How might inclusive approaches to assessment enhance student learning in HE?

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Abstract

This article reports some of the results from an investigation into issues around inclusivity in assessment undertaken at the University of Northampton (2009-2010). The *Assess4success* research project was conducted within a framework provided by the Higher Education Academy Summit programme on inclusive learning and teaching, and sought to explore the extent to which inclusivity, (a high level commitment in the university's access and teaching policies), was embedded in students' experiences of assessment. Drawing on internal quantitative data across the institution suggesting specific groups were more likely to struggle with summative assessment in Year 1, and qualitative data exploring sample student experiences in relation to formative assessment tasks, a series of generic recommendations to enhance the inclusivity of assessment practice both in the host institution and across the sector are offered.

Key words: Inclusivity in HE; assessment in HE; undergraduate achievement

Introduction

We take on round pegs and try to assess them in square holes

The institutional context in which this research was conducted is provided by the University of Northampton, an HEI awarded full university status in 2005 which has a long-standing commitment to widening participation and meeting the employability needs of the UK East Midlands region. The university has two campuses (2.5 miles apart) and 8 partner colleges. Its courses are delivered through six academic Schools, and range from foundation degrees to professional and doctoral qualifications, with particular strengths in teaching healthcare and education professionals.

The high level commitment to widening participation is reflected in its diverse student intake, 25% of whom come from BME backgrounds in a total cohort of 11,500. The student body includes 900 students who register with the disability support services, and 700 international students from 100 different countries. Of the total cohort, 28% study part-time, 42% are mature students and 62% students are female

This context provided the rationale for the institution's engagement in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) 2009-10 summit programme on inclusive learning and teaching, in that inclusivity has long been a key element in the culture of the institution. The issue of inclusive assessment was originally brought to light by our team of Dyslexia Support Tutors (colleagues who support students with dyslexia and other disabilities on a one to one basis). A common theme reported by them was the difficulty students were having in understanding the

requirements of assessed pieces of work and the timeframe in which assessments were set. In some Schools students were reporting situations where a number of assessments were set at the same time making it difficult for students to complete them in the time allowed, especially if they remained unclear what they were being assessed on. It was felt by the research team that this issue was not restricted to disabled and dyslexic students but could be a potential inclusivity issue across the institution. This became a key driver for our research.

In drafting its bid to take part in the summit programme, the university assessed its existing strengths in relation to inclusivity as:

1) Strong recognition at a senior level of the need for inclusivity including an institutional push on Equality and Diversity, and explicit support for inclusivity in the university's mission (committed to 'transforming lives'), in the strategic plan and in School development plans.

2) Strong infrastructure, particularly around disability, including a central Access Ability team, disability coordinators in each School and department, and a working group reporting to the University Learning and Teaching committee.

3) Strong Widening Participation agenda represented through its curriculum (the six Schools offer Foundation degrees, top-ups, work-based learning and other courses reaching groups that would otherwise be denied access to HE).

4) Many academic staff are appointed for their professional expertise, especially in Schools like Health and Education, so inclusivity is not a contentious 'add-on' for staff, but is often embedded as a professional value.

The summit programme aligned with the university's Learning and Teaching operational plan, which included as actions: Re-developing assessment to meet the needs of the changing learning environment and the student population; ensure…assessment strategies are fit for purpose… directly meet the needs of learners; To ensure the curriculum is…inclusive and accessible.

The university's strategic direction in relation to inclusion sought to avoid limited and formulaic anticipatory reasonable adjustments, especially in relation to assessment (ESRC, 2007), and aimed to ensure a consistent student experience across the institution, particularly in inclusive arrangements, by making a choice of alternative assessments available to all students. A key rationale for this work is to develop a fully inclusive approach to formative and summative assessment underpinned by the student voice.

Informed understanding of inclusion had already impacted on practice across the university, instigated by the Equality/Diversity Officer, Disability coordinators in each School and Department and the Access Ability team. At the time this research was conducted, over 6% of new Northampton students declared a disability on enrolment, but the figure was significantly higher (9%) when non-disclosed specific learning differences became apparent. Of these, dyslexia was by far the most commonly cited.

