How would students prefer to be assessed? Report of a pilot research study.

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Abstract

Background- A wide variety of assessment methods are used in the School of Health Sciences, but little is known about how these methods are viewed by students.

Method- Semi-structured interviews with students were used to explore their views of assessment methods, and whether and why they found these enjoyable, anxiety-provoking, fair, and/or rigorous. Interviews were conducted by a student researcher.

Results- Because of implementation problems, only six students were recruited. Diverse assessment methods were mentioned. Unsurprisingly, examinations were experienced as stressful, and assessments requiring demonstration or presentations were stressful for some. Some assessment methods were seen as clearly relevant to the professions for which students were training, particularly on clinical placement; others involved knowledge or skills that would not be used in the future. Students believed that a mixture of assessment methods was fairest, as it catered for diverse preferences and abilities. They placed great value on clarity in assessment questions, and valued being given assessment information early. Assessments should reflect lecture content.

Conclusions- Despite the small sample, the findings deserve careful consideration. The students interviewed were thoughtful and insightful. It is itself an important finding that some students are able and willing to contribute to constructive discussions about assessment, and they should routinely be given a voice in discussions of assessment design throughout the School. Although these preliminary findings need confirmation by further research, there is face validity to the implications of these findings that assessments could be made fairer by:
- the advance provision of clear and comprehensive information about assessment tasks and marking criteria;
- ensuring that course content is adequate preparation for assessment; and
- consistent adherence by markers to the marking criteria.

Key words: assessment; assessment methods; student preferences

1 Introduction

Assessment is an aspect of higher education (HE) widely seen as important, challenging, and in need of improvement (HEA, 2012). Improvement is needed for both principled and pragmatic reasons: while HE staff should be pursuing excellence as a matter of course, fee-paying students are likely to be more demanding in this respect than their predecessors (HEA, 2012). Nevertheless, improving the quality of improvement is not straightforward. Many writers (e.g. Sadler, 2005) have noted that assessments tend to be subjective, notwithstanding the use of explicit criteria and standards; and some argue that the achievements appropriate to higher education actually resist measurement (Knight, 2006).

There is widespread agreement that assessment should be used to facilitate on-going learning, rather than simply to measure achievements to date (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Carless, 2007).

It is acknowledged that students need help to understand the criteria which guide the assessment of their work (Rust et al, 2003; Carless, 2007). The concept of 'assessment literacy' has been suggested to indicate the importance of such understanding among students (Price et al, 2012), and O'Donovan et al (2008) propose that communities of practice should work together to develop understanding and expertise, thereby suggesting that HE staff and students should engage in ongoing conversations about assessment.

This paper reports the findings of a small research study funded by the Learning Development Centre at City University London in 2012, and carried out in the School of Health Sciences. The study sought to discover student preferences in assessment by asking them to articulate these, it represented a preliminary step in initiating the sort of staff-student conversation suggested above. The paper outlines the study's aims and methods, notes implementation difficulties, and presents and discusses the findings. Because of a very low response rate, this study can only be considered a pilot, but one that produced some interesting comments on current assessment methods.

2 Aims and methods

The study sought to explore students' views of different assessment methods, and in particular, whether and why they found these:
• enjoyable;
• anxiety-provoking;
• fair; and/or
• rigorous.

Final-year undergraduate students were invited by e-mail to take part in the research. The interview schedule was based on the aims outlined above (see Appendix 1). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the results were analysed thematically.

3 Implementation delays

Funding was dependent on the involvement of one or more City University London students in the study. It proved difficult to recruit a student quickly. After a delay, this was achieved, but further delays occurred while obtaining School of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee approval, and identifying and using a method whereby all final-year undergraduates could be contacted by e-mail. Thus it was almost the end of the final term before the invitation e-mail was sent. It was not surprising, therefore, that the response was low (four, one of whom did not reply to subsequent e-mails to arrange an interview). The post-graduate student researcher had previously conducted three practice interviews with friends, to gain confidence in interviewing and to receive feedback from colleagues. These were checked by another member of the research team, and judged to meet more than adequately the standards of acceptable qualitative interviewing. In the absence of other data, these practice interviews have therefore been included in the data set, making a total of six interviews. This is still a much lower number than the 30 interviews planned.

