**Students’ perceptions of the role of assessments in higher education**

**Abstract**

The Quality Assessment Agency (QAA) higher education review (2015) noted that assessment and feedback in higher education still remain an area of concern for students. Despite this, very little research has been carried out to assess students’ experience of assessments. The evidence for what factors within assessments actually contribute to student engagement is not fully understood and more research is required. This research was a qualitative study comprising of three focus groups. The student participants were 4 male and 19 female undergraduate psychology students. The data was analysed using experiential inductive thematic analysis. Two themes were identified as effecting student learning. The first was Teaching Factors which included two subthemes: Timeliness and Type of Assessment. The second theme was Student Factors which included two subthemes: Academic Maturity and Emotions. These themes were found to be mediated by the relationship between tutors and students. The outcome relates to previous research while also providing a better understanding into the role personal qualities and emotional factors have on learner engagement. Strategies to promote academic maturity and reduce stress and fear in students could foster a more constructive approach to learning.

**Key words**: assessment; student engagement; student factors; teaching factors

**Introduction**

Undoubtedly assessments lead to some kind of learning, however research has found that the quality of that learning varies according to the assessment used (Carless 2007; Raupach et al. 2013). The surface approach to learning as defined by Marton and Saljo (1976) refers to superficial learning of information mainly by memorising and regurgitating facts. Deep learning is considered more permanent and involves trying to understand information in order to facilitate learning. Formative assessments have been suggested to be more conducive to the deep approach, and summative assessment to the surface approach (Al-Kadri, et al. 2012). Summative assessments can induce stress due to their implication for the students’ degree classification and as a result encourage students into superficial learning approaches. (Al-Kadri et al. 2012). In general, assignments have been found to be preferable to examinations, as examinations require factual recall and often stimulate superficial learning (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall 2009). In contrast, assignments require more evaluation and critical thinking by the student, stimulating deeper learning. In addition when students’ perceive assessments as inappropriate they become biased towards a surface approach to learning (Lizzio, Wilson and Simons 2002).

Students’ learning approaches not only depend on the implication of the assessment but also on the staff/student relationship. Al-kadri et al.’s (2012) literature review noted that staff availability and their effectiveness as positive role models impacts student approaches to learning. High workloads among educators caused by the assessment process could increase staff stress levels and reduce their availability for student support. Gibbs (2003) refers to this phenomenon as the ‘assessment dilemma’, defined as the need to develop assessments that aim to positively encourage students to spend more time and effort on studying but without overwhelming teachers who lack the time for excessive marking.

Some studies have found that students often miss the point of assessments and rank grading as the main purpose of assessments (Fletcher et al. 2011; Hernandez 2012). This is in contrast to academics’ view who rate the role of providing feedback on student work as the most important purpose of assessments (Hernandez 2012). However Carless, Joughin and Mok (2006) concluded that students valued the learning experience of assessments. It is important to explore in more detail students’ views of assessments and to understand where these perceptions originate. Academics need to understand what factors affect students’ perceptions of assessments and how these perceptions affect their learning.

Snyder (1971) was one of the first academics to realise the driving force of assessments in student learning. He outlined that the modular curriculum and the emphasis on student learning are often at odds as students focus purely on the materials that are assessed. He referred to this occurrence as the ‘hidden curriculum’. Therefore higher education modular learning outcomes must be matched with appropriate assessments that test engagement with these objectives. Miller and Parlett (1974) found that student grades could be predicted based on students’ ability to predict examination questions. This cue-seeking behaviour may result in better grades but possibly at the expensive of sufficient learning, as assessment grades do not always reflect authentic student learning (Asikainen et al. 2013).

Others have suggested that assessments need to move away from the traditional format of examinations and essays and should instead be related to real-world cooperative tasks with less emphasis on competitiveness (Keppell and Carless 2006). This kind of skill-enhancing assessments help prepare students for the workplace in a more effective manner than traditional assessments. Libman (2010) put it aptly when he said that assessments should move students from a position of ‘knowledge consumers’ to ‘knowledge producers’. He suggested that the use of alternative assessments, such as presentations, group work and assignments that involve imagination and ingenuity, should be used to advance student learning. The rapidly developing digital world means that information is really available and becomes outdated quickly. Consequently employers need graduates who are not just knowledgeable but are critical thinkers who are competent in problem solving, decision making, sourcing credible information, effective communicators and good team players. All these skills could potentially be learnt in higher education through the use of effective assessment techniques.