Inclusivity as an assessment issue

In order to contextualise our institutional case study, we investigated a broad range of literature to understand inclusive assessment as those issues impacted on students. In our own institution, it became apparent that the term 'inclusive assessment' provoked more questions about meaning from colleagues than we had expected, so we have utilised a broad and common sense definition:

Inclusive assessment refers to the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do. (Hockings, 2010, p.2)

The literature we investigated was grouped under four loosely connected themes: broad issues of student inclusion in HE; the use of alternative (inclusive) assessments in HE; student preparedness in terms of study skills; student use of assessment feedback.

Inclusion issues

The challenge of universities 'opening-up' inclusive access routes and foregrounding equal opportunities (EO) policies, while still representing assessment as 'exclusive practice' is addressed by Darlaston-Jones (2003). She calls for inclusive assessment, by which she means removing the invisible barriers which are not readily identifiable in assessment (such as assessments being culturally inappropriate). In research focused on dyslexia in HE, Farmer et al (2002) highlight the problem of assessing writing skills, noting the specific difficulties faced by students with dyslexia when writing is so important for academic success. As an inclusivity issue, this is compounded by the range of writing challenges faced by students from unconventional backgrounds. As such, the social/emotional impact of dyslexia on assessment (for example stress, anxiety, self-worth and confidence) is raised and the question 'how to make assessment relevant and informative in the context of dyslexia?' is posed.

At Northampton, this is highlighted by discipline differences and even different assessment demands across single courses. Crucially, to avoid perceived inequalities in the parity of challenge between given assessment tasks and alternative assessment tasks, we argue it is the robustness and clarity of the learning outcomes, which in turn can be scrutinised at the course validation stage, that offer opportunities to embed inclusive assessment practices. Standards can be maintained by lecturers understanding what assessment is for, and what outcomes are essential for any student to demonstrate.

Simon and Hicks (2006) extend this to consider those excluded from the kind of learning which values cognitive and verbal means of assessment. They suggest HE should use creative arts as an assessment bridge to facilitate those learners previously disenfranchised, thus widening opportunities to learn in different ways. They suggest creative arts do not discriminate, as assessment is not solely reliant on the written, and that it is better to open HE to different modalities of learning (drama, photographs, movement, role play, masks, storytelling, paint, clay) rather than merely include those previously excluded in a system which remains unchanged. In future research, we would like to investigate if there was any evidence of creative approaches to assessment impacting on the student experience.

In a US context, Passman and Green (2009) advocate 'universal design' as an approach to front-load courses to achieve maximum inclusive understanding (including of assessment practices). This is an important vision that, rather than be designed with the 'average' student in mind, courses consider the diverse needs of all potential users, and plan for universal access, such that accommodation issues are downplayed or even eliminated. To reach this 'level playing field', multiple modes of assessment should be employed, for the explicit purpose of going beyond evaluation of student performance that grading yields to an iterative feedback/improvement loop. This macro level approach informed our final recommendations.

Alternative assessment methods

Riddell and Weedon (2006) remind us disabled students are entitled to reasonable adjustments in assessment under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (which is being embedded in a more extensive Equality Act, 2010, as this article is being published) which can mean alternative ways of demonstrating learning outcomes. The new Act makes clear indirect discrimination of those with disabilities is illegal. Riddell and Weedon argue that, if traditional forms of assessment are fundamentally discriminatory, a radical overhaul of assessment practices in HE are necessary, with the onus on institutions to find new forms of assessment which will no longer penalise students with learning difficulties. They do recognise the contentiousness of this position, noting that assessment plays a very important part in underpinning the discourse of meritocracy in HE, yet it is a process which is largely separate from teaching and learning. They suggest, if alternative assessments are acceptable and if they are genuinely equivalent in terms of the skills and knowledge they test, all students should be allowed access to these adjustments. Waterfield and West (2006) echo this, defining provision like extra time in exams as 'contingent' because the mainstream assessment system remains unchanged. For us, interesting dilemmas are raised for advocates of inclusive assessment, in terms of students with generic learning difficulties, students with dyslexia, students who come from disadvantaged social backgrounds and students from overseas.

Gravestock (2006) explains that, in order to meet legislative requirements around inclusion, disabled students in HE can be assessed by: Alternative methods; Additional arrangements; or Adjustments/adaptations. Of these approaches, the latter two are considered ad hoc and expensive, and he too suggests 'why shouldn't the alternative assessment be available to all students...if it meets the intended learning outcomes and maintains academic standards'. His accessibility checklist includes:

- Change the way assessment is delivered (rather than how it is marked)
- Check the language of assessment tasks for clarity, avoiding ambiguity
- Clarify what is being assessed (grammar/spelling?)

