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at Higher Education

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practitioner reflection and response to students' perceptions of assessment at Higher Education.
Psychology Teaching Review, 30 (2).

10.53841/bpsptr.2024.30.2.28

This is the Accepted Version of the final output.

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A practitioner reflection and response to students' perceptions of assessment at Higher Education

Abstract

Assessments are an integral component of university programmes. They have the formative function of being instrumental in gauging the level of student engagement, whilst also providing opportunity for feedback to enhance students' learning. Moreover, assessments have the summative function of providing grades on which degree classifications are based. Therefore, it is crucial that assessments are presented in a format that engage students. Listening to the student voice is an essential step in designing appropriate assessments. The aim of this reflection piece is to review and critique how the student voice is captured. While students have various informal and formal opportunities to voice their views, here we chose to focus on processes that result in recorded data, namely, Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys, Module Evaluation Surveys (MES), and research on students' experience of assessments. We conclude by outlining an example of our adjustments to assessments, based on the student voice.

(Word count: 149)

Key words: Assessment; student voice; student engagement; evaluation; grades; academic success

Higher Education (HE) assessments have several functions including grading, evaluation of student achievement and supporting student learning. Therefore, a good understanding of how students perceive assessments is imperative, and educational reform cannot progress without the direct involvement of students as the main benefactor of the process. The aim of this reflection piece is to review how the undergraduate student voice is captured in the United Kingdom (UK). We also outline our response to our own undergraduate psychology students based on our own qualitative study.

This paper starts by discussing what we mean by the student voice, and the current methods used to capture students' perspectives on assessments. This is followed by a discussion on the factors that were recognised in our qualitative study (Lynam & Cachia, 2018) examining psychology students' perceptions of assessments, with reference to other relevant studies. The paper concludes with an example of how we have changed our own assessment practice based on the student voice, and considers the practical application of these findings.

What do we mean by student voice?

Listening to the student voice is about empowering students to freely express their opinion on educational matters that affect their learning. Nelson (2015) defines the student voice as activities (including research and pedagogy) that include students' opinions on educational design and decision-making. Indeed, the contemporary student is imagined as consumer, producer, co-creator, partner, and change agent (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). All these roles should facilitate students to unreservedly express their learning needs. However, the student voice is not always sought in ways that empower the student. The neoliberal marketisation of HE envisions students as customers of financial benefit to university institutions (Tilak, 2015). Consequentially, the financial transaction between the student and the university may be allowed to interfere with how the student voice is heard and interpreted, overshadowing what is of value to the learning experience of

individual students. King and Bunce's (2020) qualitative study found that the consumer model of HE can adversely affect student learning by undermining motivation for both students and their tutors. Therefore, it is important to look closely at how we listen to the student voice and to remain cognisant of how the neoliberal context can affect how we ask for and interpret student opinion. Accurate understanding of students' perception of assessments should guide tutors' decision making regarding the delivery of student assessments.

How is the student voice captured?

The student voice is captured in everyday informal conversations with tutors and other university support staff. Likewise, students are frequently involved in university committees, policy forums and student unions that all serve to forefront the student voice. However, these opportunities are not always available to all students and student opinions are not always gathered in a systematic and useable manner. For the purpose of this paper, we exam three differing processes that harness the student voice in a manner that aims to be inclusive and to provide useable data, and the processes and results are available for scrutiny. The first is nationwide university surveys, also called Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys; the second is within individual institutions, programmes, and courses at the module level, such as the Module Evaluation Surveys (MES); and lastly research studies that explicitly assess students' perception of HE assessments. We will discuss each of these in turn.

i) Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys

SET surveys are widely used in HE as a key indicator of how good a university is and to rank universities and their degree courses. They generally consist of Likert scale questionnaires, and some include a qualitative element with open response questions. The aim is to measure students' subjective perception of teaching, including assessment practices, and the institutional facilities. However, Uttl et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis found that no correlation existed between SET scores and

objective measures of student learning outcomes, as measured by students' final module exam or proficiency marks or grades. The National Student Survey (NSS) is a SET survey that is compulsory for UK universities and is completed by students in the final year of a degree course. Within it are questions that relate to assessment and feedback. However, the NSS asks questions that non-student authorities deem important, and the same authorities decide how to react to the survey results (Richardson et al., 2007). These surveys therefore set boundaries on the student voice and how it is heard.

