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2014

Students' Views on Assessment

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Students' views of assessment: purpose, preparation, feedback and grades

The aim of the study was to explore the views and experiences of students in a Social Science department in an institute of higher education. All undergraduate students were surveyed using a structured questionnaire. 258 valid questionnaire were returned and analysed to ascertain students' opinions on the purpose of assessment, how prepared they felt for assessments, their experiences and views of formative feedback and their reactions to grades. Findings show that while students have completed a good range of assessment types and show awareness of the learning potential of assessments they do not feel they understand lecturers' expectations nor are satisfied with the feedback they received. The reactions of students who are focused more on grades than feedback and their performance in relation to others are of concern.

Introduction

Assessement has been said to determine what students choose to learn, as well as how they learn it (Entwistle 1991; Smith et al. 1997; Struyven, Dochy and Janssens 2003). Students' views and experiences of assessment are also affected by their overall workload and experiences of teaching (Maclellan 2001). The pressure of workload and desire to achieve have been found to contribute to the use of tactics such as focusing on lecturer preferences as well as cheating in assessed work (Norton et al. 2001). While each student may receive the same information about assessment from lecturers individual 'motivations and orientations to study influence the way they perceive and act upon [these] messages' (Sambell and McDowell 1998, 400). This study documents the views of undergraduate students towards aspects of assessment, specifically their views of the purpose of assessment, how prepared they feel to complete assessments, their experiences and preferences for feedback and how they react to grades. These are examined in relation to the students' year of study. Then the views of students identified as competitive, confident and grade focused are investigated are investigated.

Purpose of assessment

Maclellan's (2001) survey of lecturers and students found that both groups saw the most common reason for assessment as being reporting on student achievement. Another purpose reported was discovering areas where student do and do not have knowledge so teaching can be adapted (Yorke 2003; Fook and Sidhu 2010), though Maclellan (2001) found that this view was more common among lecturers than students. As assessment guides what students learn it can act to motivate learning (Greer 2001), though again this appears to be a belief of lecturers rather than students. Maclellan's (2001) study showed that 5% of the 130 students surveyed stated that assessment frequently motivates learning, while 69% of the 64 lecturers said it frequently did, again showing disparity between student and staff views.

Types of assessment

Using a variety of assessment methods has been shown to have advantages. It can measure a range of skills required by learners to later succeed in the workplace (Fook and Sidhu 2010), as well as contributing to the development of various skills. For example group assignments are said to help develop interpersonal skills and 'understanding of group dynamics' (Alkaslassy 2011, 367). Assessment that involves critical reflection, such as a learning journal, contributes to improving skills such as critiquing and applying knowledge, validating claims of what has been learned and self-assessment in relation to reaching learning goals (Brodie and Irving 2007). Class participation has benefits of developing skills in oral communication, interactional skills and co-operation with others (Dancer and Kamvounias 2005). Oral presentations help deeper understanding of the topic prepared, though can have the drawback of favouring the more articulate and confident student (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997).

Students have been documented to appreciate continuous assessment rather than end of module examinations for encouraging learning and knowledge throughout the module rather than "cramming" at the end (Trotter 2006), which results in short term learning (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997). Students are 'less confident about preparing for examinations' and 'do not perform as well [...] as they do in coursework' (Payne and Brown 2011). However while they prefer continuous assessment, it is reported that students find little value in writing essays, saying they largely just take the information from books. Instead they value assessment methods that 'measure qualities, skills and competencies which would be valuable in contexts other than the immediate context of assessment' (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997, 360).

The "traditional" unseen essay question examination has been criticised for impeding students' attempts to understand course content, for being simply a test of memory and suggesting that the writing process should not involve redrafting and editing (Sambell and McDowell 1998). This type of assessment is also reported to cause anxiety, which does not facilitate deep understanding (Gibbs 1992) as well as contributing to inattention during classes (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997).

However, while different assessment types can enable the development and measurement of different skills, using a variety of methods has the potential disadvantage for students of requiring them to become familiar with the associated expectations of different types (Hounsell et al. 2008).

Preparation for assessments

As variation in views of the purpose of assessment exists between students and staff so does interpretation of what is required for a particular assessment (Guilikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner 2006; Joughlin 2010) as well as between students themselves (Sambell and

McDowell 1998). For example Williams (2005) compared first year students and lecturers' understanding of common verbs used in assessments (predict; account for; define; explain; write; discuss and draw). His results showed that none of the 116 student participants interpreted all the verbs in the same way as the four lecturers. Only two students agreed with lecturers on five terms.