At Northampton, this proactive approach has been factored into some of the project's recommendations, to counter charges levelled that the existing arrangements are reactively remedial.

McGann et al (2007) argue that transferable skills (like communication, critical thinking, and independent learning) can be developed by alternative methods of assessment as a complement

to the traditional essay/exam/lab report. They describe an 'information leaflet' produced for a lay audience, accompanied by an academic critique, which facilitated greater breadth and depth of skills (including employability) by engaging students in an innovative, creative, problem-based task to 'communicate clearly to different audiences'. This was enjoyed by students and evaluated as a deeper approach to learning outcomes such as 'critically evaluate'. As an alternative approach to inclusive assessment, it could be conceptualised more explicitly as assessment for learning.

Harrington et al (2007) worry that factors other than the pedagogical, are determining choice of assessment, arguing that developing new potential for learning in the context of assessment requires attention to changing factors that constrain the alignment of assessment method with pedagogical beliefs. This, they argue, will align assessment more closely to learning outcomes and motivate students to sustain study. At Northampton, as a result of this research, recommendations about adjustment to course validation protocols have been recommended.

Study Skills

Much of the literature on academic writing supports anecdotal evidence noted by the authors that most students in HE Year 1 felt A' levels (advanced public academic examinations usually taken at age 18 and often used as a benchmark for HE entry) did not prepare them for undergraduate assessment, especially as they did not know what markers in HE were looking for.

Inclusivity in relation to expectations of HE and the early/transition experience of assessment are raised by Hramick et al (2009). Arguing that students are more likely to withdraw if their expectations of HE are not met, they established that student expectations are based on their prior experience of assessment – which for many are expectation of difference in terms of frequency, type and amount of assessment (student informants thought HE would have more assessment, but that they would receive less feedback, which they expected to be less personal and less detailed). Students coming directly from Year 13, they argued, are likely to be used to getting regular feedback on a one-to-one basis (especially those in small groups with almost daily contact with a tutor for two years). This contrasts with pressured tutors in a 'mass' HE system. The challenge, they argue, is to structure Year 1 assessment to provide greater support to develop independent learning and engage students more in the feedback process, and raises the question as to whether technology can be harnessed (via podcasts, blogs, audio?) to more effectively meet the aspiration for inclusive assessment. At Northampton, the authors are aware of tutors who pro-actively use peer assessment, or anonymous sample work from previous cohorts, in order to discuss the marking criteria and facilitate more inclusive assessment.

Significantly, they conclude assessment is 'another learning tool that students need to learn to use effectively if they are to succeed at university', and they argued for additional formative feedback in Year 1 to support transition, but warned that more and regular feedback by itself will not necessarily engage students to improve their work or to plan assessed work in advance. The key finding seems to be to provide clarity around expectations of students in Year 1.

Conversely, Jessen and Elander (2009) found FE college students (those who were more likely to have taken vocational qualifications equivalent to A levels) were 'over-confident' that they understood assessment demands. This adds to studies which suggest students entering HE from a

vocational route can struggle with traditional forms of HE assessment (Hatt & Baxter, 2003, Ertl et al, 2009), and that non-traditional routes are more likely to be taken by mature students, working class students and some BME groups (Francis, 2006). As universities like Northampton engage a far wider range of students from a broader diversity of educational backgrounds, this was important in our research, and it seems to us imperative that all HE students get an opportunity to reflect on and understand key assessment criteria (such as address the question; demonstrate understanding; critically evaluate; use language; develop an argument; structure; use evidence) in order to enhance their experience of assessment as a positive learning opportunity.

The critical importance of students understanding what assessment tasks require of them has been investigated in McDowell (2008), who acknowledges that students need to better understand the requirements of assignments, and acquire new concepts such as 'argument'. She draws out insights from research to more effectively support assignments as vehicles for learning, noting the problem that many lecturers see little evidence that carefully targeted feedback leads to students improving future performance. She reminds us we mark the end product as a straightforward indication of ability, but do not consider the process of writing which can reveal important knowledge about learners. Importantly, she claims not taking advice may not be an expression of student perversity or low levels of interest. Focusing on the traditional essay as ubiquitous assessment task, she differentiates: argument, in which students are engaged in a deep approach to demonstrating learning, from arrangement, in which students are engaged in reproducing/retelling, and which leads to a surface, instrumental approach.