Furthermore, two of the practice interviews were with postgraduate rather than undergraduate students; because of low numbers, it was decided that they should be included. Some interesting and informative data were obtained, though what was intended to be a small piece of research can only be considered as a pilot study.

4 Findings
Findings are presented as follows:
- profile of respondents
- the variety of assessment methods and student preferences (4.1)
- the perceived relevance of assessment methods to future careers (4.2)
- the perceived fairness of assessment methods (4.3)
- expectations and preparation for assessments (4.4)
- timing of assessments (4.5)
- feedback after assessments(4.6)

Interview no.	Gender	Age	Discipline	Level
1	Male	49	Optometry	Undergraduate
2	Female	23	Language and Communication Science	Postgraduate
3	Female	27	Optometry	Undergraduate
4	Female	30	Mental Health Nursing	Undergraduate
5	Female	24	Language and Communication Science	Postgraduate
6	Female	nk	Language and Communication Science	Undergraduate

Table 1. Profile of respondents

4.1 The variety of assessment methods and student preferences
A wide range of assessment methods were mentioned. Most or all respondents mentioned practical assessments, essays, group work, written examinations, and multiple choice questions. About half also mentioned short answer questions, vivas and placements, and dissertations and presentations were also mentioned.

Respondents varied in their personal preferences, but recognised that this was largely to do with personality, and often cited friends whose preferences were the opposite of their own. However, they gave some interesting reasons for their own preferences.

Some enjoyed the opportunities afforded by certain methods (such as coursework essays and dissertations) for reflection over a period of time.
> *I think that one of the reasons I don't like exams is because I like to be able to think things through and to take my time (Interview 6)*

> *I prefer doing coursework because you have more time to go into depth … I have a bit longer and I can do it at my own pace. … in the moment [e.g. exams or vivas] you can forget things or you can't, or sometimes you don't do yourself justice. Whereas with coursework you can re- - go back over it… (Interview 2)*

Another enjoyed vivas because the dialogue was in itself a learning experience.
> *Well, I like vivas … I like having the one on one… you kind of get to understanding things a bit better and if you already understand it, then you feel amazing. Quite often at the end of a viva, I'll kind of find out something I didn't know. (Interview 4)*

Some preferences related to how different methods related to the expectations of and preparation for assessment, and these are discussed below in 4.4.

Unsurprisingly, examinations were disliked because they were experienced as stressful.
> *I've had anxiety specifically in exam situations, I don't like it. (Interview 6)*

Some students, though, had learnt to cope with the stress.
> *I think a lot of the exam problems are the stress and the emotion. Yeah. I think so. I do pretty well in exams but it's because I keep myself pretty much together for them. There's no point getting upset about them. (Interview 1)*

Assessments requiring demonstration or presentation were also stressful for some.
> *I don't mind talking in front of people and stuff as well, so the group presentations and the OSCEs weren't that bad for me ... Other people would prefer everything to be essay based because they can express themselves better that way. So I think the OSCEs are particularly difficult for more people just because it's a face to face. You have to perform then and there, practically and vocally. (Interview 4)*

(OSCEs are practical examinations where students are observed and assessed carrying out clinical tasks.)

Student 6 found group work very stressful:
> *We had a group coursework in our final year and it was the most stressful thing ever... everyone just ends up bitching about each other and there's lots of conflict. (Interview 6)*

The stress was greater because the group work coincided with a number of other tasks.

4.2 The perceived relevance of assessment methods to future careers
Some assessment methods were seen as clearly relevant to the professions for which students were training.

I like being assessed on placement because your supervisor's observing you all the time. And they get to see you in a range of situations dealing with a range of different things and I think that is more holistic. It gives them a really good impression of what you'd be like, again, working in the real world. (Interview 6)

However, the mental health nursing student felt that some of the documentations he was required to complete during placement was not very relevant.

I think some of [the portfolio] is a bit too focused on physical healthcare. And obviously we do need to know a lot about that as mental health nurses, but there are some things in it that you're just never going to have to do… wound assessment and things like that which are just - you're not necessarily going to be able to get signed off. And that puts a bit of pressure on you because you're running around looking for someone that's hurt themselves so that you can assess their wound… I haven't ever dressed a wound since my OSCEs. I haven't come across one in placement. (Interview 4)

Some assessments were criticised for the perceived irrelevance of their requirements.