In recent years, the ceiling effect of NSS scores and the similarity in institutional NSS results restricts the useability of the NSS to measure differences between universities, including students' perceptions of their assessments (Langan & Harris, 2019). In addition, Buckley's (2020) review of empirical research suggests that low scores on the NSS are not valid evidence for poor assessment practices. He suggests that students rate assessment-related questions lower than other variables because they may be unhappy with their assessments outcome, not the assessment process. Two randomly controlled studies also found that student grade influences their tutor feedback ratings (Boehler et al., 2006; Vaillancourt, 2013). Buckley (2020) also highlights the effect of emotion on students' response to assessment questions. Assessments may have a more negative emotional effect than other more innocuous learning experiences, such as library facilities. Therefore, it is inappropriate to compare and evaluate assessments to other university experiences and to subsequently adjust the assessment processes. Other commentators agree and emphasise that challenging assessments should not be oversimplified, and risk students losing opportunities for learning and skill development, purely in response to low SET scores and the resulting institutional pressure to alter assessments to improve university rankings (Hemming & Power, 2021).

Assessments need to challenge students to function as learning tools. Indeed, Uttl et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis finding that students do not learn more from tutors with higher SET ratings suggests that SET surveys are not an accurate indicator of student engagement with learning and

assessments. HE institutions need to listen to the student voice but SET surveys may not be a true reflection of this voice.

ii) Module Evaluation Surveys (MES)

Another industry-wide measure of university standards, including assessments, is the Module Evaluation Surveys (MES). MES are tools for internal evaluation, developed to assess students' appraisal of teaching, including assessments. UK universities use MES to check and remediate what is not working in their universities at module level each semester. Their questions and format are generally set in preparation for national measures such as the SET. MES are designed by individual universities but are not sufficiently validated. Some studies have found cultural and gendered bias in the results of MES (Fan et al., 2019; Mengel et al., 2017). More recently, Daskalopoulou's (2024) qualitative study found that academics believe that students do not focus on academic or module experiences but instead use MES to criticise their tutors. The author suggests that this perception can have a negative effect on tutors' mental health, especially as student response ratings are considered as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at university level, comparing results across different disciplines. These studies provide an additional rationale for using methodologies that reduce bias and more accurately assess student perceptions of assessments and emphasise the need to develop a clearer understanding of how students complete surveys such as MES. However, Williams (2024) suggests that universities should move away from the current end-of-module formal survey practice. Instead, he suggests tutors seek informal module-specific feedback midway through a module, that can be implemented while the surveyed students are still enrolled on the module. Therefore, students would be prompted to provide relevant, useable responses for their own benefit. The more obvious benefit to the student of this methodology might help reduce student bias and therefore more accurately capture their opinions on teaching strategies such as assessment processes.

iii) Research Studies of Student Perception of Assessments

As discussed, SET surveys and MES may not be accurately capturing the student voice on assessment at HE. Therefore, it is important to consider other studies that may have more perceptively considered student insight into assessments at HE. Research of this kind, such as Roberts et al.'s (2022) focus group study have some challenges which may explain the paucity of publications of studies of this kind. Firstly, students who volunteer as participants in internal studies are probably the more engaged students. If this is true, studies may miss the opportunity to involve less successful and/or less engaged students. Secondly, the researchers are often the tutors responsible for designing assessments, which provides a conflict of interest and may impede honest student responses. For a more detailed discussion of the issues associated with the dual role of researcher and teacher, see Ferguson et al. (2004). Ferguson suggests that researchers should avoid using their own students as participants unless doing so is pertinent to the study goals. The aim of our own study was to understand our student's perception and experiences of assessments to adjust our assessment design and processes accordingly. Therefore, this provided justification for recruiting our own students for our qualitative study. We endeavoured to mitigate for these limitations by following the British Psychological Society research ethical guidelines (2014) and ensuring our student participants volunteered without coercion and were informed of all the study details and its purpose. Below we discuss our qualitative study and other relevant studies that aimed to capture the student voice in relation to assessments.