For assessments to ‘frame learning’ (Gibbs 2006), assessment feedback needs to be of a high quality; focusing on learning over marks, linked to the purpose of the assignment and comprehensible to the student (Gibbs 2006). For feedback to initiate learning, students must fully engage with it and act on their feedback to improve their work (Winstone et al. 2016). This phenomenon of students getting feedback and acting on it to improve their work has been described by Carless (2007) as ‘feedforward’. Feedback as ‘feedforward’ means that the feedback given to students gives timely advice about improving future work. Previous qualitative studies have found that students value feedback as an important aspect of the assessment process. They value detailed feedback comments the most, while praise from instructors has been considered to be helpful in promoting positive affect and avoiding student demotivation in the presence of low grades (Lipnevich and Smith, 2009).

Rust (2002) asserted that the effort and emotionality of an assessment has a greater impact on student learning than the assessment feedback. Gibbs (1992) also found that emotion effects student learning. He pointed out that a high workload, lack of choice within assessments and student anxiety are all associated with a surface approach to learning. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation, active learning opportunities, teamwork and a scaffolding style of teaching all contribute to students using a deep approach to learning. More recent research has concurred with these findings. For instance, Craddock and Mathias (2009) recommend giving students a choice of assessment method as this actually improves student performance. Moreover, qualitative research reported that students felt overwhelmed by workload, which hindered their academic success (Naude et al. 2016). Assessments play a pivotal role in dictating the student workload and as such are instrumental in determining its magnitude.

Other student factors that affect academic success and their approach to assessments include time management, self- regulation skills, motivation, conscientiousness and social support (Busato et al 2000; Rytkoen et al. 2012; Asikainen et al. 2013). Student motivation is a complex factor and can be separated into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is due to internal personal goals, interest and enjoyment in a subject area and is usually associated with deep learning approaches. Extrinsic motivation is induced by rewards such as achieving certain grades or pleasing others (Lin, McKeachie and Kim 2003). Self-regulated, internally-motivated learners set goals for themselves, have insight into their ability, take responsibility for their own learning, and put effort into obtaining these goals. This type of student uses deep learning approaches to their assessments and are more academically successful (Asikainen et al. 2013). Targeting such internal factors in order to improve students’ approach to assessments is a major challenge and one that requires further investigation.

***Rationale for this study***

Assessments at higher education have several functions including grading, evaluation of student achievement and supporting student learning. Their role in motivating student learning is undoubtedly its most important role. Academics are responsible for the design and implementation of assessments and students are the beneficiary of the learning outcomes from such assessments. However, as Crook, Gross and Dymott’s (2006) focus group study discovered, academics’ and students’ perceptions of assessments are often as odds. For assessments to achieve the goal of advancing student learning, academics need to understand students’ perceptions of assessments. A deeper appreciation of how differing assessment types and their mode of delivery effect student learning is needed. This study was designed to give the researchers a deeper insight into how psychology students engage with their assessments.

The research questions were: What are psychology students’ perceptions of the role of assessments in higher education? How do assessments affect their learning?

**Methodology**

***Design***

This study followed a qualitative approach, comprising of three focus groups as its method of data collection. The data was analysed using experiential inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). The experiential method of thematic analysis was selected in this analysis as this research sought to examine the experience of the student participants in the context of assessments in higher education.

***Participants***

The participants were 23 (4 men and 19 women) undergraduate psychology students in year 2 or year 3 of their study program. The age range of the learner participants was from 20 to 46 years with a mean age of 23.7 (21.5 for men and 24.3 for women). Fifteen of the participants were native English speakers. The majority of the students were Home students (18), while the remaining students were European Union nationals (2) or international students (3). The students’ grade average ranged from low second class (2:2) to first class. The mode grade of the participants was a high second class (2:1).

The student participants were recruited via an advertisement on the university’s virtual learning platform, Blackboard and via the psychology noticeboard. The inclusion criterion for the study was that each participant had to be a full time year 2 or 3 psychology student. This was to ensure that the participants had the experience of at least 3 semesters of assessments in psychology at higher education. In addition, the students had to be proficient in spoken English in order to fully participate in the focus group discussion.

