Undergraduate student views about assessment workload

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Introduction

This article reports on one aspect of a one-year project undertaken at City, University of London, in 2017/18. The project was initiated in response to concerns expressed by students and staff about the volume and relevance of assessments, the overlap of submission dates and the transparency of assessment criteria. The aim of the project was to scope the extent of the issues in order to develop a toolkit for staff that would support assessment development and respond to the concerns.

This pan-university project was led by the Department for Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD) in collaboration with Associate Deans for Education. Institutional funding allowed Learning Development Fellows (LDFs) to be appointed in some schools. A project group was established consisting of the Associate Deans for Education from all schools (n=5), the Student Union Vice President Education, and Learning Development Fellows (n=4). The group was chaired jointly by a Deputy Dean from one School and the Deputy Director for LEaD.

The project had several strands and involved mapping all assessments across all undergraduate programmes against both programme and module learning outcomes, as well as reviewing submission dates. This article reports on focus groups with students about the activities they engage in when developing their assessments and the time they spend preparing for the assessments. It contributes to the scholarship of assessment, increasing knowledge about student approaches to assessment, with reference to their views about workload.

Literature review

In the United Kingdom, student workload has become more of a focus in higher education since the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ('ECTS') as part of the Bologna process (see e.g. Scully and Kerr, 2014 and Fielding, 2008). As suggested by Chambers (1992), an appreciation of student workload allows for the uncovering of the 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1971), and encourages a deep approach to learning. The recent HEPI and Advance HE survey (Neves and Hillman, 2018) notes an average of 31.2 hours worked per week by students, split relatively equally between contact hours and independent study. Many Higher Education Institutions, including our own City Credit Framework, allocate 10 hours of study to each credit within a degree, in order to address parity of workload between students and modules. Thus, a 15-credit module is associated with 150 hours of study, which include contact time, self-directed study and assessment; however, these hours are only notional, and the number of hours expected for undertaking assessment are often not transparent.

There is a wealth of evidence of the impact of assessment on students, with reports of the domination of assessment over all aspects of students' educational experience (Miller and Parlett, 1974; Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). Whilst identifying the importance of transparency in assessment, with information about credit frameworks supporting student appreciation of the amount of effort required, Fielding (2008, p. 14) notes that 'there are no simple answers as to how student assessment workload should be measured and standardised'.

Nevertheless, some studies have been conducted which aim to establish student workload in relation to assessment. Crook and Park (2004) used electronic assessment diaries to monitor assessment loads, and to establish volume, timing and validity of assessments. They found no relationship between the time spent preparing each assessment and the number of assessments undertaken, and no relationship between how much of a module each assessment was worth and the time taken to undertake that assessment. Whilst there was agreement that students spent more time on essays and reports than on other types of assessment, in other respects there was a great variation between students,

who spent between 3.5 and 10 hours per assessment (all in 10-credit modules). Crook and Park (2004, p. 12) explain this variation by suggesting that 'we should consider the fact that students may naturally be more enthused to work on certain types of assessments than others [...] and/or that they are particularly inspired by their lecturers to invest time and energy into a particular assessment'.

The variation in student approaches to assessment is also supported by Abbott *et al.* (2014) who investigated student preferences in assessment and reported student concerns about fairness and clarity in assessment criteria, alignment of course content to assessment and consistency in adherence to marking criteria. Students agreed that they prefer to have early information about assessment, and that they prepare differently for different types of assessment, but, similarly to Crook and Park's (2004) finding, there was great variation in the types of assessment that are preferred by students, and how they prepare.

Additional studies investigate *perceptions* of workload. Scully and Kerr (2014) report on a survey of students' workload via study diaries and qualitative comments. The study was conducted in response to student concerns about workload, and the related issue of surface approaches to learning, also reported by Gibbs and Simpson (2005). They suggest that there is a mismatch between lecturer and student estimations of required workload, and that clear communication of expectations is a factor in reducing student perceived workloads. Similarly, Kember and Leung (1998, p. 302) examined the relationship between perceived workload and the amount of self-directed study undertaken by students. They found no relationship between these two factors, and conclude that 'actual workload alone is not a good measure of perceived workload as only 4% of the variance of perceived workload can be explained'.