Our focus group study (Lynam & Cachia, 2018) used an experiential inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to understand how psychology undergraduate students perceive assessments and the role of assessments in learning. The student participants were 23 (4 male and 19 female) undergraduate psychology students in year 2 or year 3 of their study program at a London University. The learners took part in one of three focus groups facilitated by the researchers. While the focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule, the

students were encouraged to freely discuss their experience of assessments and to express how they approached these assessments and the factors that influenced their experiences. We emphasised our plan to action our findings to the benefit of student learners and to avoid a tokenistic approach to research and data collection on student opinions, a concern expressed by student participants in Weisi and Ahmadi's recent study (2024). We identified three themes *Teaching Factors*, *Student Factors* and the tutors and student *Relationship and support*. Below we discuss the study findings under these thematic headings, with reference to other relevant studies and implications for practice.

a) Teaching factors

Teaching factors refer to the elements of an assessment discussed by the student-participants that are largely determined by the tutors who design the assessments. These elements include the *type of assessment* used and the *timeliness* of the assessments. Students' perception of these factors affects their engagement with their assessments.

Type of Assessment

In our study, the type of assessment relates to how the student-participants perceived the predictability of assessments and the assessment student-focused design. Students reported that assessment predictability impacts their learning approach. Assessments with low predictability, such as unseen exams, were reported by students as stressful. However, they were associated with greater time commitment to the assessment and enhance learning. Conversely, cue-seeking, such as listening for tutor hints on exam content or reviewing past test papers, and high predictability, such as seen exams or non-exam-based assignments, reduced their workload and stress, but students reported they consequentially engage in more superficial approaches to learning such as less time spent on an assessment and engaging in less effort to learn from it. Although the distinction between deep and superficial learning is controversial (Howie & Bagnall, 2013), some research has

found that deep learning is more effective than superficial learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976) but that students can effectively shift their learning style to match the assessment type (Carless, 2007).

Therefore, it is important to design assessments that induce deep learning and student effort by paying attention to the level of predictability of assessments. Balancing predictability is about providing enough information and guidance on assessments to bolster student self-efficacy whilst also offering choice within the assessment to promote student autonomy while still encouraging student effort, engagement and learning opportunities. As discussed below authentic assessments are one example of an approach which can be used to provide the right balance of engagement without high stress.

Our study found that student-focused assessments are largely favoured by students and encourage engagement. Such assessments build on student skill set (both academic and employability skills); involve an element of choice and creativity; and involve a balanced workload. A recent systematic review (Sokhanvar et al., 2021) illustrates that learners value assessments that are relevant to their career ambitions and develop their skill set and are associated with enhanced student engagement and satisfaction. Two styles of assessments that match these needs are *programmatic* and *authentic assessments*.

Programmatic assessment is an approach in which the learner's competence is continually collected across a teaching program and fed back to both the teaching staff and the student. Its purpose is to allow for individualised self-directed adjustment of learning. Heeneman et al.'s (2015) qualitative study involving medical students found that programmatic assessments improve student participation in assessments and their learning. Similarly, Oruç's (2024) action research study of undergraduate students taking an English Language Preparatory Program, involved negotiating with learners and adjusting the academic curriculum and assessments based on detailed individual

student feedback. However, in HE settings, where there are large student groups and strains on the academic staff, these individualised strategies are not always practical.