Yorke (2003) points out that assessments in higher education are complex as they have many dimensions. This causes difficulties for the "clarity of assessment standards" (Price et al. 2010) and standardising quality (McConlogue 2012). When an assessment requires a response based on argument rather than being purely correct or incorrect the criteria for judgement and thus for explaining expectations are more difficult to articulate (Sadler 1989).

Research indicates that students do not understand marking criteria (Price and Rust 1999; Glover and Brown 2006; Ferguson 2011) or do not use them when writing assignments (O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008) . A lack of understanding of marking criteria is attributed to students' unfamiliarity with the way they are expressed, which only becomes comprehensible through 'repeated cycles of formative and/or summative assessment' (Bloxham and Campbell 2010, 292). O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2008) argue that through activities such as peer reviewing assignments students can develop tacit knowledge of standards. This may be that when students have to peer or self-assess they put greater effort into understanding the criteria, as well as using them when preparing their own assignments (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997). Others argue that understanding and confidence in approaching assignments is increased when students not only grade sample assignments but have the opportunity to engage in dialogue about marking with lecturers (Hendry, Armstrong

and Bromberger 2012). When criteria are understood both confidence and performance increase (Payne and Browne 2011).

However there is some evidence that lecturers do not mark using only the criteria made explicit to students, as variation between lecturers in marking has been reported (Ferguson 2011). Maclellan (2001) found that while lecturers said explicit criteria are used students felt that both explicit and implicit criteria are used in marking. Indeed McConlogue (2012, 114) argued that the 'typically small set of assessment criteria used to evaluate written work cannot represent the range of tacit understandings that tutors draw on in making judgements about complex, divergent written assignments'. The issue of variation between students and staff regarding how explicit marking criteria are as well as the use of unarticulated measures affects how feedback is given and understood.

Feedback

While summative assessment measures performance (Hattie and Timperley 2007) and signifies achievement, formative assessment serves various purposes.

Purpose of formative feedback

Formative feedback should explain the grade awarded (Price et al. 2010), though Hunter and Docherty (2011) examined grading and feedback comments among five markers noting discrepancy between grades and comments particularly in relation to the criterion "logical sequence of ideas". When the feedback given does not explain a poor grade self-efficacy is negatively affected (Ferguson 2011) and when feedback does not match a good grade uncertainty is created (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Feedback also gives students information about 'the gap between their current and desired performance' (Wingate 2010, 520; Brown 2007), improves their knowledge of the expected standards (Yorke 2003), and understanding

of 'what counts as good quality work in their subject area' (Hounsell et al. 2008, 55). While students in Higgins, Hartley and Skelton's (2002, 59) study saw that feedback had a role in helping to improve performance 'in subsequent assessed assignments and examinations in order to raise their marks', Price et al. (2010) suggest that the value of formative feedback in helping with other assignments can be affected by a variety of assessment tasks and different tutors. Brown (2007) also suggests that formative feedback is essential for fostering independent learning while Hattie and Timperely (2007) see it as providing students as helping develop skills and becoming aware of different viewpoints. Thus formative feedback should help students learn (Tang and Harrison 2011) but to do so it must be timely (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Trotter 2006) and of good quality (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Ferguson 2011). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), for feedback to be valuable it must let students know the goals of the assessment, their progress towards these goals and how to make more effective progress to achieve the required goals.

Quality of formative Feedback

Research indicates various findings regarding the value students attach to feedback on their work, with some studies showing that a substantial percentage of students do not collect available formative feedback (e.g. Sinclair and Cleland 2007). Other studies suggest that students do value formative feedback but the issue is comprehension (e.g. Ferguson 2011) while yet others suggest that achievement determines whether students will read feedback (Wingate 2010).

Students report variation between different markers regarding both the quality and quantity of written feedback (Higgins Hartley and Skelton 2002) and whether it is aligned with the explicit marking criteria (Glover and Brown 2006). This variation appears to be due to lecturers' perceptions of both the purpose of feedback and whether students read it

(Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Tang and Harrison 2011). Glover and Brown (2006) report lecturers believing that time giving feedback was wasted because students only focused on the grade and Higgins Hartley and Skelton (2002, 56) found that lecturers did not 'feel the need to produce detailed formative feedback for students whose grades are satisfactory or of a high standard'. From the student perspective, students surveyed by Carless (2006) disagreed that they are only focused on the grade and wanted feedback while Wingate (2010) reported that low achieving students said they are less likely to read feedback. Staff and students also disagree with regard to the perceived detail and usefulness of feedback, with students reporting feedback being less detailed and useful than lecturers did (Carless 2006).

