An Evaluation of the role of assessments at Higher Education on student learning

Dr Siobhan Lynam

&

Dr Moira Cachia

HEA STEM conference

1st of February 2017
• **Assessments affect the quality and quantity of student learning** (Carless, 2007; Raupach et al., 2013)

• **The type of assessment affects student learning.** Formative assessments and assignments are more conducive to a deep approach. Summative assessments and exams are biased towards a surface approach (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Fry et al., 2009)

• Researchers have called for the use of more ‘**alternative assessments**’ that prepare students for the real-world by building on their skill sets (Keppell & Carless, 2006; Libman, 2010)
• **Personal factors affect student learning** including emotional response to assignments (Rust, 2002), perception of workload (Naude et al., 2016), time management, self-regulation skills, motivation, conscientiousness and social support all have an impact of academic success (Asikainen et al., 2013; Busato et al., 2000; Rytkoens et al., 2012)

• **Findings about students’ perceptions of assessments are contradictory**: Fletcher et al. (2012) found students perceive assessments as irrelevant to learning; Carless et al. (2006) found that students valued the learning experience of assessments
Assessments and feedback is still an area of concern for HE students (QAA, 2015)

Limited research has been carried out to assess students’ experience of assessments (Hernandez, 2012; Asikainen et al., 2013)

The evidence for what factors within assessments actually contribute to student success is not fully understood (Al-Kadri et al., 2012)
Rationale

- Academics’ and students’ perceptions of assessments are often as odds (Crook et al., 2006)

- An understanding of students’ perceptions and experience of assessments allows for better design of assessments by teaching staff (Fletcher et al., 2012)

- A deeper appreciation of how differing assessment types and their mode of delivery affect student learning is needed
This study was designed to give the researchers a deeper insight into how psychology students engage with their assessments with a view to amending assessment practices, where necessary, based on these findings.

The research questions were:

- What are our psychology students’ experience of assessments in higher education?
- How do assessments affect their learning?
Method

* **Design**
  - Focus group study
  - 3 focus groups
  - Analysed using experiential inductive method of Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013)

* **Participants**
  - 23 psychology undergraduates
  - Age Range: 20-46. 19 females: mean age of 24.3 years, 4 males: mean age: 21.5 years
Method

Procedure

• Semi-structured interview questions devised by researchers were used
• A card sort procedure was used for discussion of assessment methods
• Focus groups lasted on average 1 hour 5 minutes
• The 2 focus group facilitators were psychology lecturers at the university
Results - Themes and Subthemes

- Teaching factors
  - Supportive Tutor/student relationship
- Student factors
  - Emotions
  - Academic Maturity
- Timeliness
- Type of Assessment
Results

Teaching factors:

* **Timeliness** of:
  - Assessments

  ‘I found that the H&C essay helped me to write the Individual Differences essay and because of that it helped me a lot in the exam because it was a similar method we had to use.’ (Alex)

  ‘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 it felt like they actually knew what they were looking for …’ (Jane)
Teaching factors:

- **Type of assessment**
  - Predictability:
    - High/low
    - Cue seeking

- **Student focused**:
  - Choice
  - Creativity
  - Relevance
  - Balanced workload

‘...you have to learn every single lecture slide, because it all comes up. Whereas with the other ones they tell you, oh yeah, there’s only two questions but if you learn 3 lectures to be on the safe side’ (Marie)

‘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’ (Sally)
Results

Student factors:

* Academic Maturity
  * Self-evaluation
  * Academic perceptiveness

* Academic motivation

‘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.’ (Chris)

‘(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.’ (Sarah)
Results

Student factors:

- Emotion
  - Fear, anxiety
  - Excitement, pride

‘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’ (Haiza)

‘I think that’s why you’re so proud though, because it was so hard and we all did so well.’ (Sarah)
Results

Mediator:

* Tutor/student relationship:
  - Valued by students
  - Balanced support
  - Consistent instruction
  - Explicit, good quality feedback

‘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.’ (Sam)

‘I was forced to change my whole assignment a week before the deadline just because I got different opinions from different lecturer ... So it was quite rushed for me to change everything. So it was quite stressful.’ (Jess)
Development of assessments needs to take into consideration that:

- **Timing** of assessments and level of predictability affects student learning (there is also a knock-on learning effect with one assignment advancing the next)

- **Support** for assessments (Including feedback and feedforward) needs to be timely and balanced to avoid stress and promote independent learning

- Student’s level of engagement improves if assessments are perceived as relevant and student focused (these need to be made explicit)
Strategies to promote academic maturity, reduce stress and maintain a balanced workload could foster a more constructive approach to learning:

- Consolidated approach to setting assignments
- Time management training
- Stress management
- Strategies to promote intrinsic motivation

Appropriate assignments are a cost effective way of improving student engagement and satisfaction

Implications for module and course leaders, exam and timetabling administrators and student support services
Level 5: Biological Psychology module

Previously - 2 exam assignments - MCQ and short essay exam

Now - No essay exam

Now - Essay exam has been replaced by an audiovisual group presentation and individual short essay
Assignment changes

Teaching factors

Timeliness
* Teaching sessions to support the assignment
* Feedforward sessions including practice submissions and practice presentations
* Critical evaluation involved will support future assignments

Type of Assessment
* Predictability – focus on one well researched topic
* Student focused
  * Technical skills
  * Teamwork & Leadership
  * Choice
  * Presentation skills
  * Creativity

Student factors

Academic maturity
* Students encouraged to self-evaluate abilities and to assignment students roles based on their strengths
* Student groups encouraged to work through group problems as a group before seeking help from tutors
* Students were further motivated by making the skills learnt explicit

Emotion
* Less stress
* Positive response from students
* Almost 100% submission
Future research

- Follow up quantitative study to target larger participant group, non-psychology and less successful students

- What factors determine insight into the role of assessments and how this insight effects learning?

- How can academics foster internal motivation?

- What factors influence students perception of workload?

- What effect does study skills training (i.e. time management) have on student satisfaction and learning?
References