This idea that you have to reference articles and remember them for the exam is something that I've never come across before…it just seems strange to me that in a Masters programme you're asked to memorise where you're getting your information from … It's not conducive to making you a better speech therapist, I don't think … In real life you'll always be able to just search them and go into them, and it's more important to just remember the concept than remember where you got them from. (Interview 5)

The same student criticised another assessment for its content.

Knowing how many layers there are in the brain … I don't think that … as a speech and language therapist … you're going to come across something and you're not going to understand it because you don't know how many layers there are in the brain. (Interview 5)

An optometry student (student 1) also commented on the perceived relevance of course content tested in assessments, such as detailed biological knowledge of the whole body. But he also acknowledged that students might misjudge the relevance of content because of limited knowledge of working practices and contexts.

A lot of people seem to struggle with like dispensing and stuff like that because they don't really understand why they need to do it … They think that refraction, the actual test procedure of testing eyes is like paramount … you need a wider picture, yeah … after they've been working in an opticians for a bit they'll see why, it sort of all fits together. But just now I don't think they quite realise how important it is. (Interview 1)

Several students commented on how irrelevant written examinations seem to be to future work.

> *I don't think exams will be particularly relevant at all in our career, because you don't have to memorise things in a short time and then write them up in a short time. (Interview 2)*

Where students did feel an assessment method was relevant to their future work, they could acknowledge its value even when they disliked it: for example, assessed presentations, which encourage the development of a useful skill:

> *I actually think presentations are a good thing. I don't like talking in front of a lot of people, it does make me nervous, I hate the amount of preparation that goes into a presentation. But I think it's a valuable skill. (Interview 5)*

However, there was also a view that the stress of assessments outweighed the usefulness of such preparation for work.

> *Group coursework: obviously the university say that they're trying to teach us about teamwork and negotiation and assertiveness, that kind of thing, great skills to have. Not when you've got loads of other assessments and things and exams to revise for and your dissertation to do. (Interview 6]*

4.3 The perceived fairness of assessment methods

In general, students believed that a mixture of assessment methods was fairest, as it catered for the diverse preferences and abilities of different students.

> *I don't know about exams benefiting certain people over others …. you could say essays aren't fair because some people aren't very good at writing essays. I think if you're going to study at higher education then it's a skill that you need to learn to do. So everyone has strengths and weaknesses. So I don't know, I don't think it's unfair. (Interview 2)*

> *I think it just depends on people's strengths. There are some people like myself who prefer vivas, and then I guess it's unfair because there's not that many of them. But to be honest, you're going to have that with anything whatever …Some people are always better at written. It's just good to have a mixture, I guess; which they did. (Interview 3)*

However, there were plentiful instances where students perceived unfair demands in particular assessments. For example, assessment questions were not always seen as relating to course materials.

> *There was an exam earlier in the year where some of the questions, a lot of us didn't think that they were on the syllabus or that we'd been taught some of the questions. (Interview 2)*

Assessments where students were not all given the same task aroused suspicions of unfairness.

> *Some people, like myself, got the nice easy case record and other people got the really hard one. So obviously we all got higher marks. (Interview 3)*

Criticisms were also made of how assessments were marked. First, criteria were not always clear to students, and this is further discussed in 4.4 below . Second, markers appeared not always to heed the criteria.

> *The problem with [coursework] was that they didn't really adhere to their marking scheme at the end. (Interview 3)*

Third, there was perceived variation between markers.

> *Students have been unhappy with the fact that there were clear, clearly different ways of marking in each tutorial group. So although all the tutors are supposed to be following a standardised way of marking scheme, there were very clear differences in the way that they were marking. (Interview 6)*

This was also thought to be true in practical assessments.