As with issues regarding the clarity of expectations about assessments, studies report students do not understand feedback (Higgins Hartley and Skelton 2002; Handley and Williams 2011), which affects their ability to act upon it. For example comments such as "a need to critically evaluate" is reported by students to be unclear (Greer 2001). Thus students may read feedback but do not appear to act upon it because they do not comprehend it. Price et al. (2010) point out that students not only vary in their understanding and ability to act on feedback but also their motives to use it in future work.

Reasons given by students for not making use of feedback in future work include judging comments as being specific to a particular piece of work and thus not transferable to other assignments (Carless 2006; Handley and Williams 2011), external attributions for success (Weiner 2000), comments being all negative (Ferguson 2011), and a lack of confidence in their ability to improve (Wingate 2010). The scheduling of coursework, particularly with assignments being submitted at the end of semesters also affects the students' ability to use feedback in subsequent assignments (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton.

2001). Orsmond and Merry (2011) report discrepancies between tutors' views of the purpose of feedback comments and their practice with regard to improving future assignments. While tutors believed that feedback should help with future assignments they did not provide suggestions on how to improve subsequent assignments in their comments. Price et al (2010) distinguish between markers who focus on the content of the particular assignment and supply extra knowledge specific to that assignment in their feedback with those whose feedback centres on the process of learning and the development of skills that can be transferred to future assignments.

Studies of what students want in their feedback suggest: appreciation of individuality (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Ferguson 2011); not being overly focused on grammar and referencing (Duncan 2007; Ferguson 2011); comments on the level of critical analysis (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002); explanation of the grade (Ferguson 2011); provision of clear suggestions on how to improve future work (Nicol 2010; Ferguson 2011); specific rather than vague comments (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Duncan 2007; Brown 2007; Price et al. 2010); comments that are encouraging and confidence building (Ferguson 2011) and are legibile (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002). The format in which feedback is given can have an impact on how it is understood and used.

Format of feedback

From a survey of 465 experienced higher education students a preference for feedback in the form of comments interspersed throughout the assignment, as well as a summary sheet was found by Ferguson (2011). On the other hand Merry and Orsmond (2008) reported that students respond better to auditory rather than written feedback. Taking into account students' difficulties in understanding feedback comments, Bloxham and Campbell (2007) and Nicol (2010) argue that feedback needs to involve a conversation between student and

marker to enable each to understand the other person's view of requirements. Nicol (2010, 503) proposes that, due to the increase in student numbers in higher education, feedback has 'become detached' and written feedback is 'essentially a monologue' which does not encourage worthwhile student interaction with comments. However the lecturers interviewed by Price et al. (2010) recognised that discussion with students about feedback was necessary and offered their students opportunities for one-to-one meetings, which students did not avail of. Reasons given why students do not seek discussion about feedback with lecturers include embarrassment or possible threats to their self-esteem (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Bloxham and Campbell 2010) or beliefs that staff do not have the time to provide the help needed (Hounsell et al. 2008).

Reactions to grades and feedback

James (1995, 463) argues that grading is a social practice with two aspects. The first is the technical conception shared by lecturers and students where grades are seen as objective and rational 'judgements of worth of academic products against shared criteria'. The second is the experience of grades and distinctions between grades which is interpreted by students 'as partially constitutive of personal worth' thus having a direct effect on the value the student has of him/herself as a person. Similarly Yorke (2003) notes that students vary in their interpretation of grades, with some seeing a poor grade as indicative of not understanding or following the requirements of an assessment which others will see a poor grade as a personal failure. Other studies suggest that personal characteristics have an impact on grades and feedback. For example Young (2000) found that students with high self-esteem view critical comments more positively than students with low self-esteem. Self-efficacy can also affect whether students will use feedback to improve their work (Wingate, 2010). Self-efficacy is found to be correlated with self-compassion and self-compassion 'moderates negative

emotions after receiving ambivalent feedback (particularly for participants who have low self-esteem)' (Iskender, 2009, 713). Hattie and Timperley's (2007) review of studies on feedback indicates that the students' level of commitment and motivation mediates the impact of positive and negative feedback with positive feedback increasing motivation when people 'want to do' rather than 'have to do' an assessment and negative feedback has the opposite effect.

Thus, while assessment has an impact on students' learning, variation has been found between staff and students views of the purpose of assessment. There is also some debate about how to prepare students for completing assessments and how this matches with how assessments are actually marked. Disagreement between staff and students regarding the quantity and quality of feedback is also evident, as well as whether feedback is acted on. The present study aimed to explore the beliefs and views of students within one social science department about assessment practices.