Too often, she asserts, students do not fully understand academic conventions and ways of thinking in relation to the demands of the essay, and the need to practice activities such as critical analysis.

Inclusivity and the problem of Assessment feedback

Even if students understand what is required of them in assessment tasks, too often the opportunity to learn from assessment feedback is missed. Across the sector, a pressing concern raised by the National Student Survey is that students perceive much assessment feedback in HE as impacting negatively on the learning experience due to its ambiguity, lateness and negativity. Porter (2009) reported 'many disabled and minority ethnic students feel they have a more negative experience of assessment feedback compared to their peers'. Assessment feedback should not be regarded as a simple transmission model, because it can be 'misunderstood, expressed in inaccessible language or not heeded due to lack of timeliness'. They advocate a good practice guide for staff to complement formal policies/codes of practice, offering support for dialogic, interactive social learning which empowers students to be proactive.

The impact of assessment and feedback practices on the first year experience is discussed in Nicol (2007b, 2009a, 2009b). Key to student success, he argues, is the development of appropriate study strategies through willingness to participate actively in the learning experience, which can lay a foundation for the development of learner autonomy. Nicol is convinced 'many of the problems experienced by the student in the first year can be addressed through assessment practices', reporting early successes and early feedback as critical (advocating the first semester as entirely formative). Summarising the limited literature, he highlights: time on task leading to evenly distributed study effort; feedback focusing on learning not marks; feedback related to

assessment criteria; students having a participative rather than a reactive role in assessment processes.

This builds on the work of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), who argue that formative assessment feedback can help students to take control of their own learning, to become self-regulated learners, facilitating a profound shift to students having a proactive role in generating and using feedback. They argue that, while HE now conceptualises learning as students actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge/skills (rather than 'transmission learning'), conceptualisations of assessment feedback have lagged behind, with students given little responsibility even for low level formative assessment processes. They assert 'if feedback is to improve and accelerate learning, students need to have in mind goals to be achieved'. Noting students often rank 'content' higher than their tutors' 'critical thinking/argument' in assessment criteria, they argue for exemplars, peer assessment (for example of poster presentations) and assessment workshops to identify students' own strengths and weaknesses. The aim of assessment feedback should be to help students 'trouble-shoot' their own performance, through task-involvement dialogue rather than the 'ego-involvement' of grades. They recommend no more than three well-thought out comments, used regularly and often (perhaps via audio) rather than feedback that overwhelms in quantity, is over-critical or offers low-level learning goals.

Complementing this, Nicol (2007a) argues 'when students are reconceptualised as partners in assessment, and when technology is harnessed in assessment design, significant learning gains are possible'. The premise is drawn from social constructivism, in that more effective learning from assessment comes from feedback based on experience rather than expertise – he thus advocates greater use of open-ended online tasks, in which students seek peer feedback, challenge one another and scaffold to promote higher learning.

Norton et al (2006) concur, arguing recent shifts in learning theory, and approaches to teaching and learning, have not been matched in assessment (summative exams still dominate). Transformational agendas in assessment require HE 'adaptiveness' at all levels, to move away from anxiety-inducing reliance on memory and regurgitation at end of modules/years. The need to solve fear of plagiarism in coursework, to provide feedback on exam scripts and introduce 'user-friendly' formats would better prepare students from WP/non-traditional backgrounds, or from 'weak' schools. Norton (2007) notes many students are strategic about assessment and learning, reflecting surface rather than deep approaches. She also argues that, in designing courses, academics often consider assessment last. This is not conducive to inclusive approaches, since institutions can operate systems which are non-adaptable. Recognising students do not (often) understand assessment criteria, she recommends using assessment criteria as learning criteria, with greater use of peer assessment and an Essay Feedback Checklist.

This aligns with the new understandings emerging from Bevan and Sambell (2007) who advocate assessment for learning, rather than its current position as an end judgement of learning, recommending:

- Authentic & complex assessment, rather than 'reproduction'
- Extensive opportunities to develop learning prior to summative assessment
- High stakes summative assessment to be utilised sparingly

- Rich formal and informal feedback in a continuous flow throughout the learning experience
- Supporting students to evaluate their own performance
- This re-focussing of assessment is reflected in recommendations made as a result of this research.