> *I think that the marking can be really biased because it just depends who's observing you … the practicals that, you know, it seems to be you either have a nice supervisor person for that time, or you don't. (Interview 3)*

It was suggested that having simpler criteria would improve fairness:

> *What they did in the fourth year is they changed it to a pass or fail, so basically the marking criteria were made really clear, really simple for supervisors and we weren't given a mark for our placement, it was just a pass or fail. (Interview 6)*

Nevertheless, there was a sense that to do well on placement required pandering to the preferences of the placement tutor/supervisor rather than meeting more objective criteria.

One student suggested

> *You just go with whatever your tutor wants. (Interview 6)*

A similar point was made with regard to dissertations (modules within the school vary with respect to whether or not the supervisor is first marker). Students learnt to 'game' by pleasing the supervisor, but this did not necessarily mean that they were pleased with their work.

> *All the students felt, Whatever my supervisor says I'm going to do it because they're marking it. Which then - I feel some of us didn't get a chance to actually take our project in the direction we wanted to go in or to do things in a certain way because we, it ended up being about the marks and getting as many marks as you can, which is a bit of a shame really… (Interview 6)*

Finally, there was perceived unfairness where individual grades were affected by group efforts (or lack of them).

> *And personally I just don't like the group presentations … You're not in control of what grade you're going to get because you have to rely on other people. And if they don't do their bit of research or turn up on the day when you're practising then it's just, yeah it's horrible. Yeah, there are people that don't pull their weight. (Interview 4)*

4.4 Expectations and preparation for assessments

Five of the six respondents mentioned preparation for exams, most often talking about assessment criteria and marking schemes.

Students placed great value on clarity in assessment questions, which helped to ensure an appropriate response:

> *I think the portfolio's a good idea for our course … I couldn't think of a better way to assess how we're doing in practice because it's so clearly laid out what you do and don't need to do. (Interview 4)*

> *I would like to see some more clarity in terms of what is expected, but that has nothing to do with the types of assessments, that's to do with, I guess, the instructions and being more clear that way. (Interview 5)*

Lack of clarity caused frustration:

> *Often with the short answer questions you don't really know the type of answer you're supposed to give. So I kind of want to scream at them, do you mean this one or this one. Because I can answer it both ways. (Interview 3)*

Students valued being given assessment information early:

> *I'd also like if exam, final exam, information was released a little bit sooner. Because the exam information was released after classes were done which made it difficult to go into class the next day and ask a friend or ask a professor about it. (Interview 5)*
> *They could set out what is exactly expected of you better beforehand […] Like an actual, a marking scheme, or like the actual sheet that you're going to have to write on, that would be really useful. (Interview 3)*

One student felt that more specific criteria not only improved performance in assessment, but also helped to support in-depth learning.

> *Some of the class tests have been fine because they just quite specific so, yeah it's a bit more focused what you have to learn. So that's better than an exam which is a bit broad and so you don't really get any in depth knowledge or anything. (Interview 2)*

Some assessment criteria were viewed as being unrealistic as well as unclear:

> *The only thing that has seemed unfair sometimes is the assessment criteria for the essays. Some of those have seemed a bit unrealistic given the word count we've got, for example, or unclear. And some of the feedback that you get then is, well I would have liked to have heard more about this. But it wasn't part of the assessment criteria. So you've met criteria A and B and they've almost given you a secret third one (Interview 4)*

Assessments should reflect lecture content. One student thought it unfair that:

> *When you [examiners] ask about something that is not in the lecture slides … you're not really testing knowledge, you're just trying to catch people out. And that doesn't make sense to me. (Interview 5)*

One student appreciated an assessment (multiple choice questions) that reflected sufficient of the course content to make all her revision seem worthwhile.

> *Because if you have been revising for ages, then it's nicer that it [assessment] actually covers a little bit of everything. So, again it's kind of a bit less hit and miss, like you either, like if you've done your work then it kind of pays off in general and you kind of get the mark you deserve. (Interview 3)*

Respondents also talked about their own ways of preparing for assessments, stating that they prepared differently for different types. Some preferred coursework/essays, as they had time to prepare and to learn the content better:

> *I like the essays because, I think because you've got the time to prepare and write it. It's a good way of assessing your personal knowledge about a subject and how much you know about it and understand about it. (Interview 4)*

> *I don't like the process of revising [for exams] and having to potentially anticipate what questions are going to come up […] Whereas with coursework you can take your time, you can go off and research, you can use lots of different things to help you, so you can use books, you can use journals, you can ask people, which I find really beneficial. (Interview 6)*

While relevant information enabled individuals to prepare well, some courses also offered structures to assist preparation for assessment. Question and answer sessions and assessment-specific tutorials were mentioned:

> *[The dissertation is] just something I'd never done before, but they, also they gave us tutorials on how to do it before. So we had small group sessions that you didn't have to attend but you could attend them if you wanted more help and support on the dissertation. (Interview 4)*

Having a supervisor for the dissertation also helped students to prepare adequately.