***Procedure***

The focus groups took place in a quiet teaching room familiar to the students. Each participant read a participant information sheet and signed a consent form. The students completed a brief demographic questionnaire following which the focus group discussion commenced. The focus groups were facilitated by two researchers both of whom were lecturers in the psychology undergraduate program. The role of the facilitators was to keep the group focused on the purpose of the study. The group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule as devised by the researchers.

The questions were developed to elicit from the participants their experience of assessments and how they engaged with their assessments. Students were encouraged to discuss the assessments they had experience of and to express how they approached these assessments. Students appeared to be at ease discussing their experience of assessments and illustrated this by requiring very little probing from the researchers. The focus groups each lasted approximately one hour. Each session was audio recorded using a multi directional audio recorder. The focus groups were manually transcribed for analysis.

A systematic approach was used to analysis the data as described by Creswell (2009). The process of familiarising with the data involved repeated reading of the data set. After becoming acquainted with the data, meanings, insights and reflections on data chunks were noted on the transcript. Patterns of meaning and understanding, in relation to the research question, emerged as this processes continued, in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2013) description of the process of thematic analysis. The data was hand coded. Eventually saturation of the data was reached and no further meanings or perceptions could be found within the data set. Rereading the data sets assessed confirmation of saturation. A detailed interpretation of each of the themes and subthemes was performed.

***Ethics***

The university psychology ethics committee granted ethical approval. Participants were reassured that the data would be anonymised and that their contribution would be confidential. Students were free to withdraw at any time from the study.

**Data analysis and interpretation**

This qualitative study was carried out to comprehend the students’ experience of assessments and the resultant learning in higher education. Two themes and one mediating factor were identified to summarise the analysis. The first theme was Teaching Factors which included two subthemes: Timeliness and the Type of Assessment. The second theme was Student Factors which included two subthemes: Academic Maturity and Emotions (see Table 1). All of these themes and subthemes effected student learning and were substantial to the student experience of assessments. In addition, the themes were found to be mediated by the relationship between tutors and students. The presented interpretation is supported by participants’ quote excerpts from the three focus groups. (Fg1, 2 or 3 refers to the focus group number; P1, 2, 3 etc. refers to the participant number within that focus group)

***The relationship between tutors and students as a mediator***

Learning support was found to be a central factor in students’ experience of higher education assessments. Students reported that this provision needed to be balanced and aligned with their needs. Too much support reduced academic independence and learning: ‘I slightly feel a little bit lazy in a way because I can ask my tutors’ (Fg1, P1). On the other hand, a perception of too little support induced feelings of neglect: ‘We tried asking for help and he was like, no, we can’t help you with it, it’s an exam, you have to be prepared for that, kind of thing. So he wasn’t really giving out much…’ (Fg3, P3).

Emphasis was placed on the relationship between the tutor and learner, as the students appreciated and valued support from their tutors:

I’m not trying to trick you (quoting a lecturer) … and it was quite comforting. You didn’t feel like there was going to be any surprises; he’s like, this is how it’s gonna be and I want to see your best, so go and work hard and you kind of felt motivated to … yeah, it’s gonna be ok... (Fg2, P6).

Moreover, participants argued that the individual students’ learning style needed to be matched with a tutor who could support that style:

I know a couple of people who have one seminar tutor and they are not too fond of them so they were not really learning much so they just moved group. I can’t work in that class you have to move to a tutor where you understand them better (Fg1, P1).

Learners need instruction from tutors to be clear and consistent. Students found conflicting advice from teaching staff confusing and stressful, having a negative effect on the learning experience. They highlighted the need for clear guidance to avoid misunderstandings: ‘I was forced to change my whole assignment a week before the deadline just because I got different opinions from different lecturers... So it was quite rushed for me to change everything. So it was quite stressful’ (Fg1, P4).

Students reported that they required a quality level of feedback on their assessments that would move their learning forward. It needed to be unambiguous to allow the use of the feedback to improve future assessment work:

…regardless of how you actually did the feedback, in no way provided any foundation in which you could have moved your grade forward, if you were tasked with the same essay the following week. So you couldn’t take the feedback and go, okay, I’ll apply those corrections and my next attempt, should be at least an improvement by X amount. I would arguably say I still don’t really know what to do (Fg2, P6).