Methodology

A survey methodology was employed as an expedient way to access the experiences and views of a large group of students. While this methodology undoubtedly has limitations, such as providing superficial data restricted by the questions asked, it allowed students to respond anonymously to a wide range of topics about assessment with minimal interruption.

Data collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire from undergraduate students in a Social Science Department. Students were studying for degrees in Early Childhood Education and Social Care. As well as studying modules in social science and education students all

complete practice placements as part of their programmes. Thus linking theory to practice is an important factor in assessments.

Questionnaires were distributed during classes by lecturers. Some lecturers permitted students to complete the questionnaires in class time, collecting them and returning them to the researcher. Other questionnaires were completed outside class time and returned by the students to a central collection point. Data was collected during the month of February. This time of the year was chosen as students had submitted and received grades and feedback on a number of assignments. However this timing meant that one group of final year students were out of college on a block placement so data was not collected from them, reducing the respresentation of the most experienced students.

Approximately 320 questionnaires were distributed and 258 valid questionnaires returned yielding a response rate of 80.6%. 102 responses were first year students, 114 second years and 42 final year students.

Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of ten sections. The first section asked participants to indicate the different types of assessment they had completed. The second section asked participants to rate on a five point scale eight statements referring to their experiences of preparation for assignments. Section three involved thirteen statements about the purpose of assignments, with level of agreement also measured on a five point scale. The fourth and fifth sections were about the format in which feedback had been received and preferences for feedback formats. Section six also involved formats in which feedback could be given, consisting of ten statements with which participants rated on a five point scale. The next section asked participants to consider ten statements about the purpose of feedback and their understanding of it. Section eight had nine statements about participants' feelings and reactions to grades.

Sections nine and ten asked participants to judge the importance of elements of written assignments and their approaches to writing an assignment. The findings from these two sections are not discussed in this paper. At the end of the questionnaire participants were encouraged to add their own comments about their views and experiences of assessment, which 31.4% of students did.

Data was analysed used PASW 17. The numerical data on the purpose of and preparation for assessment, purpose and reaction to feedback, feedback format preference and reaction to grades received were compared using multi-dimensional exact significance tests for Pearson's χ^2 tests. Factor analysis could not be computed as the correlation between items was not sufficiently strong. The association between all items based on the response to items considered to measure grade focus (The grade matters more than feedback), competitiveness with other students (What matters most is my grade compared to others) and confidence in approaching assessment (I am confident about what is required in assignments), were then examined to ascertain when the focus and confidence of students differed in relation to other items.

Findings

Range of assessments

Students reported experiencing a range of assessments, including reflective journals, essays, in-class tests, oral presentations, projects, case studies and role plays. Some also reported that class participation was assessed. This could be considered a positive finding as different assessment types enable students with different skills to succeed (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997) and help measure a range of skills (Fook and Sidhu 2010), though it could affect knowledge of assessment requirements (Hounsell et al. 2008). Reflective learning journals (95.3%), essays (92.2%), class tests (80.2%) and oral presentations (66.3%) were

reported to be the most common forms of assessment over all years. Online tests were a relatively recent assessment introduced and attracted favourable comments from students in relation to the impact of frequent testing on continuous learning, as also reported by Sambell and McDowell (1998):

> We get examined on the web after every three to four classes, which means I actually learn and know it as opposed to just reproducing it for an essay or exam.

> I think that online tests are a brilliant idea as they help you study during the year and ensure that you understand the course as it goes along.

Students' concerns

The subject of the comments given by students is indicative of their concerns about assessment so are summarised in Table 1 below. Some comments given are included in more than one category.

Table 1. Subject of Additional Comments

Subject of Comment	No. of Students
Preparation for assignments	24
Scheduling of assignments	21
Feedback on assignments	21
Type of assignment	20
Grades	6
Approachability of lecturers to discuss assessment	5
Other	5

All comments on the scheduling of assignments referred to poor scheduling, with assignments all being due in towards the end of semesters thus putting students under pressure. Such pressure is associated with students adopting tactics to minimise the work and maximise the grade (Norton et al. 2001) as well as reducing the learning that could occur from receiving and using feedback (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton. 2001).

Comments about grades suggest that these participants were upset when they compared the grade received to the amount of work they felt that they had put into completing the assignment, suggesting a lack of understanding about the expectations for assignments. Two of the twenty-four comments made about preparation for assignments stated that students were informed clearly about expectations; another three pointed out variation between staff in explaining requirements. The remainder indicated that students wanted more detail about what was required in assignments and felt ill-prepared. The lack of knowledge about requirements was also evident in comments about feedback, with all but three comments referring to a need for more feedback on both assignments and examinations. One comment pointed out a mismatch between positive comments and a low grade and the other two referred to a wish for individual discussions with staff about feedback, suggesting that the lecturer should approach the student. Lecturers were said to vary regarding how approachable they were to request additional information about assessment.

