermore, some institutions employed people directly who were contracted to follow the institutional expectations which students could utilise. This could be considered as a general point of good practice since the focus groups indicated all sorts of personnel are informally reviewing students work, and sometimes carrying out proofreading simultaneously, in an unregulated way. Even though some institutions ban third-party proofreading, this process of reviewing drafts for dissertations/projects and giving feedback appears universal and may or may not include proofreading as part of the process. Managing expectations of what is reasonable from an institutional perspective in terms of providing the support needed is one angle to supporting students, but equally important is understanding how assessments may or may not be affected by errors relating to proofing. For example, students may believe that grammar or spelling errors are heavily weighted in an assessment when actually the marks are largely awarded for critical argument; the former only affecting the grade when the arguments presented do not make sense. Furthermore, a good understanding of what is and isn't acceptable from a proofreading perspective also protects students from unethical behaviours of third parties such as essay mills. There are multiple factors which contribute to the broader challenges for international students in terms of proofreading which need to be considered to support successful transition into higher education which are considered further below.

Firstly, broadly defined as "the norms", there are processes, and language of higher education that students are implicitly assumed to have which that are not explicitly taught or explained (Hubbard et al, 2020; Semper and Blasco, 2018 quoted in Birtill et al, 2022). The formal language used by institutions in their regulations and policies is often a barrier to native speakers, so being a non-native speaker presents a double barrier in negotiating this

“hidden curriculum” that affects students’ engagement and outcomes, since they have the linguistic disadvantage of being raised in a non-English environment. This double disadvantage could be why international, non-native speakers are over-represented in academic misconduct cases (Rientes, Beausaert and Grohnert, 2012; Eaton, 2020; Davis, 2022; Harrad, Keasley and Jeffries, 2024).

While home students may change institutions after their first degree and be affected by differences in institutional expectations, they are more likely to access support from continuing home students than their international peers. One reason for this is that there are proportionally many more international students on one-year master's courses compared to undergraduates; 15.7% of UG students are international, compared with 39.1% of students on master’s programmes (UUK 22). The “hidden curriculum” suggests it is important to remember that international students need time to learn about the conventions in a new UK institution where there may be significant cultural differences from where they have previously studied. Unlearning what you have spent time perfecting can be a long process, which is often at odds with the short nature of one-year postgraduate master's programmes in particular. Expectations around referencing, citation, formatting and proofreading are similar across all UK universities, however, these expectations may be at odds with what and how students have learnt prior to coming to the UK. For one-year master’s students, non-native speakers have less time to get up to speed before undertaking assessments that will affect their qualification outcome compared to the much longer undergraduate programmes where marks that contribute to the degree are typically heavily weighted towards the final years of the programme. As noted by Fatemi and Saito (2020), international students are much more likely to make convention mistakes in unintentional type academic misconduct, such as putting the reference in the wrong format or the wrong place and this should be considered poor scholarship rather than any deliberate intention to deceive. Those students taking an ERASMUS one or two semester placement will typically also face this challenge. This suggests that academic integrity training should be more cognisant of not only identifying good quality reference sources and following referencing conventions early in the programme, but also emphasise the importance of correct referencing during self-proofreading training. However one student, noted this training should not be too early:

> *‘I’m international. We arrive late with visas, maybe we miss things. There should be a proper orientation in the second month.’*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

While the term “academic misconduct” arguably conflates intentional misconduct with accidental breaches (Harrad, Keasley and Jeffries, 2024), Ellis and Murdoch (2024) argue that both hardline exclusion deterrents and supportive nurturing approaches through an academic integrity enforcement pyramid are required to facilitate a culture of academic integrity engagement and address all possibilities. Both of these recent studies acknowledge particular inequities for international students and the complexities of the particular factors which affect them. Using the principles of an institution wide Penalty Framework (Caroll and Appleton 2005; Bretag and Mahmud*,* 2016; QAA 2021) and a community of practice for academic conduct officers in each institution for any misconduct cases reduces the opportunities for bias noted by Robey et al, 2022. At the same time, these networks can then be helpful in feeding forward into the training regime in relation to proofing and self-proofreading by collecting and analysing information with respect to different groups in relation to academic misconduct cases and identifying appropriate solutions. For example, if PGT students are struggling to replicate a referencing convention, an additional intervention

might be to provide a text with a variety of referencing errors for them to identify and correct to replicate the self-proofreading task. If delivered as a workshop in groups, this would simultaneously fulfil some of the other points made by students in the focus groups about having a more practical approach.