Generally students relied on their lecturers and tutors to direct them with clarity through assessment preparation and they appreciated explicit good quality feedback.

***Teaching factors***

Teaching Factors refer to the elements of the assessment process that academic staff have some control over. Two subthemes have been identified within this main theme, namely; Timeliness and the Type of Assessment.

*Timeliness*

Timeliness incorporates the importance of the timing of the delivery of assessment guidance and on the timing of the assessments themselves. Students valued direction and instruction that was given before and during assessment preparation. This participant’s quote illustrates that students understood the value of the feedforward process that was offered to them in some assignments:

Also the feedback for the cognitive poster was also excellent because of the fact that it felt like they took you, almost step-by-step into saying this is what you should have done here to improve the poster and even if it was little things, it felt like they actually … they actually knew what they were looking for... (Fg2, P5).

Students appreciated the level of guidance that they could expect from their tutors needed to change as they progressed through their degree. They perceived that adequate support promoted independence and inspiration: ‘This year we are saying it is a little bit harder being left on our own that is just pushing us to think for ourselves’ (Fg1, P1).

Learners valued guidance to be provided early on because it allowed them to act on the advice given in order to improve their current work: ‘I actually really enjoyed doing my dissertation and just being able to have the feedback, as my supervisor gave me and being able to improve it all the time …. I enjoyed both, actually’ (Fg3, P2).

The timing of assessments affected the amount of time spent on coursework preparation and on revision for examinations. Students perceived they had more time to prepare for such assessments: ‘You have more time. You know your assessment during the first day of the lectures so you can prepare for maybe two months for the assignment but for the exam everything is too packed’(Fg1, P4).

Students explained how there was a knock on effect with one assignment advancing the next. Working on one assessment provided skill development and practice that they found useful on the next assessment: ‘it was as a result of my year one Qualitative (report) that I came to my dissertation choice. So I feel that that was the most,… the one that I learnt the most, because I can still apply it now and I’m still doing research into it’ (Fg3, P2).

Learners also valued the learning process gained from repetition of similar types of assessments. They reported feeling more confident tackling familiar assessments and were sometimes overwhelmed facing new types of assessments: ‘we had like two lab reports in the first semester and then again another two in the second semester so you’ve done, literally 4 lab reports in one year… I think lab reports we’re pretty confident with it... ‘(Fg3, P3).

*Type of Assessment*

This subtheme illustrated how the design of assessments affected student learning. Two important factors emerged, that of the effect of the assessment predictability on student learning and the value of student-focused assessments.

Predictability of assessments affected the preparation required of students. High predictability was associated with low workload and better grades:

… he basically said, ‘These are the example questions, go and learn them, these are the answers I’d expect in these example questions and these questions will be similar to the ones in the exam.’ And so actually, for me those two were really easy because (named tutor) told us the answers (Fg 3, P2).

In contrast low predictability was associated with higher workload and high levels of student stress: ‘…. because there’s so much in one topic, I don’t know what to learn anymore’ (Fg3, P5).

Cue seeking was another method employed by students to improve predictability and reduced workload: ‘actually, I kind of already knew that was gonna come up…and then I was expecting that to come up and I was actually really happy that most of the stuff that did come up I already was prepared for’ (Fg2, P5).

Student-focussed assignments included factors that the participants considered important to their learning. These learners appreciated assessments that: built on their skill set; incorporated an element of choice and allowed for student creativity; and involved a balanced workload. This student appreciated that she developed a relevant skill during the preparation for her assignment:

I’m reminded why … this is like gonna be the real world one day for us... and that’s what I enjoyed the most out of the Poster, that it was just … it felt real, somehow and actually seeing how that skill was gonna be advantageous later (Fg2, P7).

This participant explains how she valued the element of choice in her dissertation, an element that was missing from previous assessments and as such had been a negative factor in her learning experience:

And there’s all the flexibility, especially for a dissertation, the topics were chosen by ourselves, rather than, you know the first two years is kind of … most of them is more like … assigned topics, so if you don’t like them, it’s kind of not really good (Fg 3, P5).

