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LEARNING FROM STUDENT AND STAFF EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This paper explores the findings of a study taking place at City, University of London focused on student and staff experiences of assessment. The project aims to identify the benefits and challenges of assessments as perceived by students and staff. This has been undertaken in light of the ongoing student feedback around assessment and feedback each year in the other National Student Survey (NSS) and other forums. Our paper draws on the findings of three world café events for students (two in-person and one online) with a total of 52 participants, and an online staff survey for which we received 61 responses. We draw together the findings of these research activities through the following questions:

- What do students and staff value about assessments?
- What are the challenges students and staff experience with assessments?

Using thematic analysis we were able to draw out data related to the above questions but it also became clear that there was an additional theme related to the value and challenges associated with formative assessments.

Exploring these themes, we found that students see assessments as more than just a 'necessary evil' and value the opportunity they provide to test their knowledge, develop their skills, and to gain feedback. Staff similarly value the opportunity assessments provide for students to consolidate their learning and to promote student engagement. However, participant responses also suggest that both students and staff face challenges in their experiences of assessment, with students sometimes struggling to interpret assessment briefs and not understanding the marking criteria. Staff, on the other hand, identified student anxiety, difficulties in applying feedback, and issues with student engagement identified as key challenges to assessment practice.

This paper will present the findings and make recommendations for how we can learn from these findings when designing assessment of student learning.

Keywords: Assessment, student experience, staff experience, educational development.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on the findings of a study that is ongoing at City, University of London. This has been undertaken due to frequent negative student feedback around assessment and feedback each year in the module evaluations, National Student Survey (NSS) and other forums. This paper reports on the project's initial findings designed to learn from student and staff experiences of assessment and feedback.

Assessment and Feedback has been the subject of an abundance of literature over many years and the annual National Student Survey in the United Kingdom has continued to demonstrate students' dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback (1). Whilst the qualitative comments from the NSS do provide some data, we were keen to focus further on the issues. We particularly wanted to ask both staff and students what they valued about assessment and what the key challenges were. Interestingly, when searching the literature there were only a few articles that explored staff and student views separately there were limited articles that referred to the perceptions of both staff and students together which demonstrates a gap in this area.

For students' assessment is central to their education experience and their demonstration of achievement. However, often there a lack of clarity around what is expected, in part due to the language that is used. For staff this also brings similar issues with a desire to support student learning and achievement but a need to ensure criteria are met. Exploring perceptions of assessment practice for both staff and students thus appeared to provide valuable insights into existing practice and to help identify areas for development.

It is important that both students and staff share their perceptions. Zhao et al. (2) in their study found some areas where staff and students were positive about assessment but overall, the feelings were negative towards assessment and feedback. One reason for this might be, as Winstone and Boud (3) have argued, these two processes conflict with each other and should be separated because whilst both are important, the focus on assessment overshadows the focus on feedback, preventing learning. Whilst we had not considered this as a focus for our study we were interested if any evidence of this arose.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to explore student and staff experiences of assessment we used the following two research questions:

- What do students and staff value about assessments?
- What do students and staff identify as the challenges with assessments?

We held two in-person world café events in December 2022 and a further online event in the same month held over Zoom. The world café format involves participants sharing their experiences by moving around several discussion tables and talking with a number of different people; Schiele et al. refer to the methodology as a 'circulating focus group' (4, p.281). Löhr et al. suggest that it is beneficial because of the level of participation it facilitates, as well as foregrounding its possible benefits to participants for 'facilitating dialogue and mutual learning, thus motivating their participation and response' (5). In an educational context, the additional benefits of participant engagement and discussion associated with this research methodology spoke to our project's aims. However, despite offering £10 Amazon vouchers for participation, we experienced a high number of dropouts between registration and the world cafes themselves for a range of reasons from sickness on the day to workload issues. For staff, the issue of availability posed a challenge and so we chose to conduct an online survey for this phase of the research. All teaching staff at City, University of London were eligible to contribute to this anonymous survey, which was hosted online using Qualtrics software. We received 61 completed responses to this survey, which represents 6% of academic staff in the institution, and we intend to host a follow-up world café event this summer. A thematic analysis of all data has been undertaken. This research received approval from City, University of London LEaD Research Ethics Committee.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we draw together findings from the student and staff responses to engage with the following questions:

- What is valuable about assessments?
- What is challenging about assessments?