4.5 Timing of assessments

All of the students commented on the timings of assessments, though they said very different things. Some students preferred to be assessed at the end of the year, whilst others thought it more appropriate to be assessed soon after study had been undertaken; others preferred a mixture.

> *We are assessed pretty much straightaway after learning topics and things, yeah. So I've no real complaints about that. (Interview 1)*

> *It's nice to have them throughout the year because then you don't wind up with that situation of, I learned it in September and now I need to remember it for June exams (Interview 5)*

> *I like exams in the summer, I think that works quite well…. it's good to have exams at summer in a lump sum and have coursework throughout the year systematically (Interview 6).*

One student considered that being assessed a long time after studying a topic resulted in 'relearning' rather than 'revising' a topic

> *I think it helps you consolidate it a bit better if you've been studying it for say a term and then you have a test on it and then it's more engrained in your mind, rather than studying it and then not coming back to it for three or four months and then having to go back and relearn it almost. I think that's less effective. (Interview 2)*

Two students expressed the view that the scheduling of assessments was organised for the convenience of the academic staff who were marking them:

> *(Timings) could be better sometimes and I think a lot of the time its more for the convenience of the staff than the student (Interview 1)*

Overlapping assessments put pressure on students:

> *There was so much of it and it sort of got in the way of a bit of revision. It sort of overlapped it and I had to let go a bit of revision so I could get this bloody thing done, and that was annoying. (Interview 1)*

> *Sometimes I feel they've put it at the wrong time...very close together … three essays that we had due on the 5th ....three essays is a lot, I think so. (Interview 5)*

This felt worse because assignments were distributed unequally between the two academic semesters.

There was some ambivalence about being continually assessed:

> *It was actually quite good this year in that we had all of the way through, I mean literally every week we had an assessment. Which was a nightmare in terms of the fact we were all just stressed. But in terms of the way they split it, it was good, I'd much rather have on-going assessments or have a few of the exams in January or December, because when you get to the summer there's usually less time than there*

is to revise for other exams and then suddenly you've got to do everything over both terms. (Interview 3)

The mental health student appreciated the way timetables facilitated preparation for assessments:

We've always had a study leave planned before something's due in, so that's really good. I know not many people get that. (Interview 4)

4.6 Feedback after assessments

Though not explicitly asked about feedback, some did express their appreciation of feedback:

Yeah I like feedback. Feedback's good. (Interview 3)

One Optometry student described how negative feedback during a viva voce examination had helped him to focus and assisted his recall.

That negative thing from the lecturer who can spark something in your memory. Because they're actually speaking to you, rather than looking a piece of paper, you're actually getting input and it can often trigger a little something that you couldn't, you wouldn't ordinarily remember. (Interview 1)

One speech and language therapy student commented on the lack of developmental feedback and the impact this has on progression:

The feedback's really poor, so you don't really know where you've gone wrong. And it's very difficult to pin down a professor and have them re-read your entire essay and tell you where you've gone wrong... I'm completely standing still, no development, same marks continuously and I don't know how to make them go up or down. (Interview 5)

The lack of detailed and specific written feedback when rubrics were used was mentioned:

I'm happy to accept the mark but I need to know where I went wrong and there's just check marks in the rubric boxes....it's not that obvious to me (Interview 5)

Rubrics are just not good enough for saying what you did wrong […] there's check marks in the rubric boxes you've satisfactory, good, but I need to understand what's the difference between satisfactory, good and excellent. (Interview 5)

There was sometimes conflict between clinical and academic feedback. One student described a strategic way of approaching this that involved producing work that gains marks but may be contrary to current clinical practice experience. This student describes acting on feedback from her tutor about weakness in her work to find that this was challenged by her supervisor in practice, and vice versa.

