



Commentary: Student Experiences

This commentary was compiled from anonymous student contributions to the Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning Enhancement Theme. Two students, who shared very different experiences of programme approaches to assessment, were asked to take part in interviews during which a full account of their experiences were recorded and are summarised here.

Student A:
A challenging, integrated yet extremely valuable experience... if you asked me to start that module again I would have absolutely no problem doing so.

Experience of Student A

In an undergraduate programme, this male business student was undertaking a module in which he had to research into and develop a product. It was a 5-credit elective final-year module, spread over two semesters, that could be taken by different disciplines within this higher education institution. As part of the assessment activity, students were assigned into groups from across different disciplines.

During the first semester, the students were asked to conduct a feasibility study – working with students from a different field of study to agree a concept and carry out primary research, secondary research and compile accounts and marketing strategy. The assessment included a diary and an initial business plan. During the second semester, the assessment focused on preparing the product for competitions, further developing the business

plan, doing a presentation and presenting the product at a stand.

During the module, the students met with lecturers every week for feedback on how they were doing. General feedback was given in class to the whole class. Individual feedback was given during one-to-one interactions between classes. The student seemed to know how well he was doing throughout. He read and gave peer feedback on others work, although some students did not engage with the peer feedback approach.

Despite the student reporting that the module consumed a lot of time and had a high workload, he was overwhelmingly positive about his experience of the module: 'As a subject, it was my favourite one... it was extremely beneficial... I personally think the module should be mandatory for fourth years'. He highlighted how the module had integrated knowledge and skills from parallel and earlier modules: 'In that module, you basically get to taste every bit of [the subject area]... everything I've learnt outside is basically all funnelled into this... that's why I can't understand why more students are not doing the module'.

He described it as a very authentic experience and, as he did not have an opportunity to go on work placement, it was the closest he could get to a sense of running his own business. In particular, he found that working with other disciplines was highly valuable: 'Working with the other students also is very much eye-opening... different schools have different ways of doing things... I thought it was absolutely fantastic that I got to experience it... the fact even that I had disagreements with the other discipline students, I still realised it's never going to be plain sailing. At least through this I was able to get experience in dealing with those type of things... it was an experience, I was able to get over it'.

Despite the challenge and the high workload, when asked was it worth it, he said, 'Completely. Absolutely. It's the one module I hated but I absolutely loved it!... You'd have to be very very small-minded to think just because there's a lot of work it's not beneficial. The stuff you learn, as long as you take it away, will stay with you for life'.



Reflecting on the value of the module within the programme as a whole, the student shared: 'I know it might be very hard to do... I don't understand why it isn't mandatory... even if they had to remove modules there's one or two that they could possibly remove and make an elective, I do think that it should be made mandatory'. He alluded to the authenticity of the module: 'You get to use all the different knowledge that you're learning and also the fact that you don't have placement [in the programme], it's something that you could certainly talk about in an interview, which I have already... You get to actually think. You're not learning stuff off. You get to think.'

Experience of Student B

This student was enrolled in a master's programme in a similar field to Student A. It was a full year, full-time programme, six months taught, six months on placement. The student group was large (approximately 100), with a range of non-business backgrounds.

The programme began with two 5-ECTS-credit modules, including assessments, scheduled within the two weeks prior to the first semester. The first semester (12 weeks) had eight modules, each 5 ECTS credits, plus two half modules in preparation for work placement in the second semester. Assessments were mainly a mixture of individual assignments, group assignments, interview, presentation and exams. The second semester (six weeks) had four 100% group project modules, each worth 5 ECTS credits. Some of the weighting in three of the modules was for individual effort. However, the overall grade was dependant on working in a team. There were many assessments in addition to the four project outputs, resulting in a total of 13 assessments within the six weeks.

The student, who explained that she was a hard worker and wanted to get good grades, was adamant that she was over-assessed. The first semester 'was insane', while in the second semester students were 'completely over-assessed to the point where people weren't actually going to classes... in the last three weeks in one of my lectures six people showed up consistently [out of 50].'

She also felt the modules in the programme were 'not equal at all. I don't know, are they meant to be equal? In terms of the actual effort and the time it would take, parts of them were not even close to being equal. Considering they were all five-credit modules it's a bit strange. Or it felt a bit strange at the time anyway'. The student felt they were doing considerably more hours per credit than they should have been during the second semester, that the effort in those four modules outweighed the effort in the previous eight modules combined. 'We essentially did the same amount of work that we did in the 12 weeks in the first term but they squashed it into half the time (six weeks)... academically, if you had 12 weeks and you could do parts of it yourself it probably wouldn't have been so bad'.

She acknowledged that there were some good modules with passionate and supportive lecturers: 'One of my lecturers in the second term was a really interesting guy and so obviously passionate about what he did and he put so much work into his lectures and again by the last month no-one was coming because we had so much work... by the end you're kind of like, what does this mean, am I going to be assessed on this? I could be doing something else. Yes, this is interesting but is it relevant to what I am handing into the office right now?'

The student did not like that fact that the second semester was made up entirely of group work and that there no aspect for which she was personally responsible and she could control the outcome. She found this frustrating and that it was reflected in her grades: 'In first term I didn't like the group work because of my personal preference but it was fine. I was able to deal with it to the extent that it was getting done and the grades were good. It was in the second term where I had a serious problem with it and actually the entire class did because it got to the stage where nothing we did was actually any of our own work. And it ended up with a number of students, one of which was me, who just did all of the work. And there was a good 40% of the class who were just following along. And that reflected in the grades, which was really unfair in the end

Student B:
Completely over-assessed to the point where people weren't actually going to classes... I would never go back.



because they were big projects that should have had a few people working on them. And we had such a tight timeline. I think we only had six weeks for a couple of them. It got very frustrating and it wasn't just me, just my natural preference'.

Asked how the approach to assessment within the programme affected her learning, the student responded: 'Negatively, without a doubt. I like being on time to class and I like going to class and if at all possible I will go to class but even by the end where there was six of us in class it was getting to the stage where I was like "should I go to this three-hour lecture/tutorial or should I try and finalise the project and actually get to sleep before midnight?"... it was just so much pressure that you couldn't actually do anything about it. It was just about getting it done and handing it in.'

Lessons to be Learned from the Student Experiences

The two students in this commentary were faced with high workloads within their programme/module, were expected to participate in group work and participated in five-credit modules. Both were diligent and willing to do their best to get the most from their learning encounters. However, the students' experiences were very different. Notwithstanding the fact that students' interests, skills and circumstances often differ, what can be learned from the experiences of these two students?

There were indications in both cases that the credit load of modules did not always reflect the effort invested, and that the efforts required for the same credit loads sometimes differs between modules. Although the level of effort required for the same assessment can differ between students, the experiences described here do highlight the need for programme staff to be very careful in ensuring effort invested is reflected in credits awarded.

The experience of Student A illustrates how a well-constructed authentic assessment can draw together learning from across a programme in ways which have a lasting positive effect into the careers of graduates.

The experience of Student B, however, provides an insight into how poor planning with regard to programmatic assessment can result in student learning being curtailed and their experiences of higher education becoming negative. When asked what one thing she would change about the programme, the student gave a particular insight into the link between her experience of being over-assessed and the need for effective programme-level assessment planning: 'I would have a long talk with the lecturers about speaking to each other when they do assessments. Instead of everyone just assessing and just thinking of their own module, perhaps some actual communication so the students don't end up with what happened to us.'