Growing up in a culture where English is your first language teaches you much more than the basic words, though that is also relevant in this context. Rules about construction of sentences, grammar and punctuation are taught in a classroom throughout years of formal training. While students are growing up in this environment, they also have the advantage of learning informally in the playground, extracurricular activities and at home as well as formally in classroom. As discussed by Carroll and Ryan (2005), in historic advice provided by the Education Equality Unit (Arshad and Lima, 2012; Eade and Peacock, 2009) and the updated QAA (2023) guide for supporting international students, success in the classroom for international students in HEI has as much to do with the informal relationships outside the classroom as the formal ones created within them. Interestingly students noted in the focus groups that this was a particular area of inequity:

> *'Students with English not as first language may struggle accessing 3rd party support for proofreading…also those with limited family academic experience such as first in family or those without family relationships.'*
>
> Warwick Focus Group

There is an obvious temptation to gravitate to those who speak the same language as you, since it is one less thing to be worried about in an entirely new place, but this means widening your vocabulary and growing your confidence in speaking the different language is less likely. It is not an accident that contract cheating companies choose to communicate to new students in their native language, in an attempt to exploit vulnerabilities, meaning early interventions are important. However, what these interventions are may need to vary depending on the students previous learning environment. Li, Chen and Duanmu (2010), noted both similarities and differences between Chinese students' behaviours compared to their international peers, noting cultural characteristics being more collectivistic rather than individualistic and less likely to adopt an active learning culture. English language ability and social interaction was noted to be important for achievement, and parental pressure coupled with scholarship expectations identified as challenges for all students. Such differences then need to be taken into account in a pre-emptive way to prevent students crossing the line of acceptable behaviour when it comes to sharing their work for the purposes of proofreading, particularly for students taking the same programme of study. Students in the focus groups noticed that group size made a difference in this respect:

> *'Social connection is a big thing. Only 20 people on my course, so if someone needs help – you can ask… You are learning through teaching it.'*
>
> Loughborough Focus Group

Various strategies are suggested to create opportunities for students to create new support networks including "home stay" where international students spent some time living in a house with a native family, mixing nationalities in group work, extracurricular activities that encourage informal interactions such as taking part in sport or volunteering, as well as more academic experiences such as peer mentoring/home-student buddying. One international student noted the need to be mindful of insecurities in this area to retain confidence and retain students:

'We had massive lectures on plagiarism but it was a long lecture, not really helpful – just scared me.'

Loughborough Focus Group

Structured peer-assisted learning groups (Case Study 2), underpinned by academic staff involvement can provide exceptional support in both study skills and academic studies (Chivers, 2016; Lochtie and Hillman, 2022). In terms of their academic life, much research exists on the difficulties of this particular group of learners (Carroll, 2005), the staff that support them (Harwood, 2016) as well as the sometimes unrealistic expectations of the wider University staff. Differences in expectation between the staff who support them, and the students being supported can also occur in relation to what might be expected in terms of guidance/being guided. Ragavan (2016) noted how institutions can fail students by assuming the induction will expose them to all the required academic requirements or expectations without considering their background or prior academic exposure.

Comparing the performance of home students versus international students on a module, Stappenbelt (2016) noted international students typically performed a whole grade lower on average than their peers who had been classed as international (domicile classified), with the mean typically falling in the lower second-class category. Looking at the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) grade boundaries and matching it against the expectations of HEI in terms of their entrance criteria and degree classification may be useful in this regard. Most UK Universities have entrance criteria which lie between IELTS 5.5 and 7 overall (IDP IELTS, 2024), averaged across the four IELTS categories of reading, writing, listening and speaking in a scale which extends from 1 (non-user) to 9 (expert). Depending on individual academic's relationships with their English language expert teams, their understanding of what these numbers mean may not always be complete, with the standard entrance criteria well removed from that of native speakers. Note the levels 5-7 categories are described as follows in the grading criteria (IELTS, 2024):

IELTS Band Score: 7 Skill Level: Good

- The test taker has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations.
- They generally handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning.

IELTS Band Score: 6 Skill Level: Competent

- The test taker has an effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings.
- They can use and understand reasonably complex language, particularly in familiar situations.

IELTS Band Score: 5 Skill Level: Modest

- The test taker has a partial command of the language and copes with overall meaning in most situations, although they are likely to make many mistakes.
- They should be able to handle basic communication in their own field.