We also examine the specific benefits and challenges of formative assessments, as this emerged strongly as a theme in world café discussions and survey responses. This reflects the importance of these themes in participant responses.

3.1 What is valuable about assessments?

Student and staff responses suggest that assessments are more than simply a 'necessary evil', required to enable students to graduate with a particular class of degree. Both sets of respondents identified a range of value associated with assessments, including the opportunity to test knowledge, promote course engagement, and receive/provide feedback on learning.

3.1.1 Testing knowledge

Student participants in all three world cafes suggested that they value the opportunity assessments provide to test their learning: *'Summative assessments reassure students that what they have learnt they are applying to their studies constantly...'* (WC2). Staff also pointed to the value of both formative and summative assignments as ensuring *'the students know whether they understand what was taught'* (SS53). The opportunity to apply, as well as to test, knowledge was also considered a valuable aspect of assessment: *'Opportunity to link theory to practice (particularly for a healthcare related course)'* (WC3). Furthermore, the sense of assessment's role in pacing studies and informing future work emerged as a theme: *'Practical assessments help test skills and feedback is useful to inform future decisions'* (WC1).

Authentic assessments were highlighted as providing valuable insight into professional practice: *'Practical examinations are helpful in giving an insight into what students will be doing once they enter the field'* (WC1). The staff survey picked up on similar themes observing how assessment can serve to prepare students for the world of work – *'[it] helps them in their application to professional practice'* (SS22) – as well as giving students a better appreciation of their field – *'[assessment contributes] to their broader understanding and development of journalism skills'* (SS43). The role played by assessment in ensuring that certain graduate attributes are met was also raised: *'The summative assessment is carefully selected to ensure that the students experience a variety of assessment methods and that graduate attributes are embedded into the teaching, learning and assessment methods'* (SS32). These findings foreground the importance of constructive alignment and the need for assessments to clearly relate to programme content. Furthermore, they foreground the value of both practical and authentic assessments, which enable students to apply their learning to a real-life situation, as well as to develop key graduate attributes.

3.1.2 Promoting Engagement

Participants in the first world café suggested that assessment feedback can prove motivational: *'Tests and works that [are] evaluated by lecturers enhances your desire to study more, learn more and doing your best'* (WC1). More broadly, the motivational value of assessment emerged as a theme in the third world café: *'Assessment is motivating - to push you to do well, irrespective of the outcome'* (WC3). Staff responses likewise picked up on assessment's role in promoting engagement and specifically on formative assessment's role in pacing student's study: *'[formative assessment] encourages them to begin the work, research and practice towards the summative when preparing for the formative'* (SS35). Staff respondents also linked the question of engagement to reflective learning, suggesting that formative assessments: *'encourages students to engage with the material and determine whether they are able to carry out tasks in controlled conditions. This often leads them to review the level of their engagement with the material for the rest of term'* (SS47). These responses foreground the value of assessment for promoting reflective learning, with students identifying areas of strength and weakness. Furthermore, the value of assessment in scaffolding learning and enabling students to pace their work across the term or wider programme is also an important point for consideration by those designing assessments.

3.1.3 Receiving feedback

The opportunity that assessments provide for receiving tutor feedback emerged in discussions as one of their most valuable qualities for students: *'The feedback given for me to know how I might do better and improve'* (WC1). In particular, feedback was viewed as being particularly valuable for helping students improve their work; a discussion point in all three world café events: *'Sometimes you don't do well – feedback helps you to identify areas to improve'* (WC3). Staff survey findings also suggest the value of feedback in students improving their work: *'[students are] given detailed feedback that is used to do another assignment or improve on the existing one'* (SS46). Personalised tutor feedback was identified as the most valuable, though peer and cohort feedback was also considered beneficial. Given the time involved in providing detailed, individual feedback and its relationship with staff-student ratios and turnaround time, those designing assessments should consider the logistics involved in responding to this finding. It is noteworthy that many staff respondents qualified their response to the value of feedback, suggesting that students do not always fully engage with feedback: *'On the whole in my experience students only consider feedback if their mark falls below their expectations'* (SS57). This has been found in other studies with both Zhao et al (2) and Winstone and Boud (3) finding that staff felt that despite providing feedback students only focused on the mark. Given this pedagogical challenge, finding ways to ensure students implement feedback is clearly an important way of ensuring that all students benefit from the time staff take to provide detailed individual feedback.