Taken together, the literature surrounding student approaches to assessment, and actual and perceived workload, suggests not only that there is a great deal of variation between students, but that student perceptions of workload are likely to be only loosely related to actual workload. This makes it difficult for those planning assessment to advise students, and to account for assessment workload sufficiently in curriculum development. To address these issues, as part of a wider project on assessment, we investigated the time taken for our undergraduate students to prepare for their assessments, and the tasks they engage in during this preparation.

Method

As this project was an evaluation of current practice, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic inquiry was considered an appropriate methodology because this approach considers the context within which evaluation takes place as central to understanding the reality of the situation. This was important in terms of gaining insight into different disciplinary practice with the University comprising of five Schools. Ethical approval for the project was gained for the entire project, including the student focus groups that are the subject of this paper.

The Student Union Vice President Education emailed all Undergraduate Programme Representatives in order to recruit students for the focus groups. The e-mail included the participant information sheet and the consent form. This led to 15 students being recruited across four of the five Schools with 13 students being third year undergraduates.

The focus group interviews took place at a time agreed with the students which led to five focus group interviews of between 40 and 50 minutes. Students received a voucher for their participation. All interviews were undertaken by the Deputy Director of LEaD and all students who participated consented to the interviews being audio-recorded. The audio recordings were professionally transcribed, and the data was thematically analysed. The focus groups concentrated on the time spent preparing assessments, and the range of activities undertaken.

Findings

The students had been engaged in a full range of assessment tasks including unseen examinations consisting of essay questions and multiple choice questions, a range of written coursework assessments such as reports, case studies and essays on specific themes, practical assessments such as Observed Structured Clinical Examinations (OCSEs), music studio activities, verbal presentations, and group projects which were both written and verbal. Group projects were the one assessment type that all students had some concerns about. These concerns related to all students gaining the same grade and the issue of students who are perceived not to do their share of the project. The students all preferred having more than one assessment in a module irrespective of the credit value; they felt that having one assessment which was awarded 100% was high risk, particularly where there was a lack of clarity about the assessment requirements.

The activities that students engaged in when preparing assessments were varied as one would expect, irrespective of the assessment task they were engaged in. Students discussed going to the library and using the internet to search for evidence for their work. They reviewed their class notes and presentation slides on the virtual learning environment, and sometimes met with lecturers to clarify points. Some students were very strategic in planning, and for examinations would review past papers to look for recurrent themes. Some also focused on the assessment criteria and what was required. There were mixed views about study groups with some considering them a very useful approach with students sharing their resources and notes, but others preferring to focus on their own studies. In terms of using formative assessment opportunities (other than online quizzes) there were again some mixed views. Some students did submit formative work for comment and felt reassured that they were on the right lines, whilst others felt that they did not always gain constructive and useful feedback so did not use this as an approach.

None of the students were able to provide any definite length of time they spent preparing assessments. However, they noted that for some, particularly examinations, they

would start several weeks before and revise a topic per week, whereas for some coursework they might just do this over a few days. They were asked if the percentage allocated to the assessment task influenced their decision about how much time to spend on preparing the assessment, but they all said this was not the key factor, agreeing with the findings of both Crook and Park (2004) and Fielding (2008). Instead, factors that influenced the time they spent were whether they liked the focus of the assessment and enjoyed studying it further, and whether they perceived the assessment would be difficult. Again they were unanimous that group projects always took the most time because of the difficulties in meeting with others in the group and agreeing what would be in the final project.

Whilst we did not gain any specific data which we could use to influence future policy, such as indicating for students how many hours each assessment might take them to prepare, the project has provided us with some useful data to design a recording tool for students to document their assessment preparation activity and time involved. We now know that whatever tool we design, in addition to collecting information on the activities they engage in and the time taken, there also needs to be reference to the type of assessment, whether or not it was a group project, and whether this was a topic area they enjoyed.

Conclusion

Despite moves towards recognising student workload, hours assigned in module specifications are at best 'notional' and often give little indication of how much time students should expect to spend preparing assessments. Whilst there are a number of approaches to measuring student workload, none is without problems, and a great deal of variation between students and assessment is evident. The focus groups reported here have confirmed many of the findings of previous studies, and provide future directions for developing a toolkit of resources to support assessment.

To develop further insight into student activity around assessment we plan to undertake another study with students in the next academic year, but will develop a tool for them to document activity over one term and take into account the views they have provided in the focus groups.

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