Regarding types of assessment, 75% of the comments related to a dislike for examinations as being stressful and a test of memory rather than understanding, congruent with findings from other studies (e.g Gibbs, 1992; Sambell, McDowell and Brown, 1997; Trotter, 2006). These comments included suggestions for a larger percentage of marks being awarded to continuous assessment. The other 25% of comments referred to a like or dislike for specific assessment types.

Purpose of assignments

This section discusses students' responses to items pertaining to the purpose of assignments with regard to guiding their learning, transferable skills and for lecturer evaluation of students and their teaching. Responses are compared to the stage of the programme to enable

consideration of the experience of the student with assessments, as previous research suggests that practice with assessment affects views (Bloxham and Campbell 2010).

Guiding learning

The majority of students agreed that assessment helps in judging their knowledge (84.1%) and guided their learning (78.3%) with no statistically significant association with the year of the programme. Final year students were slightly less likely to view assignments as being helpful in linking theory and practice (76.2% agreed or strongly agreed compared to 85.1% of 2nd years and 84.4% of 1st years). Final year students did not perceive assignments as being helpful in preparation for examinations also with 67.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to 85.1% of 2nd years and 84.2% of 1st years.

Learning skills

With regard to other skills being learned through different types of assignment statistically significant associations were found between stage of programme and the items 'Role play helps my understanding of other people' [χ^2 (8, n=258) =18.985, p exact = 0.015] and 'Group projects assist in developing the skill of working with others' [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 20.838, p exact = 0.007]. In both cases final year students viewed these types of assignments more positively. Though not significant, final year students also showed a higher percentage of agreement with 'Essays improve writing skills' and 'Projects improve research skills'. This suggests that greater experience of assessments enables reflection on the skills being developed. Though not statistically significant, first and second year students were more positive than final years with regard to the usefulness of learning journals in helping their understanding of practice. Although this form of assignment was viewed positively in helping link theory and practice by all years (84.4% of 1st years; 82.4% of 2nd years and 71.4% of final years, one final year student's comment indicates a weakness of reflective learning journals:

> I feel doing reflective journals as part of our assignments are not useful to me and I feel I get nothing out of doing them. They don't help me reflect on my placement as I end up making up examples as it is not always relevant to my placement.

Although ratings of oral presentations were not included in the questionnaire one first year student suggested a limitation of this method of assessment:

> I don't think oral presentations are as beneficial as written assignments as people usually copy work from books and the internet as they want it to sound good in front of the group. Also they are usually left to the last minute.

Lecturer evaluation

Participants were also asked about the purpose of assignments from the viewpoint of the lecturer measured through the scale items: 'assessments help lecturers to evaluate their own teaching', 'assessment is used by lecturers to rank students' and 'assessments allow lecturers to evaluate student knowledge'. With all items first year students showed a higher percentage of agreement, though the only item which was statistically significant [$\chi^2 = 15.744$ (8, n=258) p exact = 0.042] was in relation to evaluating student knowledge.

Of possible concern is the reduction in agreement with 'assessment helps lecturers evaluate their own teaching' as students proceed through their degree programme, with a substantial reduction from three quarters of first years agreeing to just over half of final years. Maclellan's (2001) third year students also did not agree with this as a purpose of assessment. This could be due to a greater variety of learning and teaching experiences or perhaps a greater focus on their own achievement in the award year.

Preparation for assessment

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with items about the extent to which they felt that lecturers prepared them to complete assignments and where they would find information to assist them.

The lowest agreement was in regard to understanding the requirements for assignments measured through two scale items 'I am confident of the requirements for assignments' (overall agreement 55.8%) and 'Lecturers explain the requirements for assignments', (overall agreement 48.5%). A statistically significant relationship was found between the year of programme and the latter item [χ^2 (8, n = 258) = 25.775, p exact = 0.001] with first year students agreeing more. This suggests that perhaps staff do not expect first years to know the expectations for different types of assignments and consequently provide more information. The overall percentage agreement with 'Lecturers explain essay titles' was higher at 73.3% and a relationship was found between the year of the programme and this item. The first year percentage agreement was 62.7% compared to 83.3% in second year and 71.5% in final year [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 17.953, p exact = 0.021]. This could indicate an expectation from staff about the ability of first year students to write essays, as opposed to other types of assignments, due to experience at second level. However as one first year student points out the requirements are different in higher education:

> Upon entering the course first years were expected to automatically know such things as essay layout etc. and it appears to have been forgotten that we came from secondary school where layout and formats were different. To save lecturers getting annoyed they might want to explain this clearly.