Methodology

In order to explore the extent to which inclusive approaches to assessment might enhance student learning in HE, we designed an institutional case study in two stages of data collection, employing mixed methods.

Step 1: Quantitative analysis of student assessment data

In order to address our research question, we sought to scope the scale of any inclusive assessment problem by investigating a sample of students from across the University who had struggled to pass year one (level 4) assignments but not failed completely (the "Scrapers"). The rationale for this was that we did not want to include students whose failure could be attributed to serious personal issues or illness or those who had enjoyed the social life of university too much or just been unconcerned about assessment. The sample we wanted were students who had demonstrated potential to succeed at HE and had shown commitment but still not done well, partly to identify the scale of any issue(s). This group, we reasoned, would represent those who had, for reasons beyond their own control, struggled with assessment and the requirements of university study. We planned to extract quantitative data about this group from the university's records and analyse it according to standard categories. This analysis was intended to lead iteratively to our second, more exploratory stage, when we would interview a small self-selecting sample of the students to gather qualitative data.

We were limited by the data collected from students on enrolment but provided the information had been collected and entered into a data base field, we were, after some ethical debate, allowed access to it. We decided to define our sample as *"level 4 students who in the year ending Summer 2009 had achieved 50% of their marks at grade D"* (the University operates a grading system where pass is from A+ to D-). We asked for the data to include; the University School of Study (or associated college – the university is in partnership with a number of FE colleges to deliver HNDs and Fds off-campus) analysed according to: Age, Gender, Disability, WP background and Ethnicity. This resulting sample size was 114 students, about 3% of the total cohort of first years. The percentage of each of these categories within the cohort (level 4 students completing in Summer 2009) and within the University as a whole were used as a comparison set to determine if any group was over-represented in our sample.

Step 2: Qualitative data – interviews with re-sitting students

Having had an initial frustrating false start in an attempt to elicit volunteers from our sample of 114, we reflected on the challenges of engaging this hard-to-reach group struggling with HE assessment in our research. Acknowledging the inevitable fear of 'coming out' as someone failing, we re-thought our approach. As an alternative, we drew on an existing small-scale retention project aimed at resit students, in order to undertake individual semi-structured student

interviews. These were facilitated by an URB@N (Undergraduate research bursary) student researcher to explore issues around assessment preparedness. We note that students often experience struggling with assessment as an emotive issue and so because of this we wanted to employ a method that facilitated sensitivity around possible disclosures. For this reason, we decided to use one-to-one semi-structured interviewing with student participants. These interviews were conducted by an undergraduate student researcher rather than staff team members, because it was felt that the common status of student between interviewer and interviewee would: generate/enhance rapport; create a less hierarchical dynamic between researcher and researched, and facilitate discussion of issues that might be difficult to raise within staff-student relationships. The student researcher was trained by team members on how to conduct semi-structured interviews, made aware of ethical considerations, and was supplied with relevant materials such as consent forms and the interview agenda. Five interviews were conducted, each lasting around 45 minutes. Responses were recorded digitally and then transcribed. The resulting scripts were analysed by the researcher and a member of the team to identify key themes which in turn were aligned with some of the literature.

Findings and analysis

On first inspection of our quantitative data, it was clear that no School was over-represented in the sample and so being a "scraper" did not seem to depend on subject of study (it is noteworthy that most of our degree courses value practical and/or professional skills in addition to 'traditional' academic competences). However, there was some indication that doing "joint honours" (as opposed to single honours) might be a risk factor for issues emerging around inclusive assessment. This requires further investigation.

Males were disproportionately represented in the sample and young students (under 21) by a factor of nearly two so that young men (Male and under 21), seemed to be appreciably at risk of struggling with HE assessment in Year 1.

Some ethnic minority groups were over represented but absolute numbers were small and so caution is needed. In broad terms British African, British Caribbean, British Indian and British Pakistani could be said to be risk factors for struggling in year one of our degree courses. This is in line with nationally published figures (See Equality in higher education: statistical report 2009, the Equality Challenge Unit, http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-he-stats-09 p.46).

Overseas students were significantly over represented by a factor of five but the sample is very small and data unreliable and so this can be taken only as an indicator of another area worthy of further investigation.

Students with "non-traditional" academic backgrounds (non- A level entrants) were nearly twice as likely to be "scrapers" than those with A-levels.