Authentic assignments are practical assessments that aim to develop student workplace competencies by assessing skills that are required in the workplace. Gulikers et al.'s (2008) survey-based study of undergraduate social work students found that authentic assessments stimulate student learning but need to be tailored to the educational stage, setting and work experience of the student group. Authentic assignments give students autonomy and choice, allowing students to tailor these factors creating an individualised bespoke assessment but without the added workload associated with programmatic assessments. Authentic assessments can be used to balance predictability with challenge, while remaining student-focused.

Timeliness

The timing of assessments influenced the amount of time student-participants spent on each assessment. Assessments that were spread throughout a semester give students the opportunity to divide their efforts evenly across assessments. The repetition of assessment formats such as laboratory reports and essays improved student confidence, and they felt that repetition cemented their learning. Student participants acknowledged the cumulative effect of assessments on their abilities which improved with each subsequent assignment. Ortiz-Ribbing and Zilesak's (2015) also noted there is a knock-on effect, with initial assessments helping to build on subsequent assessments. Our participants also reported that timely, unambiguous assessment guidelines gave them the confidence to prepare for assessments.

c) Student factors

Student factors discussed by our student-participants included aspects specific to students that faculty have no direct control over. These student factors included student *emotions* in response to

assessments and the role of their *academic maturity* in student engagement with assessments.

Hemming and Power's (2021) review paper also commented that students' experience of assessments and the assessment methodologies used in a program is influenced by multiple student variables including preferred learning approach, ability to choose assessment method, and the perception of the appropriateness of the assessment.

Emotions

In our study, the elements of assessments found to be associated with stress included: low predictability; examinations (especially unseen examinations); fear of low grades; perception of inadequate support and of a high workload; poorly-timed assessments, and novel assessments. In contrast, a perception of assessments as appropriate, student-focused and with adequate guidance induced a sense of enjoyment and pride. Other researchers have also noted the potential negative effect of stress and negativity on students' ability to efficiently engage with their assessments (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Haughney, Wakeman and Hart 2020). These are important findings to consider 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 assessment elements that are associated with student negative or positive emotions and aim to adjust these accordingly. For example, tutors and subject heads could work cooperatively to spread assessments deadlines evenly over student semesters and avoid where possible multiple unseen exams.

Academic maturity

Our student-participants described how some personal characteristics influenced their assessment experiences. We describe this holistically as academic maturity. Academically-mature students were cognisant of the personal factors which contributed to their learning from and engagement with assessments. These students also valued the learning experience associated with assessments. This is congruent with Preston et al.'s (2020) focus group and survey study of medical students which

found that student perceptiveness such as understanding assessment difficulty, appreciation of feedback as a learning method and the length of time on a course was aligned with greater insight into the intended learning objective of assessments and better grade outcomes. However, if student maturity deepens with experience, this is not an easy factor for academics to alter but is important to consider when designed assessments over the course of a degree. The characteristics within this variable in our own focus group study included *self-evaluation*, *academic perceptiveness*, and *academic motivation*.

We found that students who could *self-evaluate* were aware of their own academic ability and what contexts allowed them to learn and perform at their best. Consequently, they could adjust their approach to assessments. For example, the perception of lower ability in a topic led to increased effort. Busato et al. (2000) also found that student learning practices affected their approach to assessments. *Academic perceptiveness* refers to students being cognisant of the quality of their learning. We found that successful learners reported being aware that short-term learning through memorising was poor quality learning. Students who reported engaging successfully with assessments appreciated that learning for the joy of learning was the most useful learning approach. Similarly, Preston et al.'s (2020) student-participants reported superior learning from assessments that they had an interest in.