3.2 What is challenging about assessments?

3.2.1 Student understanding of assessments

Interestingly, there were fewer commonalities in student and staff responses on the themes of challenges than there were on the value of assessments. Nevertheless, key issues emerged in both sets of data in relation to understanding the task and applying feedback. Discussions in the world cafés suggested that students do not always feel confident they understand assessment briefs, suggesting sometimes the most challenging thing is: *'Not knowing what to do and where to start from'* (WC3). Respondents reported feeling frustration when being unsure about the requirements of the assessment: *'the biggest challenges have experienced with assessment is when having inadequate information about the assessment, it results in wasting my time'* (WC3). Zhao et al. (2) found this was a negative area for students where they were uncertain about the assessment task and what was expected. Staff responses echoed similar concerns with reference to students not reading the assessment briefs (2). However conversely, one staff respondent suggested that *'Students aren't always given enough support/guidance beforehand'* (SS56).

Responses also suggest that students do not always understand how they will be marked. In the world café discussions, participants reported they were *'Not always given a mark scheme for what is expected'* (WC1). Even where students receive formative feedback to support their work on the summative, staff expressed concern that students do not always *'understand how the feedback actually applies to their work'* (SS27). It may be that this relates to a concern in student discussions about *'Unfairness/lack of clarity with assessment criteria'* (WC3), as if students are unclear about how to apply feedback to their work they may also be unclear about the assessment criteria. To address these challenges, it is important to ensure that students are given regular opportunities to engage with both the assignment brief and the marking criteria in class, in advance of the assessment. Indeed, many staff respondents foregrounded the value of formative assessments for this very purpose, a point to which we will later return.

3.2.2 Workload and assessment anxiety

Another theme that emerged was the issue of students feeling overwhelmed by the demands of assessments. In student world café discussions, this theme emerged particularly strongly in relation to issues of assessment scheduling. There was a sense in some world café discussions that the scheduling of assessments was not considered at programme level: *'Not enough communication between lecturers about assessment deadlines or exam dates. Very often clashes and overlap with modules'* (WC1).

An associated issue was that participants felt that there is *'No movement on assessment deadlines. [The system is] Very rigid'* (WC1). When *'lots of coursework for different modules are due at the same time [it is] difficult to focus on them all at once'* (WC1). However, when deadlines take place in the

vacation, participants observed it can be *'difficult to ask questions to professors or academics'* (WC1). Related to this, in the first world café discussion, participants raised concerns about the giving of extensions, suggesting that *'In 2nd year. No deadline extension for student with learning disability'* (WC1).

These issues perhaps relate to a broader theme, raised in the staff survey, regarding student anxiety about assessment. One respondent suggested that *'students are extremely anxious regarding assessment and failing a module. This level of anxiety is creating a major barrier to their learning and absorbing constructive feedback'* (SS30). On the one hand, this perceived anxiety may relate to the challenging logistics of assessment deadlines, but it also points towards some of the pressures today's students face with balancing work commitments with their studies at a time of high tuition fees and a cost-of-living crisis. In such a context, both in-class support and the support of central services such as the Library and Study Skills for students with their assessments becomes particularly important and, in both student and staff responses, formative assessments emerged as an important means by which students can gain confidence in preparing for assessments. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to return to the no detriment policies implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, to explore whether greater flexibility with assessment modes (for example, open-book exams) and greater leniency with extensions might help ease some of the anxieties and stress associated with workload and assessment.