First year students also commented that they needed more specific direction and exemplars of essays:

> Lecturers giving the right direction with regard to what books to use for essays would be helpful, apart from our reading list – specific books/authors for the specific title.

> Lecturers need to be much clearer when giving out essay titles, indicating what they want. I think past pupil essays or sample essays should be given out to give a better insight to what is expected.

Overall students were more satisfied with preparation for tests and examinations with three quarters of students strongly agreeing and agreeing with 'lecturers prepare students for class tests and examinations'.

Apart from first years, students report uncertainty as to what is needed to complete assignments that are not the traditional essay or examination. This can lead to frustration when a grade considered to be commensurate with the effort put in is not attained as illustrated by the students' comments:

> One particular lecturer wasn't very clear at all about what we could write for our assignments then gave me a bad mark. [...] I worked very hard and I felt the lecturer marked me very unfairly.

> Not always sure what exactly is expected of you by some lecturers, other lecturers are very clear. Feel very disheartened when I thought I did an assignment well but did not receive a good grade.

However, 86.8% of students said they would ask lecturers to clarify the requirements, with no significant relationship with the year [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 4.446, p exact = 0.848].

Despite 99.2% of students agreeing that 'Students should be told how an assignment is marked' confusion is also evident about where to find details of how essays are graded with just over half (52.6%) the total students agreeing that it is available in the student handbook and just over a quarter (26.1%) of final year students knowing this. The relationship with the year was significant [χ^2 (8, n = 258) = 17.482, exact p = .025]. This could be due to the student handbook, although available electronically, being distributed to first year and new students when they commence the programme so those who are in their final year no longer use it as a source of reference.

Preferences for feedback format

Students were asked to rank on a five point scale their most preferred to least preferred format of receiving feedback on assignments. The most preferred format for all years was a combination of verbal and written feedback, with a total of 72.1% of students over all years indicating this. The combination of written feedback on the assignment itself and a feedback sheet was judged to be the most preferred by 24.4% of students but ranked second most preferred by 53.1%. Written on assignment only was ranked third overall (51.2%) and

feedback sheet only was ranked fourth (43%). The least popular format was 'verbal only' with 56.5% of students ranking this fifth.

Participants were also asked to rate various ways of receiving feedback. No trend is apparent regarding feedback preferences as students progress through their programme of study. Although there is a significant relationship between year of study and views on the necessity of feedback sheets [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 18.608, exact p = 0.016] and 'Comments written throughout the assignment are clearer' [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 16.026, exact p = 0.032] it is the second year students who show the highest preference for both of these, rather than the more experienced students as found by Ferguson (2011). This group also show the lowest percentage for liking verbal feedback (69% compared to 82.4% of first years and 83.3% of final years). A strong preference is evident for a combination of written and verbal feedback (93%), feedback sheets as a summary (94.6%) and receiving feedback one-to-one with the lecturer (88.8%).

Students were also asked to rate 'the grade matters more than the feedback' and 'I never read the feedback when I get a good grade'. 48.1% of students agreed that the grade was more important and only 8.9% said that they didn't read the feedback when they received a good grade. These findings indicate that these students do value feedback on their assessments in agreement with research by Carless (2006).

Purpose of feedback

Scale items relating to feedback centred on three factors: views on feedback to explain the grade awarded and improve work; the quality and quantity of feedback and understanding of feedback comments.

Grade and improvement

A large majority of students (98.1%) agreed that the purpose of feedback was to help them to improve their work, as found by Hartley and Skelton (2002). Slightly less (82.6%) saw feedback as explaining the grade given. There was no statistically significant relationship with the stage of the programme. Participants were also asked whether they compared the feedback with the grade, with which 76.3% agreed.

Quantity, quality and understanding of feedback

Few students in all years agreed that the amount of feedback given was sufficient (14.6% overall) though first years were more positive. Over 90% of both second and final years agreed or strongly agreed with 'Lecturers need to give more feedback on assignments' but only three quarters of first years, [χ^2 (8, n=258) = 20.927, p exact = 0.007], indicating that the less experienced student may be happier with less feedback or lecturers provide "novice" students with more feedback, perhaps assuming they will read it (Tang and Harrison 2011).