Academic motivation is an umbrella term for the factors that drives motivation at HE (see Sikhwari, 2014). This motivation enhances engagement with assessments. Our student-participants' academic motivation encompassed intrinsic factors such as career aspirations, love of learning, and a drive to build on their skill set. For some of our student-participants, extrinsic motivation reflected a desire for higher grades and better paid employment. Previous research has found that intrinsic motivation is associated with greater academic success (Busato et al., 2000). Our study concluded that academically successful students are self-regulated, internally-motivated, set goals for themselves, have insight into their ability, take responsibility for their own learning and put effort into obtaining

these goals. The findings illustrate students' understanding of the influence of individual student variables on their approach to assessments. Targeting internal student factors to improve students' approach to assessments is a major challenge and one that requires further investigation. However, Hedin and Viggo's (2019) student-participants reported that provision of a study skill module helped them gain confidence in their study habits. Therefore, early provision of carefully designed study skills modules could help support development of these student factors.

c) Relationship and support

Our study findings noted the importance for students of a positive constructive, supportive relationship between themselves and tutors, emphasising the need to develop rapport at the start of this interaction to facilitate engagement. This relationship was vital to appropriate help seeking behaviours of students. This concurs with previous research findings that emphasised the effect of the tutor-student relationship on student learning approaches (Al-Kadri et al., 2012). We concluded that tutor support is a central factor in students' experience of HE assessments, but this provision needs to be balanced and aligned with student needs. Student-participants reported that too much tutor support reduced their academic independence and learning but a perception of too little support and poor access to tutors induced feelings of neglect. Learners also needed assessment instruction from their tutors to be clear and consistent. Conflicting advice from tutors was confusing and stressful for students and had a negative effect on their learning experience. Students reported that they rely on their tutors to direct them with clarity through assessment preparation. The students also appreciated explicit good quality feedback that moved their learning forward by not only pointing out their level of learning but also specifying how to improve. Moreover, students reported being more inclined to approach their tutors for advice on assessments and a discussion on their assessment feedback if they had a positive relationship with them.

Practical Application

The specific motive of our study was to listen to the student voice, so that the derived understanding from our findings and associated reviewed literature would have direct implications on our teaching and learning provision. It was important to us to action our findings and avoid a tokenistic approach to listening to our students' voices. We shared this new understanding through conference presentations and a peer-reviewed paper publication (Lynam & Cachia, 2018), resulting in further application and impact. Table 1 demonstrates one example of the changes made in response to our study findings on a Level 6 module, Occupational Psychology. The table outlines the identified assessment factors based on our study, details of the previous assessments used, the revised current assessments and the implementation outcomes for the student group.

Table 1: Implemented changes on module assessments

Identified factor	Previous Assessment details	Current Assessment details	Implementation Outcome
<i>Teaching factors:</i>			
<i>Timeliness</i>	Previously the learning materials were added to the module online platform throughout the module delivery, and the students were updated accordingly.	Currently, the module learning outcomes, assessment guidelines and marking criteria are uploaded and clearly signposted on the module online platform at the <i>start of the module delivery</i> . Students are also specifically directed to the online location of these resources during a taught session at <i>the start of the module</i> and discussed in a <i>feedforward session</i> several weeks before the assessment deadline. The assessments are also spread out across the semester to allow for better time management.	Students have fed back that they appreciate the timely information and guidance for their assessment preparation. They have also communicated they perceive that the required support is in place, should they need it.
<i>Type of Assessment</i>	Two assessments: Assessment 1 was an academic essay which followed the format of a literature review on one of 3 main topics related to organisational activity, for example, leadership. Assessment 2 was a 2-hour exam with 2 long-answer questions, based on theoretical understanding of presented learning material, for example:	The essay was replaced by a business report which requires students to address an organisational practice/factor (such as training or job performance). They need to pitch their argument for giving due attention to this aspect of organisational activity, with an emphasis on why the issue should be highly considered. Students can choose to analyse a real-life situation or a hypothetical one within an organisation. The exam was replaced by a real-world case study where students are presented with a brief on a successful merger between two organisations. Students are asked to critically analyse (with reference to the literature) the case study, what	The previous essay assignment presented students with <i>choice</i> but lacked scope for <i>creativity</i> . Moreover, the applied nature of Occupational Psychology was not reflected in this choice of assessment. The current provision presents <i>authentic assessments</i> based on practical organisational issues, which enhance <i>transferable skills</i> such as analytical skills, problem solving and report writing. Students are made aware of the gains from engaging with authentic assessments, and their applicability in future work settings. Such measures have <i>enhanced predictability</i> , allowing the opportunity for students to ask