3.3 What are the specific benefits and challenges of formative assessments?

A common theme that we had not foreseen was that students referred to formative assessment frequently in their responses and so this became an additional theme we explored with staff, although we had not identified this as one of our primary research questions.

Staff responses regarding the benefit of formative assessments was the role they play in familiarising students with the format of the summative assessment and the confidence this gives students in approaching this task: *'Students are less nervous if they have done similar exercises'* (SS61). Being able to learn from errors – *'practice/dummy run where can learn/make mistakes'* (SS46) – and gaining confidence through identifying what they got right – *'Students want to understand which parts of their calculations are correct, and sometimes the reassurance that they actually got right something they were unsure about'* (SS47) – were seen as important factors. Similar themes also emerged in the student world cafés. Student participants in the world café events cited the value of formative assessments in improving their work before the summative: *'Formatives before the actual assessments help with better marks and learning outcomes'* (WC1).

In particular student participants reported that they value formative assessments and the chance to test their learning without it contributing to their final grade. Staff also suggested that formative assessments provide *'a chance to experiment'* (SS46) and that in particular, they offer a chance for students to gain confidence in the specific format of the summative assignment: *'[the formative] prepares students for the style of examination, as well as allowing students to see how prepared they are for an assessment, therefore giving them targeted areas to work on'* (SS37). The opportunity to reflect on learning and receive feedback arose as an important theme in both student and staff responses, with students suggesting *'Feedback on drafts for assignments (For example for labs/lab reports) are helpful to let students know they are on track'* (WC1). While staff suggested that the formative assessment feedback *'Provides guidance to the student to enhance their summative assignment outcome'* (SS26).

Students suggested that detailed feedback is particularly valuable: *'Extensive feedback for formatives rather than just pointing out the subjects you failed'* (WC1). Staff also raised the value of specific feedback to improve future grades, both in relation to the marking criteria – *'providing feedback based on the assessment criteria'* (SS30) – and signposting areas for further study/research – staff give *'guidance to read relevant material with the aim of achieving the module outcomes'* (SS26). Thus, embedding formative assessments in the learning process is clearly a valuable way of improving student outcomes.

While staff responses recognise the value of feedback, they also highlight the logistical challenge of providing formative feedback in a short space of time to large cohorts: *'Not possible to run a full mock or review full drafts due to student numbers'* (SS54). Furthermore, staff responses also raised concerns about student engagement with formative assessments: *'[the] problem is that participation is optional, and many students opt out or do not prepare adequately'* (SS32). Indeed, the broader issue of

engagement was raised as a concern by a number of staff, with a sense that formative feedback can only go so far in supporting students with the summative assessment: *'You hope that good formative assessment strategy will result in strong summative results with a reduced failure rate, however, there are other compounding factors such as poor attendance even if the student have attended the formative mock exam and received feedback. If the student has not engaged fully during the module or adequately prepared prior to the assessment they often inevitably struggle with the summative assessment'* (SS32).

Thus, while both students and staff viewed formative assignments as beneficial to positive assessment outcomes, they are not a silver bullet for ensuring assessment success. Students need support with engaging with assessment documents, as well as with interpreting feedback, while staff need support with workload and the time needed for embedding assessment-related activities, particularly formative assignments, into classwork.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the analysis of responses we were struck by the shared sense from both student and staff that assessments are valuable for a range of pedagogical reasons. The main challenges identified might arguably be seen to stem from the more logistical aspects of assessment, on the one hand in the formality of the wording of ILOs, assessment briefs, and marking criteria, and on the other hand in relation to the assessment-related workload for both students and staff, as well as the stress and anxiety associated with this. The valuable role played by formative assessments in supporting student understanding of the assessment task was foregrounded in the findings, but this increases the logistical challenges for staff, with extra marking workload and potentially a tight turnaround time.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study in terms of the small number of participants involved but it has provided some useful data for us to consider our next steps. One of the recommendations we have from this is to undertake an across institution undergraduate student survey to collect a much broader range of data about their perceptions and compare this further to the NSS data we have for the last three years to see if there are patterns we can identify that we can then take action to address.

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