Students not only derived pleasure from being allowed to be creative in their assignments but in addition this increased their learning output:

Yeah, learned a lot but I like stuff where you know, you can put a bit of real input in it, you know, leave your mark, pretty it up and stuff like that, so, yeah, I kind of prefer to do that (Fg2, P1).

Moreover, participants frequently reported feeling overwhelmed by their workload. This often led to stress and regularly hampered their learning: ‘I think just because of insecurities and just…when it comes to revise and it seems enormous, you’re like, I don’t even know where to start and I just (*gasp*) and then you start telling yourself all those silly things.’(Fg2, P6).

Teaching Factors influenced students’ learning. The timing of assessments and of the delivery of relevant guidance impacted students’ learning experience. Students valued assessments that were designed to be student focused and their learning style was affected by the level of predictability of assignments.

***Student factors***

Participants expressed their awareness that their experience of assessments did not only depend on teaching factors. They understood that a high degree of independent learning is involved, hence putting responsibility on the students themselves. This theme incorporates the subthemes of Academic Maturity and Emotions.

*Academic maturity*

This subtheme reflects the personal qualities and insights that affect student engagement and learning. These characteristics included factors such as: self-evaluation; academic perceptiveness and academic motivation.

Self-evaluation incorporates students’ awareness of their academic ability and their preferred learning styles and this puts students at an advantage: ‘Everyone has their own learning style. Some learn by writing, some by seeing, some by hearing’ (Fg1, P1). Knowing their strengths and weaknesses facilitated learning as a perception of lower ability in a topic led to increased effort ‘Because I knew X wasn’t my strong point, so like in X exam because I knew as a result I revised more for that than Y exam’ (Fg1, P2).

Poor grades can have a negative effect on student self-evaluation leaving them feeling disheartened: ‘...but then we got a really low mark and as if I just feel like I don’t know anything, because whatever I did is wrong, but initially I thought it’s right, so what shall I do now’ (Fg3, P5).

Academic perceptiveness refers to students being cognisant of the quality of their learning in addition to an awareness that too much support from tutors leads to poorer work output and consequently reduced learning: ‘You’re spoon fed in school, high school especially, but here it’s just if you want to do work, you work, not them, that’s your own problem really’ (Fg3, P3)

Learners were aware that short-term learning as a result of memorising is poor quality learning: ‘But if you have just memorised it, you don’t actually know it, you have just memorised it. You just forget it the next day’ (Fg1, P2). On the other hand, students appreciated that long-term memory stems from having a thorough understanding of a topic, thus differentiating between deep and superficial learning: ‘Okay, I’ll be honest, some of the essays I just kind of write whatever people say and I don’t even really know what they’re trying to say’ (Fg3, P5).

Academic perception amongst students meant they understood that grades do not equate to level of learning. ‘They were still good grades at the end of the day. Even though I had not bothered about learning stuff’ (Fg1, P1).

Assessments prompted student effort and what elements of the curriculum they learnt. This student explained how they felt that any effort that was not assessment and grade-related was a wasted effort. This thinking reflects a level of academic immaturity: ‘And you’re not wasting any revision either. Like you could be revising stuff that you won’t need in an unseen exam’ (Fg2, P1).

Academic motivation stemmed from career ambition and the desire to develop transferable skills. This motivation enhanced engagement with assessments, as students understood their benefit:

…(in year 3) you keep saying applied, applied, applied, applied and that makes a difference, so then you do go away and think right this is the theory, this is how it applies to everyday life and it just seems to come together more (Fg3, P2).

In addition grade targets and degree aspirations lead to higher work output and assessment preparation:

…you don’t really want to be let down in your grades. So you would revise a lot because if you didn’t and you got a bad grade you would go ‘but that was a seen exam and how could I have done so bad? (Fg1, P3).

*Emotions*

Student emotions affected how students engaged with assessments. Negative emotions such as stress and anxiety often hindered their engagement with assessments while positive emotions like pleasure and excitement helped motivate students.

Negative emotions affected student performance on assessments. Particularly, excessive negative emotions jeopardised the learning process. Students were apprehensive about getting low grades and letting themselves down. Negative emotions were brought about by low predictability of assessments such as unseen examinations and a perception of inadequate academic support and high workload. This quote illustrates this student’s high stress level due to the close sequence of assessments and how assessment type and timing could influence how students chose their modules:

Monday I had the neuro coursework and then on that Friday I think it’s the Occupational and then on the …Sunday of it …. I have my draft for a thesis. I didn’t sleep for 5 days for it and I was a bit, like I know I shouldn’t have chosen these two modules, but they are like then I don’t want to, just because of the assessment to change modules (Fg3, P5).