The final category we were able to look at was students who studied at partner colleges. The picture on these students was not clear and much further work is needed. In most cases there was not a discernable difference between this category and the comparison group but the first analysis revealed some issues with particular colleges that need explanation.

Students with disabilities were over-represented but only those with a disability classified as "Dyslexia". Overall there were few surprises with the data; the overall picture being similar to the national picture (See- Equality in higher education: statistical report 2009, the Equality Challenge Unit, http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-he-stats-09). However, the data does clearly point out, for this University, where future effort needs to be made to assist students with either study skills or in understanding assessment. A set of "risk" factors for "scraping" can be drawn up:

- Young (Under 21)
- Male
- BME (British African, British Caribbean, British Indiana and British Pakistani)
- Non A level entrants
- Declared Dyslexia

We attempted to investigate issues around social class, but the data was unclear on this, being incomplete and so not providing us with any worthwhile information in terms of validity. The social class indicators, derived mainly from the UCAS data, are based on students' view of their parents' occupations (the NS-SEC). In 2007/08, nearly two-thirds (63.1%) of the student population had unknown NS-SEC data. Among UK-domiciled full-time first degree young (aged under 21) students, the proportion who had unknown NS-SEC data was nearly a fifth (19.5%). This suggests an issue for reporting the social class background of 'mature students'. It is also worth noting that the social class data relies on the student knowing what the main contributor to the family income does for a living and then correctly reporting this. So there appears to be lots of room for error in this, let alone the large numbers who decline to give the information. (see: Equality in higher education: statistical report 2009 A statistical overview of the equality challenges facing the higher education sector, Equality Challenge Unity 2009 Available from http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/equality-in-he-statistical-report-2009.doc/view)

 However, it did seem from our sample (and this is supported anecdotally) that non-traditional, non-A level, first generation in HE entrants were likely to be un(der)prepared for academic HE assessment. However, we need to explore the data on a much larger scale to see if the perceived disadvantage of being from Black and Pakistani minority groups is in fact a social class disadvantage. This is something that should be done routinely, and consequently informed our recommendations.

Student Voices

Analysis of the qualitative data from our interviews with these hard-to-reach resit students suggested they all had a clear expectation that HE would be 'harder' than previous study when they started, that it would be 'challenging...time consuming' but they were shocked by the reduction in support and flexibility (for example, over deadlines):

Well lecturers are a bit more distant than what teachers were in 6th form...Teachers would say this is what you need to do, come back and do it. (Interview 4)

This was compounded by a lack of confidence in understanding what their assessment tasks were asking of them, similar to the recognition in McDowell (2008) that students do not fully understand the conventions of academic writing:

Knowing what to write there's so much information and to put into a thousand words or two thousand words…it's hard to know like what they actually want to know, like what the question is actually asking. (Interview 4)

This suggests an issue for some learners in HE that assessment is, by its nature, non-inclusive and that universities need to be more pro-active in addressing their study needs in terms of ensuring opportunities to demonstrate what they know are provided. This can be linked to important issues raised about the need for pre-entry study skills which prepare a more diverse range of students for HE assessment in Hramick et al (2009).

Students expected a diet of essays, but were unprepared for assessment through group work and presentations – for which they felt they had not been prepared and didn't 'fit' with their circumstances:

I don't really like group work but that's because you have to work around other people and I have a baby, so I need to work around nursery as well, and if people aren't turning up or my daughter is ill it's just horrible. (Interview 2)

When asked about learning from assessment feedback, none of the students found assessment feedback helpful: for some, it had been expressed in a:

…sharp, unhelpful tone, suggesting 'you are at university, you should know what you're meant to produce' or 'just a list of negative points, even though the grade was a B, so I didn't know how to develop. (Interview 3)

Additionally, students wanted tutors to set aside time to go through assessment feedback and indicate how to improve their work:

I do assignments and I get, say probably a B or something but I'm not told what I could have done in order to get an A… they just write like say, for example like this bit more referencing, or something like that. That's about it, but not in detail to say this is where you went wrong and this is how you could have done to improve that. So, you don't know what to do to get the higher grades.
(Interview 3)

Some lecturers are really good at giving feedback and then some aren't. (Interview 2)

For students from a vocational route, the need to explain formative feedback (as suggested in Nicol and McFarlane–Dick) was especially pressing:

If the tutors were more approachable...yeah go through the assignment in more detail that would help, they just give you the question, some of them do if it's a problem question...go through

some questions before the essay is due in and that's good, but some of them don't and they just give you the question and you're just expected to know what they're asking, I don't think they help with actually telling you what they are asking... (Interview 4)

Where study assistance was provided around assessment tasks, help often came reportedly from students on other courses, who were regularly consulted to mediate assessment tasks, or from Personal Tutors, who were cited as key retention agents.