Ferguson (2011) notes that students want feedback that is positive and encouraging. However more than half of the students in this study (56.2%) reported that feedback did not focus on the positive aspects of their work, with no differences between stages of the programme.

In contrast to studies which suggest that experience with assessments improve understanding of requirements, greater experience with assessment did not improve reported understanding of feedback among these students, with 64.2% of final years disagreeing with the item 'I understand the feedback on assignments', compared to 52.9% of first years and 55.3% of second years. Second and final year students also had difficulties in judging their understanding of course material from feedback compared to first years. 81.4% of first years

agreed that they could judge their understanding of course material compared to 68.4% of second years and 66.7% of final years. As with explaining requirements for assignments this suggests that lecturers give clearer feedback to students in earlier stages of the programme. Alternatively the increasing complexity of material covered may have an impact.

As with willingness to approach lecturers for additional information about the requirements for assessments the majority of students agreed they would ask the lecturer to explain feedback (71.3%). However it cannot be distinguished whether low or high achieving students are more or less likely to seek clarification. Wingate (2010) found that low achievers were less likely to read feedback. As one second year student states:

> I think it would be helpful if lecturers took specific time to speak with all their students to discuss results. At present lecturers leave it up to the student to come forward. This doesn't work because student who haven't done well are less likely to come forward.

Despite some students saying that sample assignments would be useful and findings that peer assessing others' work helps understanding of marking criteria (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997; O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008) only 45.7% of students said they would read another student's work to seek clarification of feedback.

Reactions to grades

Students were asked about their emotional reaction to grades, the impact poor and good grades had on future effort, comparing grades to others and feedback received and attributions for grades.

One hundred percent of students strongly agreed or agreed that receiving a good grade made them feel proud. A higher percentage of students reported that receiving a good grade had a more motivating effect on the amount of work they did (81.4%) than receipt of a poor grade (69.8%), although 10.1% of students agreed with the item 'A good grade means the lecturer is an easy marker' suggestive of low achievement motivation. Over half (57.7%) of

students reporting feeling 'stupid' when they attained poor grades, and a significant relationship was found with the year of the programme [χ^2 (6, n=258) = 12.829, exact p = 0.045]. Anger was a more common response to poor grades as 64.4% of students agreed with 'A poor grade makes me feel angry'. Less final year students reported an emotional reaction to poor grades but the relationship is not statistically significant.

Items in this section asked students whether they compared the grade to the amount of work they had put into assignment and whether they compared their grade with other students in the group. 86.8% reported evaluating their grade with the effort put into the assignment and 26% to the grades received by their classmates. As individual orientations towards study affects behaviour in relation to assessment (Sambell and McDowell 1998), the item 'what matters most is my grade compared to others in the class' as a indication of competitiveness was compared to all other items to ascertain the views of the more competitive student towards assessment.

Competitiveness

Examining the pattern of significant relationships with the students (26%) identified as competitive indicates that these students are more likely to react with both anger and feelings of stupidity to receiving poor grades, though not with pride when they receive a good grade. For 'A poor grade makes me angry' [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 20.501, p exact < 0.001] and for 'A poor grade makes me feel stupid' [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 11.001, p exact = 0.011]. At the same time they agreed with 'A good grade means the lecturer is an easy marker' [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 22.633, p exact < 0.001]. The combination of these factors suggests that this type of student may not be confident about their own abilities.

They did not see assessment as a way for them to discover their own knowledge [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 9.683, p exact = 0.042] nor a way in which lecturers can evaluate their teaching

[χ^2 (4, n=258) = 17.363, p exact = 0.002]. Of greater concern, particularly considering their reactions to grades, these students were less likely to seek clarification from their lecturers about either assignment requirements, [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 16.229, p exact = 0.003], or for feedback on their work, [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 13.332, p exact = 0.002], congruent with suggestions that possible threats to self-esteem can affect students approaching staff (Hattie and Timperley 2007). However they will seek elucidation by reading their classmates work, [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 11.026, p exact = 0.025]. In contrast students who described themselves as being confident about what is required for assignments expressed more positive towards assessment.

Confidence

55.8% of students reported themselves to be confident about the requirements for assignments. Comparison with other items showed these students saw assignments as tools through which they can enhance competencies such as linking theory and practice [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 33.971, p exact <0.001] and writing [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 19.036, p exact = 0.001], as well as guiding their learning [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 18.803, p exact = 0.001]. They described themselves as being prepared by lecturers for examinations and tests [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 33.971, p exact < 0.001] and having essay titles explained [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 35.979, p exact < 0.001]. Additionally they stated that they would request information from their lecturers for both the requirements for assignments [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 28.810, p exact < 0.001] and feedback, if necessary [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 12.094, p exact <0.001].