As the overall score is generated as an average across the four categories, individual strengths and weaknesses, for example in speaking and writing, are also to some extent hidden. Comparing these descriptors with the grade descriptors (QAA, 2019) for the

qualification framework for Level 6 (bachelor's degrees) for 2ii and 2i shows how competencies at these different levels might directly affect degree outcomes, with significant differences between the two in terms of the ability to make critical arguments and synthesise information:

- 2ii: The student has argued logically, with supporting evidence, and has demonstrated the ability to consider and evaluate a range of views and information. They have clearly and consistently explained complex matters and ideas.
- 2i: The student has demonstrated the ability to make coherent, substantiated arguments, as well as the ability to consider, critically evaluate and synthesise a range of views and information. They have demonstrated a thorough, perceptive and thoughtful interpretation of complex matters and ideas.

Training for academic staff is needed in this area to understand what the English language entrance criteria actually mean in the higher education context and how all students can need to be supported to reach their potential. Individual differences can lead to greater difficulties in understanding complex concepts via the spoken word, compared to information written down which can be more easily revisited and translated.

Disability

Students with disabilities are typically given reasonable adjustments to enable them to be assessed equitably to their not disabled peers according to the Equality Act (Gov.uk 2010). The literature has many views on whether or not these adjustments could be argued as fair compared to those where adjustments do not apply (Cohen et al, 2005; Niemenen 2022; Niemenen and Carroll, 2023). Logically the argument is if the adjustment is "reasonable" then the adjustment creates equity between the student and their peers by mitigating the original barrier. Research on the frequency of disabled students being accused of academic misconduct is mixed. Studies by Harrad, Keasley and Jeffries (2024) suggested that disabled students were not over-represented in academic misconduct cases, while those by Davis (2022) and Eaton (2019), suggest that they are. This variability maybe in how disability had been defined and/or intersectionality with other factors. In our focus groups, students noted the difficulties of having learning differences many times in relation to the need for proofreading support for example:

> *'I have ADHD – over 1000 words I struggle – I have to rely on the good will of friends but with close deadlines nobody has time.'*
>
> Manchester Focus Group
>
> *'At times, I have to use a third party even though I am not supposed to, and pay.'*
>
> Wolverhampton Focus Group

In the 2020 pandemic, long window open book examinations over one or more days became commonplace when examination halls were out of action due to the need to socially distance. These assessments sit in a peculiar space where some assignments described as "coursework" may be set over shorter periods than these unusually long examinations. A consequence of this is where a proofreader was given as an adjustment to students for coursework, it became unclear as to whether a proofreader was permitted to support them in long window examinations. As this may result in students inadvertently taking unfair advantage or being charged with contract cheating due to inappropriate third-party

involvement in an assessment, it is recommended that permissions to use proofreaders (or not) in this context is made more transparent.

Electronic tools were a common solution given as self-proofreading adjustments for students with disabilities. For example:

> *'Grammarly premier is part of adjustments provided. Government paid for (through DSA) and cleans up my minor issues.'*
>
> Warwick Focus Group

This use of technology interestingly generated three different comments in the student focus groups, which implied that because it was considered a reasonable adjustment, it had to be acceptable for students without disabilities as well. This is another one of the uncomfortable grey areas that realistically would be helpful to clarify in proofreading policies.

A common theme in the literature is that temporary or acute mental health issues can have a significant effect on a student's decision making. In such circumstances, a student may make an unwise decision and choose to be academically dishonest out of desperation. It is, therefore, crucial that all messaging associated with warnings about committing academic misconduct and its dangers are accompanied by signposting to support them such as the student union and the appropriate university student services. Finally, ways to learn from institutional errors in the academic integrity space need to be reviewed and learnt from (Messinger and Dann, 2022). This means routine recording and analysing of the data and working with Student Unions in response to those findings are important strategies in reducing the over-representation of particular groups in academic misconduct cases.

Training for Students to Self-Proofread and Review their Own Work

This section on training students to self-proofread and review their own work directly originates from the information collected by the student union teams in their focus groups. Students reflected that they had often struggled to know where to begin when self-proofreading and reviewing their own work; often sharing they felt confused, overwhelmed or lacked confidence with their approach.

However, across the discussions it became apparent that collectively there was a wealth of knowledge and ideas for proofreading and self-review best practice that students had collated. The student union team noted that the student participants would frequently commend each other for the insight or ideas that they provided. Below we share the student generated tips and tricks on self-proofreading best practice. One recurring theme was that trying to proofread with the wrong mindset, was like 'trying to stage a play without the right scenery'. The focus groups noted time and again that it would be helpful to highlight that reviewing your own work to remove errors and make it easier to read are life skills and will be useful beyond university as well as potentially improving your grades while studying. It also should be noted that by completing the self-proofreading and review process before submitting work for a single review by a tutor, much better feedback will be generated than if a poorly written, error-strewn early draft is submitted. If a tutor is struggling to make sense of the work or is distracted by typographical errors, they cannot optimally use their subject expertise. Here are a few examples of what different students said:

'We should feel empowered to have the skill of proofreading. Empowerment comes through the social activity, not through prescription.'