Examinations were associated with considerable stress which affected student performance and their confidence in their ability:

I still have that moment where I walk into an exam and everything just goes and I’m like, oh I can’t do this, can’t do that. What am I doing here? But that’s like every exam that I’ve done in my life, so I don’t really know (Fg2, P3).

The novelty of different assessment methods can bring about fear, at least initially: ‘Yes the critical review assignment was hard at first because it was something we had not done… I was more scared about that’ (Fg1, P3). Such situations can lead to sleeplessness, panic, ill health and tearfulness, all of which adversely affect student performance and learning. However, these negative emotions are buffered by the support received in preparation, as noted in the previous theme.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, enhanced student performance on assessments. When students perceive assessments as an opportunity to express themselves and portray their knowledge and skills, they experienced enjoyment, satisfaction and a sense of academic freedom. This participant exemplifies the pleasure and appreciation students derived from good teaching materials:

...those, like step-by-step sheets they are so helpful; they’re like my saviour, I love those… and as soon as I get confused… and I think, I’ve lost the plot, I can’t remember what I’m talking about anymore, go back to that and it just sort of like clears everything. It really helps (Fg2, P3).

Moreover, achievement portrayed through good grades induced positive emotions. Students were particularly proud of themselves when they rise to a difficult challenge and succeed: ‘I think that’s why you’re so proud though, because it was so hard and we all did so well’ (Fg2, P6).

*Summary of the findings*

Students’ perceptions of assessment has been found to be influenced by two main elements which are highly inter-related: Teaching Factors and Student Factors. The relationship between the tutors and the students defines the perceived support.

**Discussion of the findings**

The aim of this study was to inform higher education practice by gaining an awareness into the students’ perceptions of their learning through assessments. The outcome relates to previous research on the topic while also providing a better understanding into students’ perception. The importance for students of a positive constructive relationship between learners and tutors concurs with previous research findings that emphasised its effect on student learning approaches (Al-kadri et al., 2012).

***Teaching factors***

*Type of assessment*

In line with previous research the type and timing of assessments affected students’ learning (Gibbs, 2006). The level of assessment predictability affected their learning approach. Low predictability was associated with stress but encouraged a deep approach to learning. Conversely cue seeking and high predictability reduced workload and stress but encouraged a superficial approach to learning. However students had insight into this process and appreciated that this was not constructive learning. This shift in learning style to match the assessment type is congruent with earlier research studies (Carless, 2007; Raupach et al., 2013).

Student-focused assessments were preferred by students and encouraged engagement. Learners appreciated assessments that: built on their skill set; involved an element of choice and creativity; and were associated with a balanced workload. Students particularly valued the benefit of having assessments that were relevant to their career ambitions and developed their skill set. This validates Keppell and Carless’ (2006) assertion that assessments should develop real world skills in students. Craddock and Mathias (2009) similarly found that choice had a positive effect on student grades.

The awareness of the negative effect on student performance of a high workload is not new (Naude et al., 2016). Reducing student workload is a cost effective way of both improving student satisfaction and facilitating a deeper approach to learning. It is important to note that some studies have found that there is a weak correlation between actual workload and perceived workload (Kember & Leung, 1998). As such it is important for educators to help students develop time management skills and other academic skills that reduce student anxiety around assessments.

Moreover, students in this study appreciated the learning outcome of assessments in line with Carless et al. (2006) and contradictory to Fletcher et al.’s (2011) study. This may have been because the participants were all academically successful, engaged students. Indeed it may be that some of their success can be attributed to their appreciation of the learning outcome of assessments. Students with a differing profile may not have had this level of insight. Future research needs to be conducted to assess the factors that determine student insight into the role of assessments and how this insight affects their learning.

*Timeliness and consistency of assessments*

Timely, consistent, relevant and unambiguous assessment guidelines gave students the confidence to prepare for assessments. Use of the feedforward process as described by Carless (2007) was appreciated by students as an opportunity to improve their work before submission. As seen in previous research studies, students valued good feedback (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Feedback on completed assessments needed to be explicit in order for students to learn from the assessment. This matches Gibbs’ concept of assessments that ‘frame learning’ (2006).