They like verbal feedback, [χ^2 (4, n=257) = 14.685, p exact = 0.003] and they see the purpose of feedback as helping them judge understanding of course material [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 17.613, p exact = 0.001] as well as improving their work [χ^2 (2, n=258) = 11.320, p exact = 0.002].

Their reaction to poor grades is one of externalisation rather than feelings of personal inadequacy in that they reported anger [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 9.057, p exact = 0.028] and seeing their poor grade as being due to lecturer favouritism [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 16.256, p exact = 0.001]. Finally students who were considered to be grade orientated, agreeing that the grade was more important to feedback, were examined.

Grade orientation

Students (48.1%) who prioritised grades over feedback compared the grade received to the feedback provided [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 13.254, p exact = 0.015] but were less likely to request clarification of feedback from their lecturers χ^2 [(4, n=258) = 11.910, p exact = 0.015], instead they judged their grade from reading other students' work (p exact = 0.016). They also saw feedback as focusing on the negative [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 16.854, p exact = 0.001]. Feedback was not seen as a way of checking their own understanding of course material [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 11.570, p exact = 0.019].

They preferred written feedback, specifically a feedback sheet [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 10.250, p exact =0.032]. There are similarities with competitive students in that they agree with 'A poor grade makes me feel stupid' [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 9.088, p exact = 0.028)] although they did agree that a good grade makes them feel proud [χ^2 (1, n=258) = 5.137, p exact = 0.030]. They also saw assessment as a way in which lecturers rank students [χ^2 (4, n=258) = 16.923, p exact = 0.002] and felt that their grade in comparison to other students is what matters [χ^2 (3, n=258) = 19.963, p exact <0.001].

Conclusions

The students surveyed reported experiencing a good range of different assessment types with final year students showing awareness that these helped develop skills that are transferable

beyond the context of the assessment (Sambell, McDowell and Brown 1997). Based on the comments added by students the main areas of concern were the scheduling of assessments particularly spacing them throughout the academic year; variability between lecturers in explaining the expectations and requirements for assessment; concern about examinations being a test of memory rather than understanding and causing stress and a lack of feedback on assessment. Most students saw assessment as a way of judging their knowledge and learning, though a notable exception were students identified as being competitive. First year students were more likely to see assessment as a way lecturers could evaluate their teaching as well as student knowledge. Common with the findings of other studies, a concern is that approximately half of the students reported not being confident of the requirements for assignments and did not feel requirements were explained to them, except for first years. As students progress through a programme of study assessments increase in complexity and greater experience does not seem to compensate for understanding how to approach different assignments. Though a range of types of assessments were used students reported being more prepared for the traditional essays and examinations, suggesting that staff need to be clear about the purpose and goals when using other ways of assessing students so these can be explained to students. Students' attention needs to be drawn to available marking schemes at all stages of the programme as well as more discussion about how to approach assessments.

An obvious deficit from the students' perspective was the amount and comprehension of feedback. While lecturers may not see the value of feedback (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002; Glover and Brown 2006) nor feel that they are providing sufficient feedback these students reported valuing it, regardless of the grade received, as well as comparing it to the grade.

As pointed out by James (1995) the emotional impact of poor grades and effect on self-efficacy needs to be considered by staff, particularly considering that students reported being ill-prepared for assignments. Feeling stupid in response to a poor grade was also more common among first year students, a time when self-efficacy in the new educational environment needs to be built up.

Students who reported being confident about the requirements for assignments are more open to learning from them and seeking out feedback. In contrast students who were more concerned their grade in comparison to others do not seeing assessment as a way of learning, showed some evidence of stronger emotional reactions to poor grades but not to good grades, which they attributed to being due to the lecturer's marking. Students with this view of assessment are of the greatest concern as they did not appear to learn from feedback as well as having external attributions for achievement. They show similarities to students identified by Wingate (2010) as having low-self efficacy and low expectations of success, so did not see any value in using feedback information.

The competitive student showed similarities to the grade orientated students, except the latter reported experiencing positive emotions on receipt of a good grade and internal attributions for success.

In conclusion this paper provides an overview of the views and experiences of a sample of students in higher education about assessment. While there is evidence of positive practice nearly half of the students did not describe themselves as understanding what is expected in assessments and the majority wanted more feedback on their work. Students who were confident in approaching assignments were more willing to learn from any feedback given, suggesting that preparation for assignments through letting students know the expectations is most important.

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