Loughborough Focus Group

'We want to understand why we are doing what we are doing. If you start with the philosophy we are here to learn –and then give us tools to do it.'

Loughborough Focus Group

'The (self-proofreading) process is as important skill for your degree and future'

Warwick Focus Group

The hints and tips for reviewing and self-proofreading have been brought together in a poster that links to resources and a slide deck covering each of the 20 tips in more detail.

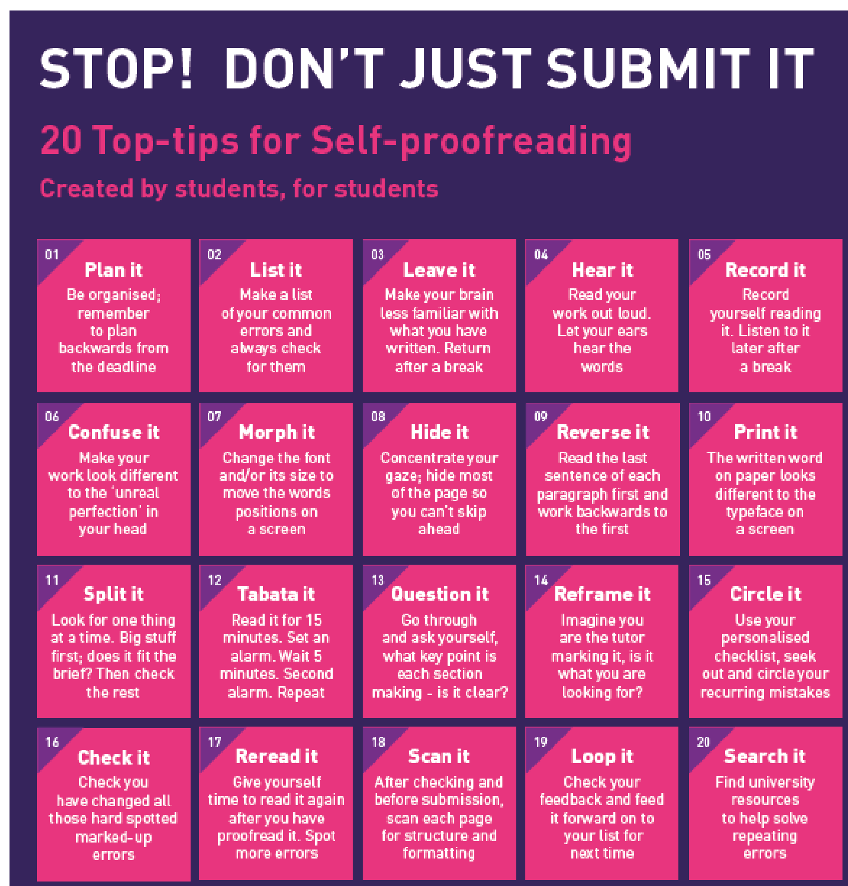

Figure 1: Screenshot of the 20 Tips from the A3 Poster, available for download.

One further case study that got particular praise at Southampton was *How to Think Like a Scientist* (Case Study 3) which gave practical approaches on how to write laboratory reports and how they were reviewed. This is included as a separate case study rather than being included in the short tips list.

Setting the Scene

Self-proofreading and reviewing your own assignment is a labour-intensive, time-consuming and difficult task and students must accept that to do it well is going to take significant time.

In order to proofread effectively, it is necessary to plan what needs to be done and avoid any distractions. Students also noted that time-management resources should mention proofreading as something that needs to be built in into writing processes.

When to do proofreading is very much person dependent. Some people reflected they were ready to go bright and early and were most alert in the morning, others noted they work best deep into the night when the world is quieter and there are no distractions. To make self-proofing work for individuals, they need to know what works for them and plan to do that proofreading when they are most focussed.

Busy offices or study spaces were noted to be unlikely to lead to successful proofreading. One of many useful things noted by students was vocalising the written word in different ways and that just isn't possible in a shared space. If you are unable to whisk yourself away to where you cannot be distracted, it was noted that making sure you have your earbuds to hand to shut out the world to some degree could help. At the same time resisting the temptation to let yourself be distracted was important; shut down your email, turn off your social media and hide your phone. Sometimes the act of going somewhere else to do the proofreading was noted to provide a much-needed break between writing and reading (see **leave it**).