Poor time management in relation to assessment tasks also emerged as an inclusivity issue, despite submission dates announced in module guides:

For most modules we have two assignments and then for some of them we have four. But they're all split so the deadlines are all on different times. But then…all the deadlines are moved…We don't read the module guide, we don't even have it. (Interview 1)

The connection between assessment, learning motivation and the retention needs of non-traditional students were also raised, underlining the crucial importance of the first year experience to bridge the culture shock of HE assessment practice:

There were like 40 something first years and now there's only half of that because most of them left…most of them have said to me that there's nothing motivating them to actually do the work. (Interview 1)

The model of centrally-provided academic support was also explored, but appeared not to be meeting the needs of some students:

I've heard of that… I think it's upstairs in Student Services...I went there but they just gave me sheets and a booklet, they just gave me papers …stuff to go and read again to do it so it didn't really make a difference to me.(Interview 5)

Conclusions and further work

Taking a critical stance towards the student interview data we did manage to collect, we recognise the limited sample and the 'resit' bias built into the cohort we did reach. However, we would argue that this group of students, those struggling with HE assessment and seemingly disengaged from the existing support services at the university, are rarely included in research reports. They did open up to a peer researcher, and as a consequence their voices help us understand the urgent need for a systematic rethink about inclusive approaches to assessment. For us, they represent a real ethical dilemma for universities that have taken great strides to embrace inclusive approaches to student access and pedagogy, but seem to be excluding some students from achieving their potential through outmoded and inflexible thinking about assessment. We recognise our qualitative data does not, by definition, include those struggling students who refuse all support, but reiterate that, given the limitations of our small sample, rare evidence from particularly hard-to-reach learners is included.

If our research is to have any impact, evidence will be seen in the introduction of proposed modifications to our university's assessment strategy, for example in our recommendations concerning:

- **Preparedness** - Advice about 'inclusive' wording of assessment tasks to become university policy – to facilitate better student understanding of the process of and reasons for assessment. This would enable them to become more 'assessment-literate' through greater transparency, rather than any perceived reduction in standards. Clearer guidance provided to the role of mentors and personal tutors in supporting this. (This is intended to partially address the unfamiliar cultural aspects of UK assessment systems which have impacted on some non-UK learners).
- **Study Skills** - Support students to become more confident in managing assessment tasks to support their learning by offering in-house 'Flying Start' programme (short, pre-HE course aimed at mature students) to all students fitting our 'at risk' category (ie young, males, dyslexics etc) and introducing a greater focus on assessment literacy. (This is intended to more effectively engage at-risk groups identified in our research, like young males).
- **Feedback** - Greater use of smaller chunks of formative assessment earlier in the student journey in Year 1, accompanied by prompt feedback to re-balance the heavy emphasis on high status summative assessment. (This seeks to empower the kind of learners identified in our research, who perceive themselves excluded from the process of assessment).
- **Alternative assessment** - Greater use of a range and choice of 'alternative' assessment tasks (including those student-led structured approaches to peer assessment) at a School level which will support students to achieve a greater clarity of understanding of assessment tasks, and enable them to more successfully make the transition to independent learning from Year 1 to 2, and from Year 2 to 3. (This is intended to meet the need to diversify assessment tasks to overcome some forms of disadvantage identified in our research, like dyslexia).
- **Inclusion** - Introduce the expertise of our Centre for Academic Practice (CfAP) and dyslexia support tutors as proactive change agents in the validation process (shifting from their present, often reactive role to an anticipatory one) and guarantee CfAP workshops embedded in all non-standard courses. (This is intended to address problems with the wording of assessment tasks before students are affected).

In sharing our findings at conferences and workshops, we are very aware that other universities have faced similar challenges around inclusive assessment and some have moved further in addressing those issues. We are also aware that in many universities, such cultural change is difficult, and dependent upon the energies of committed individuals. For inclusive assessment to really enhance the learning of all students in HE, the kind of approaches we have outlined need to be mainstreamed as part of HE's commitment to a fairer and better qualified society.

Acknowledgements

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