The timing of assessments had an effect on the amount of time students spent on each assessment. Students also appreciated the knock on effect of one assessment advancing the next. Repetition of assessments improved student confidence and learning.

***Student factors***

*Academic maturity*

Students were largely cognisant of the personal factors which contributed to their learning process. Learners’ ability to academically self-evaluate meant they were aware of their own academic ability and learning styles and used this knowledge to advance their learning. Participants’ academic perception included an awareness of the importance of balanced tutor support and an understanding of learning approaches with an appreciation that the deep approach to learning was the preferable learning style. This self-regulation and academic insight, as found in other studies (Asikainen et al., 2013), undoubtedly aided their academic success. Learners’ academic motivation stemmed from intrinsic factors such as career ambition and a desire to build on their skill set. Some element of extrinsic motivation took the form of grade targets. Previous research has found that intrinsic motivation is associated with academic success (Busato et al., 2000). The challenge for academics is to try to help students develop internal motivation strategies.

*Emotions*

Consistent with previous research, student stress had a negative effect on their ability to efficiently engage with their assessments. The elements of assessments that were associated with stress were: low predictability; examinations especially unseen examinations; fear of low grades; perception of inadequate support and of a high work load; poorly timed and novel assessments. In contrast a perception of assessments as appropriate, that were student focused, with adequate guidance induced a sense of enjoyment and pride. This is an important finding as Rust (2002) stated that student effort and emotionality around an assessment has a greater impact on learning than the actual feedback on the assessment. Therefore it is important that academics are aware of the elements of an assessment that are associated with negative or positive emotions and aim to adjust these accordingly.

***Study limitations***

The students participating in the focus groups were committed students who attended regularly and were very engaged with the course in general. These characteristics in themselves show that students who have a positive experience of learning are more likely to do better in their assessments. Further research needs to look at the experiences of students with contrasting profiles as their perceptions of assessments and its effect on their learning may differ. In addition, non-psychology students’ experience might also vary. Of note, the focus group facilitators teach on the psychology course, which may have adversely affected student disclosure and biased the analysis.

***Future Direction***

The role of assessments in generating grades and certification should no longer continue to overshadow its function as a route to student learning (Carless, 2009). The purpose of a university education should be about learning and student experience; these should supersede the classification of a degree. It is vital that academics and university steering committees understand students’ experience of assessments in order to effectively design assessments in a way that effectively engage students in the learning process. Students value learning relevant skills, however, it is important that it is made explicit to them how assessments are used to develop these relevant skills. In light of the knowledge that assessments affect learning, developing appropriate assessments is a cost effective way of improving student engagement and student satisfaction.

Institutions need to invest in services that help students develop personal academic characteristics that help improve their engagement with assessments. These include strategies to improve self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, time management and stress reduction. Further research is required in this area. There is a need for a deeper understanding of how institutions can most cost effectively foster these internal personal factors.

There is scope to develop this current study further by developing a quantitative survey therefore targeting a wider participant group in order to gain a greater insight into the factors that influence student learning from assessments. Other areas that require further research include the factors that influence student’s perception of workload and assessing how time management training effects this perception. Research is needed to look at the factors that influence student insight into the role of assessments in learning. Some students are conscious of the role of assessments in learning and others lack this insight. An understanding of the value of assessment in learning may aid student engagement in the assessment process.

Table 1. Themes and mediator derived from the data analysis and interpretation

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| **Themes** | | **Subthemes** | **Codes** |
| Teaching factors | | Timeliness | (1) Guidance   1. Assessment | |
|  | | Type of Assessment | 1. Predictability 2. Student focussed |
| Student factors | | Academic Maturity | 1. Self-evaluation (Awareness of academic ability and preferred learning style) 2. Academic perceptiveness (Awareness of quality of learning and that balanced support is ideal) 3. Academic motivation (Career ambition and desire to develop skills) |
|  | Emotions | | 1. Negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety 2. Positive emotions, such as satisfaction and excitement |
| **Mediator** | Tutor/student  relationship | | 1. Valued by students 2. Balanced support 3. Consistent instruction 4. Explicit, good quality feedback |

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