> *'I like to take a break – I read it out loud to myself.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

List it. When work is assessed, it was noted it can be easy to pick up on recurring mistakes if students get into the habit of reviewing comments made by, and errors highlighted by, staff. For example, homonyms (like peak, peek or pique) might catch them out or placing apostrophes in the wrong place, different people have individual strengths and weaknesses. Being methodical about reviewing feedback and making a list of anything which causes a problem was noted as a way to feed forward easily into new work by helping students look out for them. Many universities were noted to have courses and workshops that help address different weaknesses, so making a list of the issues and discussing them with a tutor could also prevent the same mistakes being repeated through signposting. Compiling the list with friends, using feedback, or a simple Google search of common errors also helped individuals learn from the whole class.

Peer facilitated workshops to help students develop their own checklists featured positively in the workshop discussions, one student noted:

> *'In our workshop we got people develop their own checklist. We had one assignment with lots of errors – not one of us found everything. If you do this exercise, you notice what you pick up and what you as a proofreader tend to miss. We tried to get people to be more conscious of things they might miss and come up with their personal checklist, specific to their degree.'*
>
> Manchester Focus Group

Peer mentoring was also noted to have the potential to bridge some of the challenges presented by those who have less underpinning due to social or cultural background (Ragavan, 2014) noted that continuing peer support can particularly help international students who can be overwhelmed by a one-shot information overload at induction.

The Challenge of Proofreading Your Own Work

The OfS's position is that students are responsible for their own proofreading (OfS, 2021). While this may be achieved through third-party involvement, the driving force behind the OfS's position is based on skill development in education that can be taken into the workplace. Here, however, there are challenges with proofreading your own work. When we started pulling the project together and presented our plans at meetings such as the QAA Conference, to produce a self-proofreading guide, various people voiced their belief that self-proofreading is simply not possible. The points centred largely on the psychology of the writing process. During the preparation stages, your brain starts building a picture of what the outcome will be and, as the work develops, it will helpfully fill in the blanks. Sadly, those omissions are still in the written word, but you can no longer see them due to the complete picture (Levy, 1986; Buboyne et al, 2023) now drawn by your mind.

Many of the strategies in this section, focus on making students read their documents in a different way to **confuse it**, and break the circle of familiarity and missed errors. To lessen the effects of this, one student noted to self-proofread you need to:

> *'Have a framework that you work through. A formula for you.'*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

These points below are listed to help everyone develop their own successful formula.

Plan it. By putting time between writing and reviewing/proofreading process, the circle of familiarity which enables the brain to unhelpfully fill in the blanks and/or read what students meant to say, rather than what is there, fades. One of our workshop attendees noted:

> *'I am so bored of my essays by the end that I can't face reading it and just submit it.'*
>
> Leicester Focus Group

Another student, echoing a recurring theme in the workshops, noted:

> *'I am still writing my conclusion 20 min before the submission time – I have never once had time to proofread.'*
>
> Wolverhampton Focus Group

Editors suggest that really this period should be the order of days or weeks, but even a few hours can make a difference if that is all the time you have to **leave it.** One student said:

> *'Plan to finish your work early, then leave it for a couple of days then return to it.'*
>
> Loughborough Focus Group
>
> *'I really struggle (with this) so I need to have a break and read it a second time.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

Ideally knowing that going through the full cycle of review at least twice is necessary to pick up 90% or so of the errors, allows that extra time to be built into any assessment process.

Students suggested using a calendar and working backwards from the deadline and be strict.

Some students suggested a very planned approached to self-proofreading worked for them.

Tabata it. This involves reading your work for 15 minutes, sounding an alarm, then waiting for 5 minutes and sounding the alarm again to cycle the process till the reading is done. This was likened to the high intensity, short time exercise regimes, where knowing the time is short helps to really focus and try your absolute best.

Hear it. Reading the words out loud can be really useful to pick up phrases that don't make sense.

> *'When I proofread my own (work) I have to read it out loud.'*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

Different students found that either recording themselves speaking or using text to speech software was helpful.