	what factors influence organisational identity?	worked well and what could have been done differently or improved.	questions, satisfying their cue-seeking behaviour.
<i>Student factors:</i>			
<i>Academic Maturity</i>	The format of essays and long exam questions may not have offered the level of student engagement required for deep learning and application of transferable skills.	Students reported that they feel empowered and motivated to engage with the new assessments, as they understand their value in developing their transferable skills, such as analytical skills and problem solving.	The current assessments offer scope for <i>creativity and choice</i> where students can adjust the assessment topic and presentation format according to their preference and strengths.
<i>Emotions</i>	Students considered assessments as a necessary exercise to complete to pass the module, but they had low predictability, exam-related stress, perceived high workload, and fear of low grades.	We had a positive response from students, where they reported that they perceived these assessments to be <i>student-focussed</i> . They experienced less stress in preparing for these assessments and they had the confidence to express their views about the topic more freely.	We are having higher on-time submission rates and pass rates at first sit. Students are also more positive about engaging with the process of learning through assessment preparation.
<i>Relationship and support</i>	Students noted that support needs to be balanced – enough to feel confident but not too much that it impedes independence in learning.	Tutors are available throughout the module for in-person and online for assessment support. Setting out clear, consistent guidelines and providing details about available support sets expectations on assessment preparation required. Moreover, it is highlighted to students that these assessments build on previous skill practice and development such as report writing, and research skills.	The teaching factors noted above are aimed at setting up a positive constructive relationship between tutor and students, where students can then feel confident to approach their tutors for clarification and support on preparing the set tasks. Student factors (academic maturity and positive emotions) are enhanced when the relationship works well.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to review how the student voice is listened to and to outline our response to their voice. The objective role of assessments in examining student attainment is acknowledged, whilst also understanding how student learning and engagement can be facilitated and maximised. Capturing students' perception of assessments and the impact of assessments on student learning can be used to guide assessment design to maximally impact student learning. Our analysis of the student experience of assessments suggests that the type and timeliness of assessments, students' academic maturity and emotional involvement and the tutor-student relationship and support provided all need to be considered when making decisions on assessment design and process. We recommend that tutors and subject leads plan the timing of module assessments to avoid unnecessary student stress and to allow for the building of student skills in a stepwise manner that improves student confidence. Students appreciate assessments that build on their transferable academic and employability skills and allow them choice and use of their creativity. Therefore, assessments need to be designed around current student needs and their future academic and employment needs. While it is difficult for tutors to influence individual student factors that affect their approach to assessments, early access to modules that aim to improve student academic-maturity and build on their academic skills may overcome this issue. In addition, a good tutor-student relationship that is conducive to the provision of appropriate student support can facilitate assessments as a means of student learning and growth without undue stress.

More research is required to identify how educational institutions can effectively address the development of student factors, such as intrinsic motivation, and academic perceptiveness. Future studies also need to find ways of capturing the voice of less engaged or less successful students, perhaps by conducting quantitative surveys at student induction. This discussion does not claim to be exhaustive. For instance, students' perception of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in assessment preparation has not been addressed here. Freeman's (2024) Higher Education Policy

Institute survey of HE students found that over 50% of students used AI with writing assessments and 73% expect to use AI after their studies. Freeman's survey also highlighted the emergence of a digital divide in student use of AI between privileged and less privileged learners. Therefore, researchers and tutors need to listen to student opinions on the use of AI and to subsequently develop policies and guidelines that guide students fairly and appropriately in the use of AI in assessments. In the meantime, this paper is a step forward towards a more holistic, student-focussed approach to HE assessments.

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