You tend to find (yourself) agreeing with wherever you're being marked at the time, and I think that hinders you as a practitioner in the end because you really don't know what you're doing….I felt like I was being marked by both …I was having to please both at the same time for the same piece of work… it became about gaining marks rather than what's clinically most appropriate (Interview 6)

The importance of positive and respectful feedback was commented on by one student:
> *They're very good with their feedback, they never make you feel rubbish in all of this, they're very approachable, all of the staff. (Interview 6)*

Two students commented on the timeliness of feedback and the improvement in this relating to the three-week turnaround time recently introduced by the University:
> *To start with we had to wait quite a long time for our results but they seem to have got it down to four weeks now, so that's quite good ....especially if you're going to need to resit things then you, the sooner you know the better because you can start preparing again. (Interview 4)*

5 Discussion
5.1 Limitations of the study
The small sample size has already been mentioned. There were no students from a number of disciplines taught in the School: radiography, adult nursing, children's nursing, and midwifery. Though the points made by students in this small sample are interesting and deserve careful consideration, they cannot be taken to be exhaustive or representative. The study needs to be repeated on a significantly larger scale. Another possible limitation is that students' accounts of how they were assessed were taken at face value, and not checked against assessment guidelines for relevant modules.

The students interviewed were thoughtful and insightful about assessment. This may itself be the most important finding of this study: that at least some students are able and willing to contribute to constructive discussions about the challenges of designing fair and appropriate assessment methods. For example, participants' perceptions that assessments were unfair were not routine whinges but based on actual examples that they convincingly described and explained. Students should routinely be given a voice in discussions of assessment design throughout the School: not only could this help to improve the quality of assessment, it could also help to improve the levels of 'assessment literacy' among students, as urged elsewhere (HEA, 2012; Price et al, 2012).

Students' acknowledgement that preferences reflect different character traits is borne out by the literature (Furnham et al, 2008). It is not obvious how such differences can be easily accommodated, other than, as our participants suggested, by the use of a variety of methods in the hope that in this way, each student will at least sometimes encounter their preferred assessment methods. The data in 4.3 illustrates Sadler's (2005) view that assessments, despite attempts to create objective standards, continue to be seen as subjective, leaving in turn a perception of unfairness (Sambell et al, 1997).

The value that some students placed on feedback that they can use is in harmony with the Higher Education Academy's (2012) emphasis on providing formative feedback (or feed forward), which is often neglected in favour of summative feedback. Similarly, the suggestion that assessment methods should reflect the demands of their future working lives is congruent with Boud and Falchikev's (2006) argument that assessment methods should be designed to support post- as well as pre-qualifying learning.

6 Conclusion

A number of summary points arise from our limited data that have face validity and deserve consideration. Assessments could be made fairer by:

- the advance provision of clear and comprehensive information about assessment tasks and marking criteria;
- ensuring that course content is adequate preparation for assessment; and
- consistent adherence by markers to the marking criteria.

It would also be valuable to undertake a larger study that takes this pilot forward. This could provide a firmer evidence base, which could additionally examine any differences between students of different professions. It could also serve to establish one means whereby students and staff could debate assessment issues and together develop 'assessment literacy'.

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Appendix 1. Topic guide

Introduction:

Basic information e.g. age, gender, nationality, subject studied, first/second languages, disabilities etc.

Which types of assessment have you experienced on your course? Please describe briefly. (Prompts: Essay, short answer questions, MCQs, portfolio, OSCEs, group work, presentation/poster dissertation, examinations, practical exam. Online, on paper, in class, own choice of time/place.)

Which assessment types do you prefer? Why?

Which types do you like least? Why?

Which do you think are the fairest types of assessment? Why?

Do you have any suggestions as to ways in which assessments perceived to be less fair could be made fairer?

What is your own personal learning style(s) and how does this affect your attitude to assessments?

Do you prefer assessments to be ongoing/frequent or at the end of term/year?

What are the differences in how you prepare for different types of assessment? What comments do you have on how these differences affect outcomes?