> *'I use the read aloud function on my iPad to proofread my assignments and that helps me to spot mistakes.'*
>
> Bangor Focus Group

While many writing packages have a built-in button for text to speech, there tends to be limited voice options available. There are numerous text-to-speech packages which allow more choice, many of them freely, available e.g. NaturalReader. Sometimes it was noted that the **record it** method combined with **leave it** works well. Various tips here include playing at ca 0.8 times speed to make you listen to every word, spelling out syllables rather than entire words or asking someone else to record themselves reading it. This last point assumes some third-party support is permitted in HEIs' guidance. More about proofreading buddies is included later in this section. Finally, many people noted that recordings allowed them to spot poor structuring of work, where mixtures of simple, compound, complex and complex/compound sentences are needed to keep a reader interested. Lots of short sentences can be somewhat monotone and dull and too many long rambling sentences lead to easily lost threads. Students noted:

> *'I'm bad for writing long sentences. For a long time I would use words trying to be "academic" and "intelligent" but it made it impossible to understand so now I ask "can I say this more easily?" rather than "can I say this and sound smart".'*
>
> Loughborough Focus Group
>
> *'When I re-read it, I keep in mind – if it bores me it will bore someone else.'*
>
> Southampton Focus Group

Print it. The written word looks very different in hard copy compared to on screen and many students noted their mistakes around formatting issues only really came to light when the work was printed. If students were waiting in a queue for a printer at the last minute before the deadline, this meant there was no chance to change it. Repeating words or phrases, differences in titles and subtitles or poor placing of diagrams are also easy to spot in the printed form.

‘Printing several copies to read not on a screen is what works for me. As at A levels I did everything on paper’.

Warwick Focus Group

Many students noted that using a brightly coloured pen helped them pick up their errors easily, one went as far to say that they always used a red pen because it reminded them of their school tutors’ marking things wrong.

Many students noted the enormity of trying to do everything in one go and strategies to break it up into smaller, more manageable parts.

Split it, is about starting with the big picture regarding aesthetics in consistency of titles, formatting of diagrams and working out whether the structure of the document fulfils the assessment brief requirements.

‘I made up my own early deadlines.’

Southampton Focus Group

‘I add subheadings in my work to help me proofread by breaking it down.’

Wolverhampton Focus Group

Question it at this point to make sure the key point in each section comes through. Several examples of this came through in different guises from more than one focus group.

‘My personal tutor gave me a formula. Every paragraph has to have 3 steps:
1. *What are your findings?*
2. *What does the research say?*
3. *Your criticism/point of view – in every paragraph.’*

Bangor Focus Group

‘Ask yourself, “what does the coursework want?” Read the rubric and brief.’

Loughborough Focus Group

At this point the students noted that putting themselves in the position of the marker, or **Reframe it**, using the assessment brief was helpful.

‘My friend at a different university marked their own work before submitting it to see what grade they would give themselves.’

Loughborough Focus Group

‘Imagine your audience – choose a specific person and consider them reading it’.

Loughborough Focus Group

Students in technical subjects should be checking their data and equations here as it is easy to transpose numbers incorrectly, forget subscripts and superscripts in formulae or get the units wrong. One student noted:

‘I write the equations (in the assessment), then I do a problem on a white board from a different paper and check the equations work and match.’

Loughborough Focus Group

After the structure and organisation of the document has been reviewed, and notwithstanding the challenges with sustainability, many students noted it was useful to mark-up different types of error on separate printed copies. For example, going through and marking up all the punctuation allows you to spot if there are mixtures of sentence types and lengths and if types of punctuation, particularly if apostrophes are being used correctly. Doing the same with titles and subtitles allows inconsistencies in size, font and emphasis to be spotted. Some suggested solutions to the sustainability concern, could be **Circle it** in multiple colours on one copy or printing out the document in a smaller size. Use the living checklist compiled from reviewing feedback should also be used at this point to pick up on individual's recurring errors.

Whatever the method of mark up, making sure all the errors that have been found through painstaking hard work are corrected is important. One common method identified by students was to **Check it**, mark each one off with a highlighter or each correction off as they were completed.

Tech wary students noted that spellcheckers "lie". What they really meant was that if words are spelt or used incorrectly, but in the wrong context, a spellchecker will not help. Similarly, language abusage where there is one letter missed or changed such as "than" rather than "then", and "where" instead of "were" often defeat software. Incomplete sentence, missing verbs, singular vs plural and changes from passive to active tense are all things that can be missed. Don't assume if something isn't highlighted by the tech it has to be right.

Morph it. Some people do not have the luxury of being able to print a document. It may be very long or contain sensitive material that can't be left out. In these cases, proofing has to be done on screen and the best way to spot mistakes was noted as tricking your brain into viewing the work differently to overcome some of the familiarity issues highlighted previously. Examples included, changing the font to make it twice the size it is normally, amending the pagination to arrange the text differently which makes people read those words differently too – this technique was noted as particularly good at helping with punctuation errors and double words. Another way of achieving this was by changing the font type, moving the text to columns instead of whole pages or landscape instead of portrait. One trick suggested was converting the document to upload it to a Kindle, to read while travelling, where people are often relaxed in their routine.

> *'A teacher told me to change the font of the text so it looks different. See it differently and notice mistakes.'*
>
> Warwick Focus Group

Hide it. There were various tricks to make sure concentration was retained such as creating smaller sections to prevent the brain skim reading and filling in the blanks. Students at the focus groups were often advocates of the non-opaque (often black) ruler which isolates a single line at a time.

> *'When I proofread I take a black ruler and look at each line one at a time.'*
>
> Leicester Focus Group

Others suggested a folder over piece of paper worked well, but the objective was always the same; to slow them down and make them read what was actually on the page and not skip ahead. On screen, as well as the font, it's possible to change the background to achieve the same thing or change the font from black to white to hide the majority of the text and focus on a single area.

'Open a new document. Copy it paragraph from paragraph – try it to make it more manageable.'

Warwick Focus Group

Students with reasonable adjustments who use coloured coversheets for their dyslexia changed the font to that colour, following the same process.

Reverse it. Turning the sentences round and starting from the end does sounds bizarre but again students explained about changing the order in which your brain is expecting the words. One student noted that when they thought they had finished their assignment they started moving their work paragraph by paragraph from the end to a new document, reviewing each one carefully before moving to the next. The act of doing this made them slow down and made them read every word.

Reread it. One circle of checking typically picks up 50-70% of your mistakes. Starting again at the beginning is likely to find some more and/or pick up on new issues from the first set of changes. Ideally you have left enough time to do this, remember the point at the beginning that the biggest thing to remember is proofreading isn't easy and it needs time.

Scan it. Once you have done all your changes, make sure you can see a whole page at a time and scan over how it looks before you submit it. Making changes can move titles and figures around and disrupt the appearance. This last check means that items such as figures and their captions are not separated from one another or tables split by changing the odd few words at the last minute. As one student said:

'Think how the assessor would look through it and how it looked. Tiny details such as font sizes of captions, for perception.'

Southampton Focus Group

Loop it. Build into your review process of reviewing your feedback and feeding it forward on to your list for next time.

Search it. Find university resources to help solve repeating errors.

Proofreading buddies. Despite the significant number of policies that ban all third-party involvement, it is necessary to raise the idea of proofreading buddies in this report as it came up often, though it does not appear in the 20 self-proofing tips list available as a resource.

For example:

'I have a friend, we proofread for each other. We have a discussion about what we think of the work.'

Bangor Focus Group

'Ask a peer doing a different coursework topic to support with proofreading.'

Leicester Focus Group

'When I was really struggling, I asked a friend what they thought the main point of my paragraph was. They thought it was something different, so I knew I had to work on it again.'

Loughborough Focus Group

‘When I proofread for a friend I send them questions rather than suggestions, so for example, I’ll ask “In this section, were you trying to say this or that?”, or “Will you explain more about this point later?”’

Bangor Focus Group

‘My peers looked for things I wouldn’t have thought to – Trivial things like formatting – they were really interested in perception – when the assessor looked through it – how it looked – tiny details such as font sizes of captions, for perception.’

Southampton Focus Group

Students were told by staff in many areas to “buddy up” and read/feedback to each other’s work, sometimes in total contradiction to their institutional policy. It is fair to say that professional people often do get their colleagues to read through those important “to the boss” emails or high-profile presentations to avoid embarrassment. Therefore, this quid pro quo can perhaps be made less contentious by identifying a buddy or buddies outside your direct programme of study, so no-one is tempted to steal any ideas. Another suggestion was that students could **Plan it** to complete their work early and use questions e.g. “sp?” and prompts “very wordy” rather than offering solutions or simply follow their HEI’s guide for third-party proofreaders (assuming they exist).

Reflections on Methodology

From the very outset of this project, the intention was that the Student Union would lead the way. Messinger (representing a Student Union) approached Dann (a member of university staff) when the original call from the QAA was announced and not the other way round. Other Student Unions and academics followed through both sets of connections, leading to input from other HEIs. The strength of not having any academic staff involved in focus groups was the students were very candid about what they said and perhaps shared more than they would have done if academic staff had been present, through for example, not wanting to upset anyone they knew. However, this was a difficult concept for some academic colleagues who really wanted to take a greater and more active part in the focus groups and cared very much about what their students thought.

A second point was that we have tried to focus on the student voice as much as possible in the outputs. Whether the outputs are nested in the best pedagogic practice was not the primary focus, it was really about passing tips and ideas from willing students to other students who needed them. There was no effort to control the make-up of the focus groups and it is fair to say that the approach was that all comers were welcome. As indicated in the original case for support, participation was incentivised with vouchers, and targeting students differently may have generated a different response, but we followed previous tried and tested experience from Student Union colleagues. Expectations and processes regarding ethical clearance and budgeting for research studies run by the Student Union and supported by the academics had not been determined, meaning the process needed to be organised and agreed upon for the first time. This included defining where budgets were held and how money could be transferred between Unions.

Closing Thoughts

Proofreading is a key part of any academic assessment. Giving yourself time to read over and check your work, will benefit you in two ways:

1. You will develop a key set of skills than can be applied to any career. Even with the advantages of spellcheckers and GenAI, being able to read a text and to identify and correct any mistakes can be critical. Even professionals make mistakes. Think of a legal text when buying a house. There may be typos and errors. You need to be able to identify these before you add your signature.
2. Regardless of your degree programme, the ability to present a coherent text is a universal expectation. If you present work that has not been proofread, there is the possibility that the work will not say what you want it to, but rather what you think it should say. When your work is marked, it is marked by what is on the page, not what you think is on the page. Imagine a text that has not been proofread. Imagine the mistakes, typos, and other errors. Now imagine the impact this will have on person marking the script. If the work does not make sense, this will affect the standard and the mark that can be awarded.

By using the self-proofreading tips and hints above, you can learn to adopt techniques that allow you to proofread your work.

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Appendix 1: Universities searched

Universities with a Dedicated Proofreading Policy

1. Bournemouth University
2. Brunel University London
3. Coventry University
4. Edinburgh Napier University
5. Keele University
6. King's College London
7. London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
8. Loughborough University
9. Manchester Metropolitan University
10. Oxford Brookes University
11. Queens University Belfast
12. Royal Holloway
13. Sheffield Hallam University
14. Swansea University
15. University of Aberdeen
16. University of Brighton
17. University of Cambridge
18. University of Dundee
19. University of Edinburgh
20. University of Essex
21. University of Glasgow
22. University of Hull
23. University of Leeds
24. University of Leicester
25. University of Manchester
26. University of Nottingham
27. University of Oxford
28. University of Portsmouth
29. University of Reading
30. University of Sheffield
31. University of Sussex
32. University of York

Universities with Proofreading in Other Policies

1. Bangor University
2. De Montfort University
3. Falmouth University
4. Middlesex University
5. Northumbria University
6. Nottingham Trent University
7. University of Birmingham
8. University of Bradford
9. University of Bristol
10. University of Buckingham
11. University of Central Lancashire
12. University of Exeter
13. University of Hertfordshire
14. University of Huddersfield
15. University of Liverpool
16. University of London (City)
17. University of Southampton
18. University of Strathclyde
19. University of Westminster, London
20. University of Suffolk
21. University of Surrey
22. University of Winchester

Universities with a Proofreading Policy Behind a Login

1. Lancaster University
2. Queen Mary University of London
3. University East Anglia
4. University of Bath
5. University of Warwick

Unable to find a Proofreading Policy

1. Abertay University
2. Aberystwyth University
3. Anglia Ruskin University
4. Bath Spa University
5. Birmingham City University
6. Buckinghamshire New University
7. Durham University
8. Edge Hill University
9. Heriot-Watt University
10. Imperial College London
11. Kingston University
12. Leeds Beckett University
13. Liverpool Hope University
14. Liverpool John Moores University
15. London South Bank University
16. Newcastle University
17. Plymouth Marjon University
18. Royal Agricultural University
19. Teesside University
20. University College London
21. University of Aston
22. University of Cardiff
23. University of Chester
24. University of Cumbria
25. University of Derby
26. University of Gloucestershire
27. University of Greenwich
28. University of Kent
29. University of Lincoln
30. University of Northampton
31. University of Plymouth
32. University of Roehampton London
33. University of Salford
34. University of South Wales
35. University of St Andrews
36. University of Stirling
37. University of the West of England
38. University of the West of Scotland
39. University of Wolverhampton
40. University of Worcester
41. York St John University

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions

1. Do you think the differences in proofreading expectations are fair and what are their experiences of variability?
2. Where does your own proofreading policy sit, do you have one and know what it says? Do you find it accessible (both terminology, and awareness of where to locate it)?
3. Have you used a third-party proofreader yourselves? Do you know how was that regulated in terms of making sure you did not break any rules and/or put yourself at risk?
4. Do you have good examples to share of how your institution taught you to proofread your own work?
5. How students proofread their work. Do you use any tools and what is your own practice? Have you any tips to share?

Appendix 3: Flow diagram for Project